



The Book
of the
HIDDEN AGREEMENT
(*Yinfu jing*)

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Notes

The Book of the Hidden Agreement

Yinfu jing 陰符經

A Taoist Text on the Harmony between Heaven and Humanity

Attributed to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝)

Commentary by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1258–1314)

Translated from the original Chinese

by Fabrizio Pregadio

Golden Elixir Press

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Cover : The Yellow Emperor (Huangdi).

INTRODUCTION

Despite its brevity, the *Yinfu jing* , or *Book of the Hidden Agreement* , is one of the most obscure and difficult Taoist texts. Traditionally attributed to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi, one of mythical founders of Chinese civilization, and the foremost in the eyes of the Taoists), it dates from between the late sixth and the eighth century. It exists in two main versions, containing slightly more than 300 and slightly more than 400 characters, respectively.

Later texts of Neidan (Internal Alchemy) have often placed the *Yinfu jing* with the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue) and the *Cantong qi* (The Seal of the Unity of the Three) at the origins of their teachings. Within Neidan, the text is especially well-known for its idea of “stealing the mechanism” (*daoji*), which Neidan adepts understand as meaning the inversion of the process that leads from the precelestial to the postcelestial domains.

Several dozen commentaries to the *Yinfu jing* are found both within and outside the Taoist Canon. The commentary translated here is by Yu Yan (born in Suzhou, 1258–1314), a learned and prolific author of independent works and commentaries to earlier texts. Part of his works examine the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*) and Chinese cosmology, while others are concerned with Neidan (including a major commentary to the *Cantong qi*). While Yu Yan is one of the authors who incorporate key concepts of Neo-Confucianism in their Neidan, his writings display a remarkable knowledge of both Nanzong (Southern Lineage) and Beizong (Northern Lineage) literature.

This ebook contains a complete translation of the *Yinfu jing* with Yu Yan’s commentary. As he explains at the end of his work, Yu Yan uses the shorter version of the *Yinfu jing* . Divisions into sections follow the original Chinese text; I have added section numbers.

SECTION 1

Contemplate the Way of Heaven, hold to the operation of Heaven: this is completeness.

觀天之道，執天之行，盡矣。

COMMENTARY

Being of itself as it is is the Way of Heaven; revolving to the left and turning to the right, without interruption day and night, is the operation of Heaven.

The *Zhongyong* (The Middle Course) says: “Sincerity is the Way of Heaven.”¹ It also says: “Utmost sincerity has no pause.”² Sincerity means to “be true and devoid of artificiality,” and to “match the principle of Heaven” of being so of itself.³ As this sincerity has no pause, it nourishes with continuity, moment after moment, without interruption for even one instant. If one can contemplate the Way of Heaven and preserve one’s sincerity, and if one can hold to the operation of Heaven by being “strong and untiring,” then one is a “companion of Heaven.”⁴

“This is completeness” means that although the words “contemplate the Way of Heaven, hold to the operation of Heaven” are concise, their meaning is complete. There is nothing to add.

SECTION 2

Heaven has five bandits; the one who sees them flourishes. The five bandits are in the Heart; they perform their operation in Heaven.

天有五賊，見之者昌。五賊在心，施行於天。

COMMENTARY

The five bandits are the five agents. Zhu Ziyang (Zhu Xi) said:

What is good in the world is born from those five, and what is bad is also due to those five. Therefore [the *Yinfu jing*] uses words to the contrary and calls them the five bandits. [5](#)

The five agents of Heaven are Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Soil; and the five agents of Man are sight, hearing, speech, behavior, and thinking. The five agents of Heaven are in Heaven and can be seen. The five agents of Man are in the Heart; how can they be seen? If one can see not only what is easy to see, but also what is difficult to see, then there is nothing that one cannot see. Therefore it says, “The one who sees them flourishes.”

Why does it say that they are “in the Heart”? This means that “sight is concerned with seeing clearly; hearing is concerned with hearing sharply; speech is concerned with being loyal; and behavior is concerned with being respectful”; but concern is the function of the Heart.[6](#)

Why does it say that “they perform their operation in Heaven”? This refers to wind, rain, sunshine, cold, and warmth.

SECTION 3

The cosmos is in one's own hands, the ten thousand transformations are born from oneself.

宇宙在乎手，萬化生乎身。

COMMENTARY

If one is able to set that mechanism in motion and to seize the mechanism of Heaven and Earth, then the creation and transformation of Heaven and Earth are in oneself. Therefore it says, "The cosmos is in one's own hands, the ten thousand transformations are born from oneself."

Shao Kangjie (Shao Yong) says in his "Guanyi yin" (Chant on Contemplating Change):

Each thing since its beginning has a body,
and each body has a Qian ☰ and a Kun ☷ of its own.
For one who knows that the ten thousand things are complete
in oneself,
how could the Three Powers have a separate root? 7
Heaven from the One Center makes creation and
transformation;
Man from his Heart weaves the warp and the weft.
Could Heaven and Man have two different minds?
But keeping away from following vain courses lies only with
Man . 8

This is what [the *Yinfu jing*] means.

SECTION 4

The Nature of Heaven is Man; the Heart of Man is the mechanism.

天性，人也。人心，機也。

COMMENTARY

Quiescence in the life of Man is the Nature of Heaven. Therefore it says, “the Nature of Heaven is Man.” The mechanism moving in the Center is the Heart of Man. Therefore it says, “the Heart of Man is the mechanism.”

SECTION 5

Establish the Way of Heaven, and thereby stabilize Man.

立天之道，以定人也。

COMMENTARY

When Man is able to establish his sincerity and is not moved by human desires, then Heaven is stabilized and Man is also stabilized. Therefore it says, “establish the Way of Heaven, and thereby stabilize Man.”

SECTION 6

Heaven releases the mechanism of taking life, and dragons and snakes arise from the ground. The Earth releases the mechanism of taking life, and stars and constellations fall and disappear .9 Man releases the mechanism of taking life, and Heaven and Earth are overturned.

天發殺機，龍蛇起陸。地發殺機，星辰隕伏。人發殺機，天地反覆。

COMMENTARY

When Heaven above releases the mechanism of taking life, dragons and snakes respond to it, and they arise from the ground. When the Earth below releases the mechanism of taking life, stars and constellations respond to it, and they fall and disappear. When Man in the middle releases the mechanism of taking life, what is above and what is below respond to it, and Heaven and Earth are overturned.

Those who are skilled in strategy (*quanmou*) and tactics (*zhishu*) know this principle, and therefore they make the example of the snake of Mount Heng: if you hit it in the head, its tail responds; if you hit it in the tail, its head responds; and if you hit it in the middle, both its head and tail respond.10

Those who cultivate themselves know this principle, and therefore take the head as Heaven, the belly as the Earth, and the Heart as Man. Their method consists in concealing the spirit within. They guide the coming and going of inhalation and exhalation, so that it reaches the Muddy Pellet (*niwan*) above and the Gate of Life (*mingmen*) below;11 and they cause the five agents to operate within oneself by inverting their course. In the descending phase, “Metal and Water dwell in conjunction” and descend with Soil; in the ascending phase, “Wood and Fire are companions” and ascend with Soil.12 Their rise and fall and their coming and going are inexhaustible and endless. This is “Heaven and Earth being overturned” within oneself.

The discourses of these two groups have their own motives, but their principles are obscurely joined. ¹³ In fact, those who have humanity (*ren*) see this and call it “humanity,” and those who have knowledge see this and call it “knowledge”; however, the principles are the same. Otherwise, why would this book be called *The Hidden Agreement* ?

I have seen that the book of Laozi says:

The Spirit of the Valley does not die:
it is called the Mysterious-Female.
The gate of the Mysterious-Female
is called the root of Heaven and Earth.
Unceasing and continuous,
its operation never wears out. ¹⁴

These words refer to the cultivation of oneself. It also says:

Governing a great kingdom is like cooking a small fish. ¹⁵

And it also says:

Good weapons are inauspicious tools. ¹⁶

Indeed, instead of speaking only from the perspective of self-cultivation, [the book of Laozi] also speaks of the Way of government. The *Zihua zi*, the *Guanyin zi*, the *Wenzi*, the *Liezi*, and the *Zhuangzi* all do the same. Some people hold to just one of the two perspectives and only talk of that perspective. This is deceitful. When Zhan Gu wrote a commentary on this Book (the *Yinfu jing*), he took “Strengthening the army to win the battle” to refer to the filthy arts of “riding women” and the “battle of collecting.” This is the utmost of deceit. ¹⁷

SECTION 7

When Heaven and Man release it together, the ten thousand transformations have a stable foundation.

天人合發，萬化定基。

COMMENTARY

The mechanism of Heaven and the mechanism of the Heart of Man respond to one another: in their movements, this and that are in agreement (*fu*) with each other. This is the meaning of “Heaven and Man release it together.”

Without knowing the Dao, who can know the mechanism released together by Heaven and Man? When one knows that mechanism and does not recklessly set it in motion, the root of the ten thousand transformations is stable. Therefore it says, “when Heaven and Man release it together, the ten thousand transformations have a stable foundation.”

Those who cultivate themselves know the mechanism released together by Heaven and Man. Hence at night, sitting in quiescence, they coagulate their Spirit and coalesce their Breath. In the blink of an eye, the Spirit enters the Breath, and they join one another. Then, “silent and unmoving,”¹⁸ they continue until the end of the *hai* hour and the beginning of the *zi* hour; when the Breath of Heaven and Earth arrives, they “quickly collect” it.¹⁹ If it does not arrive, they maintain themselves empty and wait for it: they do not dare to go ahead of it.

SECTION 8

In [human] nature there are skillfulness and clumsiness; they can be hidden and stored.

性有巧拙，可以伏藏。

COMMENTARY

Among people, there are those who have knowledge and those who are foolish. Therefore their nature differs in skillfulness or clumsiness. With regard to [the statements] “great knowledge seems to be foolish” and “great skill seems to be clumsy,”²⁰ [they mean that] one’s nature is hidden and stored within and is not perceived by other people. Therefore it says, “in [human] nature there are skillfulness and clumsiness; they can be hidden and stored.”

SECTION 9

The wickedness of the nine openings depends on the three essential ones; they can be in movement or in quiescence.

九竅之邪，在乎三要，可以動靜。

COMMENTARY

The “wickedness” is the human desires: when human desires burn, the principle of Heaven is extinguished. Therefore the noble man wards off and protects himself against that wickedness.

There are nine openings, but three of them are the essential ones: the ears, the eyes, and the mouth. In his movement, the noble man “does not watch what is not proper, does not listen to what is not proper, and does not speak of what is not proper”;²¹ this is being sincere in movement. In his quiescence, he does not watch and does not listen, and cautiously keeps his mouth closed; this is being sincere in quiescence.

Thus the noble man is sincere in his movement as well as in his quiescence. Since he is sincere in both movement and quiescence, wherever he goes there is no place where he could not [be sincere]. Therefore it says, “The wickedness of the nine openings depends on the three essential ones; they can be in movement or in quiescence.”

SECTION 10

Fire is born in wood: as calamity occurs, there is surely conquest. Treachery is born in the kingdom: as time moves, there is surely disruption. The one who knows this and cultivates himself is called a sage.

火生於木，禍發必剋。姦生於國，時動必潰。知之修鍊，謂之聖人。

COMMENTARY

When fire is born within the wood, the wood is burnt by that fire. Therefore it says, “fire is born in wood: as calamity occurs, there is surely conquest.” When treachery is born within the kingdom, the kingdom is impaired by that treachery. Therefore it says, “treachery is born in the kingdom: as time moves, there is surely disruption.”

In the method of cultivating oneself, one “stores the Heart in the abyss and polishes the Numinous Root.”²² When there is [a state of] rest (*an*), fire does not cause damage by blazing upward; this is the same as wood that stores fire within itself, but is not conquered by that fire. “Warding off evil and maintaining sincerity”²³ is the same as a kingdom that stores treachery within itself, but is not destroyed by that treachery. Therefore it says, “the one who knows this and cultivates himself is called a sage.”

SECTION 11

Heaven gives life and Heaven gives death: this is the principle of the Dao.

天生天殺，道之理也。

COMMENTARY

As there is the rain of spring that gives forth life, so there is the frost of autumn that causes life to wither. This is the Way of Heaven being as it is, and the Principle being so of itself.

SECTION 12

Heaven and Earth are the thieves of the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things are the thieves of Man. Man is the thief of the ten thousand things. When the three thieves find what is proper, the Three Powers are at rest.

天地，萬物之盜；萬物，人之盜；人，萬物之盜。三盜既宜，三才既安。

COMMENTARY

Heaven and Earth nourish the ten thousand things, but they also harm the ten thousand things; therefore it says, “Heaven and Earth are the thieves of the ten thousand things.” Man nourishes the ten thousand things, but he also harms the ten thousand things; therefore it says, “the ten thousand things are the thieves of Man.” The ten thousand things nourish Man, but they also harm Man; therefore it says, “Man is the thief of the ten thousand things.” In fact, the reason why [the *Yinfu jing*] does not speak of nourishment and only speaks of harm is that it uses words to the contrary.

If each of those three finds what is proper for itself, then Heaven and Earth acquire their positions and the ten thousand things are nourished. Therefore it says, “when the three thieves find what is proper, the Three Powers are at rest.”

SECTION 13

Therefore it is said: Eat at the right time, and the hundred bones are regulated. 24 Set that mechanism in motion, and the ten thousand transformations are at rest.

故曰：食其時，百骸理。動其機，萬化安。

COMMENTARY

“Time” means the time of Heaven and Earth. If I can “eat at the right time” and be joined with Heaven and Earth, then “the hundred bones are regulated.”

“Mechanism” means the mechanism of the Heart of Man. If I can “set that mechanism in motion” and be joined with Heaven and Earth, then “the ten thousand transformations are at rest” in me.

SECTION 14

Man knows the Spirit that is spirit, but does not know why what is not spirit is Spirit. 25

人知其神之神，不知不神之所以神。

COMMENTARY

Spirit is “that in which Yin and Yang are unfathomable.”²⁶ “It is the name given to what makes the ten thousand things wondrous.”²⁷ It does not mean the numina and ghosts of the common people of the world.

The foolish people do not know how to investigate the principles: they are confused by odd and weird discourses about numina and ghosts, and say that those are “spirit.” As for the cyclical movements of the Sun and the Moon, the shifting of the four seasons, and the transformations of the ten thousand things, they are accustomed to them and take them as ordinary, and say that all this “is not spirit.” Who among them could know “what makes Spirit what is not Spirit”?

In the past, I heard a recluse saying:²⁸

Heaven is empty and its shape is similar to a chicken egg. The Earth has a precise location in the middle of Heaven; therefore it is like the yolk in an egg. Above and below and all around the Earth it is all empty: that emptiness is Heaven. The Earth is suspended in emptiness but has never fallen from the antiquity to the present day because Heaven moves outside and turns around day and night, without interruption. Heaven is higher in the north and lower in the south and turns in an oblique way; therefore the North Pole is 36 degrees inside the Earth’s axis, and the South Pole is 36 degrees outside the Earth’s axis. The ecliptic surrounds the Heaven’s belly; the Sun and the Moon move within the emptiness [of Heaven] but never leave the ecliptic.

The *Suishu* (History of the Sui Dynasty) says that the Sun enters the water.²⁹ This is senseless, because “water flows within the Earth”³⁰ and never leaves it. [Moreover,] all around the four directions of the Earth there is only Heaven; how could there be water? Saying that water floats in Heaven and supports the Earth is thoroughly senseless.

On the winter solstice, the Sun in the morning is close to the South Pole and moves in the southern part of Heaven. The Yang Breath is distant from the human beings. Thus the cold at night is hidden in the emptiness under the ground, and the Yang Breath stays under the people’s feet. This is why the water in the wells is warm. On the summer solstice, the Sun in the morning is close to the North Pole and moves above the people’s heads. The Yang Breath directly irradiates what is below. Thus the heat at night is hidden outside the Earth, in the emptiness of the north, and the Yang Breath does not stay under the ground. This is why the water in the wells is cool.

The ten thousand things are born in the spring and grow in the summer, because the Breath of Great Yang steams upwards from the ground. They withdraw in the autumn and are stored in the winter, because the Breath of Great Yang leaves the ground and gradually goes away. This principle is clear, but those who are blind to it just do not understand it.

As for the birds, the mammals, the worms, and the fishes; the different creatures born from wombs, from eggs, from moist, or by transformation;³¹ and the flowering and the fruiting of plants, [in all these cases] the white [gives birth] to the white; the red, to the red; the large, to the large; and the small, to the small. Everyone knows that it is so, but no one knows what makes it so.

Therefore [the *Yinfu jing*] says, “Man knows the Spirit that is spirit, but does not know why what is not spirit is Spirit.”

SECTION 15

The Sun and the Moon have rules, the large and the small have laws. The efficacy of the sage is born from this, the Numinous Light comes forth from this.

日月有數，大小有定。聖功生焉，神明出焉。

COMMENTARY

The Sun and the Moon are Spirit! “Sun and Moon follow their courses and it is now cold, now hot,”³² and “when cold goes, heat comes, when heat comes, cold goes.”³³ This is Spirit. If not the sage, who could understand this? Indeed, in understanding Spirit,³⁴ the efficacy lies in the sage.

The Sun in one day moves by 1 degree. In one full term,³⁵ it moves by $365\frac{1}{4}$ degrees and makes a whole celestial revolution. The Moon in one day moves by a little more than 13 degrees. When it makes a celestial revolution in twenty-eight days, it moves for two more days, then meets the Sun and they align with one another. When it makes a celestial revolution in twenty-seven days, it moves for three more days, then meets the Sun and they align with one another. Therefore it says, “the Sun and the Moon have rules, the large and the small have laws.”

The sage is concerned that people do not know that the Sun and the Moon have rules, and thus could miss the times of sowing in the spring and harvesting in the autumn. Hence he sets the calendar and defines the seasons for their benefit. He establishes the seasons to complete a whole year by means of the intercalary months. There is one intercalary month in the third year, and two in the fifth year [after the third one]; in nineteen years there are [altogether] seven intercalary months, and this is called a “division” (*zhang*). In this way, the first day of the month always falls on the same day.³⁶ The rules are indeed fixed and cannot change.

The sage supports the fostering of Heaven and Earth: this is his efficacy. He causes everyone to know that the Sun and the Moon are Spirit: this is the principle that he enables to shine. Therefore it says, "the efficacy of the sage comes forth from this, the Numinous Light comes forth from this."

SECTION 16

No one in the world is able to see the stealing of the mechanism, and no one is able to know it. When the noble man obtains it, he strengthens himself .37 When the small man obtains it, he makes light of his destiny.

其盜機也，天下莫能見，莫能知。君子得之固躬，小人得之輕命。

COMMENTARY

When the mechanism is not released, and it is hidden and not exposed, who is able to see it? Who is able to know it? This is why it calls this “the stealing of the mechanism.”38

If the noble man obtains this mechanism, he uses it to strengthen himself: he knows his destiny and does not set it in motion carelessly. If the small man obtains it, he uses it to make light of his destiny: he does not know his destiny and sets it in motion carelessly.

SECTION 17

The blind is skilled in hearing, the deaf is skilled in seeing. By cutting off one source of profit, the function increases by ten times compared to the common people. By returning three times day and night, the function increases by ten thousand times compared to the common people. 39

瞽者善聽，聾者善視。絕利一源，用師十倍；三反晝夜，用師萬倍。

COMMENTARY

The eyes of a blind man do not see, but his ears are skilled in hearing. The ears of a deaf man do not hear, but his eyes are skilled in seeing. This is because they focus only on one thing.

If those who study the Dao are able to eliminate the selfishness of greed and to maintain their will undivided, then their function is ten times superior to that of a common person. People's afflictions are caused by not examining themselves. If they are able to carefully guard the three essentials, namely the ears, the eyes, and the mouth, and to maintain their sincerity day and night, then their function is ten thousand times superior compared to that of a common person.40

SECTION 18

The Heart lives in things and dies in things. The mechanism is in the eyes.

心生於物，死於物，機在目。

COMMENTARY

The Heart moves because of things; thus it “lives in things.” It follows them and forgets to come back; thus it “dies in things.”

The Heart is the residence of spirit, and the eyes are the windows of spirit. Wherever the eyes go, the Heart also goes; thus its mechanism indeed lies in the eyes.[41](#)

SECTION 19

Heaven has no mercy, and great mercy is born. Shift of thunders, blasts of wind, and all things wiggle.

天之無恩而大恩生。迅雷烈風，莫不蠢然。

COMMENTARY

The relation of Heaven to things is that it lets them be as they are. Therefore it is comprehensible that [the *Yinfu jing*] calls this “no mercy.” However, when it comes to “arousing them by thunder and lightning, and fertilizing them by wind and rain,”⁴² everything under Heaven, from the wriggling worms to the sentient creatures, is affected by its beneficence. Does this not mean that within “no mercy” there is “great mercy”?

SECTION 20

In utmost happiness, one's nature is overflowing; in utmost quiescence, it is pure.

至樂性餘，至靜則廉。

COMMENTARY

When one who has knowledge is happy, in his happiness he knows his destiny and is not distraught. Therefore his nature is overflowing: it is plentiful and unrestricted. When one who has humanity is quiescent, in his quiescence he is stable and has no desires. Therefore his nature is uncorrupt: it is pure and devoid of greed.

SECTION 21

What is most partial in Heaven is most universal in its operation.

天之至私，用之至公。

COMMENTARY

The Way of Heaven is most universal and devoid of partiality. People only see the birth of a single thing or the growth of a single thing, and think that this is Heaven being most partial.⁴³ They do not reflect on “what is illuminated by the Sun and the Moon, and what is reached by rain and dew.”⁴⁴

Among all the species of birds, fishes, animals, and plants, there is not even one that does not “receive its correct nature and destiny, and does not embrace and join with the Great Harmony.”⁴⁵ This is Heaven being “most universal.” How could Heaven be partial to a single thing?

SECTION 22

The command of birds lies in Breath (*qi*). 46

禽之制在氣。

COMMENTARY

When the oriole sings in the spring, what makes it sing? When the swan goose returns in the autumn, what makes it return? The reason is that “the command of birds lies in Breath.”

SECTION 23

Life is the root of death; death is the root of life. Mercy is born in harm, harm is born in mercy.

生者死之根；死者生之根。恩生於害，害生於恩。

COMMENTARY

Life means the movement of the ten thousand things. “When movement culminates, it returns to quiescence”; therefore “life is the root of death.” Death means the quiescence of the ten thousand things. “When quiescence culminates, it returns to movement”; therefore “death is the root of life.”⁴⁷

“Mercy” means that Heaven gives life; “harm” means that Heaven takes life. There are withdrawal and storing in autumn and winter, and thus there are birth and growth in spring and summer. There are spreading out and flourishing in spring and summer, and thus there are withering and ending in autumn and winter. Therefore it says, “life is the root of death; death is the root of life.”

SECTION 24

The foolish ones take the signs and the patterns of Heaven and Earth as sagehood. I take the signs and the patterns of time and things as wisdom. 48

愚人以天地文理聖，我以時物文理哲。

COMMENTARY

“The foolish ones take the signs and the patterns of Heaven and Earth as sagehood” because sagehood is unfathomable. As they deem it to be unfathomable, people refrain from inquiring into its principles. They consider it sagehood but do not know what makes it sagehood.

“I take the signs and the patterns of time and things as wisdom” because wisdom can be known. Those who have knowledge inquire into its principles in order to “extend that knowledge to the utmost.”⁴⁹ Thus I am able to fathom the sagehood of Heaven and Earth; and how much more can I do this with time and things?

The signs and the patterns of time and things are the same as those of Heaven and Earth. If one does not know the signs of Heaven, one just contemplates the proper times of Heaven. If one does not know the patterns of the Earth, one just observes the circumstances of the things of the Earth. What need is there of searching on high and afar?

At the end of this text (the *Book of the Hidden Agreement*) there are slightly more than one hundred other characters. Some think that they belong to a commentary, others think that they belong to the main text. For example, it says: “The Way of Heaven and Earth impregnates [all things]; therefore Yin and Yang prevail.” This means that between Heaven and Earth, when the Yang flourishes it prevails over the Yin, and when the Yin flourishes it prevails over the Yang. Like water does when it impregnates something, [the Way of Heaven and Earth] operates in a gradual way.

Although Zhu Ziyang (Zhu Xi) thought that [this part of the text] belongs to a commentary and did not write his own explications on it, he did answer the questions of his disciples about it, showing that he deeply understood its meaning. I follow his example.

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[The Seal of the Unity of the Three: A Study and Translation of the Cantong qi, the Source of the Taoist Way of the Golden Elixir](#), by Fabrizio Pregadio.

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[Commentary on the Mirror for Compounding the Medicine: A Fourteenth-Century Work on Taoist Internal Alchemy](#), by Wang Jie (?-ca. 1380).

Dating from the 10th century, the *Ruyao jing* (Mirror for Compounding the Medicine) describes the principles of Internal Alchemy in 20 poems. This book contains a complete translation of the text and of the commentary by Wang Jie, affiliated with the Quanzhen (Complete Reality) tradition.

[*The World Upside Down: Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy*](#), by Isabelle Robinet.

Four essays on Neidan translated for the first time into English. Their subjects are: (1) The alchemical principle of “inversion”; (2) The devices used by the alchemists to “manifest the authentic and absolute Tao”; (3) The role of numbers in Taoism and Internal Alchemy; (4) The meanings of the terms External Elixir and Internal Elixir.

Notes

1. *Zhongyong* , sec. 20. The *Zhongyong*, one of the main early Confucian works, is often quoted by authors of Neidan texts.
2. *Zhongyong* , sec. 26.
3. These sentences are drawn from Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) works; see *Zhuzi yulei* , ch. 16 and 61, respectively.
4. The expression “strong and untiring” derives from the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), “Image” (“Xiang”) on the hexagram Qian ☰ (no. 1; see Wilhelm, *The I-ching or Book of Changes* , p. 6). “Companion of Heaven” derives from the *Zhuangzi* , ch. 4 (see Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* , p. 56).
5. Yu Yan quotes this passage from Zhu Xi's commentary to the *Yinfu jing* . About “using words to the contrary,” compare the statement in the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), sec. 78: “The right words seem to go contrary to fact.”
6. These are four of the “nine concerns” (*jiusi*) of the noble man mentioned in the *Lunyu* (Sayings of Confucius), 16:10 (see Legge, *The Chinese Classics* , vol. 1, p. 314).
7. The Three Powers (*sancai*) are Heaven, Earth, and Man.
8. This poem is found in Shao Yong's (1012–77) *Yichuan jirang ji* (Beating on the Ground at Yichuan: An Anthology), ch. 15.
9. Falling stars, meteors, and similar unpredictable astronomical phenomena were considered ill omens in premodern China.
10. These sentences are found in the *Sunzi bingfa* (The Art of War by Master Sun), ch. 11.
11. The Muddy Pellet is the upper Cinnabar Field. The name Gate of Life can refer to several points in the region of the abdomen; here Yu Yan clearly means the lower Cinnabar Field.

12. The two sentences are quoted from the *Cantong qi* (The Seal of the Unity of the Three), 72:3–4. They refer to the inversion of the ordinary sequence of the five agents that occurs in the alchemical process, so that Water is not generated by Metal, but returns to Metal, and Fire is not generated by Wood, but returns to Wood. Soil, the central agent, makes their conjunction possible.

13. The “two groups” are “those who are skilled in strategy and tactics” and “those who cultivate themselves,” described in the previous two paragraphs.

14. *Daode jing* , sec. 6.

15. *Daode jing* , sec. 60.

16. *Daode jing* , sec. 31.

17. In several editions of the *Yinfu jing* , the phrase “Strengthening the army to win the battle” is the title of the third and last section of the text (in his text, Yu Yan does not use these subdivisions). “Riding women” (*yunü*) is a common name of the sexual practices. The “battle of collecting” (*caizhan*) refers to absorbing the female “essence” (*jing*) in those practices.

18. This expression is used in a large number of Neidan and other Taoist texts. It is originally found in the *Book of Changes* , “Appended Sayings” (“Xici”), sec. A.9 (see Wilhelm, p. 315).

19. “Quickly collect” (*jicai*) is a recurrent Neidan phrase, first found in the *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality), “Lüshi,” poem 7.

20. *Daode jing* , sec. 45.

21. *Lunyu* , 12:2 (see Legge, *The Chinese Classics* , vol. 1, p. 250).

22. This sentence is quoted from the *Taixuan jing* (Book of the Great Mystery), tetragram “Yang” (“Nourishment”). The *Taixuan jing* is a Han-dynasty work written by Yang Xiong (53 bce–18 ce). It is based on “tetragrams” or emblems made of four lines, instead of the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* that are made of six lines.

23. This expression, which defines one of the cardinal principles of Neidan, derives from the *Book of Changes* , “Explanation of the Sentences” (“Wenyan”) on the hexagram Qian ☰ (no. 1): “Even in ordinary speech he is trustworthy, and in ordinary actions he is careful. He wards off evil and maintains his sincerity” (see Wilhelm, p. 380). “Sincerity” is equivalent to the True Intention (*zhenyi*), which is the operation of Spirit.

24. “Eating at the right time” refers to taking one’s nourishment from the precelestial Original Breath (*yuanqi*) as it manifests itself in the time cycles of the postcelestial domain.

25. In other versions of the *Yinfu jing* , this sentence reads: “Man knows the Spirit that is spirit, but does not know why the Spirit that is not spirit is Spirit.” (For the sake of clarity, I use uppercase and lowercase letters to distinguish the two senses of *shen* , “spirit.”)

26. This sentence is found in the *Book of Changes* , “Appended Sayings,” sec. A.5 (see Wilhelm, p. 301). It defines spirit as the state of unity in which Yin and Yang are not distinguished from one another.

27. *Book of Changes* , “Explanation of the Trigrams” (“Shuogua”), sec. 5 (see Wilhelm, p. 272).

28. In the remaining part of his commentary on this section, Yu Yan provides examples, drawn from the astronomical and biological knowledge of his time, to document the principle that even phenomena often deemed to be obvious are owed to the operation of spirit. He also criticizes, by means of a sentence found in the *Suishu* (History of the Sui Dynasty), an example of the erroneous understanding of that operation.

29. This seems to refer to a discussion in the *Suishu* , ch. 19, that contains the following statement: “Heaven is something Yang, and moreover, it enters and exits water; it is similar to a dragon, and therefore it is represented by a dragon.”

30. *Mengzi* , 3:2 (see Legge, *The Chinese Classics* , vol. 2, p. 280).

31. These are the “four kinds of birth” (*sisheng*) in Buddhism.
32. *Book of Changes* , “Appended Sayings,” sec. A.1 (see Wilhelm, p. 284).
33. *Book of Changes* , “Appended Sayings,” sec. B.3 (see Wilhelm, p. 338).
34. *Book of Changes* , “Appended Sayings,” sec. A.12 (see Wilhelm, p. 324; Yu Yan’s use of this sentence requires a translation different from the one given by Wilhelm).
35. *Yiqi* , i.e., one year.
36. I.e., on the day in which the Sun and the Moon are aligned with one another with respect to the Earth, and the Moon seen from the Earth is black.
37. Several editions of the *Yinfu jing* read *guqiong* 固窮 instead of *gugong* 固躬: “When the noble man obtains it, he endures want.” The expression *guqiong* is found in a passage of the *Lunyu* , 15:1, that is close in import to the present passage of the *Yinfu jing* : “The noble man endures want; the small man, when he is in want, gives way to unbridled license” (see Legge, *The Chinese Classics* , vol. 1, p. 294).
38. The “mechanism,” as Yu Yan explains in his commentary to sec. 6, is the ordinary course that leads from life to death. “Stealing the mechanism” allows one to “invert the course.” This process is secret and hidden; therefore it should be “stolen.”
39. The word *shi* also means “soldier,” and this sentence has often been understood as meaning “Cutting off one source of profit is ten times better than using soldiers.” This understanding may suit the use of the *Yinfu jing* in the context of the military arts. *Shi* , however, also means “common person” or “common people.” In the present case, the “common people” are those whose senses of hearing and seeing function in the ordinary ways. Compared to them, the blind

and the deaf lack one function (“one source of profit”), but the other one increases in efficacy.

40. This section of the *Yinfu jing* contains the word *fan* (“to return”) in the sentence *sanfan zhouye*, literally translated above as “returning three times day and night.” Yu Yan intends *fan* as meaning *zifan*, a term that in Confucian texts means “to examine oneself” (e.g., *Mengzi*, 2:1; see Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 2, p. 187). For Yu Yan, however, self-examination does not only consist in questioning oneself from ethical or moral points of view; it consists, especially, in guarding the “three essentials,” each of which is “inverted” (another sense of *fan*) so that it operates inwardly instead of outwardly. For instance, the eyes are not used to look outside, but to look within. This is done “three times,” once for each of the “three essentials,” and is done “night and day,” i.e., continuously. The analogy with the blind and the deaf is clear: by eliminating each “source” (*yuan*) of dispersion (such as the eyes looking outwardly), the opposite function (looking inwardly) increases in efficacy.

41. The view that the eyes direct the course of the Heart (or the mind) seems to be first stated in the *Huangdi neijing suwen* (Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor: The Plain Questions), sec. 18, which says: “The eyes are the envoys of the Heart. The Heart is the residence of spirit.” This view has had a large number of applications in both medicine and Taoism.

42. *Book of Changes*, “Appended Sayings,” sec. A.1 (see Wilhelm, p. 284).

43. In other words, they think that Heaven has accorded some favor to that particular thing.

44. These expressions are drawn from the *Baopu zi waipian* (Outer Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature), ch. 2.

45. *Book of Changes*, “Commentary on the Judgment” (“Tuanzhuan”) on the hexagram Qian ☰ (no 1; see Wilhelm, p. 371).

46. According to one of several ways in which this sentence has been understood, birds are able to fly because they can control (*zhi* , i.e., “be in command of”) the *qi* (“breath”) of the clouds. Yu Yan’s commentary follows this understanding, but he also emphasizes that birds spontaneously know how to follow the transformations of *qi* , such as those that occur with the coming of spring and autumn.

47. The two sentences, “When movement culminates, it returns to quiescence” and “When quiescence culminates, it returns to movement,” are found at the beginning of Zhou Dunyi’s (1017–73) *Taiji tu shuo* (Explication of the Chart of the Great Ultimate).

48. “Signs of Heaven” (*tianwen*) refers to Sun, Moon, planets, stars, wind, rain, and other similar objects and phenomena that are found or occur in Heaven. “Patterns of the Earth” (*dili*) refers to mountains, seas, rocks, plants, animals and other similar objects that are found on the Earth. — In the second sentence, “time and things” refers to time as defined and measured by the movements of the astral bodies in Heaven, and to the things and creatures that exist and live on the Earth.

49. This famous sentence derives from another major early Confucian text, the *Daxue* (The Great Learning), sec. 4 (see Legge, *The Chinese Classics* , vol. 1, p. 358)