

The Zhong-Lü System of Internal Alchemy, by Livia Kohn. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2020. vi, 270 pp. US\$34.95 (paper), US\$15.00 (pdf).

This book by Livia Kohn presents a complete translation of the two most important texts of the Zhong-Lü 鍾呂 lineage of internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹): the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (*Transmission of the Dao from Zhongli to Lü*), and the *Lingbao bifa* 靈寶畢法 (*Conclusive Methods of Numinous Treasure*, DZ1191). The *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* is contained in chapters 14–16 of the *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 (*Ten Books on Cultivating Perfection*, DZ263) and in an abbreviated form in chapters 39–41 of the *Daoshu* 道樞 (*Pivot of the Dao*, DZ1017). The *Lingbao bifa* is also called the *Bichuan Zhengyang zhenren lingbao bifa* 秘傳正陽真人靈寶畢法 (*Perfected Zhengyang's Secret Transmission of the Conclusive Methods of Numinous Treasure*), and, in addition to DZ1191, is also contained in chapter 42 of the *Daoshu*.

A substantial “Discussion” (1–117) serves as an introduction, which contextualizes the texts in their historical setting (ch. 1) and offers a concise, lucid, and readable explanation of the teachings proposed in the texts, from their cosmological underpinnings (ch. 2), to their conception of the human being (ch. 3), to a detailed exposition of their system of practice, explaining stages, key terms, and concepts (ch. 4), and lastly to a clear and straightforward description of the key practices (ch. 5) culled from the often meandering explanations in the texts themselves. An extensive bibliography of twenty pages listing mostly Western secondary literature, and an index of technical terms, personal names, and titles of books complete the monograph. The numerous Chinese texts from the Daoist canon or from the classics cited in the “Discussion” section are referenced in the main text but are not listed in the bibliography.

This book is a very welcome addition to the growing literature on internal alchemy. The Zhong-Lü school is considered the earliest identifiable lineage of inner alchemical teachings,¹ and the two texts

¹ Fabrizio Pregadio, *Taoist Internal Alchemy: An Anthology of Neidan Texts* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2019), 61.

translated here are the main texts of this lineage. The dating of the texts is uncertain. Kohn notes that the Zhong-Lü system appears fully documented as such in the literature only around the twelfth century CE (1). Indeed, the earliest versions of the texts we have are contained in the *Daoshu*, a collection of texts compiled around 1151.² However, the texts might well date back to the tenth or eleventh century.³ They are among the earliest *neidan* texts, and their importance among the first doctrinal texts of *neidan* with accompanying instructions for practice is beyond doubt.

The *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* “consists of eighteen chapters that provide a structured outline of the core teachings of the tradition. The first six focus on cosmology, the next six on alchemical practice, and the last six on the overall purpose of the teachings” (14). The chapters are structured in dialogical form, with Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓 asking questions and Zhongli Quan 鍾離權 answering them. In some cases, Lü Dongbin summarizes the answer of his teacher before asking a new question. Lü Dongbin is best known as one of the Eight Immortals. Legend has it that he was a well-educated gentleman born in 796, and in 836 met under rather mysterious circumstances the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) immortal Zhongli Quan (6–7). The text ties together the doctrinal background of internal alchemical teachings with an outline of practice.

The *Lingbao bifa* is introduced at the end of the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji*, where Zhongli Quan answers the request of his student Lü Dongbin for more precise instructions on how to practice, saying “For this, I have compiled the *Lingbao bifa*” (190). The text purports to be based on revealed instructions, namely “thirty scrolls of Numinous Treasure scriptures” in three sections, respectively called the “Book of Golden Declarations” (Jin’gao shu 金誥書), “Records Written in Jade” (Yulu 玉錄), and “Explanation of the Source of Perfection” (Zhenyuan yi 真源義), which Zhongli

² See Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, “Daoshu 道樞,” in *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, ed. Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 780.

³ Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, *Procédés secrets du joyau magique: Traité d’alchimie taoïste du XIe siècle* (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1984), 25.

Quan allegedly received in a cave on the Zhongnan 終南 mountains (191). The *Lingbao bifa* offers concrete and practical instructions for the practices outlined in the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji*.

Together, the two texts present us with the basic teachings of the Zhong-Lü school, a lineage which Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein notes “represents one of the highest achievements in the history of *neidan*,”⁴ and whose doctrines, practices, terminologies, and imageries have been built on, and are cited, in internal alchemical literature to this day.

Internal alchemy texts propose intrinsically esoteric doctrines and practices based on a complex synthesis of theories, concepts, and practices from a range of sources: cosmological speculations found in Daoist alchemy (*waidan* 外丹); metaphysical and cosmological speculations based on the emblems of the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*); self-cultivation techniques from ancient *yangsheng* 養生 (nourishing life) traditions; medical theory; Buddhist soteriology; and Confucian moral philosophy.⁵ The aim of cultivation is in line with older Daoist ideals of uniting with Dao and thereby achieving immortality, joining the ranks of celestial immortals (*tianxian* 天仙), becoming an official of the celestial bureaucracy (*tianguan* 天官), or being released from the corpse (*shijie* 尸解).⁶

Internal alchemy teachings have attracted much scholarly attention in the past two or three decades, as the comprehensive bibliography in Kohn’s book documents. Furthermore, *neidan* is the basis of cultivation techniques practiced by contemporary Daoists. It has also played an important role in bringing Daoist practice to non-Chinese cultures, specifically to the West. Some Chinese masters have accepted foreign students and have consented to publishing their originally esoteric teachings in translation to reach a Western

⁴ Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, “Zhong-Lü 鍾呂 [Lineage of] Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (London: Routledge, 2008), 2:1277.

⁵ See Fabrizio Pregadio and Lowell Skar, “Inner Alchemy (*neidan*),” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill), 464.

⁶ See Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, “*neidan* 內丹: inner elixir; inner alchemy,” in *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:762.

audience.⁷ Thus, *neidan* teachings have been a focus not only of Western scholars of Daoist studies, but also of Daoist practitioners in the West. Since internal alchemy has received much attention,⁸ many of the foundational texts of internal alchemy now exist in multiple Western translations.⁹

Both texts presented in Kohn's book have been translated into Western languages before. The *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* was rendered into English by Eva Wong,¹⁰ and the *Lingbao bifa* into French by

⁷ There have been several English translations of the instructions of contemporary Chinese *neidan* masters: Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy: The Taoist Practice of Neidan*, trans. and ed. by Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011); Nathan Brine, *The Taoist Alchemy of Wang Liping* (Vancouver: Dragon Gate Press, 2020); Ho Chungtao, *Internal Alchemy for Everyone* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2018); and Wang Liping and Mark Bartosh, *Daoist Internal Mastery* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2019). Kohn states in the acknowledgements that her editorial work on *Daoist Internal Mastery* by Wang and Bartosh inspired her work on the Zhong-Lü school's texts.

⁸ Texts on internal alchemy were among the earliest Daoist texts translated into English. See Louis Komjathy, "Daoist Texts in Translation" (2003): 4, <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/taoist-texts-in-translation.pdf>, accessed December 15, 2020, which points out that inner alchemical texts were translated very early. For example, Frederic Henry Balfour, *Taoist Texts Ethical, Political, and Speculative* (London: Trübner & Co.; Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1884) contains, among others, translations of the *Yinfu jing* 陰符經 (*Scripture on the Hidden Talisman*) and the *Taixi jing* 胎息經 (*Scripture on Embryonic Respiration*). Another prominent example is Richard Wilhelm, *Das Geheimnis der goldenen Blüte: Ein chinesisches Lebensbuch* (München: Dornverlag Grete Ullmann, 1929), published two years later in English under the title *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1931). However, the earliest translations of *neidan* texts did not identify them as such, mainly because they were done before scholarly research provided the means to contextualize these texts and the practices they describe. With the steady advancement of Daoist studies, which provides ever more historical, literary, and religious background of *neidan* texts, earlier translations have been revised or retranslated, and hitherto untranslated *neidan* texts have been translated in growing numbers. Since the 1980s, several scholars in the West, such as Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, Catherine Despeux, Fabrizio Pregadio, and Livia Kohn have spent much time and energy writing and publishing books about internal alchemy and translating its texts.

⁹ See Komjathy, "Daoist Texts in Translation," and Fabrizio Pregadio, *Chinese Alchemy: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in Western Languages* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Eva Wong, *The Tao of Health, Longevity, and Immortality: The Teachings of Immortals Chung and Lü* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000).

Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein.¹¹ In a way, these two translations are symptomatic of an issue that plagues today's Daoist studies: the gap between practitioners and scholars.

Eva Wong's translation of the *Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* is from the perspective of a practitioner writing for practitioners. The language is clear and there are no footnotes, references, or bulky bibliographies and similar conventions useful for academics. An introduction of barely twenty pages presents a sweeping historical background and the main teachings of the text, again without any references to scholarly literature. Alternatively, Baldrian-Hussein's translation of the *Lingbao bifa* is derived from her 1979 PhD thesis. The translation is bristling with footnotes and the bibliography lists Chinese primary sources and scholarly works in Chinese, Japanese, French, English, and German. There is a long glossary of technical terms and a lengthy introduction of 180 pages presents the historical background, delves into the history of the text, and offers an analytic description of the method presented in the text. There are many diagrams and tables. Academically, the translation is very sound, but it is hard to digest for anyone without specialized academic training in Daoist studies.

Internal alchemical teachings are meant to be practiced, but at the same time they arose from historical, cultural, and religious contexts that are complex and far removed from us today. Kohn's book should be read as part of her larger agenda to bridge the gap between practice and scholarship. She has been relentlessly writing, publishing, and organizing workshops and conferences aimed at bringing together Daoist practitioners and academics specializing in Daoism, particularly those in the English-speaking world. She strives to create spaces in which academics may understand their materials from the perspective of practice, and practitioners may learn about the often arcane texts and historical settings from which their practices derive. Kohn's book can be considered a milestone in this endeavor.

The translation is presented in very clear language without cumbersome footnotes. It allows the texts to speak for themselves, and the reader to focus on the flow of the texts and their doctrinal

¹¹ Farzeen Baldrian-Hussein, *Procédés secrets du joyau magique*.

and practical instructions. This flow is often meandering. Practical instructions are preceded by cosmological theorizations and applications of the cosmological concepts to the human body. Kohn's translation allows the reader to fully appreciate the pedagogy of the original texts.

Kohn's own "Discussion," presented before the translations, provides the coordinates one needs to understand the translations in a systematic and lucid way. Here she includes all the conventions academics like to see—an abundance of references, a voluminous and up-to-date bibliography, and Chinese characters with Pinyin transliterations after technical terms.

Kohn has thus managed to create a book that bridges the gap. She provides ready access and informed context to two important early internal alchemical texts of the Zhong-Lü corpus for practitioners and academics alike. Furthermore, the combination of erudite discussion and readable translation should also make this a good book for classroom use. For interested non-specialist readers, this book offers an excellent introduction to Daoist internal alchemy, while specialized readers will appreciate the reliable English translations of these two foundational texts of internal alchemy, which are of great interest not only for Daoist studies but also for the wider fields of intellectual history and the study of religions in China.

Friederike Assandri
University of Leipzig