Neiye
Inner Cultivation

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A long-overlooked text of classical times, the Neiye ("Inner Cultivation" or "Inner Development") is a text of some 1600 characters, written in rhymed prose, a form close to that of the Daode jing. It sometimes echoes that text and the Zhuangzi, but it lacks many of the concerns found in those works. Generally dated to 350-300 BCE, it is preserved in the Guanzi (ch. 49), along with two later, apparently derivative texts, Xinshu, shang and xia (ch. 36-37).

The Neiye had extremely profound effects on Taoism and Chinese culture. It seems to have influenced (1) the form, and certain contents, of the Daode jing; (2) the self-cultivation beliefs and practices of many later Taoists (from the Huainanzi and Taiping jing to the 20th-century); and (3) certain fundamental concepts of traditional Chinese medicine. It may also have influenced Neo-Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, by way of Mencius' teachings on cultivating the heart/mind (xin) and building up qi (Mengzi 2A.2).

The Neiye seems to be the earliest extant text that explains and encourages self-cultivation through daily, practiced regulation of the forces of life. Those forces include *qi* ("life-energy" — the universal force that gives life to all things); and *jing* ("vital essence" — one's innate reservoir of qi). (There is no trace here of the much later Chinese concept that jing referred to reproductive fluids.) Like Mencius, the Neiye suggests that the xin was originally as it should be, but now needs rectification (zheng). The xin becomes agitated by excessive activity, which leads to dissipation of one's jing, resulting in confusion, sickness, and death. To preserve one's health and vitality, one must quieten (jing) one's xin. Then one can then attract and retain qi, and other vaguely interrelated forces, such as shen ("spirit" or "spiritual consciousness"), and tao (a vague term, apparently interchangeable with shen and ch'i). (Such concepts are explained more intelligibly in passages of the Huainanzi: see Roth 1991). In the Neiye, shen and tao are external realities, which one must learn to draw into oneself by purifying the body/mind/heart.
Since such forces come and go, one must work daily to keep the body well-regulated (e.g., by
dietary moderation and proper breathing). But, again like Mencius (and Daode jing 55), the
Neiye warns against forceful efforts to control the qi: one cannot make it arrive or stay by an act
of will, but only by purifying and realigning oneself. One's ability to achieve those ends is a
matter of one's te, "inner power" (cognate with homonym te, "get/getting"). If one's te is
sufficient, one will attract and retain qi/shen/tao. Here, te retains its general archaic sense of "a
proper disposition toward the unseen forces of life," so it also carries moral overtones.
(Mencius, for his part, taught building up one's qi by acts of "correctness," yi.) A person who
does these things well is called a "sage" (shengren) — the term for the human ideal shared by the
Daode jing and by Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi. One finds nothing gender-specific about any of
the Neiye's concepts, and it is quite conceivable that women as well as men may have engaged in
such practices.

To understand the place of the Neiye's teachings among the currents of classical China, certain
points warrant notice. First, the Neiye displays no interest in political matters: unlike the Daode
jing, which offers lessons for rulers, the Neiye gives no such advice. The shengren is apparently
not assumed either to have or to aspire to political authority. The text does argue that the
"gentleman" (junzi) who has a well-governed xin will transform all around him (suggesting
influence by a disciple of Confucius). But there is no mention of such Confucian ideals as li
(proper ritual/social behavior) or jen ("benevolence"). Yet, nowhere does the Neiye ridicule
Confucian ideals, as the Daode jing and Zhuangzi do. There is in fact little evidence that the
contributors/redactors of the Neiye were even acquainted with the concerns of other now-well-
known classical "schools." There is no evidence of awareness of the teachings of the Mohists,
the Legalists, or the yin/yang theorists. The Neiye does not share Confucius' and Mozi's belief in
Tian ("Heaven") as an agency that had instituted the world's processes, wished certain courses to
be followed, and sometimes acted in life's events. In addition, there is no trace in the Neiye of
certain concerns of others whom we commonly class as "Taoist." For instance, there is no
idealization of a simple society or a simple life (as in Daode jing 80 and other "Primitivist"
passages of that text and Zhuangzi). There is also no trace of other ideas found in Zhuangzi:
there is no critique of language (e.g., as engendering misconceptions of reality); no questioning
the capacity of the human mind to comprehend reality; no attack on "conventional" views; and
no argument that life is an unrelenting process of change. There is no trace of the assumption, found in both *Zhuangzi* and the *Daode jing*, that in antiquity people had lived in an ideal manner, and that later generations had somehow "lost the way." And there is no trace in the *Neiye* of several key themes of the *Daode jing*: there is no advice for warriors, no exhortation to engage in "feminine" behaviors; no exhortation to practice *wuwei* ("non-action"); no altruistic moral teachings (e.g., that enlightened self-restraint ultimately benefits self and others alike); no concept of "the Dao" as mother, and no ruminations on "being" or "non-being." And there is no teaching that the ideal person is someone radically different from other members of society, someone with a truer knowledge of reality.

Like the *Daode jing*, the *Neiye* is devoid of proper names (personal or geographical, real or fictive), and refers to no specific events (legendary or historic). It was clearly composed to encourage the practice of a fairly specific model of bio-spiritual self-cultivation, which would bring the practitioner into accord with the full realities of life. The continuities of such practices in later Taoism (and segments of Confucianism) need more extensive study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Rickett 1965: I:151-79 (translation and analysis; Roth 1996: 123-34 (partial translation); Roth 1999 (translation); Kirkland 1997: 73-86

SEE ALSO: ?? Meditation, Qi, Jing, Shen

FULL REFERENCES


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