

The Relationship between Theory and Practice in Taoism: Taking Zhong-Lü Internal Alchemy as an Example

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Abstract

This study takes Zhong-Lü Internal Alchemy (钟吕丹道 Zhong-Lü Dan Dao) as a case to systematically examine the interactive relationship between Taoist theory and practice. As an important system marking the shift of Taoist cultivation from external to internal alchemy, Zhong-Lü Internal Alchemy formed a complete cosmology, theoretical principles, a structured path of cultivation, and developed a set of embodied and operable cultivation practices. This article suggests that the core mechanism of this system is the dynamic interplay between theory and practice: on the one hand, theory provides guidance for cultivation through a series of concepts, transforming abstract concepts into concrete bodily sensations; On the other hand, the practice of internal alchemical cultivation constantly tests theories, manifested by using the physiological and psychological states that arise during cultivation as the testing criteria, and using the problems that arise in practice as theoretical supplements. The study further argues that the mutual construction of theory and practice model established by Zhong-Lü Internal Alchemy expanded the theory of traditional Chinese medicine and enabled the absorption of internal alchemy into folk beliefs. The study concludes that the relationship between theory and practice in Taoism is not a one-way guidance or generation, but a dialectical unity process of continuous mutual construction and achievement in the context of history and practice.

Keywords

Zhong-Lü internal alchemy; Taoist practice; Taoist theory; interaction relationship; cultivating both nature and life (xingming shuangxiu 性命双修).

1. Introduction

To have a clearer understanding of the complex interactive relationship between Taoist practice and Taoist theory, a focused case study of a coherent and operative “microcosm” within the tradition is more fruitful than broad comparisons. Zhong-Lü internal alchemy is such a good “microcosm” and a crucial case. Zhong-Lü internal alchemy, based on the legendary Tang Dynasty and Five Dynasties immortal Zhong Liquan and his disciple Lü Dongbin, integrates earlier Daoist practices such as *Cunsi* 存思 (visualization) and *Neiguan* 内观 (inner observation). It constructs a well-defined, sequential system of internal alchemical cultivation under the core principle of *cultivating both nature and life* (xingming shuangxiu 性命双修). It is a groundbreaking synthesis in the history of Taoist cultivation, marking the mature transformation of cultivation methods from external alchemy to a complete system of inner alchemy.

Core texts of the Zhong-Lü tradition, such as *Methods of the Numinous Treasure* (Ling Bao Bi Fa 灵宝毕法), *Record of Zhong and Lü Transmitting the Dao* (Zhong-Lü Chuandao Ji 钟吕传道集), construct a logically rigorous cultivation system integrating theory and practice; Not only do they inherit the philosophical ideas from *Tao Te Ching* (Daodejing 道德经) and *The Book of Changes* (Yijing 易经), but more importantly, they transform those profound metaphysical

thoughts into structured and operative techniques for transforming body and spirit. This research approach is different from general cross-cultural philosophical comparisons. It can start from Zhong-Lü internal alchemy itself and directly engage with the Taoism's tradition of *embodying the Dao through cultivation* (yudaoheyi 与道合一).

2. The historical context and core framework of the practice system of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy

2.1. Historical context: from the integration of techniques to the systematic development of internal alchemy

The construction of the Zhong-Lü internal alchemy practice system marks the maturation of Taoist alchemy, characterized by its systematic integration of cosmology, physiology, and a structured progressive path. Building upon ancient principles of *daoyin* 导引 (guiding and pulling), the Huang-Lao traditions of nurturing life (*yangsheng* 养生), and the Jin Dan philosophy since the Han and Wei dynasties, as an independent and complete internal alchemy system, it was systematically formulated in the specific historical and cultural context of the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods[1]. This synthesis was not without precedent. The work of Ge Hong in the Jin Dynasty represents a pivotal moment in the compilation of early Taoist practices. In his *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Baopuzi 抱朴子), Ge meticulously documented and theorized various longevity techniques, alchemical formulae, and ritual practices[2]. While primarily focused on External Alchemy, his emphasis on experimental rigor, precise formulas, and the quest for transmutation laid a crucial methodological and philosophical groundwork. Later, Tao Hongjing (456–536 CE) during the Liang dynasty further integrated these diverse traditions[3]. Tao Hongjing, through his monumental compilation the *Declarations of the Perfected* (Zhen'gao 真诰) and his broader scholarly work, not only compiled and annotated the revelations of the Shangqing school[4] but also actively incorporated elements from the Lingbao school's rituals and Ge Hong's alchemical legacy. Tao's synthesis of Shangqing visualization, Lingbao liturgy, and pharmacological and alchemical knowledge created a holistic model of cultivation that addressed body, mind, and cosmos—a model that prefigured the later integration seen in Zhong-Lü internal alchemy.

As Kristofer Schipper points out in his study, the Taoist tradition has always been an integrated whole, encompassing not only physical cultivation techniques related to longevity and health but also rituals, myths, and mysticism. This comprehensive yet fluid characteristic provided an essential cultural "soil" for the systematic formation of late Tang internal alchemy systems[5]. Frequent poisoning incidents prompted the decline of external alchemy in the Tang Dynasty, guiding Daoist priests to move their focus from the refinement of external substances such as metals and minerals, or jinshi to the internal transformation and refinement of one's own vital substances. Concurrently, the popular Buddhist idea of "*Chan* 禅 (Zen) Buddhism's emphasis on realizing Buddha-nature through penetrating the mind" has also stimulated Taoism to have a cultivation system that can rival its theory of mind and nature while maintaining its own cultivation characteristics[6].

2.2. Core Practice Framework: "Three Levels" Practice Sequence

The practice of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy is not a simple collection of scattered techniques, but a complete system with clear goals and distinct levels, aimed at "forging the *Jindan* 金丹 (golden elixir) and achieving union with the Dao". Its structure is usually summarized as threefold transformation: *Lianjing Huaqi* (refining essence into qi), *Lianqi Huashen* (refining qi into spirit), and *Lianshen Huanxu* (refining spirit and returning to the void). Within this framework, *zhuji* 筑基 (building the foundation of the body) is an indispensable preparation

stage among them. This initial stage, although not the ultimate goal, is a necessary effort to lay the foundation for all subsequent advancements.

The focus of the foundation building stage is to correct the body shape, make up for losses, and cultivate a vibrant, strong, and clean body, thus creating the necessary conditions for establishing an internal alchemy system. The key is that the process of *zhuji* goes beyond simple physical preparation [7], and it is also the first step in constructing a specific Taoist way of existence. As explained by Schipper's research on the "Taoist body", the cultivation of individual bodies is inherently related to shaping social identity within the Taoist community and aligning oneself with the cosmic body of Taoism. Therefore, the refinement and cultivation of one's essence, qi, and spirit not only prepares individuals for deeper spiritual cultivation, but also initiates the process of weaving practitioners into a broader network of the universe and social order.

The core of the *Zhuji* stage lies in *Xinggong* 性功 (Spiritual Cultivation, innate nature), which are the fundamental techniques for refining one's inner and spiritual nature. This requires strict mental and moral training - sweeping away distractions, subduing delusions, adhering to precepts, and staying calm - with the aim of purifying consciousness and stabilizing the original mind. Given its crucial importance, this practice is often emphasized as an initial stage that requires diligent effort, traditionally referred to as *building a foundation in a hundred days* (bairizhuji 百日筑基). During this period, practitioners focus on achieving the necessary clarity and stability of mind required for all subsequent stages of inner alchemy practice[9].

3. The theoretical system of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy : philosophy and models that lay the foundation for practice

3.1. Cosmological basis of the isomorphism between heaven and man

Zhong-Lü internal alchemy absorbed the idea of "the human body is a small world" and elevated it to a foundational principle of his entire cultivation theory. It is believed that the coordination between the human body and the universe is similar, that is, the structure of the human body is in the same form as the structure of the universe. As the cosmos is conceptualized as manifesting through the sequence of "Dao" into "Wuji"(Undifferentiated State), "Tai Chi"(Great Ultimate), "Yin Yang", "Five Elements"(Wuxing), and "All Things", and the human body's life has also undergone a process of Primordial Qi (先天一炁 the corporeal root akin to Dao's presence) → the Primordial Spirit (元神 corresponding to Wuji) → the undifferentiated unity of inherent nature and vital life (性命 corresponding to Taiji) → the dynamic interplay of vital energies (气 corresponding to Yin-Yang) → the organ systems governed by the Five Phases (五脏) → to the fully formed postnatal physique driven by acquired energies (后天形质).

3.2. Core purpose of "xingming shuangxiu" (性命双修)

Xing refers to innate nature, the essence of the spirit, and is the true essence of life; *Ming* refers to the vital life force and corporeal basis of existence. The *Xingming shuangxiu* is the fundamental theoretical banner that distinguishes Zhong-Lü internal alchemy from pure cultivation of mind (such as *Zen*) or pure cultivation of body (such as some exercises). This framework internally guides practitioners towards transformative and indescribable realization. Isabelle Robinet, in her analysis of the unspeakable dimensions of inner alchemy, notes that the ultimate goal of *Xingming shuangxiu* transcends mere technique or even philosophical understanding. It points toward a transformative, ineffable experience where the dualities of body and spirit, self and cosmos, are overcome in silence and direct realization. This underscores that "dual cultivation" is not a balanced sum of two parts, but a path to a non-dual, transcendent unity[10].

Although cultivating the body can prolong life, if the innate nature (*Xing gong*) remains clouded, and the spiritual awareness is hazy, the practitioner remains in the cycle of life and death, and has not departed. Therefore, its theory proposes that it is necessary to "cultivate both nature and life". This is achieved through a dynamic interaction: work on nature (*Xing gong*) - involving calming and observing the mind to achieve clarity - guiding and regulating work on life (*Ming gong*) - the refinement of essence (*jing*) and vital energy (*qi*). Conversely, the robust vitality and stable energetic foundation cultivated through *Ming gong* provide the necessary foundation for deepening the tranquility and insight of *Xing gong*. This collaborative process aims to "achieving integrity of body and spirit, and truly in harmony with the Tao". This solves the fundamental problem of the relationship between body and mind in cultivation, and proposes a path of integrated cultivation within inner alchemy.

3.3. Action logic of reverse repair and return to the source

This is the most methodological part of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy, which can be traced back to the "movement of the opposite way" in Laozi. According to this idea, the life of an ordinary person is a smooth process: Dao (Void) → Spirit (Shen) → Qi → Essence (Jing) → Form (Xing), which is a dissipative process from the innate to the acquired, leading to decay and death; Internal alchemy, on the other hand, is the opposite: "reversion", that is, a process of return from the acquired to the innate, from form to essence, then to qi, then to spirit, and finally return to the Void (Dao), that is, through deliberate efforts, reversing the acquired form and essence into innate qi and spirit, and finally returning to the Void (Dao). The eight-character adage highly summarizes this action logic: "Go with the flow, and you remain a mortal; reverse it, and you become an immortal". (Shun ze cheng ren, ni ze cheng xian 顺则成人，逆则成仙)

From the perspective of specific operational methods, *Taking from Kan to Fill Li* (qu kan tian li 取坎填离) refers to a process of alchemy where the yang line in the acquired Kan (Water) hexagram is returned to the Li (Fire) hexagram, thereby transforming the Li (Fire) hexagram to its innate Qian (Pure Yang) hexagram and Kan (Water) hexagram into the Kun (Pure Yin) hexagram. At the same time, the circulation of true qi through the three dantian (lower dantian, middle dantian, upper dantian) constitutes the dynamic pattern of this "reverse return" principle in physical practice. The former practice operates at the level of symbolism and cosmology, while the latter applies to the dimensions of physiology and energy. However, both are grounded in the same fundamental operative logic: that of *ni* 逆 (reversion).

3.4. Technical theoretical models of medicine, furnace cauldrons, and Firing Times (药物, 炉鼎 火候)

In order to translate its philosophy into concrete practice, Zhong-Lü internal alchemy established a complete framework of operational standards. Its core is the concept of *Yaowu* 药物 (Medicine), which refers to the basic substances of alchemy: *essence* (*jing*), *qi*, and *spirit* (*shen*). This theory strictly distinguishes between their innate and acquired forms. The "raw materials" that need to be transformed are the acquired aspects: reproductive essence (stimulated by desire), breathing qi (vital air) and the thinking spirit. The goal of alchemy is to refine these into primordial essence, primordial qi, and primordial spirit- the "true great medicine". This theory provides detailed regulations on the scene (such as *Yi yang sheng*- the arising of one yang) and timing (such as *Huo zi shi*- living midnight) of the production of this true medicine, as well as the methods of cultivating it.

The *Lu ding* 炉鼎 (furnace and cauldron) complements the *Yaowu*. The external alchemy uses a physical cauldron, while the internal alchemy uses the human body itself as the tool for alchemy. Inside this body furnace cauldron, different areas and functions are symbolically positioned: the lower dantian can be called the "Kun (Receptive) cauldron", and the middle dantian can be

called the "Qian cauldron", emphasizing the holistic transformation of the body and mind. This theory establishes the spatial coordinates of energy condensation and change.

The most subtle and critical technique is "Huo Hou" (Firing Times). It controls the intensity, rhythm, and timing of the application of mental focus during the cultivation process. The name itself is inspiring: "Fire" refers to the use of the mind, and "Hou" refers to the stage and degree of its use. This is reflected in the modulation of Wenhuo 文火 (gentle fire) and Wuhuo 武火 (intense fire). As Liu Huayang, a master of the Qing Dynasty, explained in the "Hui Ming Jing" (The Scripture of Wisdom and Life): "Gentle fire refers to the state in which Spirit and Breath are stabilized and unmoving... As for the fires of ascending and descending, both gentle fire and intense fire are to be employed." ("文火者，神气平定而不动也...至于进火退符，文武兼用。") Just as the external alchemy requires precise control of the heating stage, the internal alchemy also requires precise mastery of these physical and mental levels of "fire timing".

4. The interactive mechanism between theory and practice in Zhong-Lü internal alchemy

4.1. How Theory is' Concrete 'into Practice: From Abstraction to Experience

The cultivation practice of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy is essentially the embodiment and experiential realization of its theoretical system. Each theoretical concept directly corresponds to a bodily sensation or operational command. Even the abstract cosmology with "Dao" and "the Void (Xu)" as the ultimate origins is transformed into concrete and attainable physical and mental experiences at the highest stage of cultivation - the transcendent realm of "breaking through the Void" (Poxu) and "merging with the Great Void (Tai Xu)."

It is this process of transforming abstract cosmology into bodily reality that constitutes the core theme of Kristofer Schipper's research. He elucidated how Taoist practice seeks to concretize cosmic time and laws within practitioners themselves, mapping the macroscopic cosmic cycle to the microscopic world for transformation. The realm of "breaking the void" therefore represents the pinnacle of this embodied universe return [11]. And the achievement of this realm is precisely through long-term stillness, which enables practitioners to ultimately 'touch' the state of emptiness and tranquility that is neither inside nor outside - that is, the embodiment of the Tao.

Similarly, the cosmology of "yin and yang" and *kanli* (water and fire) is materialized as two poles in the human body: heart and kidney, qi and spirit, water and fire. The practice of *taking the Kan and filling the Li* aims to extract true yang (yang line) from the Kan hexagram (corresponding to the kidney) through a specific combination of breathing and mind, in order to fill the true yin (yin line) of the Li hexagram (corresponding to the heart) and achieve the unity of these two poles. This process is accompanied by clear bodily sensations, such as warmth and the flow of qi.

The highest philosophical principle of "non action" is interpreted in practice as the application of *zhenyi* 真意 (true intention) [12]. This true intention is not a forced subjective thought, but a natural and unpretentious power of awareness that arises after a high degree of stillness. It is this "intentionless mind" that guides the operation of the *he che* 河车 (the microcosmic circulation), perfectly embodying the principle of "acting through non-action" (*wuwei er wubuwei*).

Therefore, the process of cultivation is a continuous cycle of using the body and consciousness to "interpret" and "verify" theories. Theory is no longer just words in a text, but internalized as a vivid life experience for practitioners [13].

4.2. How to "test" and "develop" theories in practice: from experience to correction

On the other hand, long-term, collective practice constitutes the primary field for testing, refining, and developing theories. Theory is not a rigid dogma. The classics such as "Lingbao Bi Fa" meticulously record the physiological and psychological reactions encountered during cultivation, such as "Dantian fever", "decoction of two kidney soup", "golden light spitting out of the eyes", "wind rising behind the ears", "horse yin hiding appearance" [14]. These are called 'validation'. They stem from the accumulation of countless practitioners' experiences, providing an objective reference framework for later practitioners to judge whether their own cultivation is "on the road" and at what stage.

The key is that theory systematizes and validates itself by integrating these 'validations', transforming personal experiences into inheritable, structured knowledge [15]. This dynamic process was further interpreted in the differences between the main schools of thought in the later stage. Zhang Boduan, the founder of the Southern Inner Alchemy Sect, emphasized the importance of "life before nature". The founder of the Northern Sect (Quanzhen Dao), Wang Chongyang, emphasized the principle of "nature before destiny". Although their emphasis is different, both represent different starting points and focuses (i.e. variants of theory and practice) formed for different individual capacities and historical contexts under the overall framework of "dual cultivation of life and soul" established by Zhong-Lü.

In addition, a large number of warnings in theory about "magic" and "going crazy" (often translated as "madness") also stem directly from the painful lessons of failure in practice. These lessons were distilled into doctrines and became key safety guidelines for guiding future practitioners to avoid dangerous traps[16].

4.3. The core of interaction: the cultivation realm of the unity of "reason" and "law"

The ultimate result of this dynamic interaction is to reach the state of consciousness known as "the perfect fusion of principle and practice" (li fa ronghe 理法融合) in internal alchemy, where theoretical cognition and operational skills are integrated and indistinguishable. For true practitioners of inner alchemy, the chapters and sentences of the Tao Te Ching are no longer philosophical concepts that require intellectual understanding, but rather the texture of their own life reality; The various Qi phenomena encountered during cultivation are not objects worthy of persistence, but rather natural manifestations of the Dao in operation.

When the theory is fully realized and embodied, the very distinction between knowing (the principle) and cultivating (the practice) dissolves. This is exactly what Zhong-Lü's inner alchemy refers to as the realm of "unity with the Tao". At this point, cultivation is no longer a deliberate technique, but has transformed into an operation that is in harmony with the Tao, spontaneous and effortless.

5. The influence of the Zhong-Lü internal alchemy interaction mode: from elite cultivation to cultural genes

5.1. The decisive influence on the theory and practice of Taoism in later generations

Zhong-Lü internal alchemy became the mainstream and orthodox inheritance of Inner Alchemy since the Song Dynasty. Whether it is the Southern School (related to Zhang Boduan, Shi Tai, Xue Daoguang, Chen Nan, and Bai Yuchan) that emphasizes "cultivating life before nature" (xian ming hou xing), or the Northern School Quanzhen Dao (founded by Wang Chongyang and

developed by Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji) that emphasizes “cultivating nature before life” (xian xing hou ming), they are deeply shaped by their heritage.

Quanzhen Taoism clearly respects Zhong Liquan and Lv Dongbin as the first two ancestors in its own lineage (often classified as the "Northern Five Ancestors"). The core principle of “cultivating both nature and life” established by Zhong-Lü internal alchemy has become a universal standard for Taoist cultivation in later generations. In addition, the fundamental model of "reverse cultivation and return to the source" constructed by it, as well as the complete discourse system of *yaowu* (药物 Medicine), *luding* (炉鼎 Furnace-Cauldron), and *huohou* (火候 Firing Times), became the common theoretical language and practical framework of all internal alchemy traditions for later cultivation [17].

5.2. Deep penetration of traditional Chinese medicine health preservation

Zhong-Lü internal alchemy conceptualizes life as a dynamic alchemy process that can be consciously reversed, refined, and transformed, greatly enriching the theoretical and practical dimensions of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and health preservation.

The theory of "essence, qi, and spirit" provides a deeper and more structured framework for understanding the fundamental substances and transformative potential of life, supplementing the basic theories of traditional Chinese medicine. Its detailed description of the *Dantian* 丹田 area - together with the concept of the *Eight Extra Meridians* 奇经八脉 (Eight special meridians) - provides a more subtle set of energy physiology, affecting advanced practices such as acupuncture and moxibustion, daoyin (guiding and pulling) and therapeutic massage.

In addition, its precise principles of “firing times” (including methods such as wenyang-warm nurturing) has influenced the way in which TCM regulates and controls the balance between “fortifying the righteous qi” (fu zheng) and “expelling pathogenic factors” (qu xie) in the prevention and treatment strategies.

In essence, Taoist alchemy represents the most profound and proactive aspect of Chinese health preservation tradition. It transforms the paradigm of health preservation from a reactive mode mainly focused on disease treatment and maintenance of essence and qi, to an active pursuit aimed at consciously elevating life and realizing human potential.

5.3. The Rise of Lü zu Faith and the Shaping of Folk Culture

One of the most widespread and culturally pervasive phenomena derived from the influence of Zhong-Lü's inner alchemy is the widespread worship of Lü Dongbin (also known as Lü Zu). According to legend, Lü Dongbin is not only revered as the ancestor who co founded the tradition of inner alchemy with Zhong Liquan, but also depicted as a charming, compassionate, and wandering immortal - a combination of poetry, sword, and medicine immortals. It is said that he often appears in the human world, guiding sentient beings, subduing demons and monsters, and is therefore one of the most widely worshipped and considered one of the most powerful deities in Chinese folk beliefs[18].

In the popular story of "Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, Each Showing Their Divine Skills", Lü Dongbin is one of the main characters. Holding a precious sword and brushing the dust, he symbolizes that with wisdom (cutting through troubles with a sword) and practice (sweeping away dust), he can cross the "sea of suffering" in the world (using the East China Sea as a metaphor) and reach the other shore of freedom and ease. This popular narrative symbolizes the core goal of transcending the sea of suffering through inner alchemy cultivation, and spreads it in the most popular and legendary form.

Since the Song and Yuan dynasties, temples and shrines dedicated to Lü Zu have been spread throughout the country, and the incense is flourishing. The people revere him as a responsive

protector and believe that he can provide assistance in matters such as healing illnesses, divination, seeking children, and praying for rain.

6. Concluding

Through in-depth investigation of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy, this study reveals that the relationship between theory and practice in Taoism is not a one-way decision, but a dynamic mutual construction and achievement. Zhong-Lü internal alchemy perfectly embodies this core characteristic: it systematically transforms abstract philosophies such as "the unity of heaven and humanity" and "cultivating both nature and life" into embodied cultivation techniques, and long-term practice in turn tests and reshapes theories, forming a vivid closed loop of mutual verification and cyclic evolution of knowledge and action. This interactive mode has had a profound impact, not only laying a common discourse for later generations of alchemy, but also injecting the transcendent philosophy of life into popular culture through carriers such as the belief in Lü zu.

Therefore, the significance of Zhong-Lü internal alchemy goes far beyond a historical school. It provides a key case to illustrate that the Taoist tradition has always refused to separate metaphysical speculation from practical action, and that its theory must seek verification through practice, and practice must seek sublimation of principles. This paradigm of "the perfect fusion of principle and practice" not only profoundly shapes China's health culture and spiritual pursuit, but also contributes a practical philosophical paradigm with great Eastern wisdom to the common issue of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and action.

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