

Practice, Community & Reflection
in *The Scripture of the Yellow Court*

The *Scripture of the Yellow Court* is an ancient Daoist text that dates back to the 4th century of southern China that was practiced by Maoshan Daoists. This sect of Daoism was focused at the Maoshan Mountain, hence the name (EB "Shang-Ch'ing Taoism, EB "Maoshan Revelations"). This religious scripture was recited in the Chinese courts as a form of meditation. The text supports that by looking inward and focusing on the inward and outward flow of the breath and swallowing of saliva, one is able to realize their "inner vision" (RAP 359) and nourish the deities that dwell within them. By connecting with these inner gods, the one who practices this meditation is able to mentally escape their physical being, becoming one with the flow of nature.

When reciting *The Scripture of the Yellow Court*, one must have their mind and body in tune with one another, and must rid themselves of outside distractions. Breathing and swallowing saliva, "the one a yang action, the other a yin" are important for "nourishing and harmonizing of these inner organs and spirits" (RAP 360). The Five Viscera are very important in meditating on the body gods. These include the heart, lungs, liver, kidney and spleen. These five organs are referred to as many names through-out the text, but are more often then not called "the Yellow Court" (RAP 360).

The scriptures also speak of one's "cinnabar fields." These are located in the brain, near the heart, and below the navel in the lower abdomen. While a different spirit lives in each of these areas, the use of breath is what connects these spirits and bridges the gap between them, as well as between the practitioner and the universe. This may seem like a lot of confusing information, which is understandable as the text is still heavily debated by scholars. The text itself even includes mind-numbingly confusing passages.

"The triple reprise of a concinnate heart will set the embryo's transcendent dancing;
Glinting and luminous, the nine vital breaths emerge amidst the empyrean"
(RAP 361).

However, the main purpose of the text is not to be straightforward. By contemplation of the meaning of the phrases as well as warming up the body through the rhythmic lyrics, one is able to sink in to a deeper meditation that honors these gods. Daoist works often look for the reader to find the meaning behind the text itself, showing reflection through their practice of reciting the texts. As the scripture contains two parts, an inner set with 435 verses and an outer set with 99, quite a bit of time was set aside by these Maoshan Daoists in practicing the texts. The first stanza even says that if

one recites the scripture over a thousand times, one will “ascend to the Three Heavens,” will stay young and will have a longer life (RAP 361). If one has taken a class on Indian yoga, they can connect that practice with this one. A large part of yoga is focusing on the breath in meditation while seated in a yogic posture to warm up or warm down. During this time, one can think of a peaceful landscape, but they are also mindful of the deep, relaxing breaths that enter and exit their body. Worship of the Daoist body gods work on the same principle.

Maoshan Daoism has a strong focus on nourishing these body gods, including the aforementioned ‘cinnabar fields’ in order to become one with the dao, or the way. This sect of Daoism is more religious than the others, and emerged during the Six Dynasties period of China. The main focus of Maoshan Daoism (with The Scripture of the Yellow Court at its heart, so to speak) is “emphasizing spiritual fulfillment through the mental and physiological practices of inner visualization and ecstatic journeying” (EB “Shang-Ch’ing Taoism). This mental contemplation would bring spiritual harmony if one was able to connect with their inner body gods. Body gods are the deities that reside in ones organs, which are nourished and connected through one’s breathing. By nourishing these gods, it was believed that one could prolong their lifespan. They exist all throughout the body, from the “celestial hall between the eyebrows to the earthly barrier of the feet” and strengthen the body if one meditates and worships them (RAP 365). A simple way of imagining these gods is to think of them as personifications of your inner organs. For example, the liver has conversations with the spleen who has conversations with the lungs and the heart. “When thunder sounds and lightning spurts, your spirits are placid, impassive” (RAP 364). Through meditation, all of the body gods are brought in to harmony with one another and the body becomes stronger through their unification and more focused as a result.

Certain areas where the body gods reside are often mentioned in The Scripture of the Yellow Court, and these are the “Cinnabar fields.” These are areas in ones brain, heart and lower abdomen that are the main focus areas for nourishing the gods. As one recites the scriptures, the mind is to travel from the cinnabar fields of the brain, past the heart and down to the abdomen. “Elemental essence and vital breath will become rarefied, less carnal, within the three ‘cinnabar fields’” (RAP 365). When these three areas are in harmony, the inner spirits will be delighted. As the whole focus of Maoshan Daoism is to unite the body gods with the universe, a large focus of this practice is dedicated to the cinnabar fields.

My daily singing practice also requires focus on breath. A singer must warm up their vocal chords in order to sing to the best of their ability, often with warm ups that sound like nonsense but help to work the vocal chords through their use of consonants and vowels. The Scripture of the Yellow Court is a rhythmic piece, and reciting it is a test of ones ability to utilize

their lungs and vocal chords, just like in singing. "With the emergent sun and retreating moon, exhale, inhale, actualizing them" (RAP 362). The script gives cues when to breathe, much like singing where one must find the end of a phrase in order to take a breath.

Both practices require focus in two ways: the words as well as on thoughts you form from the words. A Daoist reciting the words to the Scripture will meditate on their meaning as they breathe and become in-tune with the gods dwelling within the body. "Circulate the purple, embrace the yellow, that they enter the Cinnabar field" (RAP 362). My song "The Only Flower in the World" requires reflection on how unique and interesting people are. One line compares humans to flowers and asks, "If each one of us is different, then why do we have to become number one?" Through reflection one realizes that if there's only one of you, you already are number one so bringing others down accomplishes nothing. By meditating on either the locations given in the scripture or the world view in the song, one focuses their thoughts and is not easily distracted by outside forces.

The context of these two practices are separate in that one is religious while the other is secular. It's hard to compare singing a Japanese pop song in the shower to reciting an ancient Chinese text that brings one closer to the universe as they meditate in a temple. The words of the Yellow Court focus more on turning inward to become one with the rest of the cosmic universe, while Sekai ni Hitotsu Dake no Hana has an opposite message, praising one who doesn't follow the crowd and acts as their own being. In order to nourish their body gods, the practitioner should be calm and focused, not allowing distractions from weather or other people. However, my song often brings up strong emotional feelings of nostalgia, which serve as a distraction to my practice. When I remember the times I've sung the song with my Japanese class all the way back in the Fall of 2004, or singing it at karaoke with my friends, I tend to get choked up and sentimental about it, and sometimes can't finish singing along. To one who is nourishing the body gods, the act of reciting it should not be stopped, as it would break the concentration of the individual.

The practices of reciting *The Scripture of the Yellow Court* brought about reflection to their communities. Peace could be found by turning inward and examining oneself and focusing only on that. It is believed that the scripture is a copy from before the 4th century, showing how it was an honored practice that was kept around, and Maoshan Daoist practices lasted in to the later Tang dynasty, showing its lasting effect on the community. The fact that the scripture is still around today to be read and studied says something about its lasting impact on society, especially as a Western reader trying to understand it. A lot can be said for these ancient ideas, since inner peace is often difficult to come by in these stressful times. But perhaps by knowing about them, one can turn inward and reflect on their own body gods, and can feel more relaxed and in their place with the universe.

