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Women Become Immortal through the Use of Procreation Ability: A Study on the Fertility Concept of Female Alchemy

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Abstract: The tradition of female alchemy is established in the view that the female body, like the Earth, is the form of a living goddess and endowed with the fertile energy to nurture all life. This fertile energy is concentrated and reflected in women's menstruation. Because of this energy, women can cultivate themselves as immortals through meditation and self-effort. At this level, the goddess and women share the same power. Therefore, every woman possesses this inner power; indeed, every woman is a goddess.

Keywords: female alchemy; procreative power; creative energy; goddess spirit; gender equality

1. Introduction

Goddess worship is a widespread phenomenon in religion, wherein the goddess holds the secrets of rebirth, and her energy can bring plants and animals back to life. Belief in the goddess is characterized by her qualities of death and resurrection. Whether it is the worship of a Western or Eastern goddess, at its heart is the cult of life: the desire to have a longer and better life in the world, including the transcendence of death.

The divine genealogy of Daoism is composed of gods and immortals, with some differences between them. In Daoism, gods have existed since ancient times, such as the Three Clarities (*sanqing* 三清), namely, *Yuanshi tianzun* 元始天尊 (Celestial Worthy of Original Commencement), *Lingbao tianzun* 靈寶天尊 (Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure) and *Daode tianzun* 道德天尊 (Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue). They represent the three basic energies at the creation of the universe, which are mysterious (*xuan* 玄), original (*yuan* 元), and inaugural (*shi* 始). While humans cultivated immortals, they were able to gain insight into the laws of the universe and then become immortal through specific Daoist refinement methods. Immortals have three characteristics: first, they are released from the bondage of death, have no troubles in their minds, and are not subject to bodily illness. Second, they have unique wisdom and magical powers that ordinary people do not possess. Third, they can change the shape of their bodies at will and can subdue demons, rewarding good and punishing evil. In short, immortals never suffer death. They hold the key to eternal life and are granted eternal happiness and freedom, while also having a constant concern for human society, expressed through their supernatural capacity to offset disasters in the protection of their local communities.

While the gods of Daoism are objects of worship and reliance, immortals are not only objects of faith but also role models for people on their path to immortality (Mou 2014, pp. 321–22). In Daoism, the spectrum of female deities includes goddesses and female immortals. Daoist goddesses include *Xiwang mu* 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West), *Doumu* 鬥姆元君 (Mother of the Dipper), and *Bixia yuanjun* 碧霞元君 (Original Princess of the Jasper Mist). Women, such as Sun Bu'er 孫不二 and Wei Huacun 魏華存 mostly cultivated female immortals. For many women who believe in Daoism, the goal of their practice is to become immortal.

However, the division between gods and immortals is not entirely absolute in Daoism. Individuals who have made outstanding contributions to human society can also become



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gods, such as Mazu 媽祖, who was born in 960 to the Lin 林 family of Putian 莆田 (Fujian). Centuries of popular lore surround this goddess. She practiced magic to heal the locals and rescue people from shipwrecks. She became a deity worshipped by fishermen, travelers, merchants, and seafarers, and she took control of maritime shipping as a goddess. In Daoism, if worship of the goddess is required for healing diseases and living a peaceful life, then worshipping female immortals is required for resistance to death. Indeed, the psychological need for people to resist death and revere life is reflected in worshipping goddesses and female immortals, respectively (Zhan 2010, p. 30). Therefore, the goddess and the female immortal represent two sides of the same coin in the psychology of the popular practice of female worship.

In Daoism, the belief is that the Dao is the root and ultimate destination of all existence. Moreover, the Dao is the religious and mythological prototype of the goddesses of ancient matriarchal societies that continues untampered within the patriarchal cultures that have dominated Chinese society for more than the last two thousand years. Laozi, the author of the *Daode jing* 道德經, adhered to the ideological legacy of ancient goddess religions and promoted the idea of a female creator, that all things are the result of “birth” by a goddess, not of “creation” by a male creator (Ye 2004, p. 182). Daoism preserves the sacred worship of women and their fertility from ancient times. Laozi’s ideas derived mainly from a matriarchal society, epitomized by the ideal society he portrays in the *Daode jing* 道德經. The Dao gave birth to all creatures, and Daoism, in turn, taking this vitality and the vigorous spirit as its aesthetic, not only loves human life but, by extension, involves all sentient beings and cares for them, as Her children.

This nurturing and valuing of life are related to Daoism’s worship of female fertility. The qualities of inaction and suppleness, humility, and selflessness possessed by the saint, described by Laozi in the *Daode jing* 道德經, are also embodied by the female chief in a matriarchal society (Liu 2012, p. 116). Although China is a patriarchal society, Daoism has never changed its reverence for women. It discusses gender equality from a cosmological perspective, believing that *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 are the two energies that drive the evolution of things. Only when the two live in harmony can the world develop better.

Female alchemy is a Daoist method specifically designed for women to become immortal through their physical and psychological characteristics. It was developed between the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing Dynasties. Generally speaking, female alchemy consists of three cultivation steps: The transformation of *xue* 血 (essential blood) into *qi* 氣 (pneuma), the transformation of *qi* 氣 into *shen* 神 (spirit), and the transformation of *shen* 神 into *xuwu* 虛無 (nothingness). *Nüdan* (女丹) affirms the fertile power represented by female blood. On this basis, it is believed that it is because women possess the energy to nurture life that it is easier for them to be cultivated as immortals than men (Chen and Zhang 2010, p. 892).

Among most scholars in China and overseas, more attention has been paid to the cultivation principles and methods of female alchemy. For example, Li Xikun 李錫堃 talked about *nüdan* (female alchemy, which can also be called inner alchemy for women) pointing out the differences in refinement methods based on the differences between male and female bodies (X. Li 1990, pp. 145–57). Zhan Shichuang 詹石窗 revealed two crucial aspects of female alchemy training: the essentials of cultivating *nüdan* and methods for guiding the flow of *qi* in the body (Zhan 1998, pp. 20–21). Catherine Despeux and Elena Valussi have devoted themselves to the study of *nüdan* and have published books and papers on the subject. They provided a comparative analysis of the physiological differences between the two sexes in inner alchemy practice from the perspective of traditional medicine, as well as detailed explanations of *nüdan* methods such as beheading the Red Dragon (*zhan chilong* 斬赤龍) and the birth of the spirit (Despeux and Kohn 2003, pp. 198–243).¹ Valussi compared the different perspectives on the female body held by Chinese medicine and female alchemy and argued that the first step in the process of female alchemy is the transformation of blood into *qi*. She also elaborated on the *nüdan* terms used in this refinement stage, such as *Yuexin* 月信; and Red Dragon (*chilong* 赤龍) (Valussi 2009, pp. 46–85).

We know the importance of women's menstruation in the practice of *nüdan*. Still, few scholars have noted the commonality between the fertility represented by menstruation and the goddess's energy in fertility, and in this respect, the relationship between women and the goddess. People's preference for a happy life and aversion to death is highlighted by the worship of the goddess, who represents the sanctification of female fertility. A woman's menstruation is one of the most important criteria for determining whether she is eligible to bear children. By studying female alchemy's emphasis on menstruation and its use in female cultivation, we can understand deeper that women are intrinsically and intimately connected to the goddess.

2. The Power of Divine Fertility

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, *nüdan* attached great importance to menstruation for reasons related to gaining a further understanding of the female body in Chinese gynecology and obstetrics. In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, scholars of inner alchemy noted the physical and psychological differences between men and women, and books on inner alchemy emerged specifically for female practitioners. This understanding is closely linked to the further development of gynecological and obstetrical medicine.

In the historical development of obstetrics and gynecology, during the Song Dynasty, it began to appear as an independent discipline, and gradually a set of theoretical tenets was formed (Ma 1991, p. 145). One of the manifestations was establishing a theory of qi and blood. Therefore, when treating gynecological diseases, medicine is based on treating women with blood as the foundation and then adjusting their blood. Since the Song Dynasty, people have gradually realized the connection between women's menstrual and fertility and have paid more attention to them. In the book "*Chen Su'an Gynecology Supplement*" (*Chen Su'an Fuke Bujie* 陳素庵婦科補解), Chen Su'an 陳素庵 (1605–1666) wrote: "Women's diseases are mostly caused by unregulated menstrual. Adjusting a woman's menstrual cycle back to normal not only gives her a chance to get pregnant but also treats the gynecological diseases associated with irregular menstruation." 婦人諸病，多由經水不調。調經，然後可以孕子，然後可以卻疾 (S. Chen 2012, p. 1). Taking the normality of menstruation as the standard for judging whether the body is healthy also shows great importance attached to menstruation as a reproductive force. Menstruation, which is proof of reproductive ability and fertility, accordingly, became the focus of obstetrics and gynecology during the Song Dynasty, and people had a clearer and more specific understanding of menstruation, forming a medical understanding based on the concept of "women's diseases, all ask about menstruation".

The focus on asking women about their menstruation and the importance of menstrual disorders is also reflected in Inner Alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) for women's sutras. For women with irregular menstruation, it is necessary to regulate it first so that the body can be healthy. Liu Mingrui 劉明瑞 (1839–1933) believed that if a woman wants to cultivate herself, she must first treat her illness and adjust her menstrual cycle before she can practice the method of beheading the Red Dragon 斬赤龍. In "Song of the Essence of the Source of the Dao" (*Daoyuan jingwei ge* 道源精微歌), Liu Mingrui 劉明瑞 writes: "Women's menstruation is always irregular, it is caused by congestion of menstruation in the Ren channel (*Ren mai* 任脉) and the Dai channel (*Dai mai* 帶脉). So herbs were first prescribed to treat menstrual disorders." 蓋婦人月信多有不調者，乃任脈、帶脈有虧盈之淤血，必先用草藥治其有形之病 (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 291). He aimed to keep women's bodies in good condition, not in a sickly state. Medicine regulates the body so that the expelled menstrual blood is bright red and timed correctly every month.

Although female alchemy and Chinese medicine attach great importance to women's menstruation, they have fundamental differences. In traditional Chinese medicine, menstruation is an important condition for judging whether a woman is capable of bearing children. The early appearance or delay of menstruation also reflects an abnormal situation in women's physiology. Therefore, considering women's childbearing, traditional Chinese medicine adopts treatment methods such as decoction, acupuncture, and massage

to make menstruation normal. From a medical point of view, menstruation is a process that must be limited, assisted, controlled, and regulated, but cannot be eliminated (Valussi 2009, p. 46). Female alchemy, on the contrary, reverses the female biological mechanism of aging and death and calls for the elimination of menstruation as a normal female physiological phenomenon. For refining and nurturing, the tradition espouses the view that a woman's blood contains Pneuma of the Former Heavens (*Xiantian zhiqi* 先天之炁)² that is based on blood. The first stage of female alchemical practice for women consists of sublimating the blood into *qi*. This cultivation process is often referred to as beheading the Red Dragon (*zhan chilong* 斬赤龍). *Nüdan* holds that a woman's monthly bleeding can cause her to lose a certain amount of congenital energy and that *zhan chilong* can stop this from happening and preserve this power in her body. By refining the blood, this energy is concentrated in the body and used in the later stages of cultivation. If the menstrual cycle is disordered, she cannot practice *zhan chilong*. A woman's menstruation must be based on her being in good health, which means that she has a normal menstrual cycle and then cuts off the Red Dragon, which ceases the biological function of bearing children. As a result, women will not marry or have children, but they will achieve immortality.

From this, we can learn that female alchemists' concept of fertility differs from the traditional concept of sexual reproduction. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that the arrival of the menstrual cycle at the age of 14 occurs because the acupuncture points in a woman's body, the *Ren* 任脉 and *Tai Chong* channels 太冲脉 are very open and vigorous. Female alchemy has a deeper understanding of this, believing that the creation of the universe and the birth of all things are all due to the action of congenital energy (先天之炁). Li Hanxu 李涵虛 (1806–1856) pointed out that the congenital energy is limited in a woman's body, which accumulates to the amount of one pound at the age of 14, and the limited amount of vital energy in her body is depleted with the onset of menstruation. When menopause occurs, the congenital energy is almost gone and it is not so easy to practice now (Dong and Sheng 2019, p. 328). Moreover, in traditional Chinese society, girls usually got married at the age of 14 and then had babies. Therefore, they couldn't reach immortality if they did not have the opportunity to meet a Daoist master to guide them in their cultivation.

In ancient China, the system of early marriage was promoted. To encourage population growth, the government made it compulsory for men and women to marry at a certain age during special times, such as war, or else their taxes would be increased, or their families would be imprisoned. Additionally, in keeping with the principle of having more children and increasing longevity, the time of marriage for both sexes was rarely postponed, and measures to restrict related births were rarely enacted. The Qing government set the age of marriage at 14 for women and 16 for men. Women were faced with the prospect of marriage around this age and were at the mercy of their parents. Living in the Qing Dynasty, Li Hanxu 李涵虛 was very thoughtful about this, as a woman of this age would have experienced menstruation and considered the issue of marriage. Therefore, he concluded that women should cultivate *nüdan* at a young age.

3. Women Become Immortal by Cultivating Fertility

When discussing the practice of female alchemy (*nüdan*), women are generally classified according to whether they are menstruating or not: virgin women, menopausal women, and menstruating women. A virgin girl is young and does not menstruate, so she can retain congenital energy (先天之炁) in her body without letting it drain out. She does not need to practice the first stage of the *nüdan* process, which is refining essential blood (*xue*) into pneuma (*qi*), but proceeds directly to the third stage of "refining spirit and reverting to Emptiness" (*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛), starting from the upper field of the elixir (*shang dantian* 上丹田), the specific location of the upper Cinnabar Field (*dantian*) is three inches above the space between the eyebrows.

When a woman reaches menopause, she no longer menstruates, her body is depleted of congenital energy, and the congenital energy in her body cannot generate the blood

that forms the menstrual mechanism, indicating that she can no longer bear children and illustrating the decline in her physiological functions. That is why older women need to generate the congenital energy in their bodies that formerly produced menstruation by meditating on the *Danzhong* 膻中穴 between the two breasts. While meditating and condensing the innate resources in the body, women should stay in a happy mood and not get angry easily; otherwise, the *qi* in the body will not flow smoothly, and in more serious cases will endanger their lives.

Daoism is a religion that values life, upholds the principle of love, and cares for all living beings. The Daoist methods of refinement and nourishment show that it maximizes individual initiative based on the laws of nature, which is an exaltation of individual life. For menopausal women, the absence of menstruation means that there is no congenital energy left in the body that can stop the aging process. The re-emergence of a woman's menstrual cycle through the cultivation of female alchemy is not only a blessing to bring life and vitality back to the woman's body, preventing her from aging and dying, but also a reflection of the Daoist concern for the bodies and minds of its female adherents.

For adult women who have menstruation, the first step in Female Alchemical practice allows the congenital energy contained in her blood to not decrease with the arrival of her menstrual period each month. It is believed that menstruation depletes the innate energy carried in a woman's body, and menstruation is relatively negatively evaluated. Female alchemical texts frequently mention the feelings that arise in the female body during meditation, similar to intercourse between the sexes. These texts mention the 'feelings' (*Huo-zishi* 活子時) and give specific instructions on how to deal with them (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 98). Further, these texts point out that during the menstrual cycle, it takes two and a half days for the blood to be completely expelled from the vagina, when the woman's "Real Yin" (*zhen yin* 真陰), also called pure *yin* (*chun yin* 純陰), is activated, which means that the congenital energy in her body changes from a state of being still to a state of motion.

Yin Hezhong 銀合宗 discusses this process in detail, stating that a woman's uterus is shaped like a lotus pistil and that a few days after the menstrual blood is expelled from the vagina, she will feel hot flashes, like the feeling of being baked by the sun after a heavy summer rain. At this time, the uterus, which is shaped like a lotus pistil, is about to bloom, this is the moment when the innate energy is flourishing. If a woman has intercourse at this time, she will easily conceive. For women who want to cultivate becoming immortal, the moment when the *Huo-zishi* comes is the time to practice beheading the Red Dragon. It requires the woman's body and mind to maintain a calm and peaceful state, otherwise, she will not be aware of this subtle change in her body (Chen and Zhang 2010, p. 892). Whenever the "happy time" comes, animals also need to mate, and their external expression is loud and wild, influenced by natural creation. Human beings, as the spirits of all things, also have this experience. However, due to the constraints of morality, ethics, and other cultural and social concepts, they hold back and control their sexual energy. When a woman's sexual desire is high after menstruation, she can become pregnant if she has intercourse at this time. However, Daoism attaches importance to one's own cultivation, so women must keep their hearts pure and free from sexual desire, settle down physically and mentally, and meditate quietly to allow the normal flow of *qi* in the body.

Female cultivators look outwardly to the roundness of the moon's phases and look inwardly to enhance their own cultivation, using the method of meditation, inviting the convergence of congenital energy, to prevent it from becoming turbid blood, that is, menstrual blood, which is impure energy. Accordingly, a woman should practice beheading the Red Dragon before her congenital energy is transformed into menstruation, and the time to judge this is when her pure *yin* is initiated. When a woman's time comes, she will feel the heat swirling in her womb, and her vagina should be tightly closed at this time. Because of the tightness of the vagina, she is bound to experience a pleasant sensation in her womb. At this crucial moment, it is most important not to have lustful thoughts. This is the threshold between becoming an immortal or a woman. Why should the desire to have intercourse not arise? It is because congenital energy in a woman's body trans-

forms into tangible menstrual blood, and she can no longer use the invisible essence (*qi*) for refinement. *Xiwangmu nüxiu zhengtu shize* 西王母女修正途十则 (Ten Principles of the Queen Mother of the West on the Correct Path of Female Cultivation) documents the “burgundy back” method (*Genbei zhifa* 艮背之法), which is a way to cultivate the mind and body through practicing tranquility, cutting off desires, fostering the non-movement of desire, and nurturing the mind and body (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 256). By “beheading the Red Dragon”, the woman’s body will change accordingly; the effect is that the face is like a peach blossom and the skin is like snow, and her feminine features will no longer be apparent, including the cessation of the menstrual cycle and the reduction of her breasts to the size of walnuts. In the view of female alchemy (*nüdan*), menstruation itself can be reversed, and reversing the natural course of female physiology also achieves the ultimate goal of Daoism—attaining immortality.

4. Women’s Bodies in Relation to the Earth

Goddesses are worshipped worldwide, including in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, Asia, and other regions, where the goddess of creation and the goddess of nature are commonly revered. In the religions and mythologies of these regions, we find that the Earth, with its great fertility, is perceived as a female body, such as Gaia, the Earth’s mother goddess, who is a great nurturer of many creatures. Similarly, *Nüdan* texts frequently invite their readers to visualize the “land” with the characteristics of the female body, fully acknowledging the creative fertile power it contains.

As written in the *Guanxin zhai jiwén* 觀心齋紀聞, the attributes of men are heaven and women are earth; although the sky can rain to help creatures grow, it alone cannot produce the living things that require the fertility of the goddess Earth. Hence, it is more difficult for men to become immortal. Women, on the other hand, are similar to Earth, with the energy to bring up creatures, so it is easier for women to achieve immortality (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 30). Women are likened to earth for their sacred reproductive capacity to nurture a fetus and nurse a baby after giving birth.

The character “*tu* 土” in the Chinese oracle bone script refers to the image of a block of earth standing on the ground. The first horizontal stroke refers specifically to the ground, the second horizontal stroke refers to the soil where plants can take root, and the last vertical stroke refers to plants that grow on the land, absorbing nutrients and receiving sunlight. Because women have a special physiological mechanism, the uterus, their fertility is expressed in the ability to give birth, while the function of the breasts is mainly to nurse babies, and the blood discharged from the vagina and the milk secreted from the breasts are both made of the same *qi* in the body. Usually, women do not have periods during breastfeeding, while their breasts produce milk. It is evident that the uterus is connected to the breasts by a channel. By massaging the breasts, one can unblock the channel that connects them to the *qi* of the uterus, thus allowing the *qi* to rise and reach the middle of the two breasts. The specific practice is for a woman to first focus her attention on *qixue* 氣穴 (Cavity of Pneuma) in the center of her chest, and then gently massage her breasts with both hands in a counterclockwise and clockwise manner, but to avoid this if it gives too much stimulation of her sexual desire. The purpose of massaging the breasts is to activate the circulation of blood and *qi* in the body, and the *qixue* 氣穴 can enrich the woman’s natural endowment of *qi*. Once purified, the blood descends to the lower cinnabar field (*xia dantian* 下丹田) at one inch and three degrees below the navel and is transformed into *qi*. It is no coincidence that according to *nüdan*, the ability to bear life within the female body is more beneficial for female practice. This recognition of the creative power of women is also found in other religions. For example, Hinduism also believes that the female body has the energy to procreate and nourish life. In its genealogy of deities, there is Shakti, the goddess of sexual power. Within the female body, there exists an innate substance that belongs to the feminine essence. This divine substance is associated with a woman’s creative nature, and therefore with her sexuality, and is Shakti, the creative energy of God (Hart 2017, p. 79).

Female Alchemists believe that since women have the same characteristics as Earth regarding nurturing life, they should also embody the earthly characteristics of goodness and virtue, generous benevolence, modesty, and the observance of morality. Therefore, women should follow the Daoist precepts, which function as rules for regulating behavior. This is because improper behavior can directly lead to a shorter life and prevent a woman from reaching her goal of becoming immortal. According to the *Golden Nüdan* (*Nü Jindan* 女金丹), the practice of female alchemy must begin with the twelve precepts: “Do not have a lot of distracting thoughts in your mind; do not indulge in your desires, greed, or lust; do not get upset; do not love anger; do not worry or be frightened; never use your ears too much to hear sounds; do not use your eyes too much to see; do not use your mouth to speak much; do not be stingy with money; do not kill living creatures; be a vegetarian; respect your master. Although there are more than twelve commandments for women to follow, if they can follow them, then they are not far from becoming immortal.” 一戒妄念迭生，二戒縱欲貪淫，三戒剛暴殘刻，四戒煩惱嗔怒，五戒憂思驚恐，六戒目多妄視，七戒耳多妄聽，八戒多言狂妄，九戒慳吝惜財，十戒殺生害命，十一戒不節腥葷，十二戒慢道輕師。婦女所當戒者，雖不止十二條，能戒此十二件，去仙不遠矣 (Dong and Sheng 2012, pp. 78–79).

The reason why women are required to restrict the use of their ears, eyes, and mouth is that talking, seeing, and hearing too much will damage their bodies. Daoism believes that the liver, kidneys, and heart correspond to the eyes, ears, and mouth, and similarly to other organs and body parts. They are closely related to each other so using one’s eyes excessively for a long time will damage one’s liver function, and listening to too much sound will damage one’s kidneys. Having a bad temperament, such as irritability, a sharp tongue, or anger, is also harmful to women’s bodies and minds (Dong and Sheng 2012, pp. 82–83).

Therefore, the rules and commandments that female practitioners are required to follow are, in fact, a safety barrier for the protection of women and the care of their physical and mental lives. These requirements for women’s spiritual refinement are also a re-establishment of their personalities. “The Daoist faith, and its demonstration of the divine personality, requires the believer to ‘shed her bones’ through various refinements and precepts, in order to transform her socially adapted secular personality into a worldly ‘immortal’ personality. The direct effect of the dual cultivation of body and mind is the reconstruction of personality” (C. Chen 2004, p. 105).

5. The Spirit of the Goddess

The goddesses in matriarchal societies are presented in myths, religions, and statues as valuable, independent figures who express their own integrity, life, and creative power (Ye 2018, pp. 13–34). These goddess characteristics are often stigmatized or even mutated in patriarchal cultures, in which goddesses are “created” by male divinity; and exist in relation to male gods. For example, in Egyptian religion and mythology, Isis was revered as the mother of all beings and gods, but later the goddess with the power of creation evolved to be the daughter of the sun god. There are two reasons for this situation. On the one hand, the decline in women’s status in patriarchal societies is often reflected in religious thought. Throughout ancient Greece, India, China, and other countries, women retreated from the public and religious spheres into family life, and their talents and power were limited to family affairs. In patriarchal societies, women’s roles are only established through men, such as “daughter”, “wife”, and “mother”, and they do not have a fully independent identity (Deng 2012, p. 37).

On the other hand, depriving the goddess of fertility is essentially “castrating” her creativity. With the rise of patriarchal culture, the sacredness of the female concerning fertility was gradually usurped by the male, who had no such creative power. This decision to attribute fertility to male gods and goddesses also reflects, to a certain extent, the relationship between men and women. Patriarchal religions gradually emerged, with men appropriating and tampering with female fertility, attributing the sacred ability to reproduce to men. The male gods, representing male power, conquer the goddess, and nature

is closely linked to her by force. We can find these male gods in Judaism and Christianity, as well as in Norse and Roman mythology (McElvaine 2001, pp. 135–45). The violent subjugation of the goddess by male gods also reflects the subjugation of the female by the male, a divine relationship that is unequal, particularly for the woman.

If a correct and reasonable judgment can be made on the attribution of fertility power, the incompatible relationship between the two sexes can be resolved. In contrast to the patriarchal culture of other religions, which brought about the deprivation of the creative power of goddesses by male gods and the consequent fragmentation and separation of human beings from nature, in China, where a patriarchal society formed during its historical development, a confrontation between male gods and goddesses has never occurred in Daoism. Compared to other religions in the world, in Daoism, there is no question of male gods driving away goddesses or changing their gender, but rather the opposite—the original goddesses continue to be worshipped. They continue to add companions, becoming “models” for female practitioners aspiring to achieve immortality (Zhan 2010, p. 158).

Female alchemy is predicated on the view that women must cultivate their wisdom and innate strengths. True social and political liberation for society concerns not only liberating the female body but also the female mind from a patriarchal society (S. Li 2004, pp. 212–327). In terms of caring for women’s bodies, their natural health is taken as their beauty. Women’s physical beauty is first built on top of physical health, and its external presentation is spontaneous in temperament like an orchid, gentle and resolute, solemn and inviolable, with charm and personality (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 219). Behind this idea is the implicit belief that women’s bodies always belong to them, and *nüdan* returns to women some of the human rights they have lost in a patriarchal society dominated by Confucianism. The body is a woman’s own, and her autonomy is not something to be mastered or violated by others, not a “thing” in a patriarchal society. The transformation of the female body is not based on the aesthetic vision of men. Like feminism, which opposes any action aimed at harming women’s lives (Huang 2012, p. 80), female alchemy has a spirit of freedom, equality, and fraternity (Zhu 1997, pp. 112–16). It encourages female practitioners to become immortals on their own, so we can infer that *nüdan* naturally does not allow women to lose weight or enlarge their breasts to conform to male aesthetics.

In liberating the female mind, female alchemy argues against the traditional female image of dependence on men. It advocates an independent and autonomous female personality and reinvents the traditional female image. In the female alchemy sutras, women are encouraged to be great men” everywhere: “Although I am a woman, I have manly ambitions and aspirations.” 身为女子，志似男儿 (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 175). “It is not necessary to say that women have no outstanding talent when you know that women can also have qualifications that are superior to men.” 莫谓女流无杰出之，当识蛾眉胜男子之气 (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 12). The term “great man” originally referred to a man with a broad mind, ambition, and high moral values, but later developed to mean anyone who possessed these characteristics. During the Jin and Yuan dynasties, Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) priest Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 wrote a poem to a woman surnamed Guo 郭 who had come from a place in Xingping 興平 to become a priest in the Quanzhen, praising her for her spirit of pursuing her dreams without fear of hardship and suffering, believing that such a woman deserved the title of “great man”: “Aunt Guo³ is a female Daoist (*Daogu* 道姑) of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真道), and she has the same lofty ideals and aspirations as men. She was able to give up her love and affection and was even unafraid of death. She even sews up her vulva to show that she has cut off her sexuality, which few Daoist women have been able to do in the same way. If Aunt Guo had been able to be diligent and hardworking throughout her cultivation, there would naturally have been immortals who would have helped her silently without letting her know. If she could always maintain inner peace and emotional stability, then she could become immortal and live with the female immortal Magu 麻姑.” 郭姑姑，男子志，割棄塵情，畏其生死。遠夫縫合陰門，自古今無二。慎始其終，如其始，自有聖賢，暗中提爾。處無為清淨徹頭，同麻姑居止。(《興平郭姑來投全真堂下修行》) (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 177). This is a rejection

of the characteristics of submissiveness, vulnerability, and ignorance assigned to women in a patriarchal society and a break from the traditional definition of women's roles. Female Daoist priests are expected to have both femininities, as represented by delicate emotions, tenderness, and kindness, and masculinity, which is independent and strong, rational and bold, with strong convictions and a spirit of innovation and resistance. The perfect personality of a female practitioner is expected to be the result of the coexistence and harmonious development of her femininity and masculinity. In other words, as living embodiments of the Dao, they are to be a perfect balance of both *yin* and *yang*.

Moreover, in traditional culture, a woman not only physically belongs to a man, but also her spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects are attached to a man; for women, the world of the self is confined to the relationship between men and women, especially in love. Women's values in traditional culture are reflected in their pursuit of love and marriage. For thousands of years, women looked to men and searched for men as the main way to change their dissatisfaction with their current situation. This idea is so subtle that it is deeply embedded in women's collective unconscious. Women confine their world to the love relationship between the two sexes, and this perception reflects their confinement from the full and independent development of their personality, making their pursuit of individual liberation and living their own lives seem thin and narrow. *Nüdan* advocates for women to break away from this state of weakness and restore their own strength. In the female alchemy *sutras*, women are told not to cling to their love for men, but to focus on themselves, to rely on their own strength to get rid of their unhappiness, and to achieve eternal happiness. The *Kunyuan Scripture* (*Kunyuan jing* 坤元经) states: "During the Qing Dynasty, for a woman who was already married and wanted to practice female alchemy, she should know that husband and wife respect each other, with courtesy, all for the sake of fulfilling the destiny of the previous life. Additionally, she ought to consider her husband's physical and psychological needs and procure a concubine for him. This allows her to detach herself from the responsibilities of the conjugal relationship and concentrate on meditation to prolong her lifespan." 夫妻敬爱了前缘，相见如宾礼节先。须体他心买妾奉，脱身静养乞延年 (Dong and Sheng 2012, p. 203).

When women worship the goddess and express their admiration and praise for the goddess through specific rituals, there must be a profound psychological motivation behind their external actions, which is their admiration and pursuit of their own divinity. The function of the goddess is to be in charge of the life and death of every living thing. The spirit of the goddess is centered on independence, freedom, beauty, and love, representing the full development of the female personality in terms of caring for the self, living one's value, and restoring one's connection with the earth, the body, and nature. The spirit of the goddess can also provide some useful inspiration and reflection for contemporary women. In modern society, derogatory statements are made about women, such as statements about showing more of their sensual side, which is often considered sentimental; being overly emotional is treated as hysterical and neurotic; possessing spirituality is seen as mysticism; connecting with the body is seen as excessive narcissism, and so on (Kast 2020, p. 205). In response to the view that women are devalued, women themselves need to clearly understand that these are women's strengths, women are the incarnation of the Creator, like nature, and they should use their strengths and maximize their wisdom.

6. Conclusions

Daoists are called not only to worship the goddess and respect women but also to welcome women into their sectarian organizations. In terms of religious practice, they recognize that women can also become immortal and attain eternal joy. In this way, the Daoist tradition allows women to develop themselves to the fullest extent in terms of doctrine, religious practice, and clerical positions. The ability to become a "master" is judged on the basis of a woman's virtue and wisdom, not based on gender bias that excludes her simply because she is a woman. In a patriarchal society, it is hard to imagine women enjoying so many rights. With people living in a predominantly Confucian culture in China, Daoism

provides an alternative home for women in which they can live happily and refine their bodies and minds.

Female alchemy emphasizes menstruation from a cultivation perspective, as normal menstruation is one of the most important signs determining whether a woman is capable of reproduction. Adjusting women's menstruation to become normal and bringing back menstruation in menopausal women can restore congenital energy, and specific methods can be used to keep this congenital energy from becoming the energy of childbirth. At that point, the energy can be elevated and sublimated to cultivate a women's liberation from reincarnation. The goddess has the energy to nurture all things. Since the worship of the goddess can be associated, to a certain extent, with the worship of female fertility, Daoism does not deprive women of this creative energy. This idea is reflected in the existence of many female deities in the genealogy of its deities. The relationship between gods and goddesses is not one of confrontation but of equality, and this idea is reflected in secular society, which advocates equality between men and women.

The spirit of the goddess is centered on independence, freedom, and fraternity. It stands for the full development of the female personality and for caring for oneself, living out one's feminine values, and restoring one's connection with the earth, the body, and nature. Female alchemy is also a manifestation of the goddess spirit in revering the creative energy of women, liberating women's bodies and minds, and encouraging women's independence, self-respect, and self-love. In this sense, every woman is also a goddess.

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Notes

- ¹ “Beheading the Red Dragon (*zhan chilong* 斬赤龍)” is the term used for female alchemy cultivation. Female alchemy believes that a woman's congenital energy is contained in her blood, so the first step of the alchemical practice for her consists of the sublimation of blood into *qi*. Menstrual blood is called Red Dragon, and this sublimation, known as *zhan chilong*, is meant to stop the physiological hemorrhage that harms a woman each month by causing her to lose creative energy. “The birth of the spirit” refers to the third step of female alchemy cultivation stage, where the immortal embryo is born through the practitioner's head. According to the principles of *nüdan* cultivation, a woman must realize the Greater Celestial Circuit (*da zhoutian* 大周天) in order to produce the Embryo of Immortality.
- ² Pneuma of the Former Heavens is also known as congenital energy. Female alchemy believes that a woman's Pneuma of the Former Heavens is contained within her body and that it has no image and cannot be seen by the eye. The blood produced by a woman's menstruation is transformed from Pneuma of the Former Heavens.
- ³ Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 and other Quanzhen priests wrote many poems for Daoist priestesses during the Jin and Yuan dynasties, praising their courage in defying hardship and suffering in order to become immortals, and in their verses telling them exactly how to practice according to each woman's physical and mental condition. In ancient China, female Daoists were known as Daoist Priestess (Daogu 道姑), and so the Daoist priests of Quanzhen, such as Ma Danyang 馬丹陽 and Tan Chudian 譚處端, referred to female Daoist in their poems as Aunt Xue 薛姑姑, Aunt Liu 劉姑姑, and Aunt Yang 楊姑姑, according to their surnames.

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