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# Chapter One

## Historical Context

Internal alchemy has been the dominant form of Daoist self-cultivation since the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), when it reached first full maturity as an integrated system.<sup>1</sup> The Song dynasty was a time of great change and transformation on many different levels—technology, economy, politics, culture, life-style, and religion. Society opened to new dimensions of communication and flourishing, enhancing local culture and bringing about renewal in many different areas. In terms of religion, new kinds of practitioners arose in addition to the priesthood, known collectively as ritual masters—including also mendicant preachers and eccentric adepts of various backgrounds.

In this context, the figure of Lü Dongbin, an eccentric master known for his poetry, alchemy, and sword fighting, rose to prominence especially in the southern part of the country. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, he came to be associated with a group of documents describing the first full-fledged system of internal alchemy, called Zhong-Lü after himself and his putative teacher, the Han-dynasty immortal Zhongli Quan. First fully documented in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, it laid the foundation for the teachings of many later schools of internal alchemy, furnishing structures that are still in use today.

### The Song Dynasty

The transition from the Tang to the Song dynasty has been described as “the most decisive rupture in the history of imperial China” (Kuhn 2009, 1). After the rebellion of An Lushan 安祿山 in 755, when the Tang court fled to Sichuan, the dynasty never fully recovered its dominance over the empire, which was plagued by official persecutions, rebellious war-lords, and widespread banditry. By 907, when the dynasty officially ended, the country was split up into ten states, run largely by political newcomers such as “landless peasants, robbers, smugglers, and even former slaves” (2009, 18), whose bloody campaigns ravaged the land. Over the next fifty years, five dynasties claimed the official mantle of emperor (see Lorge 2011; Davis 2002), until in 960, the Zhao clan reunited the country and provided a new level of stabil-

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<sup>1</sup> See Kohn and Wang 2009; Needham et al. 1983; Pregadio 2012a; 2014a; Robinet 1989a; 1995.

ity, which soon led to “a complete transformation of the social and political landscape” (Mostern 2011, 24).<sup>2</sup>

Restructuring the spatial and administrative organization of the country, they created a new system of jurisdiction, replaced the aristocratic class of governance by a meritocratic civil bureaucracy (2011, 11), standardized the currency, built roads that could support wider carts, expanded the canal network, and created safety for merchants and travelers by providing armed escorts (Kuhn 2009, 224-26). This not only opened up the southern part of the country and but also greatly increased commerce and innovation (Yü 2016, 239), to the point where the Song dynasty has been compared to England during the industrial revolution (Edwards 2013; Pomeranz 2000).

Technological innovations in all different fields, from farming through textile production and metal works to transportation, placed the country far ahead in the world and caused the population to triple, which in turn gave new impetus to economic growth and social innovation.<sup>3</sup> A major factor in this context was the invention of printing, first used in the 9<sup>th</sup> century in a Buddhist environment to facilitate the copying of sutras, considered a highly meritorious activity, especially in large quantities (Goodrich 1925). Made commercially viable in the Song, printing greatly facilitated mass communication, since posters with announcements could be easily placed in villages and city wards. It also inspired an increase in literacy, further supported by the government’s efforts to place both private and public schools in all districts of the empire, and led to the commencement of large-scale encyclopedia projects that collected vast amounts of knowledge in more accessible form.<sup>4</sup>

Another major effect of printing was the development of the world’s first viable paper currency, expanding the so-called flying money (*feiqian* 飛錢) in the Tang, which involved paper notes redeemable at distant locations (Verellen 2019, 268). Its Song institutionalization was precipitated by the increasing need of the government for iron and copper in manufacturing (Kuhn 2009, 234) as well as by the expanding commerce across ever wider areas. The latter involved increasingly larger sums of money, which made it cumbersome for merchants to carry hard and heavy coins in heavy sacks. Paper currency came in two forms, first letters of credit and later actual bills, created once printing reached a level of quality that made for-

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed presentation of political development under the Song, see Twitchett et al. 2010. For social change, see Hymes 1986; Hymes and Schirokauer 1993.

<sup>3</sup> On technological change, see Fairbank 1992, 88; Kuhn 2009, 220-30; also Elvin 1971. For population growth, see Mostern 2011, 11; Deng 2013. On commerce and urbanization, see Gernet 1982; Shiba 1970; Elvin 1973; Glahn 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Kuhn 2009, 40-41; Fairbank 1992, 94; Furth 1999, 61; see also Cherniak 1994; Chia 1996; 2003; Elvin 1971.

geries difficult. To begin, merchants would carry a promissory note or exchange bill that would guarantee them access to funds in far-away places. Gradually formal institutions developed, forerunners of banks that gradually replaced the direct partnerships between merchant houses. Actual paper bills—printed on pulp made from the bark of the mulberry tree and strictly controlled by the government—are first documented from the year 1020 and were fully viable by 1160 (Kuhn 2009, 238).

All of this contributed greatly to the growth of the merchant class, which had three major effects on the religious scene. First, there was a great increase in lay organizations and lay-sponsored temples and practices. Here ordinary people came together to worship specific deities and to perform rites and cultivation practices, sometimes in private homes, sometimes in special community halls. Many localities that were isolated and dependent on their own resources during centuries of political chaos developed unique organizations and deities, which now—with improved communication—started to spread and turn into wider, often commerce-oriented cults (Glahn 2003, 188-90). “New deity cults and revelatory traditions enriched and reshaped the hierarchical, communal, and aristocratic system” of previous dynasties (Skar 2000, 414; see also Hymes 2002).

Second, there emerged a much larger market for practical religious aids to daily life, from talismans for building homes and spells for granting a safe passage to exorcisms for healing, funeral rites (*liandu* 煉渡), and services for the salvation of the dead (*pudu* 普渡), often involving new and local deities (Skar 2000, 413). And third, as more and more people became religiously engaged, they required more direct contact with gods, spirits, and ancestors, notably for purposes of exorcism and healing (Davis 2001, 3). As a result, trance techniques increased manifold, either through spirit-mediums or by automatic writing with the help of the planchette, a kind of Ouija board, and a new level of religious practitioners came to the fore.

## Religious Practitioners

Traditionally, Daoist and Buddhist priests occupied the middle ground between imperially sponsored religious activities and so-called popular religion, which was often denigrated by officials for its followers’ engagement in shamanic possession, blood sacrifices, licentious cults, and sexual orgies. Peasants and villagers, as documented in numerous writings, were besieged by threats of supernatural danger, such as ghosts, demons, specters, sprites, hobgoblins, poltergeists, revenants, spooks, bogies, and contagions (Harper 1985, 497), not to mention semi-supernatural animals as well as essences of plants and minerals that had to be placated in various ways (Meulenbeld 2015, 101; Kohn 2019, 35). Many valiant officials strove to convert villagers to more sedate and imperially sanctioned practices or managed to kill particu-

lar demonic entities that demanded deeds unacceptable to the higher educated.

Organized Daoist cults as they first developed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE—and Buddhist orders in their wake—were at odds with both, claiming a direct connection to the divine traditionally reserved for the emperor and his delegates, while also insisting on a purer and more refined way of dealing with the demons of popular religion. Occupying senior positions in a bureaucratic spirit world, run like the imperial government by set administrative procedures and formal judgments, priests of organized religions claimed powers over the supernatural world that affected the living as much as the dead.<sup>5</sup> They executed these powers less by means of shamanic trance or blood sacrifices than through systematic prayers and the submission of written petitions that would obligate the spirits to act in certain, preferably nonharmful ways (Harper 1985, 472–73; Nickerson 2000, 273).

This intermediate position is quite obvious in the dietary restrictions documented in the early code of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師) school, *Laojun shuo yibai bashi jie* 老君說一百八十戒 (180 Precepts Spoken by Lord Lao, in DZ 786; trl. Hendrischke and Penny), created under some Buddhist influence and reflecting similar values (Penny 1996). Rejecting the elite tendency to drink heavily and competitively, it prohibits the consumption of alcohol (no. 24). In opposition to mainstream status-seeking through the serving of meat, it outlaws eating the flesh of wild animals specially killed (no. 172, 173). In contrast to popular cults, moreover, the code demands that members abstain from all killing and the performance of blood sacrifices (no. 39, 79), encouraging them instead to live largely on vegetables (no. 176) (Kohn 2017, 176). Exorcistic practices as well as divination and fortune-telling, and even the basic techniques of Chinese medicine were forbidden, “the penitential petitioning of celestial officials being sufficient” (Nickerson 2000, 277).<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the middle ages, the state-sponsored codification of the priesthood, both Daoist and Buddhist, provided a set role for religious practitioners that allowed them to function in this intermediate sphere between official state religion and popular cults. The Tang-Song transition brought the collapse of this system, leading to a different constellation of groups: official agents that included imperial as well as Daoist and Buddhist hierarchies at the top, village spirit-mediums and lesser acolytes at the bottom, plus “a new and expanding group of lay Daoist exorcists called ritual masters (*fashi* 法師)” in the middle (Davis 2001, 7).

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<sup>5</sup> See Harper 1994, 17; Kleeman 1998, 70; Seidel 1987, 46; Yamada in Pregadio 2008, 62.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the relationship of Daoists to popular cults, see Miyakawa 1979; Stein 1979; Nickerson 1994; Schipper 1985; 1994b.

Defined as disciples who had mastered a particular tradition or section of the canon, they were “lay practitioners who looked and performed very much like Daoist priests but who were not priests,” yet followed the same rules of purity and correct procedure (2001, 50). Socially members of a class of minor officials, they were “spellbinding erudites” (2001, 61): educated and literate, trained in philosophical and cosmological speculation, they were versed in a variety of ritual techniques, notably the increasingly popular thunder rites (*leifa* 雷法; see Skar 1997; 2000, 456-58; Chao 2009: 104-07), but also engaged in personal cultivation, such as the internal guiding of energy and the refinement of spirit—necessary prerequisites to the successful execution of the rites (Chao 2009, 108-11).

They rose to the fore as independent agents because there were no structured organizations to support them. Court subsidies for religious institutions had ceased so that temples declined, patriarchal lineages ceased, and techniques and doctrines were suspended. There were no famous monasteries or established mountain centers to go to, nor were there any officially recognized masters to follow. Budding practitioners were on their own, wandering from one sacred location to the next, connecting with isolated hermits, perchance finding a stash of old texts or discovering certain efficacious techniques by trial and error. Occasionally they even secured the support of a local ruler—who was usually more interested in alchemical ways of making gold than in spiritual pursuits—and proceeded to reconstruct one or another temple center of old.

These practitioners had no financial cushion to fall back on, and thus had to find ways of serving communities for a fee so they could continue their quest. As a result—and coinciding fortuitously with the needs of the growing merchant class—Daoist ritual masters, in competition with wandering Buddhists, tantric ritualists, and local shamans, offered services of fortune-telling, healing, exorcism, and protection.

A case in point is the famous immortal Chen Tuan 陳搏 (d. 989) who wandered through the country from Hunan to Sichuan to pick up various teachings and eventually settled at the foot of Mount Hua 華山, where he set about to restore the Yuntai guan 雲台觀 (Cloud Terrace Monastery) that had fallen into disrepair. He gained prominence as a physiognomist, recognizing the future first emperor of the Song and also, after being called to court, identifying the son best suited for leadership.<sup>7</sup> In addition, he was renowned for his cosmological speculation and credited with the first *Taiji tu* 太極圖 (Diagram of the Great Ultimate; see Wang 2005a) as well as

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<sup>7</sup> For a study of Chen Tuan, see Knaut 1981; Kohn 2001a. On his physiognomy, see Kohn 1988. On his sleep practice, see Takehiro 1990. For sleep practice today, see Wang and Bartosh 2019, 155-61.

with various methods of internal cultivation, described as a form of “sleep practice,” still part of internal alchemy today.

## Lü Dongbin

A figure of the same kind who rose to great prominence—and incidentally was linked to Chen Tuan later—is the immortal Lü Dongbin 吕洞宾, best known as the most popular member of the Eight Immortals. Consisting of seven men and one woman who attained immortality, this group appeared first in theater plays of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, portrayed as an eccentric and happy lot of supernatural heroes who responded to pleas in emergencies and granted favors and protection (Hawkes 1981; Jing 1996). To the present day widely popular and eagerly worshiped, they are usually venerated as a group. The only one with temples of his own is Lü Dongbin, commonly depicted as a Confucian gentleman with aristocratic features and a sword (Wu et al. 2011, 66). He appears frequently in spirit-writing sessions, serving as inspiring sponsor of many Daoist groups and techniques (Moziás 2020, 17; Tsui 1991).

The story goes that he was born in 796 as Lü Yan 吕严. Well educated, he failed to pass the official examination in 836 (although in some versions, he passed in 837). On his way back home from the capital, he spent the night at an inn—today the site of the Baxian'an 八仙庵 (Eight Immortals' Retreat), the major Daoist sanctuary in Xi'an—where he shared a meal with a mysterious stranger. As the millet cooked over the brazier, Lü fell asleep and dreamed:

He went up again to the capital as a candidate of the imperial examination and passed it at the top of the list. Starting his career as a junior secretary to one of the Boards, he rapidly rose in rank to positions at the Censorate and the Hanlin Academy. Eventually he became a Privy Councilor, after he had occupied, in the course of his unbroken success, all the most sought-after and important official posts.

Twice he was married, he further dreamt, and both wives belonged to families of wealth and position. Children were born to him. His sons soon took themselves wives, and his daughters left the paternal roof for their husbands' homes. All these events happened before he even reached the age of forty.

Next he found himself Prime Minister for a period of ten years, wielding immense power. This corrupted him. Then suddenly, without warning, he was accused of a grave crime. His home and all his possessions were confiscated, his wife and children separated. He himself, a solitary outcast, was wandering toward his place of banishment beyond the mountains. He found his horse brought to a standstill in snowstorm and was no longer able to continue the journey. (Yetts 1916, 790; Kohn 1993, 125)

At this point he woke up, finding that while he went through an entire official career and family life, the millet had not even fully cooked. Realizing that life was but a fleeting dream and supported by the stranger who turned out to be the Han immortal Zhongli Quan 鍾離權, he began training with him in Daoist cultivation on either Mount Hua in the north or Mount Lu 廬山 in the south, depending on which lineage wrote the tale. The legend continues with the story of ten tests he had to undergo to prove his selfless nature and sincere dedication to Dao.

He had to show that he was generous with his possessions and independent of social approval, had courage in the face of death and other threats or enticements, and was willing to sacrifice himself on behalf of weaker beings. For example,

Once, on returning home from a walk in the country, he found that during his absence thieves had carried away all his goods and chattels, leaving the house bare. Not even then was his equanimity disturbed. He just set himself to earn a livelihood by tilling the ground. One day when at work with his hoe he unearthed gold pieces to the number of several score. Yet he took not a single one, but quickly covered them all up again. (Kohn 1993, 129)



These moral qualities were not required for their own sake or to enhance particular staunchness of character but served to indicate the stamina and determination necessary for the utter overcoming of body and self on the path to otherworldly immortality. Still practiced in the school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) today, as vividly documented in the biography of Wang Liping 王立平 (Cleary 1997), they serve the same function as the abuse heaped on aspiring Zen practitioners when they first enter the training monastery. Standing outside the gate, freezing, hungry, and miserable, they inevitably question everything, culminating in, “How much do I *really* want to do this?” Only if the answer is, “More than anything,” is the candidate ready (see Wetering 1974).

Eventually approved, Lü Dongbin received many detailed instructions from Zhongli Quan, both in theory and practice, succeeded in refining himself to higher levels and attained the fullness of immortality. Afterwards, both before and after his ascension into heaven, as the story has it, he traveled widely, incognito performing miracles for ordinary people and spreading the Daoist teaching, including also to the other members of the Eight Immortals.<sup>8</sup>

## Lü in History

This hagiographic account appears first in rudimentary form in the *Yueyang fengtu ji* 岳陽風土記 (Record of Local Customs in Yueyang) by the official Fan Zhiming 范致明, dated to 1104. Here Lü is described as a native of Hezhong 何中 in Shanxi who trained on Mount Lu in Jiangxi and was later active in Hunan and Hubei. These locations not only show the spread of his cult in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century but also match his major later sanctuaries, at the Yueyang Tower 岳陽樓 in Yuezhou 岳州 near Lake Dongting 洞庭湖 in Hunan and the Yongle gong 永樂宮 (Palace of Eternal Joy) near Ruicheng 瑞城 in Shanxi. The story emphasizes that he was skilled in sword techniques and the arts of immortality and made a living by selling paper and ink (Katz 1999, 60; Baldrian-Hussein 1985, 160).

The latter reflects a strong connection of his name to calligraphy and poetry. Poetry, already a major way of communication during the middle ages (Kirkova 2016, 140), became even more widespread under the Song. Then it started to function as a significant social medium beyond the aristocracy, either composed at social gatherings or spread like graffiti on city, temple, and tavern walls—“anonymous, gossipy, popular” (Kuhn 2009, 61). Poetry could be allegorical and descriptive, record events and express emo-

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<sup>8</sup> For studies of the Eight Immortals and the story of Lü Dongbin, see Clart 2009; Jing 1996; Lai 1972; Waley 1930, 15; Wu et al. 2011; Yang 1958; Yetts 1916; 1922.

tions, show ideal moral and cosmic ways, express criticism of current politics and circulate positive energy in the world (Hawes 2005, 11-20).



The Palace of Eternal Joy

Preceding the early hagiography and establishing the connection to poetry is the first work that mentions Lü Dongbin by name: the *Qingyi lu* 清異錄 (Record of Pure and Strange Things) by the official Tao Gu 陶穀 (903-970). He records a sign outside a wine shop in Fengyi 豐邑 (Shaanxi), saying, “Soaring aloft I looked back and bade farewell to the king of spring,” followed by the character for “wine,” and expresses his admiration for the powerful calligraphy, which he attributes to Lü (Katz 1999, 54; Baldrian-Hussein 1986, 137). This shows that already in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century, Lü Dongbin was a well-known and impressive character.

The earliest poem supposedly written by him is called *Zhixuan pian* 指玄篇 (Pointers to the Mystery), often cited in later texts on internal alchemy (Baldrian-Hussein in Pregadio 2008, 1278). Further poems as well as stories featuring his alchemical techniques and magical powers appear in the imperial encyclopedia *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (A Record of the World during the Reign of Great Peace) of the year 980. Collecting various anecdotes about him, this shows just to what degree his exploits were spreading at the time (Katz 1999, 55).

Closely related are various anecdotes about his prowess as a fortune-teller, recorded in Huang Jian’s 黃鑑 (fl. 1015) *Yang Wengong tanyuan* 楊文公談苑 (Conversations with Yang Wengong). According to this, Lü traveled widely and interacted frequently with officials, providing veiled predictions at will and supporting their aspirations if they recognized him as an im-

mortal. The text also contains several poems, one describing his travels and his famous sword, the other alluding to alchemical practices.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1040s, Lü's name was linked with an unsuccessful rebellion in Hebei, and the court instituted a nation-wide search for him, which proved fruitless but did not prevent him from becoming ever more popular (Katz 1999, 57). This led to more poems being attributed to him that appear variously, including in temple inscriptions (1999, 119). The most important among them is the *Qinyuan chun* 沁園春 (Springtime in the Qin Gardens), a set of lyrics dated to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> Another early alchemical poem appears in the *Huandan zhongxian lun* 還丹眾仙論 (Discussions on Reverting the Elixir by the Host of Immortals, DZ 233), by Yang Zai 楊在, dated to 1052 (Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 856). It says,

I get the matron lady to move south  
So she can bring forth six yang energies for me.  
I steam jade fluid in the toad [moon] palace  
And refine jasper liquor at the Kan [water] gate.

The food of spirit immortals long gone  
Today comes to me to taste.  
One cup lasts a myriad eons  
As my intention soars far beyond all things. (14b-15a)

While these texts document the increasing connection of Lü Dongbin to internal alchemy rather vaguely, more specific information begins to appear in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, Chen Shidao's 陳師道 (1053-1101) *Houshan tancong* 後山談叢 (Collected Conversations from Houshan) records Lü's training under Zhongli Quan (Katz 1999, 55). The two are also linked in an inscription commemorating the restoration of the Yuntai guan, dated to 1067 and contained in the *Lequan ji* 樂全集 (Collected Works of the Recluse Lequan; see Hervouet 1978, 385) by Zhang Fangping 張方平 (1007-1091), a direct successor of Chen Tuan (Kohn 2001a, 12).

<sup>9</sup> Katz 1999, 55; Baldrian-Hussein 1986, 140; Ang 1997.

<sup>10</sup> It is first described by Liu Fu 劉斧 (1040-ca. 1113) in his *Qingsuo gaoyi* 青瑣高議 (A Lofty View of Literary Sketchbooks; 8.82) as having been revealed by Lü to a scholar named Cui Zhong 崔中 in the city of Yueyang (Baldrian, 1985, 22). It describes the process of internal alchemy, notably seven-based elixir reversion: collect perfect yang at midnight, fuse it with perfect yin to obtain the elixir seed, then refine it through the firing process and accumulate merit to attain transcendence and liberation. Two commentaries survive: one, by Xiao Tingzhi 蕭廷芝 (fl. 1260), is contained in *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書 (Ten Books on the Cultivation of Perfection; DZ 263, ch. 13); the other is by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1258-1314), a scholar of the Southern School (DZ 136). See Boltz 1987, 140; Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 845; in Pregadio 2008, 1178.

Around the same time, Lü's sword techniques featured in various works (see Eskildsen 2008) and he appears in stories relating him to members of the lower classes, notably wine merchants and barbers (see Baldrian-Hussein 1986; Zaccarini 2011).

In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, like many other cults and religious figures, Lü was officially recognized by Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125), the last ruler of the Northern Song and a great supporter of Daoism (see Bol 2001). He sponsored and collected Daoist art and himself engaged both in Daoist painting and the exegesis of Daoist scriptures, notably the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Way and Its Virtue), which was highly venerated by Song rulers in general. Huizong also organized Daoist rites for state protection and good fortune, and inspired many Daoists to come forward and present their views and texts (Ebrey 2000; Ebrey and Bickford 2006). In 1116, he bestowed several honorary titles on Lü, notably Miaotong zhenren 妙通真人 (Perfected of Wondrous Pervasion) and Chunyang zhenren 純陽真人 (Perfected of Pure Yang), elevating him to an official position in the Daoist pantheon and paving the way for his inclusion in the patriarchal lineage of later schools.

