
This book, one of the latest in a series of publications by Fabrizio Pregadio, identifies one of the earliest known traditions in the history of Chinese alchemy, namely the “Great Clarity”, or Taiqing 太清, current in the Jiangnan 江南 region of the lower Yangzi during the third and fourth centuries. This tradition derives its name from one of the highest celestial spheres from which texts were revealed to deserving mortals in order to facilitate their apotheosis and ascent into the Heaven of Great Clarity. These revealed texts were, according to a fourth-century source, The Scripture of Great Clarity (Taiqing jing 太清經), the Scripture of the Nine Elixirs (Jiudan jing 九丹經), and the Scripture of the Golden Liquor (Jinye jing 金液經). As attested by Ge Hong (283-343) in his Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master who Embraces Spontaneous Nature (Baopu zi neipian 抱朴子内篇, ca. 330; hereafterInner Chapters), these scriptures all share a common doctrine concerning rites, techniques and alchemical aims, and they had been in his family for over a hundred years. The texts had been revealed by a divine being (shenren 神人) to a “master of the methods”, or fangshi 方士, named Zuo Ci 左慈 around 200 CE, when the latter was practicing meditation on Mount Tianzhu 天柱山. According to the author, this designation does not apply to the famous mountain in Shandong but to Mount Qian 激山 in present-day Anhui, which was known under this name during the Han Dynasty.

The three texts mentioned by Ge Hong are still extant in some form in the Taoist Canon, albeit with editorial changes and amplifications added through the centuries. The first, the Scripture of Great Clarity, was lost at an early date, but remnants can be seen in two works in the Taoist Canon: one is the “Preface to Central Scripture of the Divine Elixirs of Great Clarity” (“Taiqing shendan zhongjing xu” 太清神丹中經叙), in Seven Lots from the Bookcase of the Clouds (Yunjí qiqian 雲笈七籤), 73.16a-17a, CT 1032), and the other is the Oral Instructions of the Celestial Master (Taiqing jing tianshi koujue 太清經天師口訣, CT 883). The second text, the Scripture of the Nine Elixirs, forms chapter one of a larger work, the Instructions on the Book of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue 黃帝九鼎神丹經訣, CT 885). The third text, the Scripture of the Golden Liquor, constitutes the main text of the Taoist Canon, although it is now only a fragment.


The authenticity of these texts is borne out by comparison mainly with quotations, paraphrases, and summaries in the Ge Hong’s *Inner Chapters*. The last two texts have been translated by Pregadio (chapters nine and ten) with further information provided by other sources in the Taoist Canon. In addition, two other cognate texts of the fourth century, the *Essential Instructions on the Scripture of the Reverted Elixir in Nine Cycles of the Perfected of the Great Ultimate* (Taiji zhenren jiuzhuan huandan jing yaojue, CT 889) and the *Divine, Authentic, and Superior Scripture of the Elixir Flower of Langgan, from the Numinous Writ in Purple Characters* (Taiwei lingshu ziwen langgan huandan shenzen shangjing, CT 255), are also included in the study. Although both texts were integrated into the Shangqing (Upper Clarity) corpus, the alchemical sections indicate consistently the Great Clarity tradition, judging from their technical, ritual, linguistic, and stylistic peculiarities. Pregadio translates the alchemical section of the *Taiji zhenren jiuzhuan huandan jing yaojue* (chapter 11), while the reader is referred to the translation of the *Taiwei lingshu ziwen langgan huandan shenzen shangjing* by Stephen Bokenkamp in his *Early Taoist Scriptures*.3

The Taiqing texts include a number of recipes and, in the words of Nathan Sivin, “consist only of instructions for laboratory operations, with no attempt to provide a theoretical rationale”.4 These texts do not use correlative cosmology to explain either their doctrines or techniques. The language employed is metaphorical, technical and hermetical. For instance, the first chapter of the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* (CT 885, *Great Clarity*, chapter nine) deals with:

a) its own divine origins, i.e., the transmission of this earthly version of the scripture revealed by the Mysterious Woman (Xuannü) to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) who, in turn, transmitted it to the Mysterious Master (Xuanzi) (*Great Clarity*, p. 159-160);

b) the transcendent powers of the adept upon ingestion of the elixirs;

c) ritual rules for the transmission scripture. These include purification, ablutions, the taking of an oath, immersing gold figurines of a man and a fish in an eastward flowing river, etc.;

d) precautionary measures for setting up the laboratory, buying elixir ingredients;

e) auspicious and inauspicious days for kindling the fire; sacrifice and ritual before starting the fire. This ceremony (ji) is performed beside the crucible.
