Defining the Mind in Early Celestial Masters Daoism: Historical Shifts in Early Daoist and Chinese Thought

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Abstract. The present paper seeks to define the concept of mind/心 in the early Celestial Masters tradition, tracing the relationship between the mind and its associated functions and expressions: emotions/情, inner-nature/性 and intention/意. Analysis of texts from the early Celestial Masters canon, Zhengyi fawen 正一法文, reveals that the earliest Celestial Masters manuscripts contains concepts of mind, emotions, will and inner nature that are inconsistent with those found in the works of other scholars and thinkers such as Heshang Gong (latter Han dynasty), Wang Bi (Jin dynasty), and later Daoist thinkers (Tang through Qing). The closest affinity appears to be with concepts presented in late Warring States and Early Han texts, such as Huangdi neijing lingshu 黄帝内经灵枢 and Guodian Confucian and Daoist manuscripts. However, concepts found in 5th-6th centuries Celestial Masters manuscripts begin to draw closer to those presented by Sun Simiao and Tang dynasty inner alchemists. The author tentatively concludes that the relationship of these concepts within the Celestial Masters tradition itself appears to shift between the 3rd and the 6th centuries, following a trajectory previously delineated by the author in reference to Daoist and proto-Daoist works of the 3rd c. BCE to 8th c. CE. (Neswald 2012a) This suggests a culture-wide rather than sect-specific phenomenon may be at work.

Keywords: Daoism, Mind, Emotions, Inner Nature, Celestial Masters.

1. Introduction

The Guodian Confucian text Xingzhimingchu 性之命出 (6th – 3rd c. BCE) presents an inner-nature/性 that is allied with emotions/情 and at odds with mind/心. The correlates of Huangdi neijing lingshu 黄帝内经灵枢 (DZ 1020) (hereinafter Lingshu; 770-220 BCE) generally agree. Han commentary Daode zhangju 道德章句 (ascribed to Heshang Gong 河上公, 2nd c. CE) appears to possess its own set of correlates that are not entirely consistent with Lingshu; inner nature appears at times emergent from emotions/情 and at times a rarified element emergent from a purified mind/心. Wang Bi’s 3rd c. commentary, Daode zhenjingzhu 王弼道德真經註, distinguishes a common and a rarified inner nature. Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581-682?) sees inner nature as a kind of pure and original “soul” that emerges from mind/心 when mind/心 frees itself of desires and worries; inner nature remains distinct from mind/心. By the Tang dynasty, Daoists such as Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778) see inner nature as an element of the emotional, instinctual mortal disposition, but distinguish another soul-like element (shenming 神明). By the 13th century, further transformations have infused the concept of mind: Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (d. 1227) fully identifies mind and inner nature; and even states that mind/心 IS inner nature/性. These cases show distinct understandings of how mind, emotions and inner nature relate, and present an historical trajectory in these shifts (Cf. Neswald 2012); sect specific differences also present.

The early Celestial Masters tradition presents a case in which a shift in of concepts of mind/心, inner nature/性 and intention/意 emerge over time. Tracts of the early Celestial Masters canon, Zhengyi fawen 正一法文, display a closer affinity to Lingshu and to certain Guodian tracts, while later Celestial Masters manuscripts begin to present concepts that draw closer to those found in the work of inner alchemists such as Sun Simiao. Wu Yun, a Tang scholar trained in the Celestial Masters tradition, retains elements of the early tradition, while embracing various aspects of mind and inner nature that appear to have developed in response to influences from Buddhism and other Daoist influences.(Ibid) The present research suggests that the relationship of mind, emotions, intention and inner nature within the Celestial Masters tradition itself

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appears to shift between the 3rd and the 6th centuries, partially influenced by lexical shifts in society at large. This suggests that culture-wide rather than sect-specific phenomena may be at work.

2. What is the Nature of Mind in China?

2.1. The Chinese Intellectual Toolbox

According to scholars in Philosophy of Mind, the concept of mind should be considered to include mind’s associated functions and expressions (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, p. 4). In the Chinese tradition, mind’s associated functions and expressions include qing/emotions, xing/inner-nature, jue/intellect, lingshen/spirituality, zhì/awareness, shì/consciousness, wù/zhi², intention/yì, etc. The network of related concepts through which Chinese Daoists understand the word xìng, include a) ideas of mind-body integration, b) a variety of psycho-physical elements including qi/vital-essence, jing/conceptual-essence, shén/divine-essence, c) elements of intellect and spirit such as zhì/intellect, jue/comprehension, zhijing/ultimate-spirituality, shenming/divine-illumination, Dao/Way or Godhead, wushen/internal-spirits, and d) embodied cosmic elements such as wuxing/five-phases and yin/yang (cosmic complementary phases, negative and positive, respectively). The term xìng maintains no easily identifiable, fixed meaning: one must eke meanings out through careful readings of each text, beginning with an understanding of the inter-related concepts (above) as they present in the Chinese cultural framework, e.g., in the series of contexts in which the term is used and understood in Chinese history. The relationship of xìn/mind to inner nature/xìng and intention/yì forms one aspect in which inherent meaning of the term xìn/mind appears to diverge. (Cf. Neswald 2012)

3. Where is the Inner Nature in Early Celestial Masters’ Daoism?

The concept of the inner nature/xìng is intimately entwined with the concept of mind/xìn throughout most of Chinese philosophy and religion. Indeed, it is largely in order to manage human nature that mind/xìn becomes significant. Throughout Chinese history, Daoism and Confucianism have thus worried over the basic nature of human nature. Earlier tracts such as the Guodian text Xingchuizhiming and the Lingshu associate inner nature/xìng with emotions/qìng, and place it in opposition to mind/xìn. Inner nature/xìng constitutes a force which mind/xìn must struggle to suppress. Wang Bi (3rd c. CE) and Guo Xiang (2nd c. CE) devoted many pages to these issues. From the 13th century forward, cultivating mind/xìn and revealing inner nature/xìng formed a single process that was central to Daoist self-cultivation and transcendence. Daoist speculations held inner nature/xìng to be key to Daoist goals. Startling, then, is the neglect of the term xìng in early Celestial Masters tracts: among the twelve Zhengyi fawen manuscripts surveyed, the character xìng only occurs once. A brief exploration of the canon’s contents may explain this neglect.

The idea of human or Inner Nature² is normally indicated by the character xìng 性; the character xìng occurs only once in this text and does not appear to hold a clear pedagogical position in any of the early Zhengyi texts analyzed to date; however, the idea of human nature and human behaviour are clearly emphasized. In Wailuyi, in each instance where issues of quality of mind or human nature are implied, individual traits (honesty, faith, greed, desire) are named in relation to the nature of Mind. The concept of Inner Nature is described by a modifier-plus-xìng, (shàn-xìn, hào-xìn, xiè-xìn, etc.). Inner Nature as a concept does not appear to be expressed by the character xìng 性; rather, the concept of Inner Nature appears to be fused with concept of mind/xìn. This suggests that xìng 性 retains the Guodian Confucian association with qìng 情. The lone instance of the character xìng appears in the phrase 性質直. If xìng is read qìng (cf. Chen Ning), the phrase reads, “If the individual… is of correct emotional disposition 性質直, peaceful of will/zhi, loyal and simple…” (Wailuyi 20) This reading follows the language and import of the Zhengyi texts as a whole. In addition, it resolves the apparent neglect of Inner Nature in the early Zhengyi texts: Inner Nature is in fact discussed, but the terminology is not yet fixed.

¹ These first three items can also be classified as elements of intellect and as embodied cosmic elements.
² The nature of the Chinese mind/xìn is somewhat different from what Western scholars may conceive; for the sake of clarity, the generalized concept Mind, is referred to in capitals; whereas the Chinese term mind/xìn is set in lower case. The same is true of the character xìng and the concept Inner Nature.
3.1. Jialingjie

Like other tracts of the first canon, Commands and Prescriptions for the Families of the Dao (Dadao jialingjie 道家令戒, DZ788; hereinafter Jialingjie), never once refers to the xing. The text opens with a description of the Dao creating all life through transmission of three qi, the mysterious azure qi of heaven, white primal qi of the Dao, and the yellow generative qi of the earth. All living beings receive their life force (jingshen) from these three qi. “The Dao creates heaven, heaven creates earth, and earth produces beings. All receive these three qi and are born.” (DZ vol. 30, p. 12)

These three qi enter the bodies of beings through the nine orifices of the human body and pacify the organs. When the organs are pacified, the viscera are secure, the individual attains divine illumination (shenming 神明) – a characteristic that makes him kin to the Dao. The motivation for practicing goodness and protecting the Dao is based on the value of life: those who practice correctly never lose the Dao of Life, because the three qi are conserved within the body. The text continues, “If the three qi do not depart (from the body), one can transform alongside the heaven and earth.三者不離,故能與天地變易,” (Ibid) thus obtaining the Daoist goal to live as long as heaven and earth.

Jialingjie refers to mind/xin in only two types of conditions. In the first condition, mind/xin is associated with the negative emotional condition of beings. Whereas in the Xingzhimingchu would link this mind with the nature of the inner nature/xing and emotions/qing, these terms never occur in the Jialingjie. Rather, the mind appears to obtain an instinctual, emotional nature. This concurs with the findings in section 3 above.

(s1)略至而世多愚,心復悶悶,死者如崩,萬無有全。
(s2)至義國殞顛,流移死者以萬為數,傷人心志。
(s3)故民渾濁日久,雖聞神仙之語、長生之言,心迷意惑,更懷不信。
(s4)斷絕食心,棄利去欲,改更惡腸,憐貧愛老

S4 demonstrates that negative emotional states of Mind do not extend to all emotions. In fact, individuals are urged to pursue virtuous, ‘good’ conduct, such as caring for the weak, the poor and the elderly, actions that imply compassion and love. Indeed, throughout the Zhengyi fawen, emotions/qing as a class are only referred to once; elsewhere, negative emotions are individually specified. Negative conduct and cravings are specifically defined as, greed, sexual desire, pilfering the goods of the common lot (a form of greed), and lacking faith. S4 specifically states that a rectified individual should properly pity the poor and love the elderly.

However negative, emotional and corruptible the mind may be, passages s4 (above), s5 and s6 (below) indicate that the mind is capable of reform. This indicates an understanding that negative emotions stand in contradiction to the mind; but that the inherently corrupt mind is capable of reform.

(s5-s6)下世浮薄,持心不堅,新故民戶見世知變,便能改心為善,行仁義,則善矣,可見太平,度脫厄難之中,為後世種民,雖有兵病水害之災,臨危無咎,故曰道也。

Goodness is a practice that results in long life, and the continued abiding of the Dao within the human being. When the Dao abides in the human being, divine brilliance (shenming 神明) manifests, making the individual close to (a relative of) the Dao. (Ibid, p. 12) The presence of divine brilliance thus appears to be a trace of the divine nature of the Dao extant or emergent in the individual possessed of the three qi; such a reading is consistent with Wu Yun. (Cf. DeMeyer 2006, 260-261) Whether divine brilliance is extant or emergent in the individual is unclear, but as Wu Yun understands it, it would be extant and active, bringing about the prosperity and longevity of the individual only to the point where that individual’s actions correspond with their mind.(Ibid) Those of good actions but bad intentions would not be rewarded by shenming.

The second situation in which the term mind/xin occurs is together with intention/yi. Throughout the text, the terms mind/xin and intention/yi occur together in 4 of 9 instances: (s2) above; (s7)不如任心恣意 (Daozang vol. 30, p. 16), (s8)端心正意(Ibid); the idea of will/intention is implied in one additional instance無二心(s9) (Ibid., p. 18). Similar ratios of occurrence continue throughout the twelve manuscripts reviewed. A nature of the will/intention gives us a clue to how mind/xin may be understood, for, the text states, “Intention/yi delights in chaos 人意樂亂.” (Ibid., p. 14) Could it be that the nature of mind/xin, seat of

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2 DZ refers to the Ming dynasty Zhentong Daozang. DZ numbers follow Komjathy (2002).
intention/yì, is understood in terms of inintention/yì and will/zhi? Could it be that intention/yì has taken on characteristics of the emotional inner nature/xìng as found in Lingshu and Xingzhimingchu? Contextual occurrence of both terms intention/yì and mind/xìn, suggest that the two are closely associated. The final phrase of the text strongly suggests such a possibility.

Here the word mind/xìn refers to Master Zhang Daoling’s intention or meaning. Thus, the term xìn could refer equally to “mind” or to “will/intention” (yì 意).

This analysis shows that the emotions are not named as a group, but various emotional behaviours are of great concern. The speaker seems particularly worried about greed, and to some extent lascivious behaviour, but of particular importance is faith, or the lack of it. These are all spoken of in the same terms, and appear to be understood as negative actions of mind and its intention. Inner nature/xìng is never named.

3.2. Tianshijiao

In the very short Teachings of the Heavenly Master (Tianshijiao 天師教), the character mind/xìn appears twice; in both instances, the characters mind/xìn and intention/yì appear together.

The nature of mind/xìn and intention/yì have an immediate physical impact on individuals which affects their ability to attain goodness and obtain immortality. As discussed above, these goals are obtained through retention of the vital energy or qi of the Dao within the body; retention of qi is caused by mental and physical fidelity with the Dao, or faith.

Goodness is represented by three characters, Corpse, Sage Being, and Perfected Being. Corpse refers to a person who has failed to seek refuge in the Dao and its teachings; the individual’s organs are thus void of the Dao’s blessing qi, their destiny is possessed by earthly hells, and their body is ghostly because they are destined for the Yellow Springs (of hell). (Ibid, p. 20) Perfected Beings’ organs are filled with the three qi of the Dao, Heaven and Earth, which, as noted above, constitute the Way of Life. They distinguish themselves from the common people whose minds are filled with regret, tragedy and sleeplessnes. (Ibid, p. 20) On the other hand, Sage Being follow the Celestial Master’s teachings; after death they rise to heave as an immortal and, colourfully adorned in full regalia, will meet the Celestial Master in heaven. (Ibid)

3.3. Yangpingzhi

Yangpingzhi 陽平治, the next title in the collection, contains three instances of the word mind/xìn, and one of the term emotions/qìng. The first citation contains two occurrences of the term mind/xìn and one of the term emotions/qìng. In this passage, members of the Daoist community, libations, men and women, the firm and the infirm, are all faulted for being confused and not reforming their habits. What they say is correct and good, but what they think is false and their heads are filled with “worms”. Their apartments are not sectioned off such that men and women mingle. They are lead by emotions and are unable to correct one another. They act befuddled and, in murky confusion, entrust the masses with the Way of the (Celestial) Master.

In this citation (s14) there is a clear association of mind/xìn with an intentional mind, the mind as seat of intention/yì. This is closely linked to the phrase about the emotions (a), which is usually translated “to give free reign to one’s passions.” Elsewhere we have seen this form of grammar in the phrase, “giving free reign to the will.” (Cf. s7, s13 above) The interim phrase “not sectioning off the rooms and apartments” (b) is clearly linked to the resultant effect of giving free reign to sexual passions, men and women’s apartments being undivided. The intention/yì that delights in chaos, the mind/xìn that tends towards greed and sexual indulgence, and the clearly sexual emotions/qìng point to a consistent alignment of the elements of Mind to negative emotional states. This relationship is maintained in passage s15:

欲令汝曹人人用意，勤心努力，復自一勤，為道盡節，勸化百姓。(Ibid)
Throughout these manuscripts of the Zhengyi fawen, intention/yi and mind/xin are closely associated, with the term mind/xin reflecting an attitude of negative intention and emotions, which are termed xing. Inner Nature appears to have been absorbed into the instinctual Mind; what emerges as purified inner nature in later Daoist tracts such as Yuletang and the inherently pure inner nature found in Sun Simiao does not exist.

4. Emotions/Qing – Disambiguation

In the tracts analyzed, term emotions/qing occurs three times, once each in Dadao jialingjie, Tianshijiao, and Tianshi wuyan qian sanshi. In each instance, qing occurs in a list of specific negative emotional states, such as greed and excess emotionalism. In each case, qing refers specifically to sexual desire. The eradication of sexual desire and other negative emotional states is rewarded with long life, (Tianshijiao, p. 20) and a place among the seed peoples – those chosen to re-seed the earth following the imminent apocalypse. (Ibid., p. 21) These various emotional states are spoken of in similar terms, and appear to be understood as negative actions of the mind/xin and its intention/yi. Thus, the term qing is best translated not as ‘emotions’ but as ‘sexual impulses or thoughts.’ Unless we accept xing as a general reference to emotions no class of emotions presents.

5. Conclusion

It appears that the element of intention/yi displaces inner nature/xing in the earliest Celestial Masters tracts. Xin appears to be a corruptible aspect of Mind, but does not hold the position of moral arbiter (cf. Xingzhimingchu; Chen Ning, p.18; Guanzi). Xin is internally conflicted by an intention/yi that loves chaos (DZ vol. 30, p. 14) and is given to negative emotional states such as greed and sexual desire. Individual goodness (shan 善) is actively achieved through good action and good intention, and includes positive emotional states such as “pitying the poor and loving the elderly” (s4), and embrace of faith. When faith is observed, the individual achieves emergence/arrival of shenming, affinity with the Dao and the Way of Life. Thus, the individual is rewarded with the ability to “transform alongside heaven and earth.” (DZ vol. 30, p. 12) Mind is thus one aspect of the dual cultivation of mind/xin and intention/yi that leads retention of the three sacred qi in the body, and eventually to physical immortality.4

6. References


4 For more on these topics, see my upcoming paper, Mind and Embodiment in Celestial Masters and Early Shangqing Daoism (2013).