

Wang Jie

COMMENTARY ON THE
MIRROR FOR COMPOUNDING
THE MEDICINE

(Ruyao jing zhujie)

A Fourteenth-Century Work
on Taoist Internal Alchemy

translated by Fabrizio Pregadio

Golden Elixir Press

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MIRROR FOR COMPOUNDING
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INTRODUCTION

Like many other works belonging to different traditions and lineages, the *Ruyao jing* or *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine* presents its readers with a complete, albeit not systematic, overview of the main teachings of Neidan (Internal Alchemy). It does so, here again in common with several other works, in a poetical form, but in an extremely synthetic way. With its 246 characters, the *Mirror* is possibly the shortest Neidan text—even shorter than the famous *Four Hundred Words on the Golden Elixir* (*Jindan sibaizi*), a work also in poetry attributed to Zhang Boduan (987?–1082).

With the *Cantong qi* (Seal of the Unity of the Three), the *Wuzhen pian* (Awakening to Reality), the *Yinfu jing* (Scripture of the Hidden Agreement), and the *Four Hundred Words* itself, the *Mirror* is also one of the texts most frequently quoted in the Neidan literature, either with explicit attribution or by silently borrowing its words, which every Neidan master and practitioner was supposed to have memorized. Some verses of the *Mirror*, in fact, have become almost formulaic: this is especially true of the opening poem (“Precelestial Breath, postcelestial Breath. Those who obtain them always seem to be drunk”), and is even more true of the injunction, “Steal Heaven and Earth, seize creation and transformation,” which has been incorporated into innumerable Neidan texts.

Attributed to Cui Xifan, about whom nothing is known except that he may have lived in the early tenth century (ca. 880–940), the *Mirror* has existed in different versions. The version in three-character verses—a particularly difficult prosodic form—translated here is the only one to have survived in its entirety. In addition, there have been versions now extant in fragments: one in five-character verses, one in seven-character verses, and even one in prose. It is unclear which of these versions Cui Xifan (who is often called Cui gong, or Master Cui) may have originally written. The expression *ruyao* in the title of his work literally means “to enter

the ingredients”; it is often used in sources related to pharmacology and to Waidan (External Alchemy) to mean that the ingredients are placed in a vessel in order to compound a medicine or an elixir. As for the word “mirror” (*jing* or *jian*), it appears in titles of Chinese texts to indicate that they provide models for the actual application of fundamental principles or ideas.

The *Ruyao jing* has certainly served its purpose of functioning as a “mirror.” Despite its renown, however, it also has been surrounded by controversies, due to the reported existence of commentaries that interpreted its poems in terms of what later became known as the “Yin-Yang Branch” (Yinyang pai) of Neidan, which includes sexual conjunction among its practices. While the *Mirror* itself does not contain any reference to this subject, its brevity, its poetical form, and especially its intentionally concise and symbolic language certainly count among the features that made it possible to read the text in terms of such practices, which many other masters firmly and repeatedly condemned as inadequate for true realization.

The present book contains the first complete translation of the *Mirror* and of a commentary dating from the 14th century, entitled *Ruyao jing zhujie* (Commentary and Explications on the *Ruyao jing*), which interprets the text according to the purest Neidan tradition (later called “Pure Cultivation Branch,” or Qingxiu pai). The author of the commentary is Wang Jie (?-ca. 1380), also known as Wang Daoyuan and as Hunran zi (Master of the Inchoate). All we know about his life is that he came from an affluent family and was extremely learned, and received teachings on Neidan from an anonymous master in his youth.

The most evident doctrinal affiliation of Wang Jie is with the great Neidan master, Li Daochun (fl. 1288–92), of whom he might be considered a second-generation disciple. Wang Jie edited or published two of Li Daochun’s works (which he had received from Li’s disciples), and at least one passage of his commentary on the *Mirror* directly derives from Li Daochun’s writings.¹ As for Wang Jie’s association with the Quanzhen (Complete Reality) monastic lineage of Taoism, which some scholars have suggested as possible, this association is at the very least unclear. It should not be forgotten,

nevertheless, that since early times many assertions of connection with Quanzhen do not involve official ordination into the monastic order, and indicate instead transmission of teachings of one of the Quanzhen multiple branches. To give one relevant example, Li Daochun's lineage, which became known as the "Central Branch" (Zhongpai) of Neidan, claimed descent from the early Quanzhen patriarch, Qiu Chuji (1148–1227).

In addition to his involvement in publishing Li Daochun's writings, Wang Jie is also known as the author of two independent works and of several commentaries. The independent works are the *Huanzhen ji* (Returning to Reality: A Collection), which contains essays, poems, and illustrations on Neidan, and was honored by a preface written by the 43rd Celestial Master, Zhang Yuchu (1361–1410); and the *Daoxuan pian* (The Mystery of the Dao), which contains 55 short notes on terms and subjects related to Neidan, or explained in the perspective of Neidan. The commentaries, in addition to the *Mirror*, concern the *Yinfu jing* (Scripture of the Hidden Agreement); the *Qingjing jing* (Scripture of Clarity and Quiescence); the *Qingtian ge* (Song on the Azure Heaven), attributed to Qiu Chuji; and the *Xiaozai huming miao-jing* (Wondrous Scripture on Averting Disaster and Protecting Life), a work that promises salvation to those who recite it, and that Wang Jie interprets according to the principles of Neidan.²

In various points of his commentary to the *Mirror*, Wang Jie's prose is extremely synthetic; in particular, he often describes in a few words aspects of the Neidan practice that might require longer explanations. Wang Jie also makes extended use of technical Neidan language, including a few uncommon expressions. This may initially cause perplexities to readers. Having spent some time working on this remarkable text, all I can say about this issue is that the commentary requires slow and attentive reading. Several times, a point made by Wang Jie in his explication of one section becomes clear only after reading his explication of a different section. To understand Wang Jie's Neidan discourse, readers will often need to go back and forth through the pages of this book.

My translation of the *Mirror* with Wang Jie's commentary is based on the edition found in the *Daozang* (Taoist Canon, printed

in 1445). I have also consulted the edition included in the *Daozang jiyao* (Essentials of the Taoist Canon, in the 1906 expanded edition), where Wang Jie's commentary is accompanied by those of Li Panlong (Ming dynasty) and Peng Haogu (fl. 1599). I report a few of the main variants in notes to my translation.

This book has been written and published in the context of the project "Fate, Freedom and Prognostication," directed by Professor Michael Lackner at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, University Erlangen-Nuremberg. I am grateful to Song Xiaokun for her substantial and constant help in solving issues that I encountered while translating Wang Jie's commentary. While this book could not have been published without her support, responsibility for any remaining error is entirely mine.

Fabrizio Pregadio
Winter 2013

Notes

1. This passage is found in Wang Jie's commentary to sec. 1 of the *Mirror*; see note 3 on page 7. Wang Jie edited Li Daochun's *Santian yisui* (The Mutable Marrow of the Three Heavens), which contains essays and short commentaries on Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian texts; and published his *Qing'an Yingchan zi yulu* (Recorded Sayings of the Master Who Responds to the Cicadas in the Pure Retreat), which mainly consists of conversations with disciples and of poems.

2. The titles of these works (here cited in slightly abbreviated forms) are: *Yinfu jing jiasong jiezhu* (Commentary on the *Scripture of the Hidden Agreement*, with Additional Poems); *Qingjing miaojing zuantuo jiezhu* (Commentary on the Wondrous *Scripture of Clarity and Quiescence*, with Illustrations); *Qingtian ge zhushi* (Explication of the *Song on the Azure Heaven*); and *Xiaozai huming miaojing zhu* (Commentary on the *Wondrous Scripture on Averting Disaster and Protecting Life*).

Translation

Preface

Could the learning of the divine Immortals ever be heard by ordinary and common people? Only those of vast capacity and high ability, only the great persons who possess perseverance and persistence, and only the superior people who are bright and clear could do it.

But then, what do those who follow that learning actually do? Outside, they inquire into the principles of the functioning of Heaven and Earth; within, they understand the mechanism of the operation of their bodies and minds. This is certainly all true. However, if Confucius had not received teachings from Laozi, he could not have sighed, "Like unto a dragon!"¹; and if Gautama (the Buddha) had not been a new incarnation of the saints of old, how could he be capable of seeing that he could transcend the world?

Thus, those who study may be as many as the hair of an ox, but those who attain are as rare as the horn of the unicorn. With no exception, it all depends on whether one does or does not receive the transmission.

The learning of the divine Immortals only consists in cultivating one's Nature (*xing*) and one's Existence (*ming*), and in "returning to the fundament and reverting to the origin."² You collect the precelestial One Breath and use it as the Mother of the Elixir, and set in motion the postcelestial Breath in order to practice the Fire Phases. When you use the Fire to refine your Nature, the Spirit of Metal becomes indestructible; when you use it to refine your Existence, the Breath of the Dao is constantly preserved. You entirely change your impure, Yin body and transform it into a body of Pure Yang. The transformations of Spirit are unlimited, and the responses are inexhaustible. Is this not extraordinary?

Today I see many people who study Immortality. When one discusses the true teachings with them, they stick to one or another particular view, which does not accord with the correct transmission of the Way by the masters of the past.

As I look at the eighty-two verses in the *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine* by Master Cui, their words are simple, but their meaning is complete: they encompass the entire essence of all the books on the Elixir. Not being ashamed of my limited views, I have added notes at the end of each of set of four verses, following the oral teachings of my master. I entirely reveal the mysterious mechanism, and am an eye for humans and deities.³ In the future, those who have the same commitment as mine should read them and ponder over them with attention. Assuredly, “Spirit will reveal itself, and the Heart will awaken”:⁴ there can be no doubt about this.

Some, instead, will say that my commentary is not trustworthy. But even then, the words of master Cui should be regarded as truthful. If you rely on them and put them into practice, if you trust them and follow them, you will entirely transform yourself. Then all the possibilities of the learning of the Immortals will be accomplished.

Preface by Hunran zi (Master of the Inchoate)
from Xiujiang⁵

Notes

1. Wang Jie alludes to the famous tale of the meeting between Laozi and Confucius, first told in the *Zhuangzi*, ch. 14 (see Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu*, p. 163). After the meeting, Confucius exclaimed: “At last I may say that I have seen a dragon!” As reported in several other texts, he also said: “Birds, I know, can fly. Fish, I know, can swim. Animals, I know, can run. . . . But when it comes to the dragon, I have no means of knowing how it rides the wind and clouds and ascends into heaven. Today I have seen Laozi, and he really is like unto a dragon.”

2. *Wuzhen pian*, “Lüshi,” poem 9: “I exhort you to probe and grasp the place where one comes to life: return to the fundament, revert to the origin, and you are a Medicine King” (see Pregadio, *Awakening to Reality*, p. 48).

3. The expression *rentian yanmu* means that Wang Jie provides the “Dharma-eye” (*fayan*, i.e., the ability to see the Dharma) to humans and deities, which are the two highest states of reincarnation according to the Buddhist doctrine. At the same time, it is significant that *Rentian yanmu* (An Eye for Humans and Deities) was also the title of a twelfth-century text that summarized the Chan Buddhist history and teaching. By using this expression, therefore, Wang Jie also seems to imply that his commentary provides a synthesis of Neidan.

4. Wang Jie draws this sentence from Yu Yan’s (1258–1314) commentary to the *Cantong qi* (*Zhouyi cantong qi fahui*, ch. 9), where it refers to this passage: “On occasion the Numinous Light reveals itself to a man, and his Heart suddenly awakens” (81:11–12; see Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, p. 119).

5. Hunran zi is Wang Jie’s own appellation (*hao*). Xiujiang corresponds to present-day Xiushui, Jiangxi Province.

1

Precelestial Breath,
postcelestial Breath.
Those who obtain them
always seem to be drunk.

The precelestial Breath is the original and initial Ancestral Breath.¹ This Ancestral Breath is in the real center of Heaven and Earth within the human body. [Placed between] the Secret Door and the Gate of Life, hanging in the middle, it is the Heart of Heaven.² The self-cultivation of the divine Immortals only consists in collecting the precelestial One Breath and using it as the Mother of the Elixir.

The postcelestial Breath is the Breath that circulates internally: one exhalation, one inhalation, once coming, once going. “Exhaling touches onto the root of Heaven, inhaling touches onto the root of Earth. On exhaling, ‘the dragon howls and the clouds rise’; on inhaling, ‘the tiger roars and the wind blows.’”³

When [the postcelestial Breath] is “unceasing and continuous,”⁴ it returns to the Ancestral Breath. The internal and the external inchoately merge, and coalesce to form the Reverted Elixir (*huandan*). Then you become aware of a burning fire in the Cinnabar Field that spreads to the four limbs. You look like a fool or like drunk, but “its beauty lies within.”⁵ This is why it says, “those who obtain them always seem to be drunk.”

This is what the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue) means when it says:

The Spirit of the Valley never dies:
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.⁶

And this is what the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*) means when it says about the Kun ☷ hexagram:

From the Yellow Center it spreads to the veining, as it places itself in the correct position. Its beauty lies within, and extends to the four limbs.⁷

Notes

1. “Precelestial” (*xiantian*) and “postcelestial” (*houtian*) refer to the states before and after the generation of the cosmos. The precelestial Breath (*qi*) is the One Breath of the Dao. Once the cosmos is generated, it is permeated by the postcelestial Breath, which manifests itself in the multiplicity of the directions of space, the cycles of time, and all the entities and phenomena that exist and occur within space and time. In the human being, in particular, the postcelestial Breath is the breath (*qi*) of ordinary breathing. In any of its forms, however, the postcelestial Breath hides and preserves the precelestial Breath, or one “particle” of it. In the strict sense of the term, the purpose of Neidan is the recovery of the precelestial Breath—represented as the Elixir—and its reconjunction with the postcelestial Breath.

2. The first part of this sentence alludes to the description of the center of the human body in the *Huangting jing* (Scripture of the Yellow Court): “Above is the *Hun* Numen, below is the Origin of the Barrier; on the left is the Minor Yang, on the right is the Great Yin; behind is the Secret Door, in front is the Gate of Life” (“Inner” version, poem 2). The Secret Door (*mihu*) is the kidneys, or a point in their region. The Gate of Life (*shengmen*) is the lower Cinnabar Field, or a point in its region. — The *Huangting jing*, originally dating from the second or the third century, is one of the main texts on early Taoist meditation. It exists in two versions, usually referred to as “Outer” and “Inner.” The “Inner” version is later and longer compared to the “Outer” version.

3. This passage is quoted, without attribution, in Xiao Tingzhi's (fl. 1260–64) *Jindan wenda* (Questions and Answers on the Golden Elixir). It is also found in Li Daochun's (fl. 1288–92) *Zhonghe ji* (Anthology of Central Harmony), ch. 4.

4. This expression derives from the passage of the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Its Virtue) quoted at the end of the commentary to the present section.

5. This expression derives from the passage of the *Book of Changes* quoted at the end of the commentary to the present section.

6. *Daode jing*, sec. 6.

7. *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), “Wenyan” (Explanation of the Sentences) on the hexagram Kun 坤 (see Wilhelm, *I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 395). The first sentence is also found in the *Cantong qi* (The Seal of the Unity of the Three), sec. 19: “From the Yellow Center it gradually spreads through the veining: moistening and impregnating, it reaches the flesh and the skin” (see Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, p. 77). In the explication given by Wang Jie, these passages of the *Daode jing* and the *Book of Changes* refer to the precelestial Breath.

3

Ascend to the Magpie Bridge,
descend from the Magpie Bridge.
In Heaven it responds to the stars,
on Earth it responds to the tides.¹

In the human body, the spinal column corresponds to the Milky Way in Heaven. The Milky Way separates [Heaven into two parts], but a divine magpie builds a bridge; this is why we speak of the Magpie Bridge. In the human being, the tongue is called Magpie Bridge.²

When you compound the Elixir, you always use the Yellow Dame to lead the Infant to ascend to the Muddy Pellet and conjoin with the Lovely Maid.³ This is called “ascending to the Magpie Bridge.” [Then] the Yellow Dame again goes back and forth; smiling, she leads the Infant and the Lovely Maid to return together to the Cavern Chamber.⁴ [To do so], they must come down from the Muddy Pellet; therefore it says, “descend from the Magpie Bridge.”

It is not that there are truly a Yellow Dame, an Infant, and a Lovely Maid: this is a speech made through metaphors, and concerns nothing outside the body, the mind, and the Intention (*yi*). Through the efficacy of silent operation, internally you rely on the movement of the Celestial Net, and externally you use the motion of the Dipper’s Handle.⁵ When you kindle the Fire, you become aware of the Breath ascending without interruption. Similar to the initial rise of a tide, it goes upwards by inverting its flow; therefore it says, “in Heaven it responds to the stars, on Earth it responds to the tides.”

This is what a scripture on the Elixir means when it says:

The practice is easy, the Medicine is not far away.⁶

And this is what we mean when we say: “The wheel of Heaven revolves, and the Earth responds with the tides.”

Notes

1. For the translation of the first two verses, see the next note.
2. According to a Chinese legend, the Magpie Bridge connects the Altair and Vega stars across the Milky Way, so that the Herdboy and the Weaving Girl, who live in those stars and love one another, can meet once a year. In Neidan, the Magpie Bridge connects the Function and Control vessels (*renmai* and *dumai*), which respectively run along the front and the back of the body and make the conjunction of Yin and Yang possible. According to different views, this Bridge is either the tongue or the nose. In another view, there are an upper Bridge, which is the tongue, and a lower Bridge, which is found at the bottom of the spine. In accordance with the second view, the first two verses of this stanza should be translated as “The upper Magpie Bridge, / the lower Magpie Bridge.” In his commentary, Wang Jie mentions only the tongue, and understands *shang* and *xia* (“upper” and “lower”) as verbs meaning “to ascend” and “to descend,” respectively to and from the Magpie Bridge. To avoid inconsistencies between text and commentary, I have translated this stanza in accordance with Wang Jie’s reading.
3. Muddy Pellet (*niwan*) is the most common name for the upper Cinnabar Field, located in the region of the head.
4. Cavern Chamber (*dongfang*) is usually a name of one of the “chambers” of the Muddy Pellet (the upper Cinnabar Field), but here clearly connotes the lower Cinnabar Field. Note that in both Classical and present-day Chinese, this term is also used to mean “nuptial chamber.”
5. Celestial Net (*tiangang*) is the name of the first four stars of the Northern Dipper, and Dipper’s Handle (*doubing*) is the name of its last three stars.
6. *Wuzhen pian*, “Xijiang yue,” poem 2 (see Cleary, *Understanding Reality*, p. 132).

Pages 19-26 are not included in this sample

8

Steal Heaven and Earth,
seize creation and transformation.
Gather the five agents,
bring the eight trigrams together.

Clenching Heaven and Earth, grasping Yin and Yang, gathering the five agents, and bringing the eight trigrams together: this is the learning of the divine immortals.

Heaven and Earth are Qian and Kun. Creation and transformation are Yin and Yang. The five agents are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Soil. The eight trigrams are Qian ☰, Kun ☷, Kan ☵, Li ☲, Zhen ☳, Xun ☴, Gen ☶, and Dui ☱.

However, the greatness of Heaven and Earth, and the depth of creation and transformation, lies in the fact that the five agents part and distribute themselves, and that the eight trigrams arrange themselves in a ring. By which art can you steal them and seize them, cause them to gather and bring them together?

“To steal” means to rob; “to seize” means to take; “to gather” means to converge; “to bring together” means to join. This concerns the methods of the Masters of the Elixir, whose wonder lies in the oral transmission. The true instructions on compounding the Elixir always pertain to this and nothing else. Wait until the time comes and the Breath transmutes itself: when the Medicine is produced, the Spirit knows it. Then you must shut the Barrier of Wind, close the Door of Gen ☶, turn the Celestial Net, and revolve the Dipper’s Handle.¹ As each breath allows the Matching Fires [of Yin and Yang] to circulate, it causes 3,600 correct Breaths (*zhengqi*) to converge, and inverts the series of the 72 periods.²

When you have reversed the five agents and have brought the

eight trigrams together, and all of them have returned to the Earthenware Crucible, close it and firmly seal it.³ Immediately harmonize the Fire that you send forth, and refine by means of an intense, fierce heat. [The Medicine] will coalesce and form the Embryo of Sainthood.

In this way, by practicing for a short while you seize the nodal times of one whole year. A scripture on the Elixir says:

If the human Heart joins with the Heart of Heaven,
reversing Yin and Yang takes only one instant.⁴

This means that with one exhalation and one inhalation you can “seize creation and transformation.” In one day, a human being makes 13,500 exhalations and 13,500 inhalations. One exhalation and one inhalation correspond to one breath; thus in the space of one breath, you hiddenly seize the number of a celestial revolution of 13,500 years. In one year, you make 4,860,000 breaths, and you hiddenly seize the number of a celestial revolution of 4,860,000 years. At that point, you entirely change your impure Yin body and transform it into a body of Pure Yang.

The transformations of Spirit are unlimited: coagulation results in form, dispersion results in wind.⁵ You exit Being and enter Non-Being, and whether you conceal yourself or let yourself to be seen, you cannot be fathomed. Is this not extraordinary?

Notes

1. The Barrier of Wind (*fengguan*) is one of the two openings under the palate that allow the passage of air during inhalation and exhalation. — For “door of Gen ☶,” the text in the *Daozang jiyao* has “door of Dui ☱.” Dui usually represents the mouth.

2. The 3,600 correct Breaths are often said to be those of 3,600 years, but they also correspond to those of the “double hours” contained in the ten months of gestation of the Embryo. The 72 periods are the 5-day phases that form one year.

3. Earthenware Crucible (*tufu*), a name derived from Waidan (Exter-

nal Alchemy), denotes in Neidan the lower Cinnabar Field.

4. These verses are quoted from Xiao Tingzhi's *Jindan da chengji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, ch. 9.

5. These sentences are found in many Taoist texts. The last word is usually “breath” (*qi*) instead of “wind” (*feng*), but the two terms are obviously equivalent in this context.

Pages 31-62 are not included in this sample

21

Practice this word by word,
it will respond sentence by sentence.¹

These two verses summarize the previous eighty verses. They mean that in the Great Way of the Golden Elixir, “advancing the Fire and withdrawing in response” are the wondrous instructions on seizing creation and transformation.² When they are practiced, the whole person becomes like an empty valley that responds to a sound, or like the *yangsui* mirror that collects Water and the *fangzhu* mirror that collects Fire.³ Spirit pervades and Breath responds: could anything happen faster than this? Therefore it says, “practice this word by word, it will respond sentence by sentence.”

A scripture on the Elixir says:

Watching, you do not see it, listening, you do not
hear it —
but if you call it, it responds.

Notes

1. *Mimi* means “closely.” I translate “word by word” to preserve the parallelism with the next verse.

2. In this sentence, I read *jindan dadao* for *dadao jindan*, which would mean, “the Golden Elixir of the Great Way.”

3. These images derive from the *Cantong qi*, 67:2 and 57:1–4, respectively (see Pregadio, *The Seal*, pp. 107 and 102). The *yangsui*

mirror is round like Heaven, and receives the essence of the Yang principle (fire) sent forth by the Sun; the *fangzhu* mirror is square like Earth, and gathers the essence of the Yin principle (water or dew) sent forth by the Moon. These mirrors were used in early Taoist meditation practices and in several other contexts.

The remaining pages are not included in this sample

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