The Early History
of the Zhouyi cantong qi

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The two main branches of Chinese alchemy, *waidan* or external alchemy and *neidan* or internal alchemy, offer an illustration of the process whereby two traditions develop in parallel for some time, until one of them comes to incorporate the essential parts of the other to the point of displacing it and ultimately causing its demise. In this case, however, the comparative study of the two doctrinal histories is seriously complicated by the lack of reliable dating of their respective textual corpora—an especially arduous problem in the case of *waidan*. This is one of the reasons why, although *waidan* and *neidan* developed for several centuries in close contact with each other, the ways in which they interacted, and the reasons for the transition from the former to the latter, are still largely unknown.

The *Zhouyi cantong qi* [Token for the Agreement of the Three According to the Book of Changes] is the single most important source in addressing these issues. Not only is this the text that had the greatest influence in the whole history of Chinese alchemy, but no other scripture was equally cherished within both *waidan* and *neidan*. The volume of related literature attests to the high regard in which the *Cantong qi* was held: more than thirty commentaries, written from the Tang period through the beginning of the twentieth century, are extant in at least one hundred and twenty editions (not including reprints), and bibliographic and other sources provide information on at least two dozen lost exegeses. Since the early eighth century the *Cantong qi* has been the subject of several essays, and scores of *waidan* and *neidan* works in the *Daozang* [Daoist Canon] are related to it.

This bibliographic wealth contrasts with the number of questions that the *Cantong qi* still raises, especially those concerning its date and the status of its received version. As shown below, both of these issues bear on our understanding of its place in the history of Chinese alchemy and, ultimately, of the relation between *waidan* and *neidan*. This paper tries to
answer some of these questions, focusing on the main stages of the history of the *Cantong qi* through the late seventh century, the *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the version known to us.

**Issues in the Study of the *Cantong qi***

The authorship of the *Cantong qi* is traditionally attributed to Wei Boyang 魏伯陽, a legendary character said to have come from the Shangyu 上虞 commandery of Guiji 会稽 in present-day Zhejiang. According to most accounts, Xu Congshi 徐從事, who came from Qingzhou 青州 in present-day Shandong, was the first to receive the text and wrote a commentary on it. At the time of Emperor Huan 桓帝 of the Later Han (r. 146–167), Wei Boyang transmitted both his own work and Xu’s commentary to Chunyu Shutong 淳于叔通, who also came from Shangyu and began to circulate the scripture. Despite the fictional nature of this story, three elements are worthy of note: (a) the reputed date of the *Cantong qi*, allegedly written sometime before the middle of the second century; (b) the indication of Guiji as the area of origin of both Wei Boyang and Chunyu Shutong; and (c) the hint of a compilation process taking place during more than one period.

As we shall see, the Han origins of the *Cantong qi* are confirmed by adequate evidence. An almost complete silence, on the other hand, surrounds the text during the Six Dynasties, and its first record in an extant official catalogue dates from no earlier than the tenth century: the *Jiu Tangshu* 唐書 [Old History of the Tang Dynasty; 945] mentions Wei Boyang as the author of both the *Cantong qi* and the *Wu xianglei* 五相類 [The Five Categories], a text in one *juan* that shares its title with a section of the received *Cantong qi*. References to the *Cantong qi*, in fact, begin to multiply only from the Tang period onward. The nineteen titles of commentaries and closely related texts listed by Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 in his *Tongzhi* 通志 [Comprehensive Monographs on the Institutions; 1161] are a fraction of the Tang and Song works known through other sources.

The prominence acquired by the *Cantong qi* from the Tang period is related to the process that led to a major innovation in the alchemical disciplines—the shift from practices based on the manipulation of minerals and metals (*waidan*) to those focused on the primary constituents of the cosmos and the human being (*neidan*). This process, and the role that the *Cantong qi* played in it, raises several questions: Is the text we know today the same as that of

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1. On the tradition reported above see, e.g., the preface to Peng Xiao’s 彭曉 (?–955) *Zhouyi cantong qi fenzhang tong zhenyi* (CT 1002), 1a-b.
2. *Jiu Tangshu*, 47.2041. The *Wu xianglei* may otherwise be the text, also attributed to Wei Boyang, that Lu Tianji 盧天賜 presented to the throne in the early twelfth century with his own commentary, entitled *Cantong qi wu xianglei biyao* (CT 905). See Ho and Needham, “Theories of Categories in Early Mediaeval Chinese Alchemy.”
3. *Tongzhi lüe* 43.6a-b. The most comprehensive list of extant and lost commentaries to the *Cantong qi*, also including some closely related works, is found in Wang, Ding, and Su, *Zhouyi cantong qi huikan*, 748–760.
the identically titled Han work? What was its history during the Six Dynasties? If the original scripture was submitted to revisions, when did it reach its present form?

A consideration of the history, literature, and doctrines of Chinese alchemy is called for before one tries to answer these questions. The issue of dating, in particular, is inseparable from a much debated point, namely, whether the text is primarily associated with waidan or neidan. If the Cantong qi is defined as a neidan treatise, and if the present text is the same as the original version, this would lead (and has sometimes led) to the unhistorical conclusion that a fully developed neidan tradition, capable of producing a scripture of this sort, already existed in Han times. On the other hand, attempts to define the present Cantong qi as a waidan text are confronted with its explicit rejection of waidan practices. For example, a passage of zh. 70 criticizes waidan adepts saying:

广求名药
与道乖殊
They look for renowned medicines far and wide—
how utterly different from the Way.

The final part of zh. 89 adds:

蠲除武都
八石棄捐
Dispose of realgar,
get rid of the eight minerals!

The approach followed in the present study is based on the consideration that in light of the earliest known alchemical sources, the alchemical content of the Cantong qi cannot reflect traditions as early as the Han period. Waidan sources dating from before the Tang period describe the elixirs as substances compounded and ingested to establish communication with divine beings and to ward off dangerous spirits. They emphasize the ritual nature of the alchemical work, that requires ceremonies for the transmission from master to disciple, the building of the laboratory, the kindling of the fire, the ingestion of the elixirs, and other phases of the practice. The use of alchemical symbols as abstract metaphors to describe the origin and nature of the cosmos is virtually absent in these sources. From the Tang period onward, instead, elixirs and their ingredients are explicitly used as emblems of cosmological principles. The alchemical work is described through the symbolism of the trigrams and hexagrams of the Book of Changes [Yijing 易經], the Five Agents [wuxing 五行], the patterns of the yearly and monthly cycles, and other arrangements of cosmological emblems. With very few exceptions, gods, demons, and the healing and magical properties of the elixirs are discounted.

4 On the prefigurations of neidan in the Han and the early Six Dynasties, see Pregadio, “Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy.”
5 By “earliest known alchemical sources” I mean the waidan scriptures of the Taiqing 太清 [Great Clarity] tradition summarized by Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) in j. 4 of his Baopu zi neipian 抱朴子内篇 [Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature], and now found in fragments or later versions in the Daozang. See Pregadio, Gods, Demons, and Elixirs (chapter 2).
6 On the two major subtraditions within waidan outlined above see Pregadio, “The Elixirs of Immortality,” especially 179-185.
In its alchemical and cosmological discourse, the *Cantong qi* speaks the language of the Tang and later *waidan* and *neidan* sources. One can therefore assume, as a working hypothesis, that the original Han text was submitted to revisions and additions before it reached its present shape. This perspective clears the issue of dating of some of its burden, and allows one to focus on the two other issues mentioned above: the history of the text during the Six Dynasties, and the date of the received version. As I will try to show, the original *Cantong qi* was one of several Han works elaborating the system of the *Book of Changes*. In revised forms, it became a scripture associated with both *waidan* and *neidan*, not only in the sense that parts of it admit both interpretations, but also in the more qualified sense that, parallel with a compilation process completed over several centuries, it was used within a *waidan* milieu and at the same time provided momentum for the development of *neidan*.

The historical reconstruction presented here is not based on the dating of any portion of the received text: the lack of clear internal or external evidence in this regard makes this a virtually impossible task. Although some of the passages quoted below distinctly evoke the different backgrounds of the scripture during the Han and the Six Dynasties, there is no definite indication that they are remnants of its text at one or another stage of its history. The anonymous authors of the *Cantong qi* wove their contributions to each other in a way that makes it impossible to date its textual layers. And in doing so, those authors were able to preserve the high literary standard of the work, the elegance and refinement of which have been frequently praised.

**The *Book of Changes*, the Apocrypha and the *Cantong qi***

The association of the *Cantong qi* with the Han “studies on the *Changes*” [*yixue* 易學] is manifest in the work of Yu Fan 虞翻 (164-233 C.E.), the last great representative of this tradition. A descendent of the lineage that had included Meng Xi 孟喜 (fl. 69 B.C.E.) and Jing Fang 京方 (77-37 B.C.E.), the two main Former Han exeges of the *Changes*, Yu Fan is the first author whose work shows acquaintance with the *Cantong qi*. A gloss on the character *yi* 易 (change) in the *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 [Lexicon of Classical Texts; early seventh century] attributes to him a reference to a sentence of the *Cantong qi* (“Sun and Moon make change” 日月為易) found in zh. 9 of the received text.7 The ambiguous wording of the gloss even leaves room for the possibility that Yu Fan wrote the earliest known independent commentary to the *Cantong qi*. In one of two possible interpretations, the gloss reads:

According to Yu Fan’s commentary [to the *Changes*], the *Cantong qi* says that this character is formed by the graph for “sun” with the graph for “moon” below it.

虞翻注。參同契云字從日下月。

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7*Jingdian shiwen*, 2.1a.
The punctuation that yields the second reading fits the pattern of quotations in the *Jingdian shiwen*:

Yu Fan’s commentary to the *Cantong qi* says that this character is formed by the graph for “sun” with the graph for “moon” below it.

虞翻注同契云。字從日下月。

In either of its two possible readings, this passage shows that a text entitled *Cantong qi* existed by about 200 C.E. Bibliographic sources do not mention any work by Yu Fan on the *Cantong qi*, but one of the two Tang commentaries of the scripture supports the indication gathered from the second reading. Other possible evidence of Yu Fan’s familiarity with the *Cantong qi* was pointed out by Suzuki Yoshijirō, who suggested that Yu Fan drew on zh. 13-15 for a passage of his commentary on the *Changes*. The passage deals with one of two cosmological patterns ascribed to Yu Fan and also adopted in the *Cantong qi*, which we shall examine presently.

In the *Shuowen jiezi* 説文解字 [Elucidations on the Signs and Explications of the Graphs; 100 C.E.], the sentence alluded to by Yu Fan is attributed to a “secret text” or some “secret texts” [bishi 秘書]. This apparent reference to the corpus of Han apocrypha, the *weishu 經書* or “weft texts,” is the first of several pointers to the background that the *Cantong qi* shares with them. The association between the *Cantong qi* and the *weishu* has been suggested both by commentators, for instance Peng Xiao 彭曉 (955) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), and by modern scholars, including Chen Guofu and Fukui Kōjun. The three-character title following the name of a Confucian Classic, which the *Cantong qi* shares with most *weishu*, is only the most conspicuous indication in this regard. The word *qi* 樞 (token) is frequent in the titles of *weishu* and belongs to a group of near-synonyms which, as Anna Seidel has remarked, “assimilates the apocrypha to contracts” between Heaven and

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8The commentary ascribed to Yin Changsheng 蕭長生, *Zhouyi cantong qi* (CT 999), 3.11a, cites Yu Fan’s remarks on a cryptogram hiding Wei Boyang’s name, which we shall refer to shortly below. On the Tang commentaries to the *Cantong qi*, see the section “Date of the Received Version” below.


10*Shuowen jiezi*, 9B.18a; see the exhaustive discussion in Wang, “Zhouyi cantong qi kaozheng,” 242-248.

11References to the *weishu* in Peng Xiao’s and Zhu Xi’s commentaries are in *Zhouyi cantong qi fenzhang tong shenyi* (CT 1002), preface, 1a, and *Zhouyi cantong qi* [kaoyi] (CT 1001), 3.8a, respectively. Chen (Daozang yuanliu xukao, 352-355) and Fukui (“A Study of Chou-i Ts’an-t’ung-ch’i,” 29-30) maintain on partially similar grounds that the original *Cantong qi* was an apocryphon on the *Changes*, and that its present version was fabricated in an alchemical milieu after the original text was lost. This differs from the suggestion given below that the transmission of the *Cantong qi* did not suffer major breaks after the Han.
Like the related term *fu* (symbolon, tally), *qi* sometimes designates an object, bestowed by Heaven either directly or through the mediation of a master, that grants the potentiality of communicating with Heaven. The *Cantong qi* is one of these objects: a Song *waidan* work that belongs to its tradition states that “for the Reverted Elixir [*huandan*] there is no formula; the *Jinbi jing* and the *Cantong qi* are its formulae.”

Connections between the *Cantong qi* and the *weishu* are also intimated by at least two passages in the received text. A description of the transcendence acquired by the adept (zh. 28) ends with the line “he will obtain the Registers and receive the Chart” [*yinglu shoutu* 肅錄受圖], one of a set of similar expressions that in the apocrypha designate the mandate granted by Heaven to a sovereign. In another passage (zh. 11), the *Cantong qi* mentions Confucius and alludes to the initial sentences of five Confucian Classics. This passage—which is hardly to be expected if the *Cantong qi* had been an alchemical text since its origin—fits the context of the apocrypha, sometimes deemed to have been written by Confucius long before their alleged re-emergence in Han times. A further but ambiguous indication is a pun in the final *zhang* of the text, where some characters can be rearranged to form the phrase “composed by Wei Boyang” 魏伯陽造. Cryptograms like this were both a pastime of Han literati and a technique of divination documented in the apocrypha and elsewhere, but the final portions of the *Cantong qi* are among those most likely to have been added after the Han.

Traditions concerning Chunyu Shutong—the second recipient of the *Cantong qi* according to the traditional account—provide a clearer focus to the evidence reported above. Unlike Wei Boyang, Chunyu Shutong is a historical character whose connections with prognostication point to a milieu close to that which produced the apocrypha. The most elaborate account that concerns him is in Tao Hongjing’s 陶弘景 (456-536) *Zhen’gao* [Declarations of the Perfected; ca. 499], where he appears in a section devoted to the bureaucracy of the netherworld. According to Tao’s narrative, Chunyu was proficient in numerology [*shushu* 數術] and used to ingest pills of sesame seeds and deer bamboo. At the

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12 Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 309 (“... a typical apocryphal title always indicates that its text, besides *telling* of divine revelation, is *in itself* a certificate testifying to the owner’s favor with Heaven”). Other words in this group include *fu*, *ming*, and *qian*. On the use of three-word titles in apocryphal, Daoist, and other texts see Wang Liqi, “Chenwei wulun,” 383-386.

13 *Longhu huandan jue* (CT 909), 1.1a; quoted in Sivin, “The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy,” 249. This anonymous *waidan* text dates from the beginning of the Song period, but incorporates materials of the early eighth century drawn from the works of Chen Shaowei 陳少微. On the *Jinbi jing* [Scripture of Gold and Jade], a text closely related to the *Cantong qi*, see the Appendix below.

14 In a wording very similar to the line of the *Cantong qi* (*shoulu ying hetu* 膺錄受河圖: “he will receive the script and obtain the River Chart”), this expression appears in an apocryphon on the *Book of Changes*; cf. *Qian zuodu* 乾齋度 [Opening the Way to the Understanding of *Qian* (= the One)], in Yasui and Nakamura, *Isho shūsei* 1A: 48. In later times, the same expression defined the Daoist ceremony of transmission; see Seidel, “Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments,” 308-309.

15 Wang, “Zhouyi cantong qi kaozheng,” 247-248, quotes the relevant passage of the *Cantong qi* and refers to similar passages in apocryphal texts.
time of Emperor Huan (r. 146-167), he was District Magistrate of Xuzhou (徐州, in present-day Jiangsu). Emperor Ling 隆帝 (r. 168-189) appointed him General-in-Chief, but he declined the summons and went to Wu 吴 (the region corresponding to present-day Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang). There he received the Hongjing danjing 虹景丹經 [Scripture of the Elixir of Rainbow Effulgence] from the immortal Huiche zi 虹車子.16 Tao Hongjing’s own notes to this passage quote a short account of Chunyu’s life from the Cantong qi, which may come from one of its early versions or from a lost preface. Chunyu is depicted there as a disciple of Xu Congshi, who taught him the art of prognostication. Chunyu’s connections to the science of prediction are amplified in other works that report his divinatory feats and make him an expert of the Book of Changes and the apocrypha.17

Chunyu Shutong’s dealings with both divination and alchemy are significant in light of the background shared by the two disciplines, which apply the same cosmological system in different domains. This system, as a whole, is the main feature that points to relations between the Cantong qi and the Han “studies on Changes.” As its detailed description falls outside the scope of the present study, let it be enough to briefly mention here only the two main cosmological arrangements adopted in the Cantong qi, both of which are related to Yu Fan.18

The first pattern is the Matching Stems [najia 納甲], which essentially consists of coordinating the eight trigrams to the ten Stems of Heaven [tiangan 天干]. The original form of this arrangement is associated with Jing Fang, but its main development is ascribed to Yu Fan. Elaborating on the sentence “Among the images suspended [between Heaven and Earth] none is greater than the Sun and the Moon” 縣象莫大乎日月 of the Book of Changes, Yu applied the najia arrangement to a representation of the moon cycle. In the Cantong qi, this pattern is the subject of zh. 13-15 and 46-48, where six trigrams are associated with nodal days in the waxing and waning of the moon.19

The second pattern is the Twelve-stage Ebb and Flow [shī’er xiaoxi 十二消息]. This arrangement represents cyclical change through the twelve “sovereign hexagrams” [bīgua 辟卦], whose unbroken lines flow first upwards and then downwards. While the najia pattern uses the month as the main time unit, the Twelve-stage Ebb and Flow reproduces the rise and fall of Yin and Yang throughout the year. Besides the twelve months, the twelve hexagrams are also related to the twelve double hours of the day and to other duodenary sequences of emblems such as the Branches of Earth [dìzhī 地支]. This pattern, mentioned twice by Yu

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16Zhen’gao (CT 1016), 12.8a-b. An elixir called hongjing dan 紅景丹 [Elixir of Red Effulgence] is mentioned in the Taiqing danjing yaojue 太清丹經要訣 [Essential Instructions on the Scripture of the Elixirs of the Great Clarity], in Yunji qiqian (CT 1032), 71.2b; Sivin, Chinese Alchemy, 155.

17Sources on Chunyu Shutong’s connections to divination are quoted in Yu Jiaxi, Siku tiyao bianzheng, 1211-1214. See also Wang, “Zhouyi cantong qi kaozheng,” 242 n. 1.


19The sentence quoted above comes from the Xici 繕辭 [Appended Statements] portion of the Book of Changes. This is the passage of Yu Fan’s work that Suzuki Yoshijirō deems to be based on the Cantong qi; see note 9 above.
Fan in fragments of his commentary to the Book of Changes, is described in zh. 49-60 of the Cantong qi. It played a major role in the practices of both waidan and neidan as the basis of the system of the “fire times” [huohou 火候].

The Cantong qi in Jiangnan

While the details provided above suggest that a text entitled Cantong qi existed in Han times, its relation to the received version is obscured not only by the absence of distinct textual evidence, but also by the virtual silence that surrounds the scripture from the third to the sixth centuries. The almost complete lack of references to the Cantong qi in sources dating from this period may be related to the proscriptions of the apocrypha, repeatedly decreed from the early Six Dynasties onwards, that led to the disappearance of this large body of texts now preserved almost exclusively in quotations. Whether or not this is indeed the reason, some scholars have suggested that the original Cantong qi was lost and that its present version shares nothing but its title with the Han work.

Examined against one another, however, the records of the Cantong qi in Six Dynasties sources suggest that its transmission continued without major breaks after the Han. These records, as shown below, consist of short passages found in five works; while two of them provide unclear testimony, the evidence yielded by the other three is valuable.

The question of whether Wei Boyang and the Cantong qi were known to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343) has been much debated. In the Baopu zi neipian 抱朴子内篇 [Inner Chapters of the Book of the Master Who Embraces Spontaneous Nature; ca. 317], the list of texts that belonged to Ge’s master includes a Wei Boyang neijing 伟伯陽內經 or Secret Scripture of Wei Boyang. Elsewhere in his work, Ge mentions an “archivist” [zhushi 柱史] named Boyang 伯陽 whose advice was sought by Confucius and whose son, Zong 宗, served as a general in Wei 魏. Clearly, Ge Hong refers here to Laozi 老子, or rather to the legendary character whose accounts are conflated in the Shiji 史記 [Records of a Historian; ca. 90 B.C.E.] and elsewhere with traditions concerning Laozi. Hints of an identification of Wei

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21The two main exponents of this view are Chen Guofu and Fukui Kōjun; see note 11 above.

22Baopu zi neipian, 19.334.

23Baopu zi neipian, 8.148, 7.138, and 3.52, respectively; trans. Ware, Alchemy, Medicine and Religion, 137, 129, and 64.

24The narrative on Laozi in Shiji, 63.2139-2143, includes all three details mentioned above. In a fourth passage of the Baopu zi neipian (10.185; Ware, Alchemy, Medicine and Religion, 167), Boyang is depicted as the ideal sage for those who retire on a mountain to pursue self-cultivation. On Boyang as a
Boyang with Laozi emerge from time to time in works related to the Cantong qi, but apparently only one author refers to it explicitly: Chen Xianwei (陈顯微) (?-after 1254), as reported by one of his disciples, taught that Wei Boyang was the “manifestation body” [化身, nirmāṇakāya] of Laozi. No other text, on the other hand, cites the Wei Boyang neijing. Whether this was an alternative title of the Cantong qi—in other words, whether Ge Hong knew the Cantong qi—remains an open question.

Approximately two centuries after Ge Hong, Jiang Yan 江淹 (444-505) mentions the Cantong qi in a poem devoted to the immortal Qin Gao 琴高. Two lines of the poem read, in Arthur Waley’s translation:

He proved the truth of the Cantong qi;
In a golden furnace he melted the Holy Drug.

Writing in the same period as Jiang Yan, his younger contemporary Tao Hongjing quotes the Cantong qi, as we have seen, in connection with Chunyu Shutong. About one century later, Yan Zhitui 颜之推 (531-591) reports in his Yanshi jiaxun [Family Instructions for the Yan Clan; ca. 589] that “in the Cantong qi, the character zao is considered to be composed of ren 人 and gao 告.” These words allude to the cryptogram found in the final section of the Cantong qi referred to above.

The last source is the Shenxian zhuan [Biographies of Divine Immortals], a collection of hagiographic stories often attributed to Ge Hong. The anecdote on Wei Boyang in this work is cited in several studies to confirm the traditional date and attribution of the Cantong qi. The nature and history of the Shenxian zhuan—a collection of legendary accounts, surviving only in quotations or re-editions both much later than its supposed date—make this evidence entirely ineffective. Moreover, the final sentences of the anecdote, which ascribe the Cantong qi to Wei Boyang, are unrelated to the rest of the story and, like similar instances in this or other texts, may well be a later addition.

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25 See Wang Yi’s 王十 colophon to the Zhouyi cantong qi jie (CT 1007), 2.20a.
26 Jiang Wentong jihui zhu, 3.111; Waley, “Notes on Chinese Alchemy,” 8. The text of the two lines is 方鸞參同契。金鸞煉神丹. Qin Gao is also mentioned in the Liexian zhuan 列仙傳 [Biographies of the Immortals; Kaltenmark, Le Lie-sien tchouan, 104-107], but his account there does not refer to the Cantong qi, nor does it allude to alchemy.
27 Yanshi jiaxun, 2.20a; see Teng, Family Instructions for the Yen Clan, 185. The sentence reads 參同契以人負告為造.
28 The anecdote is found in all editions of the Shenxian zhuan and is quoted in many other texts. Wei Boyang, three disciples and a dog went on a mountain to compound an elixir. Wei Boyang, one disciple, and the dog ingested the elixir and died. The two other disciples went away, but regretted doing so when they heard that the others had been revived as immortals. The story ends with this passage: “[Wei] Boyang wrote the Cantong qi and the Wuxing xianglei [五行相類] [The Categories of the Five Agents], altogether in three juan. While these texts talk about the Book of Changes, they actually borrow its emblems to discuss the meaning of compounding the elixirs. The literati of our generation do not
While the evidence from the *Baopu zi* is controversial, and that from the *Shenxian zhuan* is unreliable, the three other sources mentioned above provide important information. Jiang Yan was from Jiankang (present-day Nanjing); Tao Hongjing was born and lived in the same area; and Yan Zhitui came from Shandong but spent part of his life at the court of the Liang. All those who mention the *Cantong qi* before the seventh century (as well as Ge Hong, if his testimony in the *Baopu zi* is also taken into account) came from or lived in Jiangnan. These sources, therefore, suggest that during the Six Dynasties the *Cantong qi* was not lost but circulated in southeastern China.

Their hint is supported by other evidence which in turn helps to shape a larger picture. First, as remarked above, the traditional account of the origins of the *Cantong qi* states that both Wei Boyang and Chunyu Shutong came from Guiji. Although the claim that the original version of the *Cantong qi* originated in southeastern China cannot be either validated or refuted, it matches the testimony of the Six Dynasties sources that it circulated in Jiangnan. Second, plausible background for the history of the text after the end of the Han is provided by the development of the cosmological tradition. Yu Fan’s role in the transmission of the *Cantong qi* comes again to the fore here. Himself born in Guiji, his lineage was one of those that preserved the traditions of the “studies on the Changes” in Jiangnan during the early Six Dynasties. The close relation between Yu Fan’s work and the *Cantong qi*, examined above, suggests that his followers may have continued to transmit the scripture in southeastern China during the early Six Dynasties until it came in contact with the alchemical lineages of that region.

Third, and more importantly, the widely documented *waidan* traditions of Jiangnan made this the ideal soil for the transformation of the *Cantong qi* into an alchemical treatise. Their connections with the lineages that transmitted the apocryphal texts are remarkably reflected by a passage in *zh.* 32 of the *Cantong qi*:

巨勝尚延年
rance 可入口

If even sesame seeds prolong your life
surely you can ingest the Reverted Elixir.

Sesame seeds were one of the favorite drugs of the southern adepts. They were ingested by several adepts mentioned in the *Zhen’gao* (including, as we have seen, Chunyu Shutong), and were used in many recipes collected in the *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* 太上靈寶五符序 [Prolegomena to the Five Talismans of the Highest Numinous Treasure], a work reflecting the early Six Dynasties local traditions of Jiangnan. Ge Hong quotes a sentence virtually identical to the first verse above (“sesame seeds prolong your life” 巨勝延年) from the

understand the divine elixirs, and have written commentaries based on the theories of Yin and Yang. Doing so, they entirely miss the meaning of these texts.” For a translation of the anecdote see Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 368-369.


30*Zhen’gao*, 6.3b, 12.8a, and *j.* 14 *passim*; *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* (CT 388), *j.* 2 *passim*. Sesame seeds [*jusheng* 巨勝] are often called *huma* 胡麻 in both texts. On the recipes in the *Lingbao wufu xu*, see Yamada, “Longevity Techniques and the Compilation of the *Lingbao wufuxu*.”
Yuanshen qi [Token for Rescuing the Spirit], an apocryphal text attached to the Xiaojing [Book of Filial Piety]. Significantly, another text closely related to the apocrypha which contains the same sentence is the Taishang lingbao wufu xu. Seen in this context, the passage of the Cantong qi acquires new meaning, showing the close relation of the apocryphal and alchemical traditions in southeastern China.  

In Jiangnan, the Cantong qi also came in touch with the traditions of the Shangqing [Highest Clarity] school of Daoism, which developed from the latter half of the fourth century. One of the earlier writings which Shangqing incorporated into its canonical literature is the Huangting jing [Scripture of the Yellow Court], a work in verses that describes the human being as the seat of a multitude of divine beings and alludes to visualization and meditation practices. The Cantong qi shares many terms and phrases with the Neijing [Inner Effulgences] version of this work, which scholars generally deem to have been composed by Shangqing adepts based on the earlier Waijing [Outer Effulgences] version. One of the most obvious examples is the description of the elixir in the Cantong qi (quoted below as “CTQ”), which matches the description of the center of the human being in the Huangting jing (quoted as “HTJ”):

方圓一寸門中 [HTJ 13.6] square and round and with a size of one inch, within the Gate of Life

方圓一寸處此中 [HTJ 7.12] square and round and with a size of one inch, there dwell [the gods of the upper Yellow Court]

方圓徑寸 [CTQ 25.5] square and round and with a diameter of one inch

Altogether, the Cantong qi and the Huangting jing share no less than fifty or sixty two-character compounds and several other short phrases. These include doctrinal terms, idioms drawn from the language of cosmology, expressions related to self-cultivation practices, names of loci of the human body, and descriptive words. Both texts, moreover, allude to or elaborate on the same sentences of the Laozi and the Book of Changes.  

31 Baopu zi neipian, 11.196 (trans. Ware, Alchemy, Medicine and Religion, 177); Taishang lingbao wufu xu, 2.2a. On the relation of the Lingbao wufu xu to the apocrypha see Yamada, “Reihō gofu no seiritsu.” Fragments of the Yuanshen qi are collected in Yasui and Nakamura, Isho 5: 21-60; the one referred to here is on p. 50.

32 Robinet, Taoist Meditation, 55-96.

33 References to the Huangting jing are to section and verse of the Neijing version edited by Kristofer Schipper in his Concordance du Houang-t’ing king: Nei-king et Wai-king (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1975). References to the Cantong qi are to section and verse in Peng Xiao’s version.

34 Zh. 32 of the Huangting jing and zh. 23 of the Cantong qi allude to Laozi 28, “Know the White, keep to the Black, and you will be a model to all-under-Heaven” 知其白，守其黑，爲天下式。Zh. 35 of the Huangting jing and zh. 7 of the Cantong qi allude to a passage of the Xici appendix to the Book of Changes, “Heaven and Earth establish their positions, and change occurs within them” 天地設位，
Not all shared terms and expressions, however, are used with the same intent in the *Huangting jing* and the *Cantong qi*. In particular, several terms of the *Huangting jing* appear in *zh. 27* of the *Cantong qi*, which mentions various physiological, meditational, and ritual practices, and rejects them as inadequate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Term</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>内视密验目寄真</td>
<td>[HTJ 23.12] if you observe internally and gaze intimately, you see the Perfected everywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>内视有所思</td>
<td>[CTQ 27.2] if you observe internally, your thoughts would absorb your mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>晏夜不寐乃成真</td>
<td>[HTJ 3.6] by being sleepless day and night you will achieve perfection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>晏夜不卧寐（[...]）</td>
<td>[CTQ 27.9, 11] by being sleepless day and night [. . .]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>身体日疲倦</td>
<td>daily your body becomes tired and exhausted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>開通百脈血液始</td>
<td>[HTJ 34.5] you open up the hundred channels and unblock the blood and the fluids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>百脈鼎沸驰</td>
<td>[CTQ 27.13] the hundred channels would stir and boil like a caldron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>重扇金闕密樞機</td>
<td>[HTJ 4.5] tightly close the Golden Pass and conceal the Pivotal Mechanism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>猪挫辄有违</td>
<td>[CTQ 27.23-24] this goes against the order of nature and will cause the loss of the Pivotal Mechanism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The authors of the alchemical version of the *Cantong qi*, therefore, borrowed the terminology of the *Huangting jing* with the definite purpose of affirming the superiority of alchemy over other teachings and practices that were transmitted in Jiangnan, including those of the Shangqing school.

**A Little-known Alchemical Tradition**

As shown by Jiang Yan’s poem quoted above, the *Cantong qi* was related to the southeastern *waidan* traditions by the end of the fifth century. What were these traditions? Since no part of the received text of the *Cantong qi* can be dated with confidence to any time before the Tang, and no surviving pre-Tang alchemical source contains references to it, the only possible way to approach this question is to examine the place of the *Cantong qi* within the development of Chinese alchemy. The evidence gathered thus far on the circulation of the *Cantong qi* in Jiangnan allows one to do this with somewhat greater precision than in the past.

而 易行乎其中矣. For more examples of shared terms, see Pregadio, *Gods, Demons, and Elixirs* (chapter 11).
Waidan practices are based on two main methods, one consisting in the refining of mercury from cinnabar, and the other in the conjunction of refined mercury and refined lead. In the first method, the cyclical extraction of mercury (Yin) from cinnabar (Yang) and its addition to sulphur (Yang), typically repeated nine times, yields an essence deemed to represent Pure Yang [chunyang]. In the second method, the conjunction of Authentic Mercury (Yin) and Authentic Lead (Yang) produces a substance endowed with the same properties: Pure Yang is the state associated with the One before its separation into the two complementary principles. The analogies shared by these two different processes should not conceal a key event in the development of alchemy in China. From the Tang period onward, lead and mercury become the main substances in waidan, both as emblems of cosmological principles and as actual ingredients of elixirs. Some Tang works give evidence of this shift through their explicit advocacy of lead and mercury, with the usual rationale that Yang (cinnabar) alone cannot produce the elixir. In the new, successful model, cinnabar is retained only as the substance that incorporates Authentic Mercury, or as an emblem of Yang containing pure Yin.35

The shift to binary processes based on lead and mercury was crucial in the history of Chinese alchemy for two reasons. First, it allowed the whole array of cosmological emblems and configurations to enter the language and imagery of waidan. The derivation of Authentic Mercury and Authentic Lead from native cinnabar and native lead, respectively, makes the notions of Yin and Yang, those of the Five Agents, the trigrams and hexagrams of the Book of Changes, and other sets of emblems interact with each other in a way impossible for representations based on cinnabar and mercury alone. Secondly, the shift to processes based on lead and mercury paved the way for the emergence of neiidan, whose alchemical language revolves around these two metals and their symbolic associations with the prime constituents of the cosmos.

To evaluate the place of the Cantong qi in the history of Six Dynasties alchemy, therefore, one should investigate its possible relation to the earliest sources that describe lead-mercury processes. This is not a difficult task, since only one extant early waidan text contains methods based on the two metals. Lead and mercury are the main ingredients of altogether four recipes in the Huangdi jiuding shendan jing [Scripture of the Divine Elixirs of the Nine Tripods of the Yellow Emperor; hereafter referred to as Scripture of the Nine Elixirs], substantially identical to each other.36 Some details suggest that

35Typical statements in this regard are found in Zhouyi cantong qi zhu (CT 1004), 1.21b-22a and 2.45a-b; and Zhang zhenren jinshi lingsha lun (CT 887), 4a-b. Other texts maintain the superiority of lead and mercury over minerals as a whole. See Ren, Zhongguo daojiao shi, 415-416; Chen, Daozang yuanliu xukao, 277; Pregadio, “The Elixirs of Immortality,” 170-171; and Pregadio, Gods, Demons, and Elixirs (chapter 11).

36Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue (CT 885), 1.3a-b and 1.5b-8a. The first method is translated in Sivin, “The Theoretical Background of Elixir Alchemy,” 256; see also the full translation of the Scripture of the Nine Elixirs in Pregadio, Gods, Demons, and Elixirs (chapter 9). The only other lead-mercury process in an extant early source is briefly described in the Baopu zhi neipian, 16.290-291 (trans.
the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* was known within the milieu that produced the alchemical version of the *Cantong qi*. Not only is its circulation in Jiangnan attested to by various testimonies, including a summary in the *Baopu zi neipian* and the consideration that Tao Hongjing gave to its methods, but the *Cantong qi* itself alludes to the Nine Elixirs in *zh*. 79, and refers to the elixir formed by lead and mercury as the “First Tripod” in *zh*. 83.

The commentary to the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs*, dating from the latter half of the seventh century, also leads us to consider the little-known body of texts associated with the semi-legendary Hugang zi 狐剛子. Quotations in the commentary and references in bibliographic works show that the now fragmentary corpus going under his name took shape during the Six Dynasties. Traditions associating Hugang zi with Wei Boyang and with Ge Hong’s line of transmission suggest a southern origin for these texts, and, in the first instance, point to links with the *Cantong qi*. The writings ascribed to Hugang zi are of remarkable historical value as they included the earliest *waidan* texts largely based on metals, and specifically on lead and mercury. The best example of the use of the two metals in this corpus is in fragments of the *Fu xuanzhu jue* 伏玄珠訣 [*Instructions for Fixing the Mysterious Pearl*], which contained recipes for the separate refining of lead and mercury culminating in a method for their conjunction. The final part of the process is quoted in the commentary to the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* as “Method of the Nine-cycled Essence of Elixir-Lead and the Mysterious Pearl” [*jiu danqi a n jing xuanzhu fa* 九丹禲玄珠法]:

Heat two pounds of Mysterious Pearl and twelve ounces of Nine-cycled Essence of Elixir-Lead in Vinegar of the Yellow and the White [*huangbai zuowei* 黃白左味], for seven days and seven nights. When the compound coagulates and becomes white and stabilized, let it dry and remove its toxicity. It is used as “blanket and mat,” and no elixir will form in its absence.

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Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 274). Ge Hong quotes it from a body of texts which he calls “Huangbai jing” 黃白經 or “Scriptures of the Yellow and the White.”

37 *Baopu zi neipian*, 4.71 and 74-76 (trans. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion*, 69-70 and 75-78), and Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T’ao Hung-ching,” 144, respectively.

38 Juan 9, 11, and 12 of the *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue* are largely based on texts ascribed to Hugang zi. Other fragments are found in different chapters of the same work and in other sources. See Chen, *Daozang yuanliu xukao*, 303-309; Zhao, “Hugang zi” (especially pp. 203-206 on lead and mercury); and Pregadio, *Gods, Demons, and Elixirs* (chapter 5). Three works depict Hugang zi as a disciple of Wei Boyang: *Taiqing yu beizi* (CT 927), 6b; *Danlun jue zhixin jian* (CT 935), 4a (also in *Yunji qiqian*, 66.4a-b); and *Longhu yuanzhi* (CT 1083), 4b-5a. In the *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, instead, Hugang zi appears as a disciple of Zuo Ci 左慈 (the alleged originator of the alchemical tradition known to Ge Hong) and the master of Ge Xuan 葛玄 (Ge Hong’s granduncle); see 7.5a-b and 3.6b, respectively.

39 See *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, 11.6a-b for the refining of mercury; 12.3a for the refining of lead; and 11.7a-b and 12.3a-b for their conjunction (the last method is given twice). The *Fu xuanzhu jue* is not listed in bibliographic works.

40 “Blanket and mat” (*fuji*) refers to the use of the compound as the lowest and highest layers in the crucible together with the other ingredients. A method for making the Vinegar of the Yellow and White in Three Cycles is quoted in *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, 17.5a-b, from the *Wanjin jue*
The links among the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs*, the Hugang zi corpus of texts, and the *Cantong qi* show that lead-mercury processes were practiced in southeastern China within a tradition that counted the *Cantong qi* among its sources. We know nothing about the history of this tradition during the Six Dynasties. The scarcity of contemporary related sources suggests that what may have started as a minor local lineage progressively acquired influence, and later came to affect the whole development of Chinese alchemy.

**Date of the Received Version**

Dating the received version of the *Cantong qi* has a bearing not only on the history of the text, but also on the whole history of Chinese alchemy. Several passages of the *Cantong qi* indicate that the process of its compilation ended when the shift from *waidan* to *neidan* had already occurred, at least within local lineages, before it affected larger segments of the alchemical tradition. The transition from external to internal alchemy was a lengthy process that was not fully achieved until the Song period with the *Wuzhen pian* [Awakening to Reality; ca. 1075], the first work entirely conceived within a *neidan* context to exert a lasting influence on the later tradition. *Waidan* and *neidan* coexisted throughout the Tang dynasty, with *neidan* slowly gaining prominence just while *waidan* reached its apogee.

Based on the sources related to the *Cantong qi* examined below, the initial shift had already taken place by the end of the seventh century. The *Cantong qi* mirrored these events and at the same time provided them with textual authority. Its prestige is attested to by an increased awareness of the text from the beginning of the Tang and especially from the early eighth century, and not only in alchemical sources. The earliest Tang quotations are in encyclopedias dating from the first decades of the seventh century, and even illustrious poets such as Li Bai 李白 (701-762) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) were often attracted to this text.41

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41 The first mention of the *Cantong qi* in the Tang period is in the *Beitang shuchao* (ca. 620), 160.1a, which quotes sentences from zh. 40. It was followed shortly later by the *Yiwen leiju* (624), 95.1650, which quotes a passage from zh. 33. Another Tang encyclopedia compiled ca. 720, the *Chuxue ji*, 27.645 and 23.549, quotes passages from zh. 31 and 79. On Li Bai’s and Bai Juyi’s references to the *Cantong qi*, see Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po*, 55-56, and Ho, Goh, and Parker, “Po Chü-i’s Poems on Immortality,” 167 and 171. Around the time Bai Juyi was writing, the *Cantong qi* was recorded for the first time in an extant bibliography; see *Shiyao erya* (preface dated 806; CT 901), 2.3b, which lists a *Cantong qi Wei Boyang jue* 參同契魏伯陽詎 [Wei Boyang’s Instructions on the *Cantong qi*] and an anonymous *Cantong qi zhigui* 參同契指歸 [Pointers to the True Meaning of the *Cantong qi*]. These references antedate those in the *Jiu Tangshu* (note 2 above) by about one and a half centuries.
The Two Tang Commentaries
While Peng Xiao’s commentary of 947 C.E. is often indicated as the earliest extant exegesis of the *Cantong qi*, Chen Guofu has been the first scholar to suggest that the anonymous *waidan* commentary in the *Daozang* dates from between the end of the seventh and the middle of the eighth century. Its two *juan* correspond to the first *juan* of Peng Xiao’s recension, but the preface describes the text as divided into three parts. The last is the “Five Categories” [*Wu xianglue* 五相類], said to consist of explications on the first two parts. This shows that the commentary originally included the full text of the *Cantong qi*.

In addition to mentions of place names officially adopted between 686 and 760, on which Chen Guofu has based his dating, other details support his suggestion. No text or author quoted in the commentary can be assigned a date as late as the Tang period. The evidence of tabooed characters is ambiguous, but words that formed the personal names of Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-649) and Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649-683) are often avoided or replaced. Meng Naichang has provided another substantial indication, pointing out that a sentence in the preface is quoted in two Tang texts. Taken together, the available evidence suggests that the anonymous two-juan commentary dates from around 700 C.E.

Its contents support this dating. The commentary interprets several passages of the *Cantong qi* as dealing with a lead-mercury compound called Elixir of Correct Yang [*zhengyang dan* 正陽丹]. It also describes methods for other elixirs, and provides instructions on the furnace and other instruments. References to earlier *waidan* works are

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43Zhouyi cantong qi zhu (CT 1004), 1.2a. That this work once contained the whole *Cantong qi* is also shown by a note in 1.20a, which quotes the phrase *tingchu wudu* 指除武都 (“dispose of realgar”) as coming from the now missing “last *pian*” 下篇. It is found in the third and last *juan*—or, in some editions, *pian*—of the received version, in the portion of text corresponding to Peng Xiao’s *zh*. 89.
44Two of five occurrences of *shi* 世 (part of the personal name of Taizong) are replaced with *su* 俗 in the main text (1.42a and 2.31a). Both characters, however, are found in the commentary, where *shi* appears ten times and *su* nine times. *Min* 民 (also part of Taizong’s name) does not occur in the whole text. One of three occurrences of *zhi* 治 (part of the personal name of Gaozong) in the main text is replaced with *li* 理 (1.34b). *Zhi* appears eleven times in the commentary, while *li*—the most common substitution for *zhi* in taboo avoidance—appears thirty-two times. To further contradict any clear pattern, this recension of the *Cantong qi* has *zhi* 治 (2.26b) in a sentence where other recensions read *fei* 飛 or *zhi* 之.
45Meng, *Zhouyi cantong qi kaobian*, 28-29. The two texts are the *Yuqing neishu* [Secret Writ of Jade Clarity; CT 947], 3a, and the *Tongyou jue* [Instructions for Penetrating the Obscurity; CT 913], 23a. Both quote the passage explicating the title of the *Cantong qi* from the anonymous commentary, 1a. The *Yuqing neishu* and the *Tongyou jue* share considerable portions of text. The *Yuqing neishu* provides an indication of its date in the sentence “at present, in the great Tang state . . .” 今大唐國 (3b). The omission of *jin* 今 (“at present”) in the version of the *Tongyou jue*, 23a, may indicate a later date for this text.
46One of the clearest statements on the Elixir of Correct Yang is in 1.16b-17a; see also 1.13a (“Gold is the Elixir of Correct Yang” 金者正陽丹也), 2.6a, and 2.34b-35b. For other elixir recipes see, e.g., 2.24b-25a, and on the furnace, 2.2b.
especially significant. The anonymous author summarizes one of the lead-mercury recipes and the method for making the luting mud from the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs*. Acquaintance with the corpus ascribed to Hugang zi is reflected in a quotation from one of his writings, the *Wujin fen tujue* 五金分圖缺 [Illustrated Instructions on the Powders of the Five Metals], and a mention of the Nine-cycled Essence of Lead, the method of which was found, as we have seen, in another work of that corpus. These and several other references suggest that the anonymous commentary is a late product of the southern *waidan* traditions centered around the *Cantong qi* in the Six Dynasties.\(^{47}\)

Not long before or after 700 C.E., another anonymous author wrote the second Tang exegesis of the *Cantong qi* preserved in the *Daozang*. Attributed to the immortal Yin Changsheng, this work is distinguished by a strictly cosmological interpretation, but incidental references to actual practices show that it originated in a *waidan* context.\(^{48}\) It quotes several times the *Yisi zhan* 乙已占 [Prognostications for 645 C.E.] by the early Tang cosmologist, Li Chunfeng 李淳風 (602-670). Since no source later than this is mentioned in the whole text, Chen Guofu has suggested that the commentary dates from the seventh century.\(^{49}\)

Again, additional evidence supports Chen’s dating. The text virtually matches the anonymous two-juan commentary in either replacing or leaving unaltered the characters that form the personal names of Taizong and Gaozong. These correspondences provide part of the evidence for the textual kinship between the two works. Taking as a unit the single sentences of the *Cantong qi*, the Yin Changsheng and the anonymous recension together diverge more than one hundred and fifty times from the text established by Peng Xiao. About two thirds of these variants are shared by both works, which in many other instances differ from each other only in minor details. Most missing or displaced sentences are also the same. Moreover, as shown by Meng Naichang, quotations from the *Cantong qi* in several Tang works correspond to the readings of the two Tang recensions.\(^{50}\)

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\(^{47}\) The lead-mercury recipe is in 2.12b-13a; compare *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, 1.6a. On the luting mud see 2.3a, and *Huangdi jiuding shendan jingjue*, 1.3b-4a. The *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* is also mentioned in 2.45a. The *Wujin fen tujue* is quoted as *Wujin jue* 五金誨 in 2.24a, and the Essence of Lead is mentioned in 2.12b.

\(^{48}\) This is suggested, for example, by the references to drawing images of the gods of the four directions on the four sides of the furnace (1.10a; the same is said in 1.35b about the image of the vermilion bird); to the ingestion of a small quantity of the elixir in 1.32b; and to the refining of lead into white lead (*fen* 粉, for *hufen* 胡粉) in 1.37a.

\(^{49}\) Chen, *Daozang yuanliu xukao*, 377. For quotations of the *Yisi zhan*, see 1.22b, 23a, 24a, 25b, and 2.2b. The only feature in disagreement with this dating is the presence of the “Song of the Tripod” [Dingqi ge 鼎器歌] in a separate section at the end of the text: Peng Xiao claims that this innovation resulted from his own editorial work (see the section entitled “Composition of the Received Version” below).

\(^{50}\) Meng, *Zhouyi cantong qi kaobian*, 5-30.
The Essay by Liu Zhigu

A third source showing that the *Cantong qi* had reached its present form by the middle of the eighth century is the *Riyue xuanshu lun* 日月玄樞論 [Treatise on the Sun and the Moon, the Mysterious] by Liu Zhigu 劉知古 (zi Guangxuan 光玄; before 661-after 742). Liu, a *daoshi* from the Jianqiong 監邛 district in present-day Sichuan, was summoned by Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756) near the beginning of his reign, and questioned on ways to bring an end to the natural disasters that struck in those years. Several years later, he was again invited to court to celebrate *jiao* 教 rituals. The composition and preservation of Liu’s treatise is indeed linked to Xuanzong’s patronage, as shown by the memorial of submission included in one of its two extant versions.51

The *Riyue xuanshu lun* is the earliest extant essay on the *Cantong qi*, of which Liu Zhigu provides a summary and the first *neidan* interpretation that has come down to us. In doing so, he quotes or refers to many passages of the text, all found in its present version. The most telling detail is a reference to passages now found in zh. 24 and zh. 66 as coming from the “first book” [*shangjing* 上經] and the “middle book” [*zhongjing* 中經] of the *Cantong qi*, respectively. Those passages are found in the first and second *juan* of the received text. Liu’s wording confirms, once more, that by his time the *Cantong qi* was already divided into three parts.

Composition of the Received Version

The two Tang recensions of the *Cantong qi* mark the end of the process that brought the *Cantong qi* to the shape it has today, but not the end of its textual history. Nearly all later commentators arranged the text in different ways, dividing it into a varying number of *juan* or *pian* and further breaking it into shorter sections (sometimes provided with a title) at junctures deemed fit for inserting their annotations. The resulting discrepancies were augmented by editors and compilers of collectanea, who often felt free not only to add or expunge prefaces, but also to rearrange the format, or modify and even dispose of parts of the text they were handling.

Despite these differences, and apart from the prefatory and concluding sections found in single commentaries or editions, in one of its two main current versions the *Cantong qi* is composed of four major parts. Speculations about their authorship abound in the commentaries, where one or another section is attributed to Wei Boyang, Xu Congshi, or Chunyu Shutong. The four parts are the following:

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51The *Riyue xuanshu lun* is preserved in the *Quan Tang wen*, 334.12a-21a, with the memorial of submission, and in an abridged and inferior version in the *Daoshu* (ca. 1140; CT 1017) 26.1a-6b, entitled “Riyue xuanshu pian” 日月玄樞篇. On Liu Zhigu’s life, see *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* (ca. 1294; CT 296), 32.2a-3b, which expands the account given in the *Sandong qunxian lu* (preface dated 1154; CT 1248), 1.10b-11a.
1. The main text, mostly consisting of verses of four or five characters with short passages in prose. The subsection corresponding to zh. 80-83 in Peng Xiao’s recension is patterned on the Lisao 離騷 [Encountering Sorrow] poem in the Chuci 楚辭 [Elegies of Chu], with the lines of each couplet separated by the particle xi 兮.

2. A section usually entitled “Filling Lacunae” [Busai yituo 补塞遺脫] or “Five Categories” [Wu xianglei 五相類], corresponding to zh. 84-90 of Peng Xiao’s text. It is entitled “Filling Lacunae” by Peng Xiao and in an anonymous neidan commentary (dating from after 1208), “Five Categories” by Zhu Xi (whose commentary dates from 1197) and by Chu Yong 储泳 (early thirteenth century), and simply “Postface” [Xu 序] by Yu Yan 俞琰 (1284). Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (ca. 1330) divides it into two parts, labeled “Filling Lacunae” and “Author’s Postface: My Bequest” [Zixu qihou 自敘啓後], respectively. Traditional accounts maintain that this section was written by Chunyu Shutong or by Wei Boyang himself to address matters not discussed in the main text. 52

3. “Song of the Tripod” [Dingqi ge 鼎器歌], a poem in verses of three characters. Yu Yan and Chen Zhixu identify this section, instead of section 2, as the supplement added by Wei Boyang to the main text. Both Yu and Chen place the “Song” before section 2, and criticize Peng Xiao for moving it to the end of the whole Cantong qi—an arrangement followed in all later recensions except theirs. In Yu Yan’s and Chen Zhixu’s view, therefore, section 2 serves as the postface to section 3. A confirmation of their claim comes from Peng Xiao himself: he says that the “Song” was originally before “Filling Lacunae,” and that he isolated it from the rest “so that it corresponds to the figure 1 of Water” 以應水一之數. 53

4. A final “Eulogium” [Zanxu 諧序], found only in the recensions by Peng Xiao, Zhu Xi, and Yu Yan. While Peng Xiao maintains that this is another synopsis of the Cantong qi,

52 For the former view see, e.g., the preface to the anonymous two-juan commentary, Zhouyi cantong qi zhu (CT 1004), 1.2a. The latter view is maintained, among others, by Peng Xiao (CT 1002), 3.6b, and by Yu Yan in the preface to his textual notes, Zhouyi cantong qi shiyi (CT 1006), 2a-b. “Busai yituo” is only the title of zh. 84 in Peng Xiao’s recension, but a remark at the end of zh. 83 shows that he too considered the concluding part of the Cantong qi as a self-standing unit. The anonymous neidan commentary is the three-juan Zhouyi cantong qi zhu (CT 1000), whose text follows closely Peng Xiao’s recension, including alterations made in 1208 by Bao Huanzhi 鮑瀚之 (fl. 1207-1210). Note that the portion of text corresponding to Peng Xiao’s zh. 87 is found within the portion corresponding to zh. 15 in the anonymous waidan commentary (CT 1004, 1.31b-32a) and in the recensions by Yu Yan, Zhouyi cantong qi fahui (CT 1005), 2.9b-10a (cf. his Shiyi, 6b-7a), and by Chen Zhixu, Zhouyi cantong qi fenzhang zhu, 11b. It is found between Peng Xiao’s zh. 68 and 69 in the recension by Chen Xianwei, Zhouyi cantong qi jie (CT 1007), 2.16a.

53 See Peng Xiao’s preface to the “Song” in his Zhouyi cantong qi dingqi ge mingjing tu (CT 1003), 1a (a similar passage is in the preface to his commentary to the main text, CT 1002, 3b). For the criticism to Peng Xiao, see the preface to Yu Yan’s Shiyi, 2b, and Chen Zhixu’s Zhouyi cantong qi fenzhang zhu, 77a. As remarked in note 49 above, the “Song” is also found in a separate section in the Yin Changsheng commentary.
both Zhu Xi and Yu Yan suggest that the “Eulogium” is the postface to an early commentary. Zhu Xi indicates its author as Xu Congshi.\footnote{Peng Xiao’s *Zhouyi cantong qi dingqi ge mingjing tu* (CT 1003), 6a; Zhu Xi’s *Zhouyi cantong qi [kaoyi]* (CT 1001), 3.7b-8a; and Yu Yan’s *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* (CT 1005), 9.19b.}

Many recensions of the *Cantong qi* later than those just mentioned follow the arrangement described above. In the early sixteenth century, however, the text was submitted to a thorough revision, resulting in a new version that separates the portions in lines of four characters from those in lines of five characters. This version, known as *Guwen Zhouyi cantong qi* 古文周易参同契 [Ancient Text of the *Zhouyi cantong qi*], enjoyed much prestige in the lineages of late neidan. Its origins can be traced back as far as Du Yicheng 杜一誠, who wrote a commentary to it in 1517, but the altered ordering reflects a hint first given in 1248 by Yu Yan, who suggested that sections of different meter should be isolated from each other.\footnote{Zhouyi cantong qi fahui, 6.19b-21a.} Textual peculiarities show that the rewriting was based on Chen Zhixu’s recension. Although the *Guwen* version includes virtually the whole text of the *Cantong qi* and does not contain additional materials, scholars have often considered it spurious. This judgement—first expressed by the compilers of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete Texts of the Four Repositories] in 1782 and reiterated in several studies—may have been influenced by the controversial personality of Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488-1559), who claimed in 1546 to have recovered its original manuscript in a stone casket, and who, since then, is often erroneously indicated as its creator. The *Guwen* is better defined as a rearrangement of the text of the *Cantong qi*, which in this shape reveals a much clearer pattern than the one, hardly discernible, of the standard version.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, the relation of the original *Cantong qi* to the apocrypha and to the Han exegetical tradition of the *Book of Changes* is grounded in the cosmological system shared with both corpora. The association of the *Cantong qi* with the apocrypha is shown by several details, including its title, some shared expressions, and Chunyu Shutong’s connections with prognostication. The earliest mention of the text is by the late Han commentator of the *Book of Changes*, Yu Fan, who is also credited with a commentary to it. His lineage, based in Jiangnan, likely played a crucial role in the transmission of the scripture during the early Six Dynasties. The testimony of Jiang Yan, Tao Hongjing, Yan Zhitui, and possibly Ge Hong shows that the *Cantong qi* was not lost after the Han but circulated in southeastern China.

Little-known alchemical traditions built on this foundation during the Six Dynasties, transforming the original text into a treatise on the elixir. By 500 C.E., the *Cantong qi* was used in Jiangnan as a scripture providing the foundation of *waidan*. We have no details about the associated practices, but the *Scripture of the Nine Elixirs* and the corpus of writings

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\footnote{54Peng Xiao’s *Zhouyi cantong qi dingqi ge mingjing tu* (CT 1003), 6a; Zhu Xi’s *Zhouyi cantong qi [kaoyi]* (CT 1001), 3.7b-8a; and Yu Yan’s *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* (CT 1005), 9.19b.} \footnote{55Zhouyi cantong qi fahui, 6.19b-21a.}
ascribed to Hugang zi certainly were known to the lineages that transmitted the *Cantong qi*. As does the *Cantong qi*, these lineages promoted lead and mercury as the main elixir ingredients, a development that not only influenced the later history of *waidan*, but also the rise of *neidan*. Two commentaries dating from about 700 C.E., as well as the slightly later work by Liu Zhigu, show that the final major stage of the textual history of the *Cantong qi* had been concluded by the end of the seventh century. Its Tang text is preserved in the anonymous *waidan* commentary (which lacks, however, the whole latter half) and in the commentary ascribed to Yin Changsheng. Both interpret the scripture as a *waidan* work, while Liu Zhigu’s essay provides its earliest *neidan* reading.

Is the *Cantong qi* then a *waidan* or a *neidan* scripture? Since this text has been, from the Tang period onwards, the main source of both *waidan* and *neidan*, the question should be rephrased so as to ask how it can be related to both traditions. The history of the *Cantong qi* shows that, during the formative stage of the received version, the text circulated in Jiangnan and was associated both with *waidan* lineages and with the milieu that gave rise to *neidan*. This twofold association, which continued throughout the history of alchemy in China, was favored by a distinctive feature of the text: although parts of it use the language of *waidan* or *neidan*, the *Cantong qi* does not sanction any “external” or “internal” practice. Its doctrinal exposition may apply to both *waidan* and *neidan*, and has provided the Chinese alchemical traditions with the necessary links between cosmology and alchemy, between doctrines and practices, and also between *waidan* and *neidan*. Dealing with all three facets—the doctrines, and their application to both *waidan* and *neidan*—the *Cantong qi* is the only scripture that covers the whole latitude of Chinese alchemy.

Two final remarks may be useful in evaluating the place of the *Cantong qi* in the shift from *waidan* to *neidan*, in a future more in-depth treatment of this extremely complex phase in the history of Chinese alchemy. First, the Shangqing tradition of Daoism, which originated and flourished in Jiangnan, must have been instrumental—although probably only indirectly—in the conversion of the *Cantong qi* into an alchemical work. Some Shangqing texts dating from the late fourth century display an anticipation of what would later emerge as *neidan*.  

An indication of continuing relations between Shangqing and alchemy is provided by the Zhenyuan 真元 [Authentic Origin] corpus of *neidan* writings studied by Isabelle Robinet, which combine elements from Daoist classical thought, the cosmology of the *Book of Changes*, medical texts, and other sources, but are ultimately based on the Shangqing vocabulary, imagery, and pantheon. Though these works may have reached their present form as late as the Song period, they are based on materials dating from the seventh or eighth century. The Shangqing interest in the *Cantong qi* is, to my knowledge, explicitly documented only by a memorial dated 749, but a tangible sign of the influence played by the meditation practices of this tradition on alchemy is in the passages and expressions that the *Cantong qi* borrows or echoes from the *Huangting jing*. As we have seen, this did not restrain

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56 Robinet, *La révélation du Shangqing*, 1: 176-180, and Strickmann, “On the Alchemy of T’ao Hung-ching,” 169-178. As shown in these studies, the compounding of elixir is used in Shangqing as a support for meditation practices.  
57 Robinet, “L’école Zhenyuan.”
the authors of the alchemical version of the *Cantong qi* from openly expressing their criticism of the meditation practices described in the *Huangting jing*.58

Second, the existence of *waidan* methods centered on lead and mercury during the Six Dynasties shows that the transition from *waidan* to *neidan* was neither abrupt, nor attributable only to external factors—such as the influence of Buddhism or the instances of elixir poisoning within and outside the imperial court—but was firmly rooted in the earlier tradition. The primacy of lead and mercury in *neidan* is related to, and actually derives from, their slowly acquired importance over cinnabar and mercury in *waidan*. The cosmological imagery of *neidan* texts, in turn, influenced several *waidan* works dating from the Tang and later. How exactly the rise of *neidan*, fostered by changes in the *waidan* tradition, later affected the language and practices of *waidan*, how the two traditions interacted, how the transition from one to the other took place, and what role the *Cantong qi* played in these developments, are some of the questions in the history of Chinese alchemy that await closer investigation.

**Appendix:**

*Cantong qi, Longhu jing, Jinbi jing*

Several commentaries and other works associate the *Cantong qi* with the *Longhu jing* 龍虎經 [Scripture of Dragon and Tiger] and the *Jinbi jing* 金碧經 [Scripture of Gold and Jade]. According to these sources, the *Longhu jing* contained the original text of the *Cantong qi* and provided inspiration to Wei Boyang. However, not only is the relation of the *Longhu jing* and the *Jinbi jing* to the *Cantong qi* unclear, but the same is true for the very identity of these two texts and a third work, the *Qiantong jue 潛通訣* [Instructions for Pervading the Unseen], that is often mentioned in connection with them. Passages quoted from one text are sometimes found in the present version of another, and the use of such titles as *Jinbi longhu jing* 金碧龍虎經 or *Jinbi qiantong jue* 金碧潛通訣 even raises doubts as to the number of works to which they actually refer.

The *Daozang* and other collections include two recensions of the *Guwen longhu jing 古文龍虎經*, which claim to consist of the “ancient text” of the *Scripture of Dragon and Tiger*. One of them, in one *juan*, was established by Wang Dao 王道 in 1185 and contains his own commentary and subcommentary. The other is divided into three *juan* and contains anonymous and undated notes. As shown by Wang Ming (“Zhouyi cantong qi kaozheng,” 279-283), the *Guwen longhu jing* corresponds to the text entitled *Jindan jinbi qiantong jue 金丹金碧潛通訣* [Instructions on Gold and Jade for Pervading the Unseen through the

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58 The memorial is quoted in *Maoshan zhi* (early fourteenth century; CT 304), 2.14b-15a. Yu Yan’s commentary is especially useful for studying the relation between the *Cantong qi* and the *Huangting jing*. Yu Yan refers to the *Huangting jing* in his *Zhouyi cantong qi fahui* (CT 1005), 2.28a, 29b; 3.5a; 5.4b, 11b, 21a; 6.22b; and 8.8a. Several other works associate parts of the *Cantong qi* with the *Huangting jing*: one of them is Chen Zhixu’s magnificent compendium of *neidan* entitled *Jindan dayao* (CT 1067).
Golden Elixir] in the Yunji qiqian (CT 1032), 72.7b-11b. The relation between this work and the Cantong qi is clear: the Jinbi jing / Guwen longhu jing is a shorter paraphrase of the Cantong qi, marked by a tendency to substitute the cosmological imagery of the Cantong qi with a language closer to alchemy, and by an inferior level of literary refinement.

As for the other works, a clearer pattern than one might expect emerges from Tang and early Song sources that quote them. These sources show that, at least until the beginning of the Song period, Longhu jing was an alternate title of the Cantong qi. The Jinbi jing was a related but separate text, also referred to by some authors as Qiantong jue (hence its present title in the Yunji qiqian). In later times, the boundaries between the Longhu jing, the Jinbi jing and the Qiantong jue—or, rather, between their titles—become increasingly blurred.

Since the Longhu jing quoted in Tang or early Song texts is the Cantong qi, the claim that the Cantong qi derives from the Longhu jing suggests that the relationship between them is not only textual. The original, unwritten Longhu jing is the celestial scripture of which the Cantong qi is the terrestrial complement. In the Song, a different work modeled on the Cantong qi, originally entitled Jinbi jing, was chosen to represent the “authentic” text of that scripture.

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