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The Artist as Alchemist:

Reimaging Xu Wei's Nanjing Museum Handscroll

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The Artist as Alchemist:
Reimaging Xu Wei's Nanjing Museum Handscroll

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A B S T R A C T

China's late Ming dynasty was a syncretic age, and the polymath pursuits of the artist Xu Wei embraced each of the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Of these, the Daoist impact on Xu's artistic production, and specifically the impact of Daoist internal alchemy, have been least explored. The present essay is an effort to contribute to this nascent inquiry. Zhang Songhui's ground-breaking research has made an immense contribution toward fleshing out the Daoist context of Xu Wei's life and work—his identity as a Daoist master, relationships with Daoist associates, and orientation towards Daoism itself. In this context, it is unsurprising to find a Daoist influence in the numinous resonance that Xu attributed to the tools of his craft—brush and ink—and the Daoist dynamics reflected in his aesthetic values. But to keep this essay within the scope of an exploratory survey, such matters can be considered only briefly before pursuing the essay's primary focus, an examination of the apparent referential frame of Daoist internal alchemy played out through style, emblematic prologue, and narrative program in Xu's famed handscroll, *Pictures of Various Flowers*, in the Nanjing Museum.

Key words: Xu Wei, 徐渭, Daoist internal alchemy, *neidan*, 內丹, *Zhouyi cantong qi*, 周易參同契, *Pictures of Various Flowers*, 雜花圖卷

To

Kiyohiko Munakata,

who, from the beginning, recognized the alchemical resonance

in the work of Xu Wei;

and to

Jerome Silbergeld,

who extended much needed guidance and encouragement

when the whole enterprise faltered toward the end.

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THE ARTIST AS ALCHEMIST: REIMAGING XU WEI'S NANJING MUSEUM HANDSCROLL

The compelling draw of the artist Xu Wei's 徐渭 (1521–1593) prodigious yet tragic persona has for centuries fostered a centripetal view of the dynamics of his art. Meteoric in his genius; mercurial of temperament; yet in time so deeply conflicted as to devolve into severe mental imbalance, self-mutilation, and eventually murder—this impassioned profile has traditionally framed semiotic interpretations of Xu's artistic style.[1] Indeed, as Kathleen Ryor has observed, beginning with the first biographical account of Xu, written soon after his death, his life and personality have been the "lens through which his art has been perceived."[2]

Xu Wei was a supremely gifted, complex man, compelled by circumstances to summon all his

1 Kathleen Ryor opens her dissertation with a reference to Yuan Hongdao's 袁宏道 (1568–1610) role in the early hagiographic construction of Xu's "eccentric" and "tragic" persona, which set the pattern followed by later generations for a causal linking of Xu's life, mind, and personality with his art. See Kathleen M. Ryor, "Bright Pearls Hanging in the Marketplace: Self-Expression and Commodification in the Painting of Xu Wei" (PhD diss., New York University Institute of Fine Arts, 1998), 1–2. Founder of the Gong'an 公安 school of literary thought, Yuan wrote a preface, with an agenda of his own, to the publication of Xu's collected work *Xu Wenchang san ji* 徐文長三集 (Three Collections of the Writings of Xu Wenchang) seven years after Xu's death. For Yuan's preface, see *Xu Wei ji*, 徐渭集 (hereafter *XWJ*), 4 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 4:1342–44, "Xu Wenchang zhuan" 徐文長傳 (Biography of Xu Wenchang). Edward Isaac Luper, "Muddy Waters: Political Tensions and Identity in the Writings of Xu Wei (1521–1593)" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, Pembroke College, 2015), 206–10, translates Yuan's preface and includes the Chinese text. For brief English language overviews of Xu's biography, see James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368–1580* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), 159–63, which further extends the analysis with a profile of the Ming "educated, eccentric type" as related to disposition and socio-economic status, 163–66; and Tseng Yu-ho, "A Study on Hsü Wei," *Ars Orientalis* 5 (1963): 243–54. Martin W. Huang provides context by describing the biographical, psychological, and cultural factors, beginning with Xu's birth, that contributed to Xu Wei's mental breakdown in his mid-forties, as well as the coping strategies he called upon to navigate this minefield. See Huang's *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), chap. 3, "The Case of Xu Wei," 53–71. For a substantial biographical investigation in English, see I-cheng Liang, "Hsü Wei (1521–1593): His Life and Literary Works" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1973), 13–49. For an early careful linking of Xu's writing with his biography, see Xu Lun 徐崙, *Xu Wenchang* 徐文長 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1962).

2 Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 1.

gifts to navigate the chronic challenges of complex times.[3] Despite grave calamity, Xu's polymath achievements as professional writer, poet, calligrapher, painter, and dramatist have been celebrated throughout successive generations.

Born in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, to a concubine, on March 12, 1521, Xu lost his father within one hundred days of his birth. The family's third son, Xu was over thirty years younger than the eldest of his two stepbrothers, born to his father's first wife. His father's second wife, far from her family and without children of her own, doted on the boy. Xu responded with a deep attachment. Precocious from the outset, Xu Wei exhibited stellar literary talents very early, and he enjoyed such other pursuits as operatic singing, playing the *qin*, archery, swordplay, and horseback riding.

But due to financial struggles, Xu's birth mother was sent from the family when he was nine years old, and at age thirteen Xu's beloved stepmother died. Deeply distressed by both losses, Xu came under the sole care of his elder brother, Xu Huai 徐淮, until he left the family home to join the household of his future bride.[4] Huai had scattered the family fortune among mountains and waters in search of immortals and the elixir of longevity. He would die from elixir poisoning at the age of fifty-three. Xu Wei's tomb inscription for Huai does not discount his brother's spendthrift hand yet shows true empathy with Huai's longing for transcendence.[5] But in Xu Wei's later years, he distanced himself from transcendence through external alchemy and wholly aligned himself with internal elixir cultivation.[6]

Seen as a man of great promise, Xu was welcomed into the family of the government official Pan Kejing 潘克敬, and relocated with them to Guangdong province, where Xu would marry their daughter in 1541. Back in Shaoxing, the couple was blessed with a son in 1544. On returning to his

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3 This sketch draws primarily from Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 42-77; Liang, "Hsü Wei," 13-47; and Tseng, "A Study on Hsü Wei," 243-252, but cites only a few key events. For a full consideration of his life, please consult these sources.

4 Zhang Songhui 張松輝, "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen ji qi yu Daojia Daojiao de guanxi" 談徐渭的道士身份及其與道家道教的關係 (On Xu Wei's Identity as a Daoist Master and His Relation to Daoist Thought and Religion), *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊, no. 6 (2000): 11.

5 See *XWJ*, 2:632-33, "Boxiong muzhiming" 伯兄墓誌銘 (Tomb Inscription for My Elder Brother).

6 Zhang S., "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen," 13; and *XWJ*, 2:548-49, "Wang shanren zeng yan" 王山人贈言 (Words Offered to Recluse Wang).

hometown, Xu found guidance in the arts from fellow Shaoxing members of the local literati society, the "Ten from the Yue Area" 越中十子. But Xu's beloved wife, weakened by childbirth, died within two years. There followed an interval of uncertainty, transient living, and shifting livelihood, though also a period of stimulating study with a disciple of the neo-Confucianist Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), accompanied by enduring friendships with fellow students. A cherished acquaintance with the painter Xie Shichen 謝時臣 (1487–after 1567) confirmed Xu in aesthetic choices outside the dominant literati canon; in the later 1550s, Xu was honored with the respect of the renowned writer and military strategist Tang Shunzhi 唐順之 (1507–1560) and was gratified by their common innovative views on literary theory.

Yet this was also a stressful time, marked by Xu's repeated failure in the civil service exams—seen as the essential portal to a venerable profession—and of virulent attacks on China by nomads on the northern border and pirates along the southeast coast. Shaoxing itself suffered pirate attacks, and Xu Wei participated in the resistance, also writing accounts of campaigns and suggestions for military strategies, as well as poems to celebrate heroics or censure faulty defense.

But it would be Xu Wei's ghostwriting for the General Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1512–1565), commander of defenses against the southeast coastal pirates, that would dramatically elevate Xu's financial fortune—then precipitate his downfall, even his descent into derangement. Xu's ghostwritten dedicatory memorials, well-received by the throne, greatly raised General Hu's stature in the emperor's eyes. Still, as Hu's reputation soared in courtly circles, Xu remained in the shadows. While ever free-spirited and unconventional in his behavior, Xu was handsomely rewarded by his patron surrogate. Hu showered Xu with gold for his *Zhenhai lou ji* 鎮海樓記 (Record for the Pavilion of Ocean Pacification), which he then invested in the construction of a large estate of twenty-two rooms, with fish ponds and bamboo groves, baldly calling it Hall of Remuneration for Words. A brief second marriage had ended in divorce, but in 1561 Xu would marry a third time and a son was born to the couple the following year.

However, the karma of long-embedded bureaucratic corruption would come to a head in 1562, and the Chief Grand Secretary Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480–1567) was forced to resign. General Hu was accused of cooperating with Yan and thrown into prison. With this stroke, Xu lost his livelihood. Though soon exonerated, in 1565 Hu Zongxian was again implicated in corruptive dealings with the Yan faction and put in prison, where he apparently committed suicide.

In 1563 Xu took a position in Beijing as secretary to the Minister of Rites, Li Chunfeng 李春芳 (1510–1584). But this proved unsatisfactory and the difficulty of severance from his employer greatly deepened Xu's agitation. In 1565, with news of General Hu's death, Xu was seized with fear that he, too, would be implicated, and was further consumed with the guilt that he had not spoken out in support of Hu, who had so favored him with such generous patronage.

Overcome with a sense of dishonor, Xu Wei became bent on suicide and wrote his own epitaph to explain his impending death. Though he did not die, acts of self-mutilation confirm his true derangement during this period.[7] He drove a three-inch nail into his ear then fell, deepening the penetration, though he felt no pain. Eventually, blood issued copiously from the inflamed wound. Xu cracked his skull. He smashed his testicles. Finally, enraged by a suspicion of infidelity, in 1566 Xu Wei beat his wife to death.

Saved from execution through the intercession of influential friends, Xu was imprisoned until granted amnesty at the New Year of 1573, with the ascension of the Wanli Emperor. Amazingly, given these arduous conditions, Xu's writing and study flourished during his imprisonment, and friends were able to visit and provide food. It was in prison that Xu would write a carefully considered commentary on the alchemical classic *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (The Seal of the Unity of the Three in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*).[8]

It is generally assumed that most of his paintings date from his post-prison years. Upon his release, Xu Wei taught private students and traveled with disciples to famed sites in the surrounding

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7 For a discussion of Xu's illness, see Kathleen Ryor's book chapter "Fleshly Desires and Bodily Deprivations: The Somatic Dimension of Xu Wei's Flower Painting," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 122–26.

8 This classic is attributed to the alchemist and Guiji 會稽 native Wei Boyang 魏伯陽 (fl. second century). For a translation and annotation of this work with accompanying Chinese text, see Fabrizio Pregadio, *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* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011); see 5–12, 27, for a discussion of the authorship and dating of this work. The text is also included in the *Daoist Canon* with commentary by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1258–1314); see *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* 周易參同契發揮 (An Elucidation of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*), in *Daozang*, TY 998, vols. 625–27. Works collected in the *Daoist Canon* are cited here by the corresponding [TY] number from Ren Jiyu 任繼愈 and Zhong Zhaopeng 鐘肇鵬, eds., *Daozang tiyao* 道藏提要 (*Daoist Canon* Abstracts) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991).

environs. In recognition of his writing skill and critical thinking, Xu was recruited to contribute economic and societal analyses in entries for the *Guiji County Gazeteer* 會稽縣志 (*Guiji xianzhi*) (the area of the present Shaoxing). Further afield, Xu answered the summons of patron friends associated with garrisons on China's northern frontier and, in addition, worked as a ghost writer in Beijing. But physical and mental illness continued to plague him, and in 1582 he returned home for good, distancing himself from people of wealth or rank. Though he responded to civic requests for commemorative writings and helped to edit the Guiji local gazetteer, by 1587 Xu's health increasingly deteriorated, and injury from drunken mishaps brought much pain—even deafness. Impoverished, living in the home and under the care of his younger son's wife, Xu Wei died in 1593—the exact date is unrecorded.

Traditionally, a madman-genius persona has glossed all interpretations of Xu Wei's visual arts, with his proponents championing his work as "original," "eccentric," "heterodox," "wild and untrammeled." Over recent decades, this profile has been greatly augmented, initiated by the rigorous analysis of Kathleen Ryor's dissertation, which contextualized interacting vectors of self-expression in Xu's painting style and inscribed poems as they interfaced with the literati, military, and commodity cultures of late Ming.[9] Her later detailed study of the somatic dimensions in Xu's art—actualized through style and made explicit by text and imagery—counterpointed the artist's sensual desires, common to many in the flourishing contemporary marketplace, with the painful disjunction imposed by his bodily limitations caused by ill health, poverty, and old age.[10]

But beyond the physical and affective contradictions revealed in his art, Xu Wei's ardent longing for enlightenment loomed large throughout the endeavors of his lifetime. The late Ming was a syncretic age[11] (Fig. 1),[12] and Xu seriously pursued each of the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and

9 See Ryor, "Bright Pearls," as well as her article "Regulating the *Qi* and the *Xin*: Xu Wei (1521–1593) and His Military Patrons," *Archives of Asian Art* 54 (2004): 23–33.

10 See Ryor, "Fleshly Desires," 121–45.

11 See Judith A. Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 46–61. For Xu's view, see Luper, "Muddy Waters," 47–50; and *XWJ*, 2.583, "Sanjiao tu zan" 三教圖贊 (In Praise of a Picture of the Three Teachings). Zhang Songhui also notes Xu's high estimation of both Daoism and Buddhism, second only to Confucianism. See Zhang S., "Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen," 11–12; and *XWJ*, 2:493, "Lun zhong qi" 論中七 (Seventh Essay).

12 This woodcut illustration is from the alchemical treatise *Xingming guizhi* 性命圭旨 (Principles of Balanced Cultivation

Daoism. Altogether, Xu Wei saw the Three Teachings as a complementary unity, each essential to the whole, as wife and concubine to a marriage.[13]

of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to the disciples of Yin Zhenren 尹真人弟子, all persons otherwise unidentified. The earliest extant edition dates to 1615, twenty-two years after Xu Wei's death. The work is richly illustrated, giving graphic representation to principles associated with inner alchemy prevalent during this time. Xu Wei's poem cited in n. 11, "Sanjiao tu zan," would appear to have been written upon viewing an image with content similar to that of Fig. 1. For a reprint of the treatise, see Yin Zhenren dizi, *Xingming guizhi* (early 1600s; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1989). Digital reproduction of the 1622 edition held in the Library of Congress is accessible online at https://www.loc.gov/item/2014514151, accessed 3/3/2024. For a rendering in the vernacular with annotations, see Li Jianzhang 李建章, *Xingming guizhi baihua jie* 性命圭旨白話解 (Vernacular Explication of the *Xingming guizhi*) (Beijing: Renmin tiyu chubanshe, 2000). For a cultural contextualization and annotated translation of key sections of the text, including passages that accompany many of this essay's illustrations, see Daniel Burton-Rose, "Integrating Inner Alchemy into Late Ming Cultural History: A Contextualization and Annotated Translation of Principles of the Innate Disposition and the Lifespan (*Xingming guizhi*) (1615)" (MA thesis, University of Colorado, 2009).

13 See *XWJ*, 2:493, "Lun zhong qi." In this essay, Xu ranks Confucianism first, as is due the legal wife, complemented by the two equal "concubines" of Daoism and Buddhism. See also Zhang S., "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen," 11–12.

Fig. 1. "Three Sages." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 1.1b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

Several investigations into Xu Wei's identity, oriented by each of these Teachings, have emerged in recent years, two of them citing their impact on his literary or painterly style.14 The Daoist resonance

14 For the influence of Chan Buddhism on Xu Wei's thought and artistic style, see Xu's biography regarding his cherished associate of many years, Yuzhi Faju 玉芝法聚 (1491–1563), *XWJ*, 2: 622–23, "Ju Chanshi zhuan" 聚禪師傳 (Biography of the Chan Master Ju); and Kathleen Ryor, "Style as Substance: Literary Ink Painting and Buddhist Practice in Late Ming Dynasty China," in *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, ed. Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 244–65, esp. 250–55; 250, mentions Xu's relationship with this monk; 246 speaks to the contemporary dynamics between literati and Chan monks. See also James Cahill, "Continuations of Ch'an Ink Painting into Ming–Ch'ing and the Prevalence of Type Images," *Archives of Asian Art* 50 (1997/1998): 17–41. Unlike Ryor's study, Cahill's investigation is not limited to works with

in Xu's artistic production, and specifically the impact of Daoist internal alchemy, remain the least explored. However, the immense pioneering contribution of Zhang Songhui's biographical research has worked to flesh out Xu's identity as a Daoist master (道士 *Daoshi*), his relationship to Daoist associates, and his orientation to Daoism itself.15 Within this context, it is unsurprising to find a Daoist influence in the numinous resonance that Xu attributed to the tools of his craft—brush and ink—and Daoist dynamics reflected in his aesthetic values. But these can be considered only briefly before pursuing this essay's primary focus, an examination of apparent Daoist internal alchemical reference played out through style, emblematic prologue, and narrative program in Xu's famed handscroll, *Pictures of Various Flowers*, in the Nanjing Museum.

The term Daoism embraces a vast array of indigenous Chinese systems of thought, belief, and practices—all related through a common cosmological thread.[16] In this view, the original single component/dynamic behind the continually transforming, evolving cosmos is Primordial *Qi* 元氣 (*yuanqi*).[17] Without a Western conceptual counterpart, the term *qi* has been variously translated as "breath," "energy," or "vital life-force." Isabelle Robinet says of this *qi*: "Condensed, it becomes life; diluted, it is indefinite potential."[18]

Preceding the generative process that would ultimately birth the manifest world is the One—Original Chaos, the Great Ultimate, the Dao. The Dao would birth the Two: Yin ☷ (*Kun*/Earth) and Yang ☰ (*Qian*/Heaven), here expressed through the corresponding system of trigrams from the *Book of Changes* (易經 *Yijing*).[19] According to the narrative favored by internal alchemy, during the turbulence immediately following this separation into Yin and Yang, *Qian* would lose its inner essence

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Buddhist-specific iconography. As for the Confucian impact on Xu Wei's thought, extended to his literary style, Edward Luper's dissertation, "Muddy Waters," explores this in depth; p. 42 summarizes Luper's approach.

15 See Zhang S., "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen."

16 Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1–7. Robinet's book is the primary source for this overview, particularly pp. 1–20 and 212–51.

17 See Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2:1192, "*yuanqi*."

18 Robinet, *Taoism*, 7.

19 See *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and rendered into English by Cary E. Baynes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967).

to *Kun*, now transformed as *Kan* ☵, *yin* harboring True Yang. *Qian* is similarly transformed as *Li* ☲, with an inner essence of True Yin harbored within *yang*. From the continual, myriad interactions of *Li* and *Kan* issue the "ten thousand things" of the existential world.

Conceptually and in practice, the two trigrams *Li* and *Kan* hold primary place in internal alchemical refinement. "The first task of the alchemist consists in finding the 'true Lead' and the 'true Mercury' [metaphorically referencing key elements used in the external alchemical process], which are the Yin in the Yang, and, conversely, the kernel inside the fruit" [the Yang in the Yin].[20] (When viewing Xu Wei's Nanjing handscroll, recall this fortuitous expression, "the kernel inside the fruit"!)

Unlike earlier Chinese techniques of external alchemy 外丹 (*waidan*) which aimed to produce an ingestible elixir of immortality using laboratory procedures, from the eighth century onwards, internal alchemy 內丹 (*neidan*) gained currency as a physiological and intellectual discipline of enlightenment—"redeeming and regenerative."[21] This practice sought to align an adept's own body and mind with cosmic order, strategically reversing the above generative process, to effect a reversion back to the Original Unity of the Dao, the Origin of all possibility—a condition seen as akin to physical and spiritual "immortality."[22]

After an initial preparatory stage, three refinement stages work towards a realization of this transformation. The active drama of the first stage, where the "Medicine" (藥 *yao*) circulates in successive refinement cycles through the body (Fig. 15), lends itself splendidly to vivid pictorial

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20 Robinet, *Taoism*, 237.

21 Robinet, *Taoism*, 218.

22 Xu Wei believed in the actuality of Transcendents ("immortals" 仙人 [*xianren*]). His biographical sketch of Wang Daozhen 王燾貞 (or Tanyang 曇陽) (1558–1580), a young woman contemporary with Xu, who attained "immortality" through Daoist cum Buddhist study and practices (even an "ascension," said to have been witnessed by thousands), is an apologia for belief addressed to those who do not believe. For this biography, see *XWJ*, 3:1039-40, "Tan Dashi zhuan lue" 曇大師傳略 (Biographical Sketch of Master Tan). Xu further wrote a series of poems celebrating Tanyang's achievement; see *XWJ*, 1:111-12, "Tanyang" 曇陽. For a recent evaluation of Wang Daozhen's life, see L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368-1644*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 2:1425-27 (Wang Tao-chen). For Xu's belief in internal alchemy as an effective means toward transcendence, see Zhang S., "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen," 13; and *XWJ*, 2:548-49, "Wang shanren zeng yan" 王山人贈言 (Words Offered to Recluse Wang).

representation and appears to set the frame of reference for Xu Wei's Nanjing scroll. Only the rare adept can continue on to the second stage, nourishing the Embryo of Sainthood (聖胎 *shengtai*), the Infant (嬰兒 *ying'er*) (Fig. 32); or to the third, "refining spirit to return to Emptiness" (Fig. 24). Details of the first refinement stage will preview and accompany an examination of the specifics at play in Xu Wei's Nanjing Museum handscroll.

Within such a Daoist context, this inquiry opens with a look at the evocative aura the artist claimed for his tools. Xu's series of sixteen lyric poems (*ci* 詞), individually titled to feature such cosmic players as Sun, Moon, Wind and Cloud, extends this numinous celebration to four human-created phenomena: inkstone, brush, ink, and sword.23 Xu Wei cites all these lyrics as *dai yingzhi* 代應制, ghost writings commissioned to present to the throne, with the ultimate recipient most probably the Daoist Jiajing Emperor (r. 1521–1567), a believer in alchemy and avid seeker of immortality.24

Excerpts from the brush and ink verses of this series reveal that Xu could locate the nature of his craft on a Daoist altar. Of the brush, Xu writes:

	Flowers are born in dream	夢裏生花
2	Lanes fly out beyond the calligraphic strokes	書邊飛巷
	The fruit of long whiskers is communication with the Spirits	長鬚果是通神
4	Who can be called a companion?	作伴云誰
	All come to the gemlike scholar upon his mat	都來席上儒珍
6	Jade drops of the Moon Toad	蟾蜍玉滴
	Golden eyes of the Sun's Blackbird	鸛鴿金睛
8	Are gathered together on wondrous paper[25]	廉收松麝溪藤

23 See *XWJ*, 2:422–27.

24 These lyrics were likely written during Xu Wei's period as "substitute brush" for General Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1512–1565). For a detailed account of Xu's tenure under Hu, see Xu L., *Xu Wenchang*, 81–99; see Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 53–56, for a brief overview.

25 Literally *songshe* 松麝 ("pine musk-deer") and *xiteng* 溪藤 ("stream vines"). *Xiteng* paper was a local specialty of the Shaoxing area. I am guessing *songshe* was also a type of paper but have been unable to confirm this. For *xiteng* paper, see *Shaoxing fuzhi* 紹興府志 (Shaoxing Prefecture Gazetteer) (Kangxi 1719 ed.; Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1983), 537: [pt. 4]

	All yield to the general	併付將
10	Who with martial command	雄豪管領
	In one sweep [is master of] a thousand warriors	一掃千軍[26]

Speaking of different inks, Xu elaborates:

4	Dragon compound[27] and rhinoceros[28] glue	龍劑犀膠
	Collected together accompany the lamp smoke	收來共伴燈烟
6	Refining relies on method	煉修依法
	Correspondences accord to person	印證隨人
8	[The ink] then assumes the mystery of Laozi	纔成老氏之玄
	. . .	. . .
	With drops of water	呵來滴水
16	It magically becomes purple mist or coiled scaly dragon	幻成紫霧蛟磻
	Or may be transformed as immense green flies	有時化作蒼蠅大
18	Or again the gown and cap adorning a Daoist adept	便改粧道士衣冠
	Offered to our Emperor:	向吾皇
20	O Mountain of ten thousand years	萬歲山呼
	Longevity equal to Heaven	壽永同天[29]

Here Xu regards the fruit of his brush (called "long whiskers") as "communication with the

11.1054–55, "Wuchan zhi" 物產志 (Record of Local Products).

26 *XWJ*, 2:426, "Bi" 筆 (Brush).

27 The characters *long ji* 龍劑 ("dragon compound") may refer to the ink *long xiang ji* 龍香劑 ("dragon incense compound") cited in Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (fl. 1360–1368), *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄 (Nancun's Recordings Made during Respite from Plowing) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 363.

28 The character is *xi* 犀, a bovine animal of mythical proportions with one to three horns, here glossed as rhinoceros.

29 *XWJ*, 2:426, "Mo" 墨 (Ink).

spirits," delighting in its "jade drops of the Moon Toad"[30] and "golden eyes of the Sun's Blackbird."[31] The lyric's Moon and Sun reference Yin and Yang (or True Yang within *yin* and True Yin within *yang*, integral to the art under Xu's hand), whose interactions result in generating the endless diversity of the "ten thousand things" in the manifest world. Such imagery is realized through the marvels of ink, refined in accord with his person, to be imbued with the mystery of Laozi. Altogether, Xu's brush and ink actualize an art with a kindred resonance worthy of an idealized emperor[32]— "Offered to our Emperor, Mountain of ten thousand years, longevity equal to Heaven."

At their core, Xu Wei's aesthetic values are grounded in the dynamics of Daoist mystery. What is most celebrated in Xu Wei's painting, and vividly animated in a Xu colophon included in his collected work,[33] is the precarious conflated tension between the protean natures fronted by the Eighteenth Aunt 十八姨 *Shiba yi* (Aunt Feng [*Fengyi* 封姨], a personified goddess of wind [*fengshen* 風神]), and Shi Cucu 石醋醋 (the red pomegranate flower as sensuous "sylph" [仙 *xian*]). Two characters from an enchanted tale of the Tang dynasty, in Xu's poem the wind goddess and seductive sylph are recast as aesthetic values.[34] These values, in turn, appear to shadow the dialectics of "alchemical" process. Merging the compelling sensuality of flower and fruit with the rake of wind—the wild roughness of Xu's

30 See Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), esp. 191, for the image of the Moon Toad in poetry.

31 See Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, 163–68, for Sun lore.

32 For Xu's concept of his relation to an idealized emperor and the imperium, see Luper, "Muddy Waters," 150–94.

33 See *XWJ*, 1:150, "Yu zuo hua shier zhong duo fengshi, zhong you liuhua, ti qi juan shou yue Shi Cucu mazuo" 予作花十二種多風勢, 中有榴花, 題其卷首曰石醋醋罵座 (I Made Twelve Kinds of Flowers Much [Blown] by the Power of Wind [or filled with the aspect of wind (多風勢 *duo fengshi*)], Among These Is the Pomegranate Flower, So I Inscribed the Scroll with the Poem "Shi Cucu Curses the Host"). For a translation of the poem, see Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 180–82.

34 For a translation of the Tang dynasty story, see Karl S. Y. Kao, ed., *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 297–300. For the Chinese text, see Zheng Huangu 鄭還古 (ninth century), *Boyi zhi* 博異志 (Record of Various Strange Matters), Congshu jicheng xinbian edition, vol. 82, 115–16, "Cui Xuanwei" 崔玄微. This story enjoyed currency in late Ming with successive printings. Works by early Qing writers also played off the dramatic tension of the narrative. See Judith T. Zeitlan, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 262, n. 3.

creative power outside any containment of convention—works as vital *yang* force sounding within *yin* sensuous forms.

The energetics of the Tang tale are greatly heightened in Xu's colophon, which exponentially amplifies the polar dynamics of the two spirits: "I Made Twelve Kinds of Flowers Much [Blown] by the Power of Wind [or filled with the aspect of wind (多風勢)], Among These Is the Pomegranate Flower, So I Inscribed the Scroll's Poem 'Shi Cucu Curses the Host.'"[35] Arriving in the garden of a Daoist recluse for the moonlight gathering of fragrant flower spirits, Aunt Feng is wild yet heavy of body as against the aqueous sensuality of Shi Cucu, her hair combed in a new high chignon. Shi is as if sea-living, the woman-fish (鮫人 "jiao ren"), both comely and capable, who wreaths her bower with many sashes of silk woven on coral branches.[36] Her tears are bright pearls, pearls like the moon that waver but do not drop, like ice lodged in the white belly gel of yellow fish. "Red mouth, vaporous powder, brows like distant mountains; when worry comes, wrinkling snaps the silk cocoons of spring. But lovely Shi, small of form, does not refuse the cup; the night is deep, the tide low, cheeks are flushed and soft."

Toasting the sensuous Shi, a volatile Aunt Feng carelessly overturns her wine cup, staining the sylph's garment. With Aunt's careless spill, the tone shifts and Shi Cucu unleashes a torrent of accusations. Initially seemingly linked to the counter of *yin* and *yang*—butterfly's ash 胡蝶灰[37] and

35 *XWJ*, 1:150, "Yu zuo hua shier zhong duo fengshi . . ."

36 See *Ci yuan* 辭源 (Source of Expressions), 4 vols. (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 4:3510, "jiao ren" and "jiao xiao" (鮫綃 jiao silk). My understanding of Xu's lines here differs from Kathleen Ryor's, being oriented by Xu's reference to "jiao silk," a product specific to "jiao ren." The *Bowu zhi* 博物志 (Monograph on Various Matters) by Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) speaks of "jiao ren" as a creature of the Southern Sea, living in the water like fish, though able to spin and weave, whose eyes weep pearls. "Jiao xiao" 鮫綃 (鮹 *sic*) is the silk she weaves. See Zhang Hua, *Bowu zhi*, Sibu beiyao edition, vol. 362, 9.2a. Xu's stanzas describing Shi Cucu: 醋醋能嬌百帶牢，珊瑚枝上織鮫鮹，明珠似月搖難落，冰住黃魚白鰾膠 。 。 。 朱唇粉暈山眉遠， 愁來皺斷春蠶繭，石娘嬌小不辭觴, 夜深潮淺腮紅軟。

37 "Butterfly's ash" may be related to the pigmented powder-like scales on butterfly wings that Xu Wei seems to refer to, by comparison with the cosmetics gracing his imagined "flower fairies" 花姨 *huayi*, in his poem "Ke qiang yu hua shiliu zhong hua. . ." 客強予畫十六種花 (A Guest Compelled Me to Paint Sixteen Kinds of Flowers), *XWJ*, 1:150. Adele Austin Rickett has translated Xu's line describing rooms [i.e., his scroll] adorned with a profusion of flowers (as if with beautiful women): "The butterflies are jealous of this powdered company" 蝴蝶固應憎粉伴, quoted in Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 209.

yellow wasp's stinger, wind of Fengyi and thunder of Fenglong 豐隆 (Master of Clouds/Thunder),[38] and a query through painted pictures regarding Being and Non-being (問畫圖，有與無)—Shi challenges Aunt Feng: "Why did you do it?" Continuing unabated, Shi heaps a cacophony of charges, decrying all manner of riotous revelry.

The poem concludes with a scene of drunken gaming while recklessly imbibing in the company of a *yaksha* spirit, which flips the *yin–yang* dialectic on its ear as a volte-face fudging when shouting out scores: "For 'five white,' call out 'five black [*liu*]'" (五白呼盧 *wubai hu lu*). These terms come from a gambling game.[39] Black on top, white underneath, the playing pieces when thrown to fall all five black score a throw called "*liu*" 盧.[40] "*Liu*" is the highest hand; "five white" ranks second. Throughout this catalog of unbridled abandon, again and again Shi demands of Aunt Feng: Why? Why? Why?

All considered, Xu Wei's colophon foregrounding the counters of butterfly's ash and wasp's stinger, Fengyi's wind and Fenglong's thunder,[41] rounded out with a query through painted pictures

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38 Fenglong, Master of Clouds, is known through thunder. See Morohashi Tetsuji 諸橋轍次, *Dai Kan-Wa jiten* 大漢和辭典 (Unabridged Chinese–Japanese dictionary), 13 vols. (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten, 1960), 10:11092 (650), "Fenglong" 豐隆.

39 See *Ci hai* 辭海 (Sea of Expressions), comp. *Ci hai* bianji weiyuanhui (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1979), 30, "wubai" 五白. For a poem by Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), on being reconciled to taking a chance and falling short—throwing "five white" but unable to throw "*liu*"—as a way of life beyond an evening's diversion, see Du Fu, *The Poetry of Du Fu*, trans. Stephen Owen (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2016), vol. 1, bk. 1, 36, entry 1.30, "Jin xi xing" (今夕行 This Evening: A Ballad).

40 For game details, see Li Ao 李翱 (772–841), *Wumu jing* 五木經 (Book of Five Wood [Playing Pieces]), Congshu jicheng xinbian edition, vol. 54, 437.

41 Consonant with Xu's apparent *yang–yin* dialectic of Fengyi and Fenglong in his inscription, the set of sixteen *ci* lyrics, which includes the poems on brush and ink excerpted above, opens with the primary cosmic players of sun and moon, followed immediately by the paired lyrics of wind and cloud. See Xu's lyrics *XWJ*, 2:422–23, "Feng" 風 (Wind) and "Yun" 雲 (Cloud), with the "Wind" lyric also featuring the counter of *Fengyi* 風姨 ("Aunt Wind") and Shi Cucu (here called "small female spirit" 小女神 *xiao nüshen*). The "Cloud" lyric, in transmitting the Dao from Heaven to Earth, cites the powers of Fenglong, Master of Clouds and Thunder on the peak of the Kunlun Mountains, and the Goddess of Shaman Mountain exuberantly rhapsodized by the poet Song Yu 宋玉 (fl. third century BCE). Two rhapsodies attributed to Song are the loci classici for this goddess. See Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), comp., *Wen xuan; or Selections of Refined Literature*, trans. David R. Knechtges, 3 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982–), 3:325–39, "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine"; and 339–49, "Rhapsody on the Goddess." For the Chinese text, see *Wen xuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature), 6 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 2:19.875–86, 高唐賦 "Gaotang fu," and 886–92, 神女賦 "Shennü fu." First seen in Song's

regarding Being and Non-being suggests a core *yin–yang* dialectic at work in the accompanying painting. Kathleen Ryor has noted Xu's "admiration of the feminine sensuousness within the military vigor of the painting and calligraphy of Chen Daofu" 陳道復 (ca. 1483–1544), whose work most closely mentored Xu's stylistic development.[42] Transmuting Chen's approach, Xu Wei's essential aesthetic, which conflates the *yin–yang* energetics of "Cloud" and "Wind," (or merges the essences of Dragon and Tiger as "alchemical elixir"),[43] would seem active in numerous paintings.

But Xu's poem "Twelve Flowers Much [Blown] by the Power of Wind," in its query through painted pictures regarding Being and Non-being, activates the *yin-yang* resonance of his art within a cosmological energy field. The Nanjing Museum's celebrated handscroll of various plants would seem to participate in this cosmic dialectic, both in individual imagery and the scroll's narrative progression. Yet the only verbal nod toward the sense of the Nanjing scroll refers simply to its playful tone through

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poem as a cloudy vapor 雲氣 that momentarily undergoes a myriad transformations, the goddess says of herself: "At dawn, I am the clouds of morn; at evening the coursing rain" (translation by Paula M. Varsano, *Tracking the Banished Immortal: The Poetry of Li Bo and Its Critical Reception* [Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003], 347, n. 73.) While sexual innuendo attends the goddess' "clouds and rain," her continually changing nature is vastly magnified across the convoluted panorama of her environs: the marvels and fearsome sights of an ever-transforming Shaman Mountain, the "progenitor of the myriad things" (萬物祖 *wanwu zu*), vividly described in "Rhapsody on the Gaotang Shrine."

42 Ryor, "Bright Pearls," 145–46. Her book chapter "Fleshly Desires" carefully deconstructs somatic aspects in the work of Xu Wei; see esp. 135–36 for "physical movement" and "seductive appearance."

43 The *yin–yang* polar dynamics of "Wind" and "Cloud," animated in correlative associations with Tiger and Dragon, have a long literary tradition in China, ranging from the *Book of Changes* (易經 *Yijing*) and the *Chuci* (楚辭 Songs of Chu) (fourth century BCE–second century CE) to alchemical texts. See *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, 382: "Clouds follow the dragon, wind follows the tiger." For the dating of this work, see ibid., lviii–lxi. Fabrizio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:1161–64, "*Yijing*," describes this classic. For the Chinese text, see Xiao Dengfu 蕭登福, *Yijing xin yi* 易經新譯 (New Interpretation of the *Yijing*) (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 2001), 120: 雲從龍, 風從虎. For parallel language in inner alchemical practice, see Wang Jie 王玠 (?–ca.1380), *Commentary on the Mirror for Compounding the Medicine* ("*Ruyao jing zhujie*"): *A Fourteenth-Century Work on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, trans. Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2013), 7 and 72: "On exhaling, 'the dragon howls and the clouds rise'; on inhaling, 'the tiger roars and the wind blows'" [呼則龍吟而雲起, 吸則虎嘯而風生]. Emblematically, in Ming dynasty inner alchemy, the Tiger symbolized True Yang within *yin*; the Dragon, True Yin within *yang*; see Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, 12–13, n. 16, and 211. Formation of the elixir was graphically expressed as the merging of their essences—the two fundamental cosmic principles of True Yang and True Yin (Fig. 4).

Xu's sign-off, integrated into the last passage of the painting itself: "Playfully smeared by the Lake of Heaven recluse Xu Wei" 天池山人徐渭戲抹.

Throughout an astounding course of "play," the Nanjing handscroll projects a process that is ever vibrant and luminously present. But is this *yin–yang* process one of generation succeeded by decline, as in the manifest world, or of reverting back to the Origin through elixir refinement? Or both? Or is it primarily a play of the painting process itself and of personal expression?[44] Indeed, any ontological reference in the painting must be rendered deftly malleable to imperatives of aesthetics, expression, and gesture singular to Xu. But given Xu Wei's deep regard for the numinous nature of his craft and his lifelong quest for enlightenment, the dynamics of elixir-refining could resonate with the iconography of the scroll's shine.

While the Nanjing handscroll is universally acclaimed as the apex of Xu Wei's painting artistry, interpretations of the intent of its style and imagery span a varied spectrum. These range from the category of "unorthodox" "black painting" (黑畫 *hei hua*), reflecting the anguish of madness, personal misfortune, and religious conflict,[45] to "the place where the artist's bravura execution threatens to collapse the boundary between expressing the heart/mind through the hand and representing the physical disruptions of the artist's body."[46]

Taking a position not yet elsewhere explored,[47] this essay holds that the Nanjing handscroll—very playful in imagery, for all its intensity—references the alchemical first stage of internal elixir refinement in the journey towards transcendent reunion with the Dao. This is the stage, mentioned

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44 In the conclusion to her dissertation, Ryor reflects on the stylistic intent of the Nanjing handscroll. See "Bright Pearls," esp. 275.

45 See Wu Hung, "A Short History of 'Black Painting' (黑畫 *hei hua*)—A Counter Tradition in Chinese Art." Talk presented at "Art, History, and Sinology: An International Conference in Honor of Martin J. Powers," November 10, 2018, posted at https://youtu.be/ej3Ojm4HyXA, accessed 3/08/2024.

46 Ryor, "Fleshy Desires," 143.

47 Cited in Ryor, "Fleshly Desires," 143, Jonathan S. Hay referred to this painting as an "alchemy of ink and illusion" in an unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Boston, March 1994. But by personal communication, Dr. Hay insisted that the term "alchemy" was used only metaphorically in this paper, and did not at all involve inner alchemical refinement.

earlier, in which the "Medicine" circulates in successive cycles of refinement through the body. To facilitate this internal "travel," during a preparatory stage ("laying the foundations" 築基 [*zhuji*]), an adept must have carefully cultivated the body's Lesser Celestial Circuit 小周天 (*xiao zhoutian*)[48] so as to form a continuous conduit from the lower Cinnabar (Elixir) Field 丹田 (*dantian*),[49] located in the lower abdomen, to the first of the "Three Passes" 三關 (*sanguan*)[50] at the base of the spine (see this essay, Fig. 15). The Control Channel 督脈 (*dumai*) of this Circuit then follows the spine up through two more "Passes" and along the skull to the upper Cinnabar Field (behind the eyes, in the center of the head). By way of the Circuit's Function Channel 任脈 (*renmai*), the conduit drops directly down the center of the body, passing through the middle Cinnabar Field, to return again to the lower Cinnabar Field.[51] During the first refinement stage, while being guided by an adept through the conduit in its ascent along the spine, the Medicine undergoes incremental increases of *yang*; descending, the Medicine is gradually "softened" with incremental increases of *yin*. During the three hundred cycles along the Lesser Celestial Circuit of this first refinement stage, the adept advances the Medicine through ever greater purification. Details will be discussed when considering specifics in Xu Wei's painting.

In rendering the dynamics of the Medicine's refinement "journey," Xu ingeniously translates the traditional handscroll "travelog" narrative format into a progression of plant images, reflecting the experience of the Medicine as it moves through the body during this initial stage of the physiological refinement process towards elixir formation. Xu's scroll hits the highlights—the Three Passes and Three Cinnabar Fields—appearing to end with the emergence of "immaterial" Yang *qi*.

The "travelog" itinerary, which forms the bulk of the scroll, immediately follows what is presented as an introductory prologue. Xu Wei was also a playwright, and this "prologue" approach is

48 For a summary of the *zhoutian* in inner alchemical theory and practice, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:1287–89, "*zhoutian*" 周天 (Celestial Circuit).

49 For the three *dantian*, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:302-03, "*dantian*," Cinnabar Field(s); Field(s) of the Elixir.

50 For the Three Passes, see Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy: The Taoist Practice of Neidan*, trans. Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), 34–36.

51 For a description of these two Channels, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:389–91, "*dumai* and *renmai*."

comparable to devices in drama that introduce key characters and situational dynamics. In Xu's scroll, these assume form as plant renderings of key internal alchemical *xiang* 象 (images). *Xiang* are explicatory, analogical images, referentially mediating between the ineffable, formless Dao and the manifested world.[52] The handscroll's first two images—peony and pomegranate—may respectively reference the two *xiang*, *Li* 離 ☲ and *Kan* 坎 ☵ (True Yin within *yang* and True Yang within *yin*). As the initial targets for elixir refinement, Xu's opening of his scroll with the analogic images of *Li* and *Kan* could squarely situate these "players" and the "play" within the first refinement stage.

Intimately conversant with the analogic tools of internal alchemy, Xu Wei wrote a carefully considered commentary to the alchemical classic *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (The Seal of the Unity of the Three in Accordance with the *Book of Changes*) while in prison for the murder of his third wife.[53] The *Zhouyi cantong qi* integrates three traditions: a cosmological systembased on the *Book of Changes* (易經 *Yijing*);[54] the way of "non-doing" (無為 *wuwei*) as expressed in the *Daode jing* (道德經 Scripture of the Dao and Its Virtue);[55] and alchemy, or the way of "doing" (有為 *youwei*).[56] As a microcosm, man reflects the macrocosmic system governing the whole. Internal alchemy looks to the principles operative in this cosmic system to discern the way home, principles which can illumine an individual's path towards reunion with the Original Unity of the Dao.

To review again the cosmic generative process: the One—Original Chaos, the Great Ultimate, the Dao—precedes the operations that will ultimately birth the manifest world. The Dao births the Two: Yin ☷ (*Kun/Earth)* and Yang ☰ (*Qian*/Heaven). According to the narrative favored by internal alchemy, during the turbulence immediately following this separation into Yin and Yang, *Qian* would lose its

52 See Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:1086–87, "*xiang* 象. See also Isabelle Robinet, "The Alchemical Language, or the Effort to Say the Contradictory," in *The World Upside Down: Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, by Isabelle Robinet, ed. and trans. by Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), 26–32.

53 On Xu's commentary, see Fabrizio Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, *Vol. 2*, *Bibliographic Studies on the "Cantong qi"; Commentaries, Essays, and Related Works* (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), 55–56, 89, and 163–66.

54 See *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm.

55 On this text, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:311–15, "*Daode jing*."

56 See Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, [vol. 1], 4–5.

inner essence to *Kun*, now transformed as *Kan* ☵, *yin* harboring True Yang. *Qian* is similarly transformed as *Li* ☲, with an inner essence of True Yin harbored within *yang*. From the continual, myriad interactions of *Li* and *Kan* issue the "ten thousand things" of the existential world.

Expressed by analogy, to backtrack towards reunion with the Original Unity of the Dao, the alchemist's goal (Fig. 2, read from right to left) is to first extract the True Yang of the pre-celestial Dao from within post-celestial *yin* (*Kan*), and the pre-celestial True Yin from within post-celestial *yang* (*Li*) (stage 1); then perfect the Two and conjoin them as One (represented as Pure Yang) (stage 2). With further refinement, the One can then return to the Dao of "Emptiness" (stage 3).[57]

57 For an overview of the cosmogonic "continuation" (順 *shun*) process, which generates the "ten thousand things" from the Dao, correlated to its "inversion" (逆 *ni*) in elixir refinement, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:551–55, "*jindan*" 金丹 (Golden Elixir); and 555, Table 15. For a useful introduction to the concepts and practices of internal elixir refinement see Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, esp. 79–83 and 67–68, followed in this essay's summary of the first stage in refining the Medicine. See also Joseph Needham with Lu Gwei-Djen, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 5: Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part V: Spagyrical Discovery and Invention; Physiological Alchemy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), esp. 20–129. But how does it actually feel in the body, what is the experience of this physiological/intellectual discipline? Traditionally and to this day, the practice of internal alchemy is orally transmitted—and directly guided—from Daoist master to disciple. Wang Mu, whose text is cited above, is ordained in the Longmen (Dragon Gate) tradition, but his narrative transmits essentially the principles and conceptual dynamics behind the practice of internal alchemy. When moving into the second or third stages of refinement, his analogic language largely "indicates," lacking any direct explication. The concept of a self-help, hands-on manual is alien to the traditional discipline. Works by Nathan Brine, following also the Dragon Gate tradition of his teacher Wang Liping, do give a glimpse into his physical experience of internal alchemy practice. As an introduction, see his *The Taoist Alchemy of Wang Liping, Volume 1* (Vancouver, BC, Canada: Dragon Gate Press, 2020). Fabrizio Pregadio, the translator of many of the alchemical works cited in this essay, is also associated with the Ming Shan 明山 Center in Bullet, Switzerland, a learning institution which merges scholarship with the practice of Daoist arts. Internal alchemy is a creative discipline; to know, one must do.

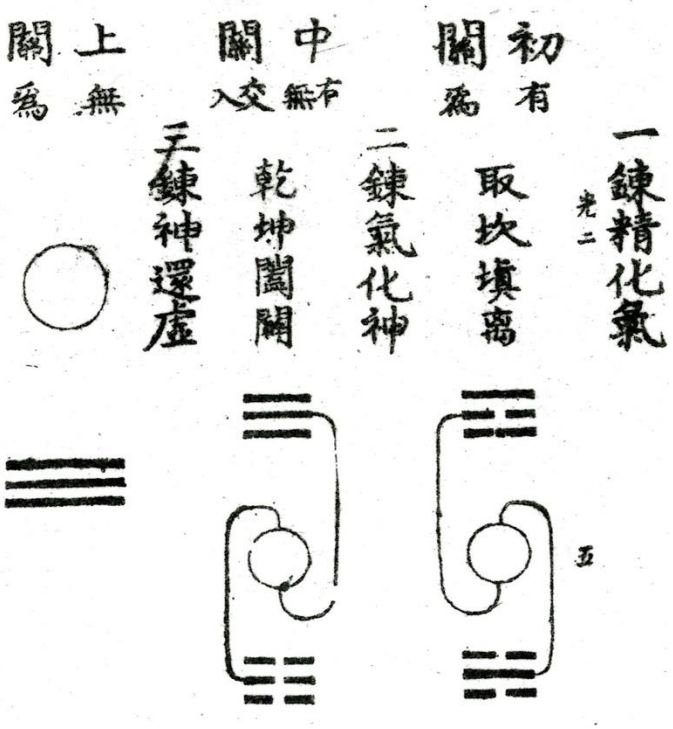

Fig. 2. "The Inner Elixir Process Represented by Trigrams of the *Book of Changes*." (After Li Daochun [fl. 1288–1292], *Zhonghe ji* [Anthology of Central Harmony], *Daozang*, TY 248, 118:2.6a–b).

This first stage in elixir refinement is emblematically referenced in the alchemical text *Xingming guizhi*, as an adept meditates on the interactive dynamics of *Kan* and *Li* (Fig. 3). On the right, the caption reads: "Take the [Yang] stroke out from *Kan* ☵ to repair *Li* ☲, restoring it to *Qian* ☰" 取出坎中畫補離還復乾. A further illustration from the same text portrays *Li* ☲ as Dragon with a "female" inner essence of True Yin, and *Kan* ☵ as Tiger whose "male" inner essence is True Yang (Fig. 4). To fulfill the alchemical process, their inner essences must merge in the "crucible" to form the elixir.

Fig. 3. "Taking from *Kan* to Fill *Li*." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 1.38b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

Fig. 4. "Dragon and Tiger Copulate." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 2.33b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

All existence is seen to contain three essential components: *jing* (精 essence), *qi* (氣 vital life-force), and *shen* (神 spirit).[58] Before actual alchemical refinement can begin, a preliminary phase of "laying the foundations" targets replenishing the body's own *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* and "clearing the Barriers" for their subsequent refinement during passage along the body's Lesser Celestial Circuit. What will be called the Medicine is composed of these three essentials, which have been replenished during the

58 For an overview of these three essential constituents, see Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:562–65, "*jing, qi, shen*" 精 / 氣 (炁) / 神 (essence, pneuma [breath, energy, vital force], spirit).

preliminary stage.[59] During the actual refinement process, *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* are to be reintegrated into one.

As indicated in the captions accompanying Fig. 2, the three stages of inner elixir refinement are "framed as the reintegration of each of these primary components . . . into the one that precedes it, culminating in their 'reversion' (還 *huan*) to the state of Non-being, or Emptiness."[60] During the first stage of refinement (see Fig. 2, right), *jing* will be refined and transmuted into *qi* (鍊精化氣 *lianjing huaqi*). Backtracking towards the Original Unity of the Dao and by analogy expressed in terms of *xiang*, during this first refinement stage the solid line of True Yang, as the inner essence of *Kan* ☵, is withdrawn to restore *Li* ☲ to its original *Qian* ☰, and *Li* exchanges its inner essence of True Yin to restore *Kan* to its original *Kun* ☷.

While certainly not aspiring to laboratory illustration, imagery from the Nanjing scroll may reference principles and dynamics of the physiological alchemical process during this initial stage of refinement; the alternating *yin*–*yang* energetics towards refining and transmuting *jing* into Yang *qi* through circulation along the Lesser Celestial Circuit; or even the eventual emergence of "immaterial" Yang *qi*. In such a context, the aesthetics of "Wind" and "Cloud" assume cosmic dimensions.

So, to begin: Many images are suggestive, although naming sites is not meant to box up Xu Wei's intention, but to simply consider possible alchemical resonance that might factor into the painting. Outlining the dynamics of alchemical process, conceptualized in the language of analogy from the *Book of Changes*, the *Zhouyi cantong qi* identifies *Li* ☲ and *Kan* ☵ as the initial targets for elixir refinement. As prologue to the handscroll's narrative, embedded within the vital performance of Xu's opening images could be an introduction to these initial actors in the process: True Yin within *yang* and True Yang within *yin*.

With the sweep of plant stems, leaf veining, and the bristled flare of the peony's "crown," strong directional *yang* vectors frame the "obscure" *yin* pooling at the flower's center (Figs. 5–6).[61] From the

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59 See Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 66.

60 Quoting Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:553–54.

61 Illustrations from scans after the publication *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* appear blackened, lacking fine gradations in the gray scale, thus losing the immense variation in ink tonalities that gives such life to the imagery. The photographs of details taken

flower's contemporary trope as female genitalia, the *yin* inner essence of the peony image would be readily recognized.[62] By contrast, the *yin* husk of the succeeding pomegranate fruit seems hard pressed to contain an imminent outbreak of *yang* momentum ("the kernel inside the fruit"!) (Fig. 7). The parallel, reflexive postures of the two successive plants weight them as balanced counterparts, working in tandem. Such a symmetry of aspect is rare in Xu Wei's painting of adjacent images.

Fig. 5. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Peony, pomegranate, and lotus leaves from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (After Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:144–45).

Fig. 6. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Peony detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

by Ellen Laing in the 1970s convey Xu's virtuosic command of ink tonalities.

62 Ryor, "Fleshly Desires," 137.

Fig. 7. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Pomegranate detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

This introduction to the lead "players" appears to be immediately followed by an image of the dialectical drama of the transformative process itself. Bursting upon the pomegranate to fully fill the frame (Figs. 8–10), the painted image of lotus leaves is particularly startling and complex.[63] The essential sense of the large lotus leaf may emblematically embody the terms of engagement during this first refinement stage, as seen in successive *yang–yin* phases, while circulating the Medicine along the Lesser Celestial Circuit. More broadly, the theater of the overall image could enact the central alchemical principle of "reversal," literally "upside down" (顛倒 *diandao*).[64]

63 There is a join in the paper immediately following the pomegranate. Perhaps more space originally separated these two images.

64 For an intricate exposition of this principle, see Isabelle Robinet, "The World Upside Down in Taoist Internal Alchemy," in Robinet, *The World Upside Down: Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, 1–15.

Fig. 8. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Lotus leaves from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (After Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014], 1:144).

Fig. 9. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Lotus leaves detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Fig. 10. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Lotus leaves detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Viewing the whole image from left to right suggests the successive *yang-yin* phases of the circulation of the Medicine. Doubled *yang* vectors of two lotus leaf stems join the thrust of marsh grasses. But the large lotus leaf drops at midpoint, to be submerged, as a cloud-like *yin*, into the water. A vertical brushstroke striking downward from near the center of the large lotus leaf may underscore the mid-point transition during the first stage of elixir refinement from "yangization" to "yinization." This stroke can only be read as emblematic, not as a stray stalk of grass. Such merging of organic, "natural" imagery with emblematic "signs" recurs throughout the handscroll.

Conversely, moving right to left across the image as the scroll unrolls, the *yin* energy of the submerged lotus leaf will surface at midpoint, to eventually transmute into the *yang* energy of strong stems upended in mid-air. The image may enact the goal of the first refinement stage, in moving from

a pervasive *yin* condition towards transformation into a "yang body" sought by the Daoist adept.[65] The concept of "inversion" (逆 *ni*)—backtracking towards Original Unity from the generative process that gave birth to the "10,000 things"—may figure in this "turning things upside down," as in the basic alchemical principle of "reversal."

Most curious are the seeming "flowers" at either end of the image, in opposite phases of evolution and embedded in contradiction to the predominant ground (Figs. 8–10). On either side of the turbulence—as the large leaf hits the water—are robust, curving lines suggesting petals of downturned lotus flowers. At the other end and crossed by the stem of the small lotus leaf, the possible vestige of a lotus flower—also with the characteristic stippled stem—suggests a lingering remnant of its original identity. Here both "flower" and small leaf share a latent *yin* aspect. Could these "flowers" represent latent phases of *yang* within *yin* and *yin* within *yang*?

The choice of the large lotus leaf to "act" among the prologue *xiang* may, in part, relate to a passage which opens the *Zhouyi cantong qi*: "Kan ☵ and Li ☲ are the inner and the outer walls, they spin the hub and align the axle" 坎離匡郭，運轂正軸.[66] The classic *xiang* of *Kan* and *Li* as the "inner and outer walls" (of *Qian* ☰ and *Kun* ☷) is seen in the second image down from the *Diagram of the Great Ultimate* (太極圖 *Taiji tu*) (Fig. 11).[67] When *Kan*, with the inner essence of *Qian*, and *Li*, enclosing the inner essence of *Kun*, are bent and brought together, they become a wheel. To quote Fabrizio Pregadio's analysis, relating this image to a passage from the *Daode jing*: "The central hub is the emptiness from which existence comes forth; the axle passing through the hub is Qian and Kun, which hold the wheels in position; and the wheels with their spokes are the compass of space and the cycles of time governed by Kan and Li."[68] There may be a synergy with these meanings and Xu's image, or the

65 See Isabelle Robinet, "Visualization and Ecstatic Flight in Shangqing Taoism," in *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, ed. Livia Kohn in cooperation with Yoshinobu Sakade (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1989), 160.

66 This is Pregadio's translation from *Seal of the Unity of the Three*, [Vol. 1], 69; Chinese text, 269; explanatory notes, 129.

67 For a thorough explication of this diagram, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 460–72; and Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, 128–31.

68 Pregadio, *The Seal of the Unity of the Three*, [Vol. 1], 129.

choice may be essentially fortuitous. Certainly the "spokes" reference reflects the lotus leaf structure and the large leaf's above/below "water dynamics" fit the *yin–yang* transformations through the cycling of time.

Fig. 11. "Diagram of Supreme Polarity." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 1.23a. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

After due distance from this prologue presentation, the narrative of alchemical refinement begins in the lower Cinnabar Field, located in an adept's lower abdomen and actualized in Xu's scroll

by the wutong tree imagery (Figs. 12–14). The wide overshadowing reach of the wutong trees, with a pervasive *yin* energy through the ink wash of variant tones shaping the broad wet leaves, sets a foil for the syncopating lines of clustered seed pods and their bobbles of seeds. The lower Cinnabar Field has been termed "seed chamber" (種室 *zhongshi*),[69] with the Medicine, the True Seed (真種子 *zhen zhongzi*), as its "seed."[70] This Field is the major player, along with the Lesser Celestial Circuit, during the first stage of elixir refinement.

Fig. 12. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wutong tree section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (Composite photocopy after Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:142–44).

69 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 86–88.

70 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 50. See also the poem with commentary in Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987–1082), *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (Awakening to Reality), in *Daozang*, TY 262 (in *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 [Ten Books on the Cultivation of Perfection]), 127:27.4a–b, "Jueju shang" 絕句上, "Wu" 五.

Fig. 13. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wutong tree leaves and seed pods detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Fig. 14. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wutong tree trunk and seed pods detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

It is from here that the Medicine will set out, aligned with the macrocosmic circulation of the universe, to traverse the body's Lesser Celestial Circuit through successive stages of *yang* and *yin* transformations. Collected and returned to the lower Cinnabar Field for further refinement, the Medicine will again set out innumerable times. And it will be here that the External and Internal Medicines eventually coalesce to form the "Mother of the Elixir" (丹母 *danmu*), concluding the first refinement stage.[71] Tendrils are not part of the seed pod structure, yet a squiggly line playfully animates the departure of a pod as it dangles from the final cluster, headed for the Control Channel of the Lesser Celestial Circuit (Fig. 14).

Just before the end of this passage, two parallel tree trunks could wryly herald imminent entry

71 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 67–68.

through the first of the "Three Barriers/Passes" (三關 *sanguan*) along the Control Channel of the Lesser Celestial Circuit (Fig. 12, left).[72] A later graphic depiction of the internal alchemical process marks these Passes with traditional architectural structures (Fig. 15).[73] Here the initial Pass, termed Caudal Funnel (尾閭 *weilü*), figures prominently at the base of the spine. The other two receive diminutive representation: the Spinal Handle (夾脊 *jiaji*) and the Jade Pillow (玉枕 *yuzhen*), respectively, along the spine, level with the heart; and at the base of the skull, level with the occipital bone.

72 For the Three Barriers, see Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 34–36.

73 Stephen Little with Shawn Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 350–51, analyzes this work. See also David Teh-yu Wang, "*Nei Jing Tu*, a Daoist Diagram of the Internal Circulation of Man," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 49/50 (1991/1992): 141–58.

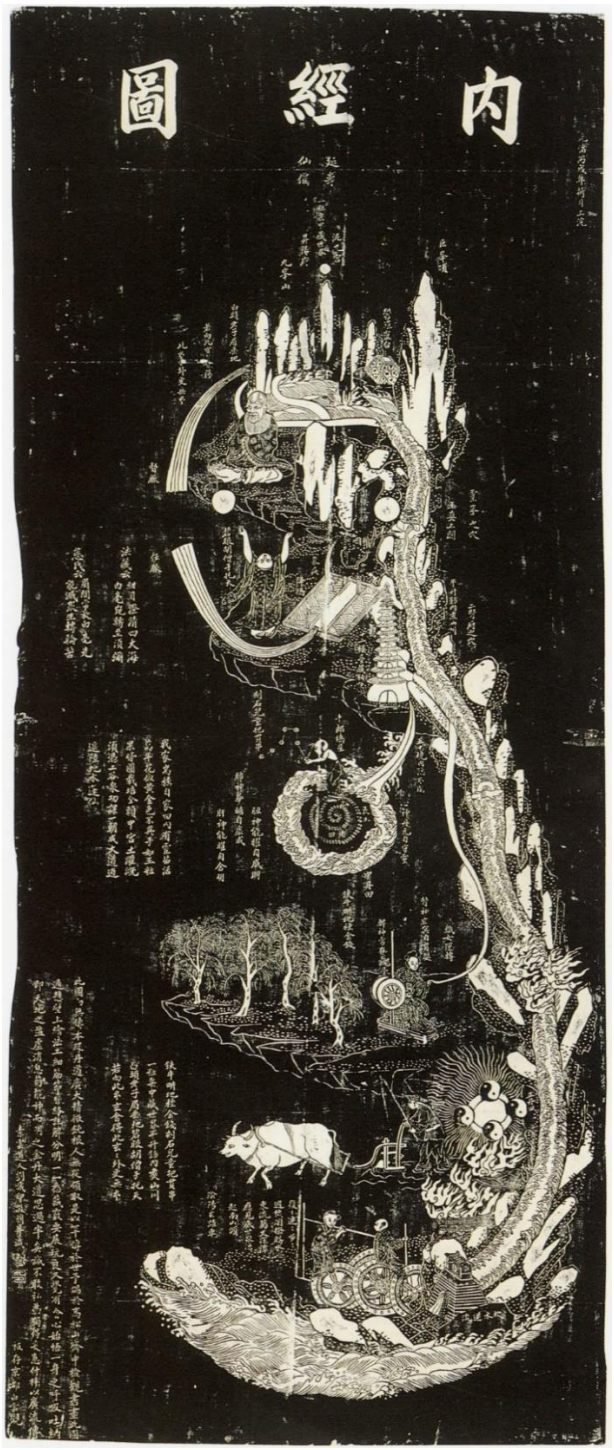

Fig. 15. "Illustration of Inner Circulation" (*Neijing tu*). Ink rubbing from a stone stele originally held in the White Cloud Temple, Beijing. Ink on paper, 133 × 56 cm. From the collection of the Richard Rosenblum Family, Newton Center, Massachusetts. Source: Little with Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), p. 350.

Entering the first Pass, the "yangization" ("advancing the Yang Fire" [進陽火 *jin yanghuo*]) of *jing* (essence) begins as it ascends along the Control Channel. Again imagined in terms of *xiang*: from the "birth of initial Yang" (一陽生 *yi yang sheng*), represented by the hexagram *Fu*/Return ䷗ (composed of the trigrams *Kun*/Earth ☷ and *Zhen*/Thunder ☳), at the Caudal Funnel near the base of the spine, *jing* tempered by *qi* (vital life force) courses through six cumulative *yang* stages rising up the spine along the Control Channel until it culminates at the upper Cinnabar Field.

The Three Passes are accompanied by different "Fire Times/Phasing" (火候 *huohou*) for the Medicine as refinement proceeds up the spine's Control Channel.[74] The different characteristics of these three "fire phases" have also been traditionally expressed as chariots carrying the golden elixir, and drawn successively by sheep, deer, and ox (羊車 *yangche*, 鹿車 *lüche*, 牛車 *niuche*).[75] These animals indicate the varying nature of the "fire times" as the Medicine ascends along the spine against the natural current in early schematic depictions (Fig. 16) and remain linked with fire phases in later illustrations (Fig. 17) (here the illustration features an advanced stage in the refinement process).

74 For a summary of the Fire Times through both "yangization" and "yinization," see Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 74–83.

75 For these three chariots, see Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 83.

Fig. 16. "Diagram of the Inner Aspect, Right Side." Woodcut book illustration, 5 × 11.5 cm. Attributed to Yanluo zi (tenth century?) in *Xiuzhen shishu* (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Perfection), *Daozang*, TY 262, 125:18.3a.

Fig. 17. "Together the Fires Transport the Gold." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 3.16b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

Quickening the pace beyond the two wutong tree trunks, the series of four spritely plants may reference the initial two of these animal chariots first pulled by the light, ambling gait of a sheep and then by a deer's quick liveliness (Fig. 18). The jaunty stride of the chrysanthemum and melon vine is enlivened further with a leap in the arc of the pea pods and the extended stride of the cassia branch crowned with froth.

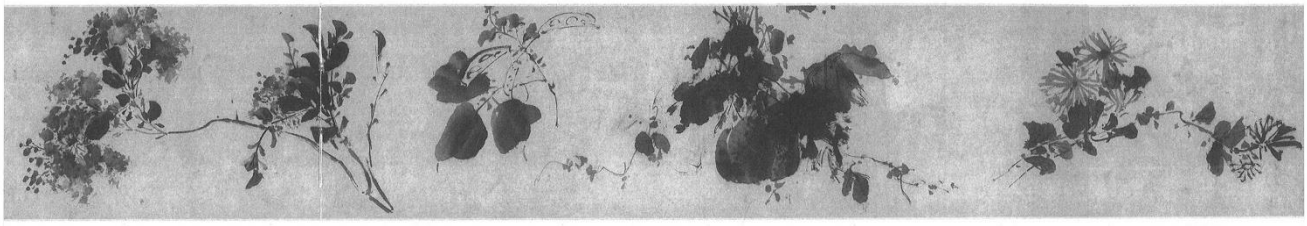

Fig. 18. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Chrysanthemum, melon, peas, and cassia section of the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (Composite photocopy after Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:142, 144–45).

To move through the third Barrier, only the strong thrust of an ox can draw the chariot up the slope of the skull.[76] Called the Jade Pillow (玉枕 *yuzhen*), it is also termed Iron Wall (鐵壁 *tiebi*) due to the excessive difficulty of passage.[77] A playful trailing of leaves opens the grape section, but soon a dense layering of foliage impedes further transit (Figs. 19–20). This could reference the Iron Wall. When unrolling the scroll, the abrupt encounter with the Iron Wall image must have erupted upon the eye as a sudden jar in space and time. The grapevine passage continues with a more contextual/spatial coherence. The scroll's paper has lost a short (?) segment at the left of the Iron Wall. There is concern that this could have affected the continuity of Xu's tale.

76 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 35 and 83–84, seems to give contradictory advice on how to proceed.

77 Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:835, "*sanguan*."

Fig. 19. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grape section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (Composite photocopy after Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:142–44).

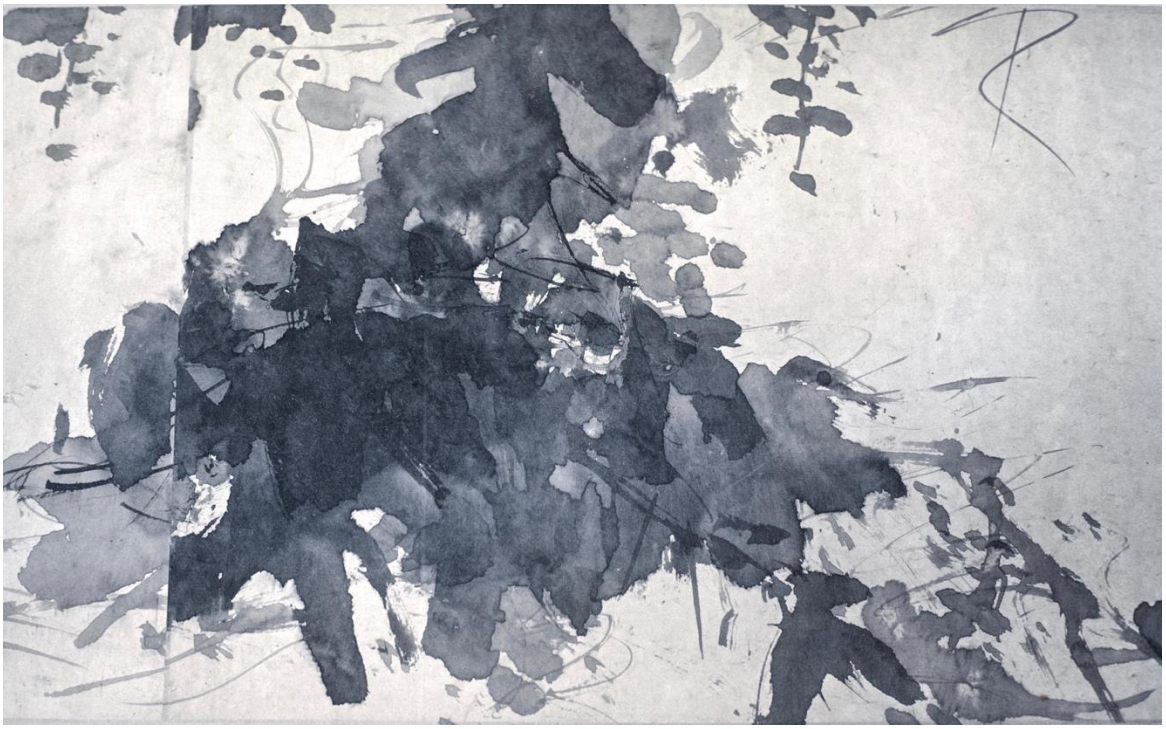

Fig. 20. Xu Wei (1521–1593), "Jade Pillow"/ "Iron Wall" detail of grape section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Having reached the height of *yang*, the Medicine enters the upper Cinnabar Field, conceived as being in the center of the head, behind the eyes (Fig. 19, middle cluster of leaves and fruit, and details Figs. 22–23, 25). During the third and final stage of the refinement process, this will become the site of

"returning to the Dao," "refining *shen* (spirit) to return to Emptiness" (鍊神還虛 *lianshen huanxu*) (Fig. 24).[78] But at this first refinement stage, the upper Cinnabar Field participates in the practice pervasive throughout this stage of "reverting the course of *jing* to replenish the brain" (還精補腦 *huanjing bunao*) and "eliminating the ore to keep the gold" (去礦留金 *qukuang liujin*) effected through repeated cycling of *jing* mediated by *qi* along the Lesser Celestial Circuit.[79]

Fig. 21. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (After Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:142–43).

78 The explication accompanying this image is expressed very much in Buddhist terms.

79 See Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 25; also, Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:1287–88, "*zhoutian*" / "Celestial Circuit."

Fig. 22. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine right side detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Fig. 23. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine right side detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Fig. 24. "The Yang Spirit Emerges and Manifests." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 4.23b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

The upper Cinnabar Field has been compared to the mythical *axis mundi* Mt. Kunlun, connecting Heaven, Earth, and Man.[80] Broad and flat at the top, but narrow at the bottom, that craggy icon of an immortal realm may receive a passing nod in Xu's cluster of grape leaves and fruit (compare Figs. 25 and 26).[81] Or not. What is unequivocal is the intense animation of this section. Beginning with

80 Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:777, "*niwan*" 泥丸 / "Muddy Pellet."

81 This image, *Inner Vision of Flying to the Sun with the Dragon on Fire in the Yang Grotto*, is included in Susan Shih-shan Huang's book chapter, "Daoist Visual Culture," in *Modern Chinese Religion I: Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan (960–1368)*, ed. by John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 2:961, Fig. 18, dated to 1445; and found in the *Daoist Canon* text *Wushang santian yutang zhengzong gaoben neijing yushu* 無上三天玉堂正宗高奔內景玉書 (Precious Text of Flying

the "Iron Wall," fine rapidly swerving lines or repeated straight "scratchings" appear to manifest the Yang *qi* permeating the length of this passage. With deepened measure, thicker arcs to the left of the central leaves/fruit cluster speed the Medicine on its way down through the vines of the Function Channel (任脈 *renmai*) of the Lesser Celestial Circuit (Fig. 23).

Fig. 25. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine section, upper Cinnabar Field detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (After Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:154–55).

High in the Inner Landscape, from the Correct Tradition of the Jade Hall of the Supreme Three Heavens), ascribed to Lu Shizhong 路時中 (fl. 1120–1130), in *Daozang*, TY 220, 104:1.6a–b. For a description of this text, see Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2:1073–74.

Fig. 26. "Inner Vision of Flying to the Sun with the Dragon on Fire in the Yang Grotto." Woodcut book illustration, 5 × 11.3 cm, edition dated 1445. From the text *Wushang santian yutang zhengzong gaoben neijing yushu* (Precious Text of Flying High in the Inner Landscape, from the Correct Tradition of the Jade Hall of the Supreme Three Heavens) ascribed to Lu Shizhong (fl. 1120–1130), *Daozang*, TY 220, 104:1.6a–b.

But in accord with refinement procedures, before it can merge with *qi*, the *yang jing* (essence) must be transmuted and "softened," to lose its materiality.[82] So from the upper Cinnabar Field, the culmination of *yang* is followed by inversion ("withdrawing by the Yin response" [退陰符 *tuiyin fu*]), represented initially by the hexagram *Gou*/Encounter ䷫ (composed of the trigrams *Qian*/Heaven ☰ and *Xun*/Wind ☴), where the firm *yang jing* is incrementally "softened" through six *yin* stages that traverse a direct course down the Function Channel of the Lesser Celestial Circuit through the center

82 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 79.

of the body, returning to the lower Cinnabar Field. The Function Channel, together with the Control Channel, completes the cyclical track for elixir refinement as seen in the phrase "Three Fields in the Front, Three Barriers in the Back" (前三田，後三關 *qian santian, hou sanguan*).[83] Spaces formed by the crossing of the two main vines may allude to the Function Channel that completes the connection between the "Three Fields" (Fig. 21), with the middle Cinnabar Field enclosed in the center.

The dynamism of this section has generated much interpretive comment. Indeed, the evocative life force of the vines—resonant in the speed of Xu's brush, the track of flying white abruptly shifting course, the hand keeping pace with the heart or leaping ahead—is arresting. Sending the Medicine on its way, arcs of speed and light flash from the upper Cinnabar Field's cluster of leaves and fruit (Figs. 23, 27). At the end, a vigorous stub draws the two vines into the lower Cinnabar Field through a marvel of spectral light and shower of myriad shapes (Figs. 28–29).

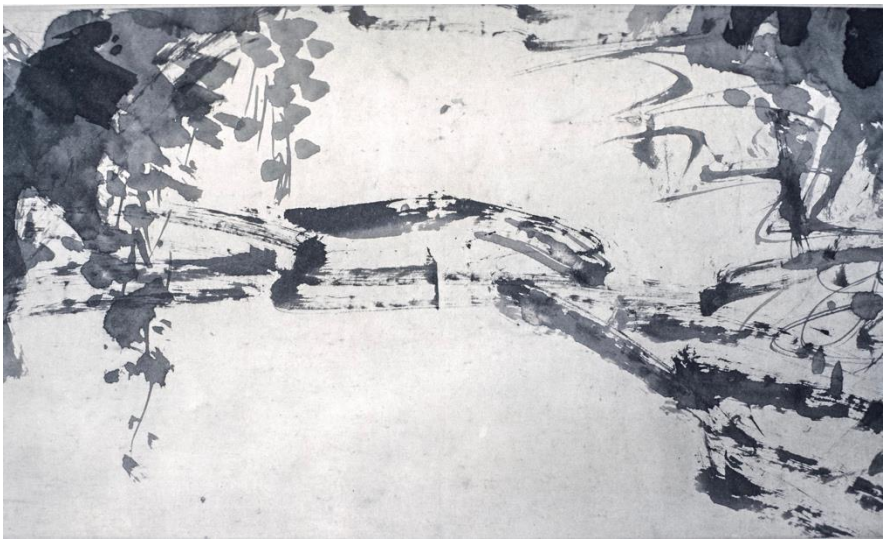

Fig. 27. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine center detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

83 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 35.

Fig. 28. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine left side detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Fig. 29. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Grapevine left side detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

In terms of the alchemical scenario posited here, why such flash of spangled lights, such seeming speed of free fall at this stage in the process, as the Medicine would traverse down through the Three Cinnabar Fields? So fraught with past interpretations, this passage could alternatively be read as celebratory, lighted by impending liberation, as the first stage of elixir refinement nears fulfillment in the emergence of "immaterial" Yang *qi*, manifest in the imagery of the scroll's concluding frame.

An explication now becomes a spoiler for Xu's final punchline, but it would support the reading of this passage. Isabelle Robinet cites the physical body as the *materia prima* of all Daoist practice, in the adept's journey towards nurturing a new "yang body."[84] For Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288–1292), the internal alchemical *materia prima* is the Primordial particle of "light" (Original *Qi* 元氣[炁] *yuanqi*),

84 See Robinet, "Visualization and Ecstatic Flight," 160.

moving throughout the cosmos, but also immanent in all people.[85] Through alchemical refinement, this becomes the "elixir." Both "primal matters" would seem deeply engaged in the Nanjing Museum handscroll, and nowhere else so intensely as in this passage.

A sign of the abundant emergence of Original *Qi* manifests as the phenomenon termed "Toad Light" (蟾光 *changuang*) (Fig. 30), the radiance seen progressively by an adept before his/her eyes during the stage of refining *jing* and transmuting it into *qi*. Without hesitation, such Original *Qi* should be gathered and accumulated in the lower Cinnabar Field.[86] The speed of this passage and the vigorous gathering in of the crossing vines at the stub may reflect both the compelling attention and celebration given to this stage. A kind of "ghost vine" with a hollow core, first appearing on the right of the upper Cinnabar Field's fruit/leaf cluster, frames the upper margin of the scene, dropping into the space formed by the final vine crossing, while another segment connects swiftly with the vine stub, altogether forming a phantom canopy enfolding this numinous space (Figs. 22–23, 27–29).

85 Noted in Pregadio, ed., *Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 2:1283, "*Zhonghe ji*" 中和集 "Anthology of Central Harmony"; and 1:635, "Li Daochun." For *yuanqi*, see ibid., 2:1192. For excerpts from Li's text, see *Zhonghe ji* 中和集 (Anthology of Central Harmony), in *Daozang*, TY 248, vols. 118–19, esp. *juan* 3: 118:3.8a–b; 3.26b, etc., translated in Thomas F. Cleary, *Book of Balance and Harmony* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989), 48 and 67. Wang Jie's *Commentary on the Mirror for Compounding the Medicine* also opens with this assertion: "The self-cultivation of the divine Immortals only consists in collecting the precelestial One Breath and using it as the Mother of the Elixir" (translation by Fabrizio Pregadio). See Wang J., *Commentary on the Mirror*, 7–8, and n. 1.

86 See Li J., *Xingming guizhi baihua jie*, 114, n. 6, and 115. In a similar vein, Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 90–91, speaks of a "Yang radiance" (陽光 *yangguang*), which manifests before one's eyes following three hundred cycles of refining in this first stage, indicating the achievement of a full flourishing of *qi*. On the second appearance of *yangguang*, this stage of the alchemical process should be quickly brought to conclusion.

Fig. 30. "Toad Light." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 1.33b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

Having circled through a full three hundred cycles of "yangization" and "yinization" while traversing the Control and Function Channels along the Lesser Celestial Circuit, the Medicine's *jing* is fully transmuted into *qi*, now as a purified Original *Qi* accumulated in the lower Cinnabar Field. This has become the completed "External Medicine." Spirit (*shen*) then joins with the External Medicine to generate the "Internal Medicine."[87] Finally, External and Internal Medicines coalesce as the "Mother of the Elixir" (丹母 *danmu*),[88] completing the first stage of refinement. Only the rare adept can go beyond,

87 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 67.

88 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 67–69.

"refining *qi* to transmute it into spirit" and "refining spirit to return to Emptiness." Xu's grapevine passage would seem located on the last length of the Medicine's journey in this first refinement stage, richly alive with Original *Qi*, before entering the lower Cinnabar Field to form the "Mother of the Elixir."

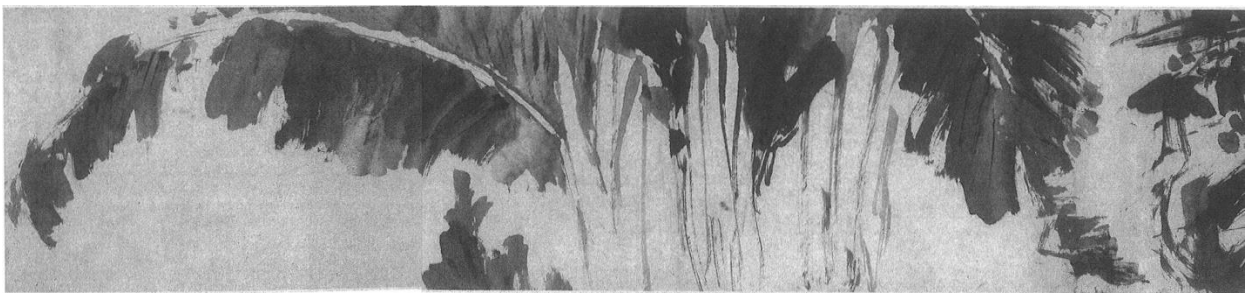

Fig. 31. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Banana palm section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (Composite photocopy after Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:142,145).

The banana palm slips a frond under the vine stub to welcome the Medicine again into the lower Cinnabar Field (Fig. 31). With both emphatic *yang* energy and inchoate form, the measured, open spacing of the vertical white "stalks" (the supporting "stems" of the fronds' central vein) balances the wide *yin* sweep of the outer leaves, richly inked in varying tones. Dark swaths of leaves spike the upper space among the expanse of stalks. A vertical, emergent leaf cluster punctuates further dimensions to the lower left.

The wall of stalks appears composed of three plants. Could these three playfully reference the successive entities of External Medicine, Internal Medicine, and the Mother of the Elixir, all held in the *yin* embrace of the banana leaves of the lower Cinnabar Field? Could their reflexive depictions intimate their ultimate merger into one? As for the emergent plant at the left, could this presage emergence itself?

The True Seed "sprouts." In the second refinement stage, it will form "fruit" as the Embryo of Sainthood (聖胎 *shengtai*), the Infant (嬰兒 *ying'er*)—the "new man"[89]—to be nurtured in the middle Cinnabar Field (Fig. 32).[90]

Fig. 32. "The Infant Manifests Its Form." Woodcut book illustration. From *Xingming guizhi* (Principles of Balanced Cultivation of Inner Nature and Vital Force), attributed to disciples of Yin Zhenren, engraved by Huang Bofu, 1622 edition, 4.1b. Ink on paper, 28.3 × 23.4 cm. Source: Library of Congress.

Xu Wei's scroll concludes in early spring, with a blaze of fire and ice in the flowering plum. First to bloom at the node where the *yin* of winter yields to emergent spring *yang*, wild plum iconography

89 Robinet, *Taoism,* 218.

90 Wang M., *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, 100–01.

carries traditional associations of regeneration and renewal.[91] As if in triumph, the monumental "immaterial" Yang vitality of a young blossoming plum branch flashes across the final length of scroll, both emerging from and partnering the ancient *yin* substrate of a wet, dark trunk (Fig. 33–35). The iced, jagged flash of the young branch breaks and rejoins at will, with a life force at once immanent and immaterial as the brush lifts, leaving a hollow trace (Fig. 35). Blossoms also seem emblematically immaterial, even ethereal as emblematic signs, yet vibrant with vital *qi* in the hollow, rapid trace of the petals—a sharp contrast to the earthy mottled wash of the gnarled trunk, saturated with organic weathers through the harshness of enduring years. The sublimation of immaterial Yang *qi* and the emerging of a new "yang body" could figure in Xu's image.

Fig. 33. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wild plum section from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. (After Xu Jianrong, ed., 2 vols. *Xu Wei shuhua quanji* [Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2014] 1:144–45).

91 Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

Fig. 34. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wild plum trunk and emerging branch detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

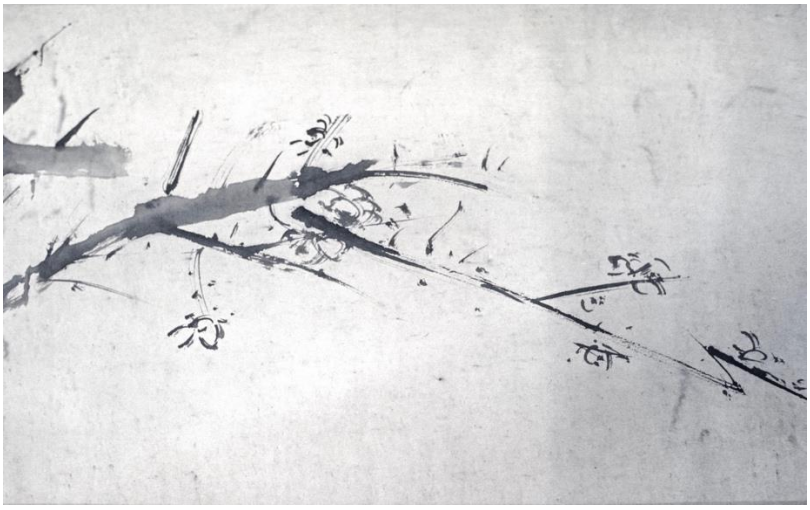

Fig. 35. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Wild plum branch detail from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

As if in confirmation of alchemical success, with a leap of distance and proportion, a large image of narcissus (水仙 *shuixian* [water immortal]) rises under the arm of the plum (Fig. 36). Although the organic lines of certain leaves and flowers recall plant growth in the natural world, the sharply abstracted leaf at the image's center and a blackened, abstracted flower stem(?) would seem to signal the flower's emblematic role of distilling the "transcendence" intention at the handscroll's core. A narcissus poem from Xu's collected work reflects his sense of the spiritual purity of this flower from early spring:

> One hundred coquettish appearances may be so vulgar to push Spring away
> While just one pure heart may be comparable to the Spirit of Spring Growth
> They are like farmers' wives wearing silver hairpieces and white silk clothes
> Compared with the fasting female Daoist[92]
>
> 百品嬌容俗却春，一清可以擬丰神。銀鈿縞袂田家婦，絕粒休糧女道人。

92 Translation by Kiyohiko Munakata. For Xu's text, see *XWJ*, 2:399, "*Er*" 二 ("Two").

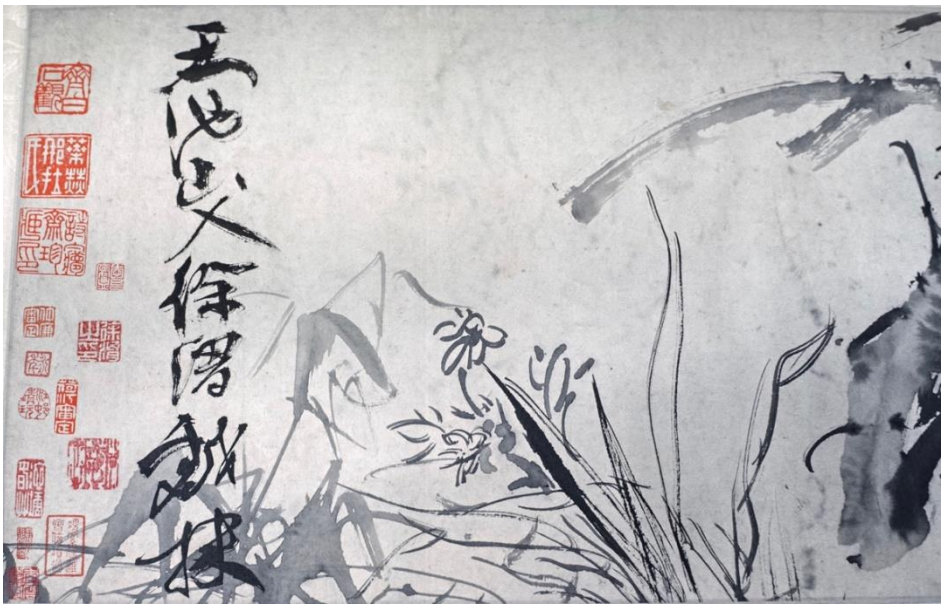

Fig. 36. Xu Wei (1521–1593), Narcissus from the handscroll *Pictures of Various Flowers*. Ink on paper, 37 × 1049 cm. Nanjing Museum. Image courtesy of the Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. Photo: Ellen Laing.

Altogether, though the suggested script narrative cataloged here pales against the astounding life and nuance of the painting, some reference to alchemical aspiration could resonate in Xu Wei's deeply invested performance. In actualizing the dialectics of elixir refining, whether as a dynamic play that merges Dragon and Tiger (Cloud and Wind) with each touch of the brush, or the drama driven by an alchemical narrative, such devices directly engage painter and viewer in the visceral transformative process. If this essay's premise regarding the painting's intent is valid, both creator and viewer could inhabit the scroll's energy-field while accumulating manifest, abundant Original *Qi*, thus participating in the ages-long empirical discipline of internal elixir refinement. The painting would offer not only a graphic presence of internal alchemical experience but would also serve as a site of immersion in this experience.

As for this essay's first and last consideration of indicators of madness in the style of the Nanjing scroll, James Cahill has written of Xu's paintings:

> They express a sense of release rather than of repression, and this may be a key to their effect: as a channel for drawing off some of the psychic energy that fed his turbulence, painting was probably for Xu Wei more therapeutic than symptomatic. One's emotional response on retracing empathically the movements recorded by one of his paintings is thus a feeling more of liberation than of discomfort.[93]

Spiritual liberation appears as the essential tenor of the scroll's final frame in the impression of a spontaneous, iced emergence of Yang *qi* in the young plum branch and the "immaterial" plane of its structure and blossoms. The narcissus, the Water Immortal, would stand as testament to this.

All told, the conjectures posited here can only be offered as hypotheses. Hopefully the issues will stimulate interdisciplinary interest, including a close examination of Xu Wei's commentary to the *Zhouyi cantong qi*, towards a clearer understanding of Xu's Daoist identity and the role it held in his art. As seen earlier, Xu Wei himself could locate his craft on a Daoist altar, reveling in the brush's jade drops of the Moon Toad and golden eyes of the Sun's Blackbird, together realized through ink forged in Daoist mystery, with a kindred resonance worthy to face the emperor—Mountain of ten thousand years, longevity equal to Heaven.[94] And certainly Xu's longing to transcend still compels as a luminous call that quickens and transforms.

The actual nature or extent of Xu Wei's personal practice of internal alchemy is not clear,[95] but

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93 Cahill, *Parting at the Shore*, 163.

94 For an extended examination of Xu's writings as they reflect his thinking on an idealized emperor and the imperium, see Luper, "Muddy Waters," esp. 150–94.

95 However, there are suggestive associations. Zhang S., "Tan Xu Wei de Daoshi shenfen," 13, cites a "placard couplet" titled "Changchun guan" 長春觀 from a later collection of Xu's works, noting that Changchun guan has long been an important Quanzhen Daoist temple. This couplet opens with foregrounding the wholeness of the "three clarities" (三清 *sanqing*), in this instance referencing *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* (精, 氣, 神). As these three comprise major content in the cultivation practices of the Quanzhen tradition, Zhang concludes that the couplet's pointed reference reflects Xu's Quanzhen orientation towards Daoist study. For the couplet, see *XWJ*, 4:1149, "Changchun guan." Zhang, ibid., 12, further notes early biographical accounts of Xu's refraining from eating grains for over ten years, but he is unsure if this could be attributed to hagiographic exaggeration.

did Xu attain a kind of enlightenment after all? I-cheng Liang finds signs of Xu Wei's coming free from attachment in the series of poems "Spring Thoughts" (春興 *Chunxing*), written in 1592, the year before his death, to commemorate his seventy-first birthday (seventy-two *sui* 歲).[96] As Xu reflects on the life he has lived, one poem momentarily backslides into a dispirited lament.[97] Viewing the small plot of land by the home where he now stays as guest—with trees felled, birds flown, a deer starving on the meagre rice field—Xu rues the day he was born. Through rain on the Qingming festival,[98] Xu weeps. He has no grandson to attend to his own grave after his death. But twisting a willow branch in his hand, Xu is suddenly startled and laughs, bemused to recognize this sorrow—in the face of transience—as a failing in his Chan Buddhist practice. Liang reads a second poem as Xu's acquiescent realization of the Chan tenet "Everything is emptiness, and emptiness is everything."

> Heaven and earth changed in an instant as wind following snow
> Like a rainbow after rain, everything turned from shadowed to clear
> It is my lot to remain shut out from the butcher's door after fasting
> What is difficult is the wine cup, empty before my seated place
> A guest came requesting calligraphy with half a string of cash
> An old man brushed a few plum blossoms in exchange for rice
> Drinking casually by the west wall, close to the dark of bamboo
> In pairs, tender birds call one to another from among spring bushes[99]

> 乾坤瞬息雪邊風，萬事陰晴雨後虹。已分屠門齋後斷，只難酒盞座前空。
> 半緡榆莢求書客，數點梅花換米翁。小飲牆西鄰竹暗，綿蠻對對語春叢。

96 See Liang, "Hsü Wei," 42–43.

97 See *XWJ*, 1:262, "Spring Thoughts: Five" (五 *wu*).

98 This is the yearly observance of "Sweeping the Graves," honoring and attending to those who have passed on.

99 My translation; for the Chinese text, see *XWJ*, 1:261, "Spring Thoughts: Two" (二 *er*).

The poem grants a last glimpse of Xu Wei: under a clear sky—alive and awake—sweeping the broom of his brush to live day by day, or drinking close to the shadowed bamboo as nearby birds delight in the tender lusts of spring.

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