Blood, Tigers, Dragons: The Physiology of Transcendence for Women

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Abstract
This article sets out to compare visions of the female body and its processes found in Chinese medicine and in a Daoist tradition called nüdan, or female alchemy. This tradition, developed fully in the late Ming and Qing periods, describes the female body in ways very similar to those of Chinese medicine. However, despite the fact that loci, fluids and processes are described in a similar manner in the two textual traditions, the goals to reach are strikingly different. In the case of medicine, the goal is health, well-being, regularity, and the production of children, while in the case of female alchemy, the main goal is transcendence, achieved through the reversal of natural female processes like menstruation, gestation and childbirth.

Keywords
Chinese medicine, Daoist female alchemy, gender, blood, body

It is said that blood is the energetic basis of the woman. Her nature is inclined toward the yin, and the nature of yin is to enjoy freshness. If a woman does not avail herself of massage, helping through it the qi mechanism to circulate subtly, she will easily sink into Pure yin. Yin is cold, cold is ice-like. If you do not activate it [the qi mechanism] through the revolving motion, this may result in illnesses such as congestion and blood obstruction, and the practice would be difficult to implement.1

The quotation above describes the bloody, yin and cold nature of the female body, its natural propensity to falling ill due to congestion and depletion ailments, its inherent deficiency and the necessity to intervene to replenish, repair and refine it through massage and internal qi circulation. The text quoted is found in a collection of Daoist writings on female spiritual practices dating from the Qing (1644–1911) period. These practices, commonly termed nüdan 女丹 or female alchemy, consist of a process of progressive refinement of the female body through meditation, breathing, internal visualisations and massage techniques with the ultimate goal of attaining physical immortality. In this article, I wish to analyse the initial step of this practice, where the uniqueness of the female body, of female physiology and its processes is clearly

1 Niwan Li zuhi nüzong shuangxiu baofa, first precept.
laid out and where the gender specific loci and fluids related to the practice are clearly identified. This initial step sees a dramatic transformation of the outer sexual characteristics of the female body as well as of blood, the multivalent element described as the energetic base of the woman.

But what is female alchemy? It is a Daoist practice, which finds maturity in late eighteenth-century China. This process, like the parallel non-gendered process in inner alchemy (neidan 内丹), has the aim of reversing the normal course of life that ends with old age, decay, and death, with a rejuvenation enacted through the transformation of bodily fluids into energy. This refined energy concentrates inside the body to form an embryo of immortality that is subsequently released through the top of the head. The neidan process had been formalised (within the Daoist tradition) for an un-gendered audience of practitioners as early as the Song (960–1279) dynasty. It involved three steps, the transformation of jing 精 (seminal essence or essence) into qi 氣, the transformation of qi into shen 神 (spirit), and the transformation of shen into xuwu 虚無 (nothingness).

In the Qing dynasty this non-gendered process was, for historical and social reasons, adapted and applied to a specific female audience, and nüdan was born. Xue 血 (blood) was the element substituted, in the traditional alchemical refinement triad jing-qi-shen, for the essence jing, resulting in a slightly different (female) triad, xue-qi-shen. In this new process, the blood, not the seminal essence, was refined first into qi and then into spirit. Thus the first step shifted from jing to qi to the more gendered xue to qi, while the rest of the process remained almost unchanged. Once the female bloody constitution was transformed, and the gender and external sexual differences almost eliminated, the woman, having reached a state of pre-puberty or androgynity, could progress towards the final goal of immortality in the same way as the man.

History and sources

The shift from a tradition like neidan, which did not clearly define the practice differently for men and women, to nüdan, which defines itself in sharp contrast to neidan, by focusing on the differences between male and female physiologies and spiritual trajectories, happened between the end of the Ming (1368–1644) and the beginning of the Qing dynasty. While mentions of

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2 There are a number of studies on the origins and development of inner alchemy. Robinet 1995 is still the best introduction to the topic. Other important contributions are Baldrian-Hussein 1984 and 1989–90, and Pregadio 2006a and 2006b. For a comprehensive bibliography on inner alchemy in Western languages, see Pregadio 1996.
specific loci that women practitioners should focus upon were present in inner alchemical text within the *Daozang* (Daoist Canon), thus prior to the Qing period, full fledged texts and, later, collections of female alchemy started appearing, in the context of spirit writing cults, only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The reasons for the appearance of this tradition, complete with a newly minted lineage of female immortals responsible for the transmission of the texts, are multiple and complex.

At the beginning of the Qing, there was an opening of Daoist and inner alchemical teachings to a wider audience, documented not only in canonical Daoist literature, but also through the appearance of references to these practices in literature as well as prescriptive texts. This meant that practices once open to a very limited number of people, most of whom were male, could be accessed by a much wider audience, with a higher percentage of women. In the same period of time, there was a concomitant shift towards a stricter policy on women’s involvement in public religious activities, and a heightened interest in and reactionary move towards chastity. In the case of *nüdan*, this reactionary shift is exemplified by the insistence, in prefaces to female alchemy texts, on the dangers of certain incorrect (physically harmful but also indecent) practices, on the superfluousness of an outside (male) teacher and on the simplicity of the prose, easily read by women at home. This indicated the preference for an actual transfer of spiritual practices for women from the public sphere to the private space of the home. In the Qing, there was also a parallel development of spirit writing practices at local altars, which provided the religious context and the physical location for the increased production of *neidan* and *nüdan* texts.

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3 For example, in the *Chongyang zhenren jinguan yusuo jue* by Wang Chongyang (1112–1170) there are several mentions to female practice. The *Daoshu*, a twelfth-century anthology of earlier texts of inner alchemy, also includes a mention of female practice in the chapter *Chongzhen pian*, 細真篇 (Chapter on respecting the truth), by Chongzhen zi 崇真子, alias Jin Daocheng 金道成. There, he describes the seat of female practice as being in the breasts.

4 Monica Esposito has discussed in detail the resurgence of the Quanzhen tradition, and especially of the Longmen school throughout China at the beginning of the Qing period, and the opening of new altars for the transmission of precepts, which led to a great diffusion of Daoist ideas and practices. See Esposito 2001 and 2002.

5 Theiss 2004 analyses the emergence of a cult of female chastity in the Qing dynasty. Bray 1997 discusses the external attempt to control women’s activities through a regulation of their work and of their bodily function. Epstein 1996 and 2001 discuss a different attempt to bring order to the cosmos through balancing the transgressive yin forces of women with the stability of yang forces. Dudbridge 1992 explains very well the climate of criticism around female pilgrims in Qing literature.

6 On spirit writing, see the classic study Xu Dishan 1941, and also Jordan and Overmeyer 1985. On more recent spirit writing cults, see Lang and Ragvald 1998, Mori 2002, and Clart
Finally, the boom in the localised printing industry provided cheap availability and good distribution of such texts and collections. Thus, this practice was offered to women, by male authors and editors, as a safe, correct and simple alternative to the plethora of unchecked and potentially harmful practices that were widely available at the time. It was written in simple prose, for use by women of wealthy families with leisure time and the capability to read simple texts, and it was to be practised at home and in isolation. Practical instructions were preceded and accompanied by abundant behavioural guidelines for women of the kind found in shanshu (morality books), they were provided with authority by a lineage of female immortals, and they were presented by the authors as expressly requested by women themselves. The texts were produced at local spirit writing altars and distributed and exchanged easily.

The sources I will be using in this article come from the varied corpus of female alchemy. Many of the texts cited are included in the Nüdan hebian (Collection of female alchemy), one of the most extensive and important collections of female alchemy texts. It was collated and printed in 1906 at the Erxian an temple in Chengdu and its main editor, He Longxiang (fl. 1906), was a local Daoist and Confucian intellectual. This collection includes texts of different origins and dates, collected and organised by He, who also provides a lengthy and exhaustive introduction to nüdan in it. One of He's main sources is an earlier collection, the Nüjindan fayao (Essential methods for the female golden elixir) compiled in Sichuan in 1813 by Fu Jinquan (fl. 1820), a local religious leader who received the texts at a local spirit writing altar.


For the publishing boom in Late Imperial China, see Kai Wing Chow 2004 and Brokaw 1996. For information on private publishers and owners of private libraries, see Swann 1936.

There are other interpretations of the emergence of this tradition. Zhan Shichuang 1990 praises the achievements of women within Daoism, and Daoism for being a women-friendly tradition. Li Suping 2004 praises nüdan as a liberating practice for women. Both books position the beginning of nüdan in the Yuan period, because several texts of nüdan are—apocryphally—attributed to the Immortal Sun Bu'er (1119–1183). Both books present a fairly ahistorical perspective of Daoism as very beneficial to women, and describe nüdan as a fixed, stable and un-shifting cultural phenomenon as well as a tool for women's self-assertion. This perspective does not take into account the historical origins and the process of transformation of the tradition that is so evident if we look at the prefaces and at the paratext in general.

The Nüdan hebian is one of the most complete collections of female alchemy available to us. Its history and its editor He Longxiang are presented in Valussi, forthcoming.

For a biography of Fu Jinquan, see Xie 2005.
The remaining texts in the *Nüdan hebian* were collected directly by He Longxiang on a lengthy stay on Emei mountain in Sichuan. Other sources used in this article come from outside the Sichuan area. Of them, two in particular are worth mentioning. Min Yide (1758–1836), an influential Daoist intellectual and a Longmen patriarch of the eleventh generation in Jiangsu, included two *nüdan* texts in his *Daozang xubian* (Sequel to the Daoist Canon), the *Niwan Li zushi niuzong shuangxiu baofa* (Precious raft on paired cultivation of women by Master Li Niwan) and the *Xiwangmu niuxiu Zhengtu shize* (Xiwangmu’s ten precepts on the proper female path). Liu Yiming (1734–1821), again a Longmen patriarch of the eleventh generation in Gansu, included a discussion of *nüdan* in his *Xiuzhen biannan* (Discriminating Difficult Points in the Cultivation of Perfection; 1798). Several other sources will be used, but not described in detail here.

**Ruled by blood**

As mentioned above, this paper will not describe the female alchemical process in its entirety, but rather the dramatic transformation that takes place in the female body during the initial step of the practice. This first step entails the transformation of blood, the energetic base of women, into *qi*. I will describe the different functions blood comes to embody, the locations where it gathers, the way in which illness, age, and temperament act as differentiators in the quest to refine it as well as the way in which general beliefs about the power and pollution of blood are clearly identifiable in the rhetoric of female alchemy texts.

The description of female physiology as ruled by blood, as seen in the initial quotation, is not just a prerogative of female alchemy; the attention to depletion ailments and to the leadership of blood in female physiology has a long history in Chinese medicine, and the difficulty of curing women’s diseases, mostly due to their bloody nature, is also widely known and discussed in medical manuals from at least the Tang period onwards. Sabine Wilms has discussed in great detail the development of the attitude to women’s illnesses.

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11 The *Li zushi niuzong shuangxiu baofa* is reprinted in *Zangwai daoshu* vol. 10, pp. 540–6. The *Xiwangmu niuxiu Zhengtu shize* is reprinted in *Zangwai daoshu* vol. 10, pp. 533–40.
12 The *Xiuzhen biannan* is reprinted in *Zangwai daoshu* vol. 8, pp. 467–72. The discussion appears on pp. 34b–36a of *juan shang*.
13 For a detailed description of all available sources of *nüdan*, see Chapter 3 of Valussi 2003.
14 Furth 1999 addresses these issues in detail. See especially Chapter 2.
throughout the history of Chinese medicine, and has found that the attention
to blood, to menstruation and vaginal discharge increases and deepens over
time. In the early Classical period, men and women were described as endowed
with idealised androgynous bodies, and as having similar physiologies related
more to the Yin and yang cosmological concepts than to their physical makeup.

Later, in the Tang period, Sun Simiao and other medical writers came to
define women’s illnesses as related directly to the blood, menses, childbirth
and all the processes that are inherently female. There was the ‘recognition
that the female body is categorically different from the male’, and that this
difference was in large part due to the overwhelming presence and influence of
blood in female physiology.\textsuperscript{15} Charlotte Furth has described the Song as the
period in which a separate medical discipline that dealt with childbirth \textit{(chanke
産科)} was defined and developed, and the period of clear awareness that
women’s ailments were mainly linked with blood, its flow, its blockages and
obstructions; thus therapy should also direct itself towards acting on blood.\textsuperscript{16}
While Furth describes the Ming period as reverting to a concept of fundamen-
tal androgyny of male and female bodies for both recognition of ailments as
well as therapy, the concept that the female body was ruled by blood never
really faded, especially as it pertained to menstrual problems. Speaking of
gynaecological manuals of the Qing, Furth describes the still strong double
symbolism of blood for women’s health, on the one hand prenatal cosmic
vitality, on the other, the very substance ‘whose disorders made women the
sickly sex’.\textsuperscript{17} Still in the Qing, Yi-li Wu has described a flourishing tradition of
gynaecology,\textsuperscript{18} and Francesca Bray has discussed the close relationship between
ideas of menstrual regularity and ideal womanhood.\textsuperscript{19} In contemporary cul-
ture, the role of blood in the treatment of women is still central, as is testified
by ethnographic work by Furth and Chen, who have looked into contempo-
rary beliefs on menstruation in Taiwan.\textsuperscript{20} The view that blood is at the same
time a channel to immortality but also impure and in need of transformation,
fits into the widespread perception of blood, and especially female blood, as a
powerful but polluting and decaying substance not only in medical, but also
in religious and social practices, about which there is a wide variety of aca-
demic contributions.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{15} Wilms 2005\textit{b}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{16} Furth 1994 and 1999.
\textsuperscript{17} Furth 1986, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{18} Wu 1998.
\textsuperscript{19} Bray 1995 and 1997.
\textsuperscript{20} Furth and Ch’\textit{en} Shu-yueh 1992.
\textsuperscript{21} For the Chinese case see, for example, Ahern 1975, Sangren 1983, and Seaman 1981. For
a general overview of the polluting nature of menstrual blood in women and their role in death
Female alchemy texts describe the female body in ways that are very similar to the view we see portrayed in medical manuals, and blood is seen there both as an energetic asset and a problematic substance for women. Thus, in this analysis I will definitely avail myself of the knowledge of the female body we derive from Chinese medical texts. In this context, though, I wish to explain that, while female physiology, the understanding of the workings of the female body, and the important loci in it are parallel in Chinese medicine and in female alchemy, there is a consistent difference in the final perspective through which this body is viewed: one is health, the other transcendence. For Chinese medicine, the female body, its health, sickness and treatment revolved around the idea that blood, as its energetic basis, flows around the body, is discharged through menstruation, feeds the unborn child and transforms into breast milk. With this in mind, cure was approached as an intervention on a woman’s inherent depletion and coldness, as well as in promoting blood’s flow and averting its congestion. For female alchemy this situation of health was just the starting point of a radical transformation that still had blood as its main actor. In niidan theory and practice, blood did not just need to be corrected and supported in its flow, but, while keeping its role as the energetic base of a woman, blood needed to be further transformed into a finer and more ethereal substance in order not to be dispersed any more through menstruation, childbirth or lactation. This ethereal substance would be the basis of the immortal embryo and not the basis for a healthy reproductive life.

Therefore, in a sense, practice for immortality took away the reproductive capabilities of a woman. It is still an open question as to which women would approach this path, and especially when in their reproductive life,. One possibility, suggested by the space given to post-menopausal practice, is that women would have performed their reproductive duties before turning to this practice.

**Fluids**

Turning back to female alchemy texts, it should be noted that blood and menstruation are there defined in many different ways. Terms like xue 血 (blood), rituals all over the world, see Bloch 1982. For a parallel in Indian culture, Doniger O’Flaherty 1980 describes how Indian medical texts see blood as a pervasive substance in the female body and the basis for menstruation, milk and the female contribution to the formation of the foetus. Leslie1996 analyses discourses about menstruation in Indian Buddhist and medical literature. Martin 1991 and 1997 discuss the role of menopause and menstruation in contemporary Western culture.


zhen xue 真血 (true blood), jing 经 (menstruation), jingshui 经水 (menstrual water), yueshui 月水 (monthly water), tiangui 天癸 (Heavenly-prenatal-vitalities), tianshui 天水 (Heavenly-prenatal-water), xinshui 信水 (messenger water), yuexin 月信 (monthly message), chao 潮 (tide), renshui 任水 (Ren water), guishui ordova (Gui water), and chilong 赤龙 (Red Dragon) are all used. Many of these terms are also extensively used in gynaecological treatises. What is the meaning and what is the reason for this differentiation in terminology? Are the texts under investigation using these terms interchangeably, or are they referring to different moments of the period, different moments of the practice, different functions in the female physiology, or are they perhaps indicating different semantic fields? It is hard to find unequivocal answers to the above questions. I will, however, try to explain each one of these terms and the semantic field they occupy, before moving to the analysis of ways in which blood is dealt with and transformed.

Xue 血

Blood, together with qi in the compound xueqi 血气 is identified from the earliest writings of Chinese medicine as the fundamental vital element of the human body, regardless of gender. Blood and qi are the embodied Yin and yang forms of cosmic qi, the vitality of the cosmos.

The middle-warmer [...] receives the qi [of foodstuffs]. It secretes dross, purifies fluids, and transforms them into their essence, transports them upwards to the lung vessels, where they are transformed to become blood, to nourish life and limbs. There is nothing more precious than blood, so it only travels within vessels, and is called nutritive qi.22

While blood had the same general functions in male and female bodies, it had a special role in female bodies, especially pertaining to women’s reproductive roles. Blood is the marker of female generativity, it indicates fertility as menses, and it ascends as breast-milk with pregnancy; together with jing (in this case male seminal essence), it contributes to the production of offspring. In the Tang, Sun Simiao devoted three chapters to female illnesses in his Beiji qianjin yaofang 救急千金要方 (Essential Recipes for Every Emergency Worth a Thousand Coins of Gold). In it, he directly related female illnesses to disorders of the blood, and specifically of the menstrual flow. At the very beginning, he

states that ‘women’s disorders are ten times more difficult to treat than men’s.’

Then he continues:

From the age of fourteen, [a woman’s] *yin qi* floats up and spills over, [causing] a hundred thoughts to pass through her heart. Internally, it damages the Five Organs; externally, it injures the disposition and complexion. The retention and discharge of menstrual fluids is alternately early or delayed, obstructed blood lodges and congeals, and the central passageways are interrupted and cut off . . .

While Sun Simiao helped establish gynaecology as a tradition by systematising women’s illnesses, Song physicians further developed the theory of the ‘leadership of blood’ in women (*nuzi yi xue wei zhu* 女子醫學為主). *Xue* thus became the female physiological element *par excellence*, defining female physiology and the treatment of women’s illnesses, overwhelming all other characteristics of female physiology. The idea of ‘the leadership of blood’ informed every work on female illnesses from the Song onwards, and ‘by the late imperial period, every work on women’s medicine began with an essay on menstrual regularity’.24 This quotation from a Song physician exemplifies this belief:

Males and females both have Blood and *qi*, yet people say that in women Blood is fundamental. Why? Because their Blood is in ascendancy over *qi*; it is stored in the Liver system, flows through the womb and is ruled by the Heart system; it ascends to become breast milk, descends to become menses, unites with semen to make the embryo.

Despite changes in the understanding of illness in the Ming, and a shift, described in detail by Charlotte Furth, towards an understanding of the medical body as ‘androgy nous’ and not gendered, the belief in the leadership of blood, and the use of this notion in the treatment of women, was still common in the late imperial period, when the female alchemy literature started to appear. Thus, with a clear debt to medical literature, also in *nüdan* texts, *xue* is the general term that refers to the blood that circulates in the female body and that, at different times, nourishes the body, transforms into breast-milk, produces saliva or exits the body in the form of menses. Rather than just a fluid, *xue* is thus a process. It changes shape and degree of purity, it transforms into milk, it is replenished and exhausted.

The female alchemy text *Nüdan cuoyao* 女丹摘要 (A synopsis of female alchemy) describes the formation of the female body from the mingling of the parents’ energies, the formation of blood and its exhaustion through menstruation:

Th e mysterious and subtle of before heaven (Xiantian xuanwei) said: when a woman is not yet born, her father and mother join essences. Th e [seminal] essence of the father arrives first, the blood of the mother arrives second. Blood containing essence, this forms the female (xue li jing er cheng nü). When women receive life, they first obtain one liang of their mother’s Lead qi. First the right kidney is formed, and [from there] a thread of silk is pulled up to form the two eyes, [from there] one thread of silk is pulled down to form the golden elixir. From this on you depart; in 12 days one zhu of heavenly water (tiangui) is formed. In 180 days, one liang of heavenly water is formed. From then on, each 15 days one zhu of heavenly water is formed, and each year one liang is formed. At 14 years of age, there are 14 liang of heavenly water in the sea of blood. Already within the womb there were another two liang, so altogether they amount to one jin. Three hundred and eighty-four zhu unite with the 384 heavenly revolutions in a year, and obtain the 384 days. Th e hexagrams of the Yiijing contain 384 lines, this is the number of heaven and earth. When the yin reaches its apogee, the yang is born. When the heavenly [water] is exhausted, the lead is manifested, therefore at 14 the heavenly water descends. At 14 years of age, after the heavenly water has descended, in 26 months, 7 days and a half, one liang of heavenly water is squandered away; once one reaches 49 [years], it has been completely consumed.

This passage also describes the role blood has in the determination of the gender of the child: if the blood envelops the essence, the offspring will be female; if the essence envelops the blood, the offspring will be male. An often quoted passage by the medical writer Chu Cheng 褚澄 (Fl. 483 CE) describes sexual differentiation in very similar terms:

When man and woman unite, the essences of both are joyful. If yin Blood arrives first and yang Essence then dashes against it, the Blood opens to wrap around the Essence; Essence enters, making bone, and a male is formed. If yang Qi enters first and yin Blood later joins it, the Essence opens to surround Blood; Blood enters to make the foundation and a female is formed.

When [male] semen dominates [female] blood [during intercourse], then yang is the ruler, and qi is received in the left child palace and a male takes form. When essence does not dominate blood, then yin is the ruler, and qi is received in the right child palace and a female takes form.

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26 Ancient unit of measure amounting to 1/24th of a liang. One liang amounts to 1/16th of a jin.
27 Tiangui is a common term for a woman’s menses. It will be described in detail below.
28 In alchemical theory, the element lead is normally associated with yin. But when it appears as true lead, the lead found inside the yin lead, it is associated with yang. In this case, it appears as true yang when the yin has reached its apogee.
29 Nüdan cuoyao, in Nüjindan fayao, shang juan, pp. 3b–4a.
31 Zhu Zhenheng, Gezhi yulun p. 27. Translated in Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 16.
There are very important differences to be highlighted between the way in which blood and menstruation are evaluated in the two traditions. The female alchemy passage above defines, similarly to earlier medical passages, the moment of the first menstruation at 14 years of age. However, even though medical texts continue to describe women as much more difficult to treat than men because of the need to regulate blood, the start of menstruation also indicates the propitious beginning of fertility for women. In female alchemy texts, however, this moment is only seen as the beginning of a depletion that, if not counteracted, will slowly but steadily continue and result in complete exhaustion. The alchemical passage above describes in detail the amount of blood within the female body and deems it a precious finite entity that needs to be kept intact, and the process of menstruation as a dangerous squandering of energies.

The same passage also carefully relates the process of blood production in the female body to a cosmological sequence of celestial revolutions and to a symbolical sequence of hexagrams, thus highlighting the cosmological, heavenly nature of blood. The ebb and flow of blood in the body, its production and depletion is also directly connected to the ascending and descending of yin and yang in the body and in the cosmos. This symbolical and cosmological aspect of blood in texts of female alchemy is not present in the medical understanding of blood.

**Jing**

While *xue* is the energetic base for the woman, it can transform itself in breast milk and in menstruation, and it can form the foetus, *jing* is only part of that process. In both medical and female alchemical texts, *jing* indicates the process of expelling menstrual blood from the female body. Here is how Li Shizhen, a Ming physician, defines *jing*:

> As for the female period (*jing*), its constancy is coming once a month. If it is early or if it is late, if it is overflowing or if it is blocked, then there is an illness.32

While in gynaecological texts, menstruation is a process that has to be circumscribed, aided, controlled, regulated, but not eliminated, in fact, a regular and healthy menstrual cycle is seen as a cycle of regeneration, where old blood is eliminated and new blood produced.33 On the contrary, in female alchemical texts of female alchemy...
texts, as briefly mentioned above, menstruation needs to be halted and completely transformed if a woman wants to utilise the energy that would otherwise flow outside the body through the menses. This cosmic energy is the basis of the process that will create an immortality embryo inside the female body and which will eventually be liberated through the top of the head. Therefore, while the appraisal of menstruation as a powerful influence on female physiology is very similar in medical and alchemical texts for women, the approach to menstruation is quite different, because there is a different aim for the female body, not just health and regularity, but transcendence.

Thus, in female alchemy, menstruation is in itself a process to be reversed, if one desires to keep the original vitalities endowed to the female child at birth and transform them. This process will prevent the prenatal storage of blood described above from transforming into menstrual blood and thus exiting the body. The first step of the female alchemical practice is therefore to transform jing before it exits the body. Thus ‘Xiu jing’ 修經 ‘cultivating the menses’, is the standard title of several initial chapters of collections of female alchemy, which discuss techniques to transform blood into qi. This is how it is described in the second chapter of the Nügong zhengfa, called ‘Xiu jing qiyong’ 修經起用 or ‘implementing the cultivating of the menses’:

As for women, when they get to 14 years of age, their menses move, their blood is lost. Even though month after month the messenger water is re-produced, in fact month after month it is harmed and wasted.34

A very similar rhetoric of squandering and depletion is described in the third chapter of the Jinhua zhizhi 金沙直指 (Direct instructions on the golden essence), called Xiujing 修經 (Cultivating the menses):

Men’s image is like the sun, women’s image is like the moon. At 14 years of age, the true blood (zhen xue) is completely replenished, the true qi (zhen qi) is circulating [around the body]. The one [line] of yin within yang is like the image of the moon on the fifteenth day [full moon]. Once the Heavenly water (tianshui) descends, then the true blood will be damaged, decreased, and the true qi will also be ruined. With the advent of marriage and the birth of male and female children, the blood will be even more depleted and the qi even more scattered. So, even though every month there is the renewed production of the water messenger (xin shui), in reality every month the water messenger is yet again harmed. For this reason, as for those women who get to 45 and stop [menstruating], or for those who are getting old but have not yet stopped [menstruating], none of them know the methods of practice. As for the method of practising meditation, for those who have not stopped [menstruating] yet, it is to scatter it and cause it [menstrual

blood] to cease, for those who have stopped [menstruating] already it is to beckon it and cause it [menstrual blood] to come back…. These are the necessities of cultivating the menses.35

The above passage clearly distinguishes between a blood that is pure and unfouled, and a blood that is impure. Zhenxue is the blood that derives from the parents’ joining as well as growing during the early years, and that fills the reservoir of blood to the brim. Puberty defines the critical moment in which this true blood can either be refined into energy, or lost through menstruation and later childbirth. As mentioned above, and as is made abundantly clear in this passage, female fertility in niandan texts has a negative valence, menses and the production of children only harm the body as well as the possibility to refine it.

Together with zhenxue, other terms are used for blood in the above passage. While jing is the general term for menstruation, tianshui highlights the heavenly origin of the blood that exits the body through the menses, and xinshui stresses the regularity with which the blood exits the body. Another common term that highlights the heavenly nature of menstrual blood in female alchemy is tiangui.

Tiangui 天癸

While tiangui is a very common term for menstruation in medical texts, it originally defined not only female, but also male original vitality. The Huangdi neiijing suwen (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor—The Basic Questions) thus describes it for both genders:

When a girl is seven, the qi of the liver is full, her teeth are firm and her hair long; when a girl is fourteen, her prenatal vitalities (tiangui) arrive, the controller vessel moves, her thoroughfare vessel is abundant; her menses flow regularly and she is able to bear children…. When a boy is eight, his kidney qi is full, his hair is long and his teeth are firm; when he is sixteen the liver qi is abundant, his prenatal vitalities (tiangui) arrive. His seminal essence overflows and drains; he is able to unite yin and yang and so beget young.36

In later medical texts, tiangui defines more specifically the female period, but it does not lose the character of original energetic endowment.37 In female

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35 Jinhua zhizhi, chapter 3, pp. 21a–b.
37 Tiangui refers directly, through the word tian, to the heavenly character of menstruation already mentioned above. As for gui, it is the tenth celestial stem, and in terms of wuxing theory, it belongs to the yin water element, both characteristics of menstrual blood.
alchemy texts too, tiangui maintains the character of energy endowed by Heaven through the parents’ vitalities. Specifically, in many female alchemy texts, tiangui refers to the blood that is first formed in the female body and that gathers inside the uterus before the first menstruation and exits as the first menstruation. It is the storage of prenatal energies that will then be squandered monthly. It is described thus in the Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize 西王母女修正途十則 (Xiwangmu’s ten precepts on the proper female path):

When a girl is young [...], she has a little bit of the ‘first menses’ (chu jing 初經) hidden inside the vagina; it is like a star or pearl, it is the great treasure of former heaven stored above the Kun abdomen (kunfu 坤腹). Its seat is within the Central Yellow region. If she knows to purify her nature, not to watch licentious plays and not to hear licentious poems, [...], if in her actions she follows the rules of womanly behaviour and is at ease in her tranquillity, then this ‘thing’ [...] will become the primal one and will not transform into the red Pearl, will not become the heavenly water (tiangui). Unfortunately, common women do not know this, they have a child-like nature and like to move about, to play and have fun, to jump and run. Invariably, this will cause their qi to move and their heart/mind to be agitated; their vitalities will become internally confused and their true qi will be unstable. Then, this star-like heavenly treasure will grow and melt, will be hot like fire, will forcefully open the door and descend, rushing through the vagina and coming out. The world calls this heavenly water. 38

Yuexin 月信 or xinshui 信水

While tiangui and tianshui highlight the heavenly character of the original vitality that would become menstruation, yuexin, the monthly evidence, stresses the predictability (xin) of its coming. In medical texts, xinshui is in fact the process of regular monthly menstruation. In some female alchemy texts, however, there is a subtle difference between the monthly evidence and the menstruation itself. The texts understand and explain the word xin not so much as proof or evidence, but rather as a message, the intimation of the arrival of the menses, which manifests itself in physiological symptoms like dizziness and abdominal discomfort. This message arrives before the arrival of the blood (also termed tide, chao 潮) itself. This distinction in the texts is important because it defines the most advantageous moment to implement the practice of transformation and reversal, the moment between the arrival of the message and the arrival of the blood itself. Here is how this is described in the Nügong lianji huandan tushuo 女功煉丹丹說 (Illustrations

38 Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize, pp. 4b–5a.
and sayings on the female practice of refining the self and returning to the elixir):

The commentary says: treatises on female alchemy talk a lot of the female practice, every time they say that, whenever the monthly message arrives, you then have to stop the practice. This description is incorrect. They all err because they have not yet distinguished clearly. In general, as for female practice, what is most important is the *qi* mechanism. But within it there is a distinction between *ren* and *gui*. If the *ren* water comes first, and the *gui* water has not come yet, this then is 'the message has arrived' (*xin dao ye* 始到也). When the message arrives, you know it by yourself. Sometimes the head is dizzy, sometimes the waist hurts; the message has arrived but the tide [the blood itself] has not yet arrived. At this time you ought to perform correctly the 'invert the light and reverse the gazing' method (*huiguang fanzhao* 虚光返照), silently guard the breasts and sea of blood, and use the gathering method, in order to replenish the brain and set the basis.

Then, what you have gathered is the *ren* water, it is not the *gui* water. As soon as the *gui* water arrives, you have to stop the practice. You have to wait for 30 hours or two and a half days, when the *gui* water has extinguished, [then] you [can] still use the gathering method. Gather until what day and then stop? In this respect there are the oral instruction of the heavenly mechanism (*tianji* 天機). You need to seek a true master. The mouth transmits, the heart/mind receives, you cannot have a wild guess at it. If you obtain that transmission, you will be able, if young, to complete the basis in a hundred days.40

This passage not only distinguishes between the message (*xin*) and the tide (*chao*), but between related liquids, the *renshui* and the *guishui*. While *renshui* is a liquid that arrives together with the messenger, therefore manifests itself together with the dizziness and the abdominal pain, *guishui* is the full fledged period, or the tide (*chao*) that arrives later. While *gui* has been used in relation to menstruation in the compounds *tiangui* and *guishui* since early times, *ren* is not normally used in this way. *Ren* is the ninth celestial stem, and, positioned just before *gui*, has been chosen here to define the part of the menstrual cycle that comes just before the arrival of the blood. Moreover, in terms of *wuxing* theory, both *ren* and *gui* belong to the water element.

Implementing the practice in the period of time between the intimation of the menses and the actual arrival of the blood is called, in the *Kunyuanjing* (Scripture on the female origin), *suo longtou* 索龍頭 (squeezing-capturing the dragon’s head).41 Before the blood has the chance to enter the uterus, the work of intense meditation will have refined it into *qi* and sent it back to its source, the *qi* cavity between the breasts, and from there the refined *qi* is scattered

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39 The heavenly mechanism is the mechanism by which heaven transmits knowledge to humans.
40 *Nügong lianji huandan tushuo*, p. 2b.
41 *Kunyuanjing*, pp. 26b–27a.
around the body. In this way the head of the dragon is squeezed before it enters the uterus.

While texts warn against practising during the period, as it would only provoke major illnesses within the body, once the period has passed, the female practitioner can resume her work. The refinement of the menses that takes place after the end of the period is called, again in the *Kunyuanjing*, *qin huwei* (capturing the tiger’s tail). As is described in that text, once the period is completely over, the woman will feel the movement of the true yin within her uterus, ‘just like a fish inhaling water’, then she can resume her practice of refinement. Interestingly, the time just after the end of the menstrual period was also thought to be the best time, in medical terms, to have intercourse in order to produce offspring. In the case of capturing the tiger’s tail, the blood is not sent directly upwards to the qi cavity between the breasts, but it travels to the back side of the practitioner, ascends up the spine to the top of the head, and from there descends to the qi cavity between the breasts. The text translated above states that this second method would be more appropriate for middle-aged women. The names of these two methods reflect their use: in the first instance, the practitioner catches the head of the period, in the other the tail.

**Red dragon (chilong 赤龍)**

After beheading the red dragon, the woman’s body will change into that of an adolescent, and the yin, turbid blood will naturally cease to flow from underneath. She will then be able to escape death and enter life.

Red Dragon is yet another animal metaphor for the energetic base of the woman, which is depleted through menstruation. It is a term that only appears in *nüdan* texts, and does not have a correlate term in medical theory.

The dark dragon (*xuan long* 玄龍) and the white tiger (*baihu* 白虎) had been essential elements of the inner alchemical theory since the Song dynasty. In traditional alchemical theory, the tiger was symbolised by the inner yin line of the trigram *Li* and the dragon symbolised the inner yang line of the trigram.

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42 *Kunyuanjing*, p. 27a.
43 Furth 1999, p. 208.
44 *Nannü dangong yitong bian*, pp. 22a–b.
45 The terminology differs slightly in different texts: *zhan long* 斬龍 (Behead the Dragon), *duan long* 斬龍 (Cut the Dragon), *duan honglong* 斬紅龍 (Cut the Red Dragon). The earliest appearance of this term is in the *Chunyang dijun shenhua miaotong ji*, compiled in 1310. Episode n. 106 tells of a 16 year-old girl who, to escape her parent’s plan to marry her, hides away on a mountain. Here she meets an old man who tells her: ‘I will slay your Red Dragon.’
In *nüdan* we see for the first time the appearance of a red dragon, and the traditional roles are partially reversed: on the cosmological level, the white tiger is still associated with the internal yin line of *Li*, while the red dragon is symbolised by the two external yin lines of the trigram *Kan*. In order to complete the process of inversion and attain immortality, *Kan* must change into *Qian*, therefore recapturing the external yang lines lost in the intermingling of *Qian* with *Kun*, the process that generated *Kan* and *Li*. The same holds true for the white tiger. Symbolised by the internal, yin line of the trigram *Li*, it should be transformed into complete yang. The transformation of *Kan* and *Li* into *Qian*, of yin into yang, denotes the return to unity that does not eliminate, but incorporates and overcomes the duality of *Qian-Kun*, *Kan-Li*. On the physiological level, this process transforms the yin menstrual blood in yang *qi* (in the same way in which, for men, the seminal essence *jing* is transformed into *qi*).

When a man has completed the practice and the seminal essence (*jing*) does not drip away any more, this is called ‘subduing the white tiger’. When a woman has completed the practice and the menstrual flow (*jing*) does not drip away anymore, this is called ‘Beheading the red dragon’. In the man, seminal essence moves against the current and he becomes immortal; in the woman, blood moves upwards, ascending towards the heart’s cavity.46

The beheading of the red dragon for women and the subduing of the white tiger for men mark the completion of the first stage of the alchemical practice. The halting of the menstrual flow, achieved through the massage of the breasts described below, transforms the female body into a more androgynous body, a body where main sexual characteristics like menses and large breasts, and the possibility of generating children, are deleted.

**Physical and emotional transformation**

**A correct transformation of blood**

In medical texts, the presence of blood in the female body is seen as a hard reality to deal with, a uniquely female situation that is perceived as complex and treacherous. In female meditation texts, even more than in medical texts, menstruation is seen as an enemy to be fought, a Dragon to be slayed, whose head has to be squeezed or cut. A general situation of decline is described for

46 From the preface to the *Nudan hebian*, written by He Longxiang in 賀龍顥 1906. *Nüdan hebian*, p. 5a.
the woman who does not start refining her storage of vital energies even before her first menstruation at 14, and an even direr situation for women who allow themselves to lose vital energies every month. The all-pervading rhetoric is one of loss of energy, decline, depletion, and eventual exhaustion.

When a woman is still little, and the heavenly water fills the measure of one jin, the authentic original qi of the elixir field is sufficient, and ascends towards the origin of blood to produce blood. At this point, the yang reaches its apogee and transforms into yin and into the turbid flux that flows outside the body. Therefore [it is said] that ‘when she is young [the loss of original qi starts] from the top’. As for the declining, when the heavenly water is completely exhausted, qi cannot ascend to produce blood anymore; for this reason, the womb dries up and the blood is blocked.

This situation of depletion must be reversed, and that is the aim of the female practice. It is essential, then, to halt the monthly haemorrhage that depletes the female vital reserves, transforming it into energy.

If one wants to practise until the Qian body is completed, the movement goes upwards from the lower [elixir] field to the yang cavity; the spiritual fire (shenhuo) will steam up like vapour and transform the flux into yellow, the yellow into white and the white will change into nothingness. The form, then, will recede by itself… [This process] is different from that of a man. If you are not aware of this, you will not form the elixir.

This transformation, though, should be accomplished in a correct way: it is not the simple effect—amenorrhea—that is sought, and emphasis lies on the process that leads to this result. Nüdan texts distinguish between ‘a menstrual blockage’, identified as a disease to be cured, and the gradual transformation and refinement of blood inside the woman’s body in such a way that it does not any more appear in its usual forms outside the body (menstrual blood, milk). This transformation, through which the blood becomes thinner and changes colour from red to yellow to white, and then disappears transforming into qi, is achieved through a specific series of breathing techniques, massage of the breasts, internal visualisations and micro-movements. The Kunyunjing describes it thus: ‘the natural result as it pertains to the menses is: from red it changes into yellow; from yellow it changes into white; from white it changes into nothingness; from nothingness it changes into qu’. An erroneous process would constitute a deviation and jeopardise the adept’s health. We read in

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47 Here, elixir field means sea of blood, as explained in the (untranslated) previous lines.
48 Through the practice, the menstrual flow changes in amount, consistency and colour, from red to yellow to white, eventually disappearing altogether.
49 Nü jindan, xia juan, pp. 20a–b.
50 Kunyunjing, p. 22a.
the *Nannü dangong yitong bian* 男女丹功異同辨 (Differences and similarities in the alchemical work of men and women):

Some say that, before you have beheaded the red dragon, there is no way to form the elixir, nor to complete the Dao. They do not know that, if blood is depleted to the point of exhaustion, then *qi* will be exhausted as well. [...] If *qi* leaves the blood, then *qi* itself cannot be given birth to. [...] If, only once blood has disappeared, we can talk about sublimating the elixir, then why is it that young [girls] fall ill due to blood blockage? This is the final proof of the fact that [*qi*] shouldn’t part from blood. 51

The arrest of the menstrual flow, then, should start from a state of replenishment and not of depletion. The *Nüdan huijie* 女丹解 (Collection of explanations on female alchemy) adds, “What transforms into *qi*, what in blood changes into *qi*, is the original *qi* inside the blood.” 52

The texts of female alchemy also seriously address the issue of illness. Illness, usually related to common female problems of congestion and depletion, must be addressed before the start of the practice, and at the same time the practice has to be implemented correctly if one wants to avoid health complications. The *Jinhua zhizhi* 金花治志 (Cure illnesses) devotes Chapter 8 (Zhi bing 治病—Cure illnesses) to this issue:

As for those women who have an honest heart and seek the Dao, there is no doubt that their monthly water is the cause of their illnesses and makes it difficult for them to practise; they need to obtain the ‘there is one liang’ method. First you need to eliminate the illness’s symptoms, and only then can you implement the refinement. As for female's illnesses, in some of them the blockage of the menses results in illness, in others it is childbirth which causes disasters, in others again the collapsed girdle [uterus* beng dai* 剖帶] causes the illness. There are many different kinds, and I have three main methods to cure them: the first method cures the illnesses that develop before the child is born or after childbirth. . . . Another [method] treats those illnesses begotten as a result of blood loss from the vagina not connected to the period. . . . Another [method] cures the blockage of menses followed by the release of blood and sedimentous bloody clots. . . . In the world there has not yet been this kind of transmission, [but] in the immortal’s palace there really are these recipes. Wei Huacun practised these at every sitting, and the female immortal Magu often picked this medicine. If women truly practise this with a saintly heart, no matter if it is a new illness or an old illness, there will be results for all. 53

Once the practice has started, the practitioner has to be careful about implementing it correctly:

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51 *Nannü dangong yitong bian*, in *Nüdan hebian*, pp. 25a–b.
52 *Nüdan huijie*, p. 10a.
Having arrived at this stage of the practice, one has to discern between true and false, turbid and pure. If you refine the false yin and the turbid qi, then you will unavoidably develop illnesses that will not be dispelled by drugs.54

Transformation of blood in older women

If blood, especially in its instantiation as menstrual blood, is the essential element that needs to be transformed, what is the fate of women who have already 'naturally' reached menopause? Women who have reached menopause can practise nüdan too. Since, however, as specified above, refinement has to start from a situation of replenishment, not of illness or depletion, it follows that, in order to practise nüdan, women in menopause should first reconstitute the natural energetic endowment that produced the menstrual flow. Once that blood has manifested again, it can then be refined into qi, following the normal course of the process:

After the age of 49, the womb is exhausted, the production of blood stops, and there is no birth mechanism (shengji) any more. If a woman fosters it for a long time, though, the origin of blood is reactivated and will be like that of a young girl. This is the marvellous birth of being from non-being. Once it has been observed that it [the red dragon] has come back, as soon as it is beheaded the transformation will take place and vitality will reappear.55

The Jinhua zhizhi devotes Chapter 6 (Yin huan —make it return) to this issue:

As for women’s Heavenly water (guishui), there are those who get to old age and their bodies are still not clean, and there are those who get to 45 or 46 years old and have stopped [menstruating]. If you are in the group who has already stopped menstruating and desire to seek the practice of meditation, you need to ‘return to the root and go back to the source’, [going back to] being like a maiden…. Within 100 days you can obtain the return of the heavenly water, of a pinkish colour, and then three days later you can use the previous method without adding to it even a little bit, without changing its implementation. So you use the daoyin exercises to make it come, and then with the other method, beheading and cutting [the dragon], you make it go away. In this way yin and yang revolve around and the sun and moon circle around.56

The fifth chapter of the Xiwangmu nixiu zhengtu shize (Xiwangmu’s ten precepts on the proper female path) is called fuhuan (Returning) and it too is completely devoted to techniques that cause the

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54 Nügong lianji huandan tushuo, p. 6a.
55 Nannü dangong yitong bian, in Nüdan hebian, p. 21b.
56 Jinhua zhizhi, pp. 23a–b.
menses to come back in postmenopausal women.\textsuperscript{57} Such an attention to this category of women in most of the \textit{nüdan} texts suggests that, socially, it was an important cohort of the audience for these practices. It also suggests that menopause itself was not perceived as a ‘natural’ event in the woman’s life span, but rather, just like menstruation itself, in need of reversal. From the perspective of the reconstruction of one’s innate energies, one had to recover as much of what energy was left and then refine it to complete the immortal embryo.

The process that menopausal women have to go through to restore their blood is, in the above text, paralleled to a similar process in older men, that of reforming their store of \textit{jing} before refining it. This process in men is not mentioned in other \textit{nüdan} texts, nor is it a common process in \textit{neidan}. However, a quotation that confirms this theory is found in a text by Fu Jinquan that is not specifically directed at women, the \textit{Shijinshi} (Examining gold and stone) in the \textit{Jindan zhenzhuan} (True transmission of the golden elixir).\textsuperscript{58} In the first section of this text, entitled ‘Changsheng’ (長生—long life), Fu discusses the practice of both men and women when they are very old. This passage is of particular interest, because we have a parallel between older women and older men as far as the alchemical practice is concerned:

In general, as for men, when they are old and reach the age of 80, 90 or even a hundred, their essence (jing) dries up and their qi is exhausted; they need to go from a state of absence of essence to a state of ‘return’ of essence. Moreover, if they can avoid women and can plant the seed, then from a state of replenishment of essence they will refine until they arrive at a state of absence of essence, and even have a cavity of no-essence. The penis will retract to look like that of a young boy, and then you will know that the essence has transformed itself into qi, and that the basis is completed. When women grow old and reach the age of 80, 90, or a hundred, their qi and blood are old and dry; they need to go from a state of absence of blood to producing blood, so that they have their menses again. Then from having menses, they need to refine until they arrive at a state of no menses, and we call that ‘beheading the red dragon’. The body will be like that of a virgin, and then you will know that the blood has already transformed into qi and the basis is completed.\textsuperscript{59}

For both men and women, the decay and depletion that comes with old age needs to be, and can be, reversed.

\textsuperscript{57} Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize, pp. 8a–9a.
\textsuperscript{58} Jindan zhenzhuan, in Zangwai daoshu vol. 11, pp. 877–87.
\textsuperscript{59} Zangwai daoshu vol. 11, p. 878.
Emotions and the heart-mind (心 xin)

If we talk about menstruation (经shui) for cultivating your life, then you need to first and foremost be scrupulous about what you drink and eat, secondly you need to be scrupulous about your feelings: do not be excessive in your desire for sour, sweet, bitter, spicy, raw and cold foods, and do not be excessive in stirring emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, delight, love and hatred.60

Not only do women have a complex physiology, but, as the passage above introduces, there is yet another level of complexity, the emotional level. The physical workings of the body are inherently connected with the emotional world, thus a level and peaceful heart and mind are the perfect basis for a healthy body and the springboard for advanced spiritual work. Chinese medicine has long acknowledged that women's physiology is directly connected to emotional well-being. Sun Simiao, in his Qianjin yaofang, clearly connects female illness to disorders of the emotions:

Nevertheless, women's cravings and desires exceed men's, and they contract illness at twice the rate of men. In addition, they are imbued with affection and passion, love and hatred, envy and jealousy, and worry and rancour, which are lodged firmly in them. Since they are unable to control their emotions by themselves, the roots of their disorders are deep and it is difficult to obtain a cure in their treatment.61

Uncontrolled emotions can harm the female body, cause illnesses and, in the case of female alchemy, hinder the path to transcendence. Controlling the emotions is thus of utmost importance.

In Chinese medicine as well as in nidan, the heart-mind (xin) is the seat for the production of the blood that circulates in the body. Thus, controlling and making it still is essential, otherwise blood will be difficult to refine. In nidan, the very first step, even before cultivating the menses, involves pacifying the heart-mind:

Unfortunately, common women do not know this, they have a child-like nature and like to move about, to play and have fun, to jump and run. Invariably, this will cause their qi to move and their heart-mind to be agitated; their vitalities will become internally confused and their true qi will be unstable.62

To nurture inner nature and return, it is necessary first to have a still heart-mind.63 The heart-mind is like still water, by itself it is meditative.64

60 Jinhua zhizhi, chapter 3 (Xiu jing—Cultivating the menses), pp. 21a-b.
62 Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu pp. 4b–5a.
63 Nüjindan, juan xia, p. 8b.
64 Nüjindan faoan, juan xia, p. 9b.
The heart-mind and emotional stability are inherently connected, especially in women. Sensual desires are a great hindrance to the stillness of the heart-mind, and women need to seriously curb them, as precious vitalities can be easily squandered through sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbirth:

A woman’s inner nature and feelings are easily unsettled; as soon as a woman covets sex, then the fire of her desire will burn her body and the feelings will be hard to control. If she does not have a husband to follow her desire she will inevitably engage in shameful conduct. Even if this does not cause her to lose her chastity, as soon as her lascivious heart-mind moves, the fire will take over her whole body and her vitalities will no longer be preserved inside.\(^65\)

Even once a woman has started seriously practising, the practice itself can cause sexual arousal, which needs to be immediately suffocated:

As for the infant’s palace ([zigong](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uterus)—uterus), the body feels a gust of warm qi encircling it, at this time, it is particularly important to lock the ‘gate of the spring’ ([quanfei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vagina)—vagina), and not allow it to relax. If you obtain a feeling of pleasure, you should mostly fear the arising of random thoughts; there might be a slight feeling of passion, which will lead to a sensation of numbness throughout the whole body. If you do not realise that you ought immediately to curb the emotions, this is where the immortal and mortal ways part.\(^66\)

As is clear from the above quotations, female emotions are embodied, they elicit reactions that are clearly displayed in the body, and this connection between emotions and bodily functions is widely acknowledged and highlighted in female alchemy texts. While [neidan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neidan) already was a practice firmly based in the body, and with the aim of conducting the spiritual process through the body, [nüdan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nüdan) describes in even more detail the minute changes that the female body undergoes throughout the spiritual practice.\(^67\)

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\(^{65}\) Nüjindan, juan shang, p. 7a.  
\(^{66}\) Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize, p. 6b. Fourth precept, xiaoting. 
\(^{67}\) This is in line with recent scholarship on the embodiment of religious practices. Scholars of religion are increasingly attentive towards the importance of the body in the practice of religion. In the 1989 address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Meredith B. McGuire says: ‘Our research strategies need to take into account that believers (and nonbelievers) are not merely disembodied spirits, but that they experience a material world in and through their bodies.’ For women, this is all the more central.
Fig. 1. Image of a woman sitting in meditation, inscribed with the most important loci for the refinement process. 

*Nügong lianji huandan tushuo*, 女功煉已還丹圖說 (Illustrations and sayings on the female practice of the reverted Elixir created by self-refinement), page 1. In *Nüdan hebian*, 女丹合編 (Collection of female alchemy), ed. by He Longxiang 賀龍騫 (Qing period, 1644–1911), printed at the Er xian an 二仙庵 in Chengdu, 1906.
Loci

Charlotte Furth has demonstrated how, in Chinese medicine theory and practice, blood defined the female body and its processes in a gendered way from the Song onwards. Above, I have tried to explain how blood and its instantiations define the female body similarly in female alchemy, even though the way in which this fluid is treated differs in the two traditions. But where is the blood produced, gathered and transformed? Since blood is such a fundamental part of the physiology of women, it follows that the main loci of her physiology would be involved with the storage, passage and transformation of blood. Where are these locations in the female body? Are they structurally different from what are considered important loci in female physiology? Are they different from the locations where the blood flows and gathers in the male body and are the loci where the blood flows and gathers as gendered as blood itself? This is how the preface to the *Nüdan hebian* describes the structures of men and women:

The man has a knot inside the windpipe [i.e., Adam’s apple], the woman does not. The male breasts do not produce liquids and are small, the female breasts produce liquids and are big. A man’s foundation is convex [tu asjon], a woman’s foundation is concave [ao asjon]. In the man [the convex organ] is called the essence chamber (jingbi), in the woman [the concave organ] is called the palace of the child (zigong). In men the vital force (ming) is located in the qi cavity (qixue), whereas in women the vital force is located between the breasts. In the man, generative force is located in the pelvis, whereas, in the woman, generative force originates from the blood. In the man it is the essence (jing) its colour is white and its name is white tiger, in the woman it is the blood, its colour is red and its name is red dragon. As for male essence, it is yin within yang; as for female blood, it is yang within yin. The power of male Essence is more than sufficient, the power of female blood is insufficient.69

In another text, the male and female bodies are likened to crucibles, different vessels for the transformation of the bodily essences that will produce the immortal embryo:

For men, the crucible is formed by the lower, middle and upper dantian. For women, the crucible is formed by the palace of the child [uterus], the navel, and

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68 This passage resembles closely an earlier passage in a government medical textbook: ‘The cinnabar field is the life-gate (mingmen). In the man it is called the chamber of essence (jingbi), and in women it is called the child palace.’ In *Yizong jinjian* 45, pp. 25b–26b. Quoted in Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 24.

69 I translate here shen (kidneys) as ‘generative force’. In Chinese medicine the system of the kidneys includes the genital apparatus and is therefore the seat of generative power.

70 *Nüdan hebian*, introduction, p. 4a.
the breast stream [a point between the breasts]. The palace of the infant is one cun and three fen below the lower dantian, and it is two cun and 8 fen below the navel, and it is also below the upper breast pass. Above it is in the breast stream, in the centre it is inside the navel, below it is in the palace of the infant.\textsuperscript{71}

Both quotations identify the breasts, the navel and the uterus as focal points of the practice. These points form a nexus, a channel of transformation, an essential duct, almost a single organ through which blood descends; in the case of female alchemy this is the crucible through which blood needs to reverse its course to be refined. This channel of transformation is clearly seen in figure 1, where the body of a woman in a meditative pose is inscribed, on a vertical axis, with the points xuehai 血海 (sea of blood), zhongji 中極 (central pole—navel) and rufangxue 女房穴 (breast cavity).

In Chinese medicine, a similar system that connects the breasts, the navel and the womb is exemplified by the controller and the thoroughfare vessels (chong mai 衝脈 and ren mai 任脈), shown in pictures 2 and 3. In analysing the female gestational body in Chinese medical sources, Yi-li Wu talks about a ‘key-bodily nexus . . . consisting of three interlinked components: blood, the womb, and a pair of circulation channels whose Chinese names I will translate as the thoroughfare and controller vessels (chong ren mai 衝任脈).’\textsuperscript{72} As Yi-li Wu has demonstrated, even though these two channels are not specific to women, they were identified from very early times to be particularly important to female physiology. They are mentioned in the Inner Classic as being involved in female sexual maturity, and in fact the thoroughfare vessel was identified with the sea of blood.\textsuperscript{73} The renmai, shown in image 2 on a male figure, originates in the perineum and ends on the lower lip. Several of the points on this vertical axis coincide with those indicated on the female meditating in figure 1: the xuehai (sea of blood) on the female figure corresponds to the hui yin, in the perineum, on the renmai; the zhongji (also named jiangong on the female figure) shares a name and a location with the same point on the renmai; the rufangxue, a point between the breasts and right above the sternum on the female figure, corresponds with the shan zhong on the renmai. The chongmai, shown in image 3, originates in the lower abdomen at the guanyuan point, located right above the zhongji point, it descends to the huiyin and ascends within the spinal column, thus it encircles the abdominal area.

\textsuperscript{71} Nügong zhengfa, p. 11b.
\textsuperscript{72} Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{73} Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 10. In the same chapter, Wu also mentions that Wang Bing (fl. 751–62), whose commented version of the Inner Classic was the basis of the received text used by Qing doctors, further underscored the special role of these two channels for women by explaining that ‘the thoroughfare vessel is the sea of blood, and the controller vessel is master of the fetal womb (baotai)’. Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 10.
interested by the *nüdan* practice. In contemporary *nüdan* practice, it is the medical names inscribed on images 2 and 3 and not the alchemical names inscribed on image 1 that are used to explain the practice.

**Breasts (rufang 乳房)**

Women have a yin, impure body (ti 体). A constitution (qu 血) of bloody liquids. If they use the fat from their breasts to transform into *qi* matter, if for a long time they circle it and refine it, then naturally the red will turn into white and the blood will transform into *qi*.

The importance of the breasts as producers of milk and of the yin secretions that become menstrual blood is attested at least since the twelfth century in Chinese physiology, as Charlotte Furth has demonstrated. Breasts also play a fundamental role in the woman’s sublimation process, already documented before the emergence of *nüdan*. This passage from a Song commentary on the *Wuzhen pian* by Xue Shi 薛式 is one of the first written examples of how the breasts were deemed a central location for the practice of women:

> As for women practising to become immortals, breasts are where the *qi* is produced. The process is extremely easy. For a man practising to become immortal, we speak of refining *qi*, for a woman practising to become immortal, we speak of refining the form. The woman first has to accumulate *qi* in the breasts and then settle the crucible and erect the furnace, applying the method of the refinement of the form of Supreme yin (*taiyin lianxing*). This is the easiest process to complete the Dao.75

The breasts are at the centre of the female apparatus. In the sixth chapter of the *Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu*, they are described like this:

> As for the breasts, above they communicate with the secretions of the heart-mind and lungs, below [they communicate] seamlessly with the veritable extract of the sea of blood.76

It needs to be noted that, when the texts speak of the breasts, they are referring to two different loci in the same area. One is the breasts themselves (rufang), which are massaged in order to halt the downward flow of blood that results in menstruation. The breasts undergo major changes in size and shape once the adept has completed her practice. The other locus *locus* has different names: ‘breast cavity’ (rufangxue), the ‘*qi* cavity’ (qixue 氣穴), also called ‘origin of blood’ (xueyuan 血元) or breast stream (ruoxi 乳溪); it is located between the

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74 *Hutian xingguo nüdan shize*, p. 1b.
75 *Wuzhen pian sanzhu*, ‘Memory’ (*Ji*), p. 4a.
76 *Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize*, p. 9a.
Fig. 2. Image showing the names and locations of the acupoints on the *renmai*, or thoroughfare vessel, which originates in the perineum and ends on the lower lip.

Shou li lu congshu: Jingmai fentu (Individual Charts of the Channels, in the 'Ancient Oak Hut' series), by Wu Zhiying (Qing period, 1644–1911), illustrated by Luo Shaoqi, published by Shou li lu ('Ancient Oak Hut'), 1920, juan 1.
Fig. 3. Image showing names and locations of the acupoints on *chongmai*, or controller vessel, which originates in the lower abdomen, it descends to the perineum, and ascends within the spinal column. Shou li lu congshu: Jingmai fentu (Individual Charts of the Channels, in the ‘Ancient Oak Hut’ series), by Wu Zhiying (Qing period, 1644–1911), illustrated by Luo Shaoqi, published by Shou li lu (‘Ancient Oak Hut’), 1920, *juan* 1.
breasts, at the depth of one cun and two fen. This is the place where the female alchemical practice begins, where the blood is stored prior to descending to the uterus, and where it has to ascend to with the practice. The Jindan zhizhi, in Chapter 7 (lian ru 炼乳—to refine the breasts), describes both in this way:

In order to move the breast stream women need, in particular, to refine the breasts, because the breast stream is hidden and hard to pry into, and the breasts are prominent and evident.77

**Massage of the breasts**

Massaging the breasts helps to revert the downward flow of blood from the qi cavity to the sea of blood. This massage is described in minute detail in many niúdan texts:

> Intention is focused on the breasts, left and right it revolves 36 times in each direction. The lips [are sealed] above and below, the teeth clench firmly, the nostrils are closed tightly. Use internal breathing. On the breasts, with the palms of your hands, massage 72 times each side, first softly and then more urgently, first lightly and then strongly. In a hundred days the work will be completed, and they will acquire the form of walnuts.78

With the progressing of the practice, eventually resulting in the beheading of the red dragon, the breasts undergo physical changes, the nipples retract to look like those of a man. This process is thus described in the sixth chapter of the Xi wangmu niúxiu zhengtu shize:

> practising will result in your breasts becoming like those of a maiden, the form of those of a young girl, then the woman transforms into a male body.79

[...][if you practise] like this for 100 days without interruption, those with flourishing breasts will become flat as young girls, those with empty breasts will have them solid like walnuts.80

> First slowly, then fast, first gently then hard; practise like this and within 100 days the two breasts will change and have the shape of almond pits.81

If you transform the menses into qi then the breasts will shrink and be like those of a man and the period will not leak any longer.82

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77 Jinhua zhizhi, pp. 23b–24a.
78 Nugong zhengfa, pp. 10a–b.
79 Xi wangmu niúxiu zhengtu shize, p. 9b.
80 Xi wangmu niúxiu zhengtu shize, p. 10a.
81 Jinhua zhizhi, p. 24a.
82 Nüjindan, juan xia, p. 34a. The massage of the breasts can also be used as a technique for older women who are already menopausal to make their blood flow again. This is described, for example, in the fifth chapter of the Xi wangmu niúxiu zhengtu shize, called fuhuan 恢還, ‘Return’.
Qi cavity (qixue 氣穴), origin of blood (xueyuan 血元), breast stream (ruxi 乳溪)

These three terms are used interchangeably in nüdan texts to indicate the same point between the breasts. The different names do indicate to us different functions and semantic fields that this unitary location has. As a cavity of qi, the qixue is the primary gathering location for the qi of a woman, and it is clearly differentiated in the texts from the male qi cavity, located in the lower dantian. As the xueyuan, the origin of blood, it is the location where blood, the energetic base of the woman, is stored, and from which blood descends to the sea of blood and, later, exits the body. As breast stream, it indicates the flow of blood and qi passing between the breasts.

In all these roles, this is the central point of women’s sublimation process. The Nüjindan describes it in detail, starting with a poem:

The qi cavity is none other than the breasts, to stop under the umbilicus is an absurd guess. If people don’t know the place where the yin is born, how can they make the poisonous dragon submit of itself?

The qi cavity (qixue) is the origin of blood (xueyuan); it is the breasts (rufang). Exactly, it is located between the breasts, at the depth of one cun and three fen. In a man the vital force is situated in the elixir field, therefore [for him] the lower [elixir] field is the qi cavity. In a woman the vital force is situated in the breasts, therefore [for her] the breasts are the qi cavity. In a man, the vital force is located in the elixir field, therefore [for him] the elixir field is the qi cavity. When the yin reaches the apogee, it becomes yang and, from the qi cavity, the yin blood flows outside [the body]. Therefore, as for the beheading of the red dragon, the effort should start from where the yin is born. Practise for a long time, and the form will recede of itself. If you indicate it [qi cavity] as the place in the male body three cun and one fen under the umbilicus, you are mistaken.83

In the normal female physiological process, the blood produced by the heart concentrates in the qi cavity, flows down into the sea of blood, and leaves the body as menstrual blood. During the sublimation process, on the contrary, it is made to ascend from the sea of blood back to the qi cavity to become qi. Here, the qi thus transformed unites with the original qi (yuanqi 元氣) to form the embryo, within a symbolic period of 10 months. The counter-current flow is well described in this passage of the Kunyuan jing:

[... ] at this point, once the counter-current conduction (niyun) is activated, [the blood] reaches the qi cavity between the breasts. If one practises in this way for months, after a long period it transforms, and the numinous fat (lingzhi) becomes qi.84

83 Nüjindan, juan xia, p. 21a. From the chapter called qixue —qi cavity.
84 Kunyuanjing, p. 22a.
As mentioned in the passage above, the starting point of men’s practice is the lower elixir field, located below the navel. This point is close to the kidneys, the organ that produces the vital energy (and sperm) in males. It makes sense, therefore, that the central point of female refinement should be between the breasts, the location closer to the xin, the heart-mind, where female vital energies (blood) are produced.

**Womb: Zigong (palace of the infant) and xuehai (sea of blood)**

The womb is the other area where the female practice needs to focus. Yi-li Wu, in her study of female physiology, has found that the womb has not received all the attention that the blood has received:

…while medical works frequently mention the womb, they contain only a few sustained discussions of the womb itself. Unlike blood, whose protean nature made it a suitable focus for medical theorizing and therapeutic manipulation, the womb seems to have largely been taken for granted as a relatively stable object whose range of functions and pathological states were more narrowly defined.85

Yi-li Wu explains that, in the Chinese medical tradition, there are a number of terms used for uterus, and no consensus, among medical writers, about a standardisation of the term or, for that matter, its exact location and specific function. However, the earliest and one of the most used terms is bao 胞, and another common and early term is zigong 子宮 (palace of the child).86

Female alchemy texts never use the term bao by itself, only sometimes in conjunction with the term xuehai 血海, resulting in the compound xuehai bao 血海胞. The term zigong, on the other hand, is used often, as exemplified in the quotation below:

Then, a little bit of sweet dew will enter the palace of the child (zigong); and you will be able to see clearly a bolt of hot qi revolving around in the palace of the child. The left heel does not shift at any moment. After a short while sitting in quiet meditation, the palace of the child will be quieted, and the jewel will return to the northern sea; only then can you rest.87

As for the exact location of the palace of the child, some texts are very specific:

…[the] palace of the child is one cun and three fen below from the lower dantian; it is 2 cun and 8 fen below the navel, and also the lower dantian is outside the palace of the child. The first (outer) level is the navel, the second (middle) level is

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85 Wu, unpublished manuscript, p. 3.
86 Wu goes into a detailed description of the origins of this term and of its first reception and later use in Wu, unpublished manuscript, pp. 12–13.
87 Jinhua zhizhi, pp. 22b–23a. In the chapter named Duan long 斷龍—Cutting the Dragon.
the lower dantian, the third (innermost) level is the infant’s palace. The locations (buwei) go from outer to inner, while the circulation/implementation (yunyong) goes from inner to outer.\textsuperscript{88}

So, keeping the navel as our mark, and moving down and inward, we will find that the lower dantian is below the navel of one cun and 5 fen, while the palace of the child is one cun and 3 fen below that. The text specifies that, while these locations move progressively inwards, deeper into the abdominal cavity, the practice needs to start from the innermost location (zigong) moving outwards (to the lower dantian and to the umbilicus) and upwards, later ascending to the breast pass.

As in medical texts, in female alchemy texts too it is unclear if the zigong and the sea of blood indicate the same location and the same function. But while the location of both the zigong and the xuehai are in the general vicinity of the biomedical womb, in female alchemy their semantic field is defined slightly differently. While zigong is always referred to as a receptacle, a cauldron, one of the three main loci of the female body (breasts, navel, palace of the child), and is not directly involved with blood, the xuehai, while it sometimes also has that connotation, is more related to the actions of blood, which inhabits, enters and exits it.

In traditional medical literature, the sea of blood is generally understood as the location in the body where the blood is stored, in both men and women. The \textit{Huangdi neijing Lingshu} 黃帝內經靈樞 (Numinous Pivot) thus describes it:

People have the sea of marrow, the sea of blood, the sea of qi, and the sea of water and grains; in all there are four, therefore we speak of four seas.\textsuperscript{89}

Despite the fact that blood, as well as essence (jing) were vital energies in both men and women, in later medical literature, the sea of blood becomes more related to female physiology, and especially to her reproductive organs. Xue Ji 薛己 (1487–1559), in his \textit{Jiaozhu furen lianfang} 校注婦人良方 (Revised good prescriptions for women), writes:

Blood is the vital qi produced by the digestive process, which harmonises the five zang organ systems and infuses the six fu organ systems. In males it makes [Semenal] Essence and in females it makes breast milk and descends to make the Sea of Blood.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Jinhua zhizhi}, pp. 25a–b. In the chapter named \textit{An ding} 安鼎—Pacifying the Cauldron.

\textsuperscript{89} In the \textit{Hailun} 海論 (Discussion of Seas) chapter. \textit{Huangdi neijing lingshu}, juan 6, p. 4b.

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{Jiaozhu furen lianfang}. In \textit{Zhongguo yixue dacheng} 中國醫學大成 5, p. 479. Translated in Furth, 1999, p. 144.
In female alchemy, the sea of blood maintains the explicit correlation with female physiology. Its location is approximately the same as that of the lower elixir field in the man. But while in the man the lower dantian contains essence (jing), in the woman the sea of blood stores blood:

At 14 years of age, there are 14 liang of heavenly water in the sea of blood.\(^91\)

Menses come once every month. The period comes from all the channels and the blood vessels around the body, it arrives in the liver and enters the heart-mind, then descends to the uterus-sea of blood (xuehaibao).\(^92\)

The sea of blood is where the blood gathers just before being expelled outside of the female body through menstruation. It is here that it needs to be blocked and made to ascend to the cavity between the breasts, where it initially came from. This is the beginning of the reversal, of the backward path of blood, the initial step of the process of transformation of blood from a heavy red substance into a thinner, lighter one in colour and more and more ethereal energy. ‘Naturally it [the refined qi] does not return to the sea of blood.’\(^93\)

The texts not only describe the blood as entering and exiting the sea of blood, but also the process by which the blood is there transformed:

If you really have arrived at the completion of the basis, and the medicine is born in the dantian, then there will be a pearl of fire rushing forward, the sea of blood will be as if boiling and sizzling, the nose will have spasms and the body will shake. Do not be frightened at all.\(^94\)

Refining the form, this means nurturing [yang]. The bloody liquids (xue ye 血液) are yin. Therefore their turbidness congeals in and inhabits the lower part of the body, they are stored in the uterus-sea of blood (xuehaibao). This is what is called: the pure part of the qi ascends towards the breasts, and the impure part of the qi flows down and becomes congested. This is where creating humans and creating immortals part ways.\(^95\)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the image of female physiology that emerges from texts of female alchemy texts is reassuringly similar to that found in traditional medical texts. The female body is ruled by blood, female illnesses are often caused by diseases related to menstrual irregularity and blockage, as well as to

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\(^{91}\) Nüdan cuo yao, p. 3b.

\(^{92}\) Kunyuanjing, p. 24a.

\(^{93}\) Kunyuanjing, p. 26a.

\(^{94}\) Nügong lianji huandan tuhuo, p. 3a.

\(^{95}\) Hutian xingguo nüdan shize, p. 4a.
emotional turmoil, and menstruation itself is a cause for depletion. The description of menstruation as well as the loci that the blood traverses are the same. But what happens in them, as well as the valence of blood, menstruation and fertility is completely different. The processes that happen between the breasts, within the sea of blood, the transformation that the blood undergoes, are of an opposite nature to those normally happening in those locations. The female body, with its menses, the breasts, the uterus, is a tool, a vessel for transcendence, not just a body to be regulated, cured, prepared for childbirth and recuperated after it. It is a body that contravenes all of the normal expectations. It is a body that, despite having the same structure and the same ailments, follows an opposite trajectory, one of complete transformation.

The female body itself is central to this transformation. Thus, the woman needs to listen to its changes, especially around the time of menstruation, in order to understand when to act. The 'normal' course of her physiology is reversed. Once she feels a movement like that of a 'fish inhaling water' in her uterus, she performs the massage of the breasts. Thus the blood, sizzling and boiling, is refined in the sea of blood; the dragon is beheaded, the tiger's head is squeezed, or its tail snatched. The results, stopping of the menses, shrinking of the breasts, impossibility to procreate, are directly against the 'natural' course of life.

However firmly based in the body this process may be, the link that blood and menstruation has with Heaven is also stressed, and its return to Heaven, in much refined form, is hoped for. The relationship between physicality and cosmology is made also evident through descriptions of bodily and cosmological processes side by side, the bodies of men and women likened to trigrams. While the physicality of the menstrual process is never negated, its cosmological nature is highlighted, so that its return to its cosmological origin is already conceived. Because of the fundamental difference of the aim, once the illnesses, the depletion, the imbalances are dealt with, the trajectory for the female body and its liquids is completely different. Blood has to be dealt with not because it is an important asset of female physiology, but because it is the link that women have with transcendence.

In terms of the locations of female refinement, we find that, while both the breasts and the uterus are fundamental locations for the female gestational body, this natural process is negated in female alchemy, and both the breasts and the uterus are used to reverse the gestational process. In this process, the breasts become smaller and harder (as opposed to larger and full of milk during pregnancy and lactation), and the uterus is utilised not for the conception and the nurturing of a human foetus, but for the conception and nurturing of an immortal embryo. This immortal foetus is nurtured with the same energies that would go to the human foetus.
Thus beheading the Red Dragon, cultivating the menses, transforming blood into \( qi \), the transformation of red into white, the shrinking of the breasts, all mark the first stage of the reversal of natural processes, such as old age, decay, but also fertility for women. As menstruation as well as pregnancy and childbirth are part of the depletion that takes the practitioner away from its final aim, fertility, normally a major asset to be nurtured and controlled, is in fact reversed by the \textit{nudan} practice. This reversal uses the same energies and the same locations of the natural process. As the \textit{Niidan shize} says:

>This is where creating humans and creating immortals part ways.\footnote{Hutian xingguo niidan shize, p. 4a.}

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