

Alchemy of the Spirit: Jung's Psychological Interpretation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in Taoist Inner Alchemy

Shisheng Zhang¹, Rong Huang^{1, 2, *}

¹ School of European Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

² School of European Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Carl Jung's engagement with *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (*Taiyi jinhua zongzhi*), a foundational classic of Taoist inner alchemy (*neidan*), is a typical representative of cross-cultural dialogue between Taoist inner alchemy and Western psychology. This study analyzes how Jung's psychology absorbs religious concepts from Taoist inner alchemy in three aspects. First, the correspondence between the "Golden Flower" as a Taoist symbol of transcendence and Western alchemical image is explored, emphasizing their distinct practice. Second, it compares the procedure of Taoist circulation of the light (*huiguang*) with Jung's method of active imagination, illustrating their similarities and differences in the process of spiritual transformation. Third, it discusses three core challenges in Jung's cross-cultural interpretation: (1) simplification of Taoist spiritual cultivation into psychological metaphors; (2) Translation induced theological distortions; (3) The difference between Taoist non-dualism and Jung's mind-body dualism. In a word, this study regards Jung's psychological adaptation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower* in Taoist inner alchemy as an example of the global transmission of religious theories. During this adaptation, Taoist thoughts were creatively transformed while its transformative potential was retained. This study also contributes to a deeper understanding of how religious traditions are integrated in cross-cultural contexts, particularly between Asian spirituality and Western modernity.

Keywords

Carl Gustav Jung; *The Secret of the Golden Flower*; Taoist inner alchemy; Cross-cultural interpretation; Analytical Psychology.

1. Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, deep dialogues between Eastern and Western thoughts have emerged as a crucial phenomenon in human spiritual exploration. Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, an important scholar of Analytical Psychology, built his psychological theories not only on the Western alchemy and Christian mysticism, but also on the theory of Chinese Taoist inner alchemy (*neidan*, 内丹) theory. Through the translation and introduction by German sinologist Richard Wilhelm, Jung contacted with *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (SGF) (*Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi*, 太乙金華宗旨), a Taoist inner alchemy classic that integrates Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist thoughts¹. After reading its German version, Jung shifted his research work towards Western alchemy, which is different from Freud's research directions². In his later academic career, he developed his own theories: individuation and active imagination.

In previous research works, the relationship between Jung and Chinese Taoism had been extensively explored. First, a large number of studies have detailed the historical relationships between Jung and Wilhelm, as well as the background and process of Jung's acceptance of Taoist

thoughts. For instance, in book of *Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction* [1], Murray Stein traced Jung's acceptance of Taoist culture from a historical and personal perspective. Luo Tao further explored Wilhelm's intermediary role between Chinese and Western cultures, arguing that Jung creatively integrated traditional Chinese culture into his psychological theory through Wilhelm's translations of SGF [2]. Second, scholars have also investigated the relation and correspondence between Taoist inner alchemy and some concepts of Jungian psychology. Due to Jung's emphasis on concepts such as "Tao" (the Way, 道) and "circulation of the light" (*huiguang*, 回光) in SGF, the academic community has focused more on comparing these concepts. Marlan believed that "light" (*guang*, 光) was an important metaphor in Taoist inner alchemy and Jung's analysis style, which is closely related to the unity of opposites and conjunction [3]. Li Xiafei analyzed in detail the key contribution of the core concept "circulation of the light" in Wilhelm's translation of SGF to Jung's establishment of the collective unconsciousness theory [4]. In his book *Die Erfahrung der Goldenen Blüte* (The Experience of the Golden Flower), Mokusen Miyuki explained the connotation and system of Taoist inner alchemy from its basic concepts such as "Tao" and "Qi" (energy, 氣), and elaborated the dual significance of "circulation of the light" in Taoist inner alchemy and psychology in view of analytical psychology [5].

Furthermore, academic community has extensively examined the connection between the symbolic image in Jungian psychology and Taoist inner alchemy. This article aims to further interpret the connection between Jungian psychology and SGF, revealing the deep similarities between Western alchemy and Taoist alchemy, which includes how they resolve consciousness fragmentation through the integration of opposites and pursue the integration of the psyche or the universe. Meanwhile, this article critically examines Jung's psychological interpretation of Taoist alchemy, emphasizing the modern significance of activating traditional wisdom while respecting cultural specificity, and providing a more inclusive way for the communication between Eastern and Western civilizations.

2. Conceptual Connections Between Jung's Alchemical Psychology and *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

2.1. The Archetypal Correspondence Between the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone"

The "Golden Flower" (*Jinhua*, 金華) and the "Philosopher's Stone" are symbols of the Transcendent Self in both Taoist inner alchemy and Western alchemy. The "Golden Flower" is defined as "the true energy of the translucent great one" (太乙先天之真炁) [6], and its appearance symbolizes the awakened state of the primal spirit (*yuanshen*, 元神) breaking through the obscuration of the conscious spirit (*shishen*, 識神). SGF points out: "The light of heaven is the primal spirit, and the primal spirit is the Way" (天光即元神, 元神即道) [7], anchoring the essence of the "Golden Flower" to the manifestation of the origin of the universe. Within Western alchemical discourse, the "Philosopher's Stone", traditionally associated with the transmutation of substance, is viewed by Jung as a symbolic appearance of the psychological concept of the "Self". Through analysis of medieval alchemical manuscripts, Jung discovered that the alchemists' obsession with "turning stone into gold" was actually "a collective unconscious expression of the individual pursuit of psychological integrity" [8]. Despite rooting in different cultures, these two symbolic systems exhibit a mirrored resonance at the archetypal level.

2.1.1. The Innate Attributes of Transcendence in the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone"

The "Golden Flower" in SGF not only refers to the true energy of the translucent great one, but also exists as a result of reverse cultivation that transcends acquired consciousness. The

Philosopher's Stone plays dual roles as a symbol of Self, as both the psychological origin and ultimate goal in Jung's analytical psychology. Zhang Qicheng argued that the "Golden Flower" was not a concrete existence, but rather "the crystallization and manifestation of the true energy of the translucent great one in the human microcosm" [7]. Its generation required the energy purification process of "refining seed into energy, refining energy into spirit, refining the spirit to unity with the Way". This purification was not a physical operation, but signified a reversal of the downward flow of the life energy through the practice of "circulating the light", allowing the original radiance of the pre-heavenly spirit to illuminate and dispel the murkiness of the conditioned conscious spirit. In alchemical practice, the Philosopher's Stone is accordingly regarded as the final outcome derived from the prima materia through transformative stages such as calcination, dissolution, and coagulation, which Jung psychologized as "the symbolic crystallization of the reconciliation of the opposites of consciousness and unconsciousness" [9]. Wilhelm keenly captured this ontological resonance in SGF, believing that both the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone" pointed to "the perfect form of the inner universe" or "the ultimate fit between individual existence and cosmic law" [10].

2.1.2. The Transcendental Value of "Light" and "Gold" in the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone"

SGF concretizes the goal of cultivation as "the Golden Flower crystallizing into the embryo" (*jinhua ningtai*, 金華凝胎), in which "gold" symbolizes immortality and purity, while "flower" is a metaphor for the blooming form of life energy. This symbolic system, together with the images of "jade liquid returning to elixir" (*yuye huandan*, 玉液還丹) and "holy embryo completing" (*shengtai yuancheng*, 聖胎圓成) in the Book of Consciousness and Life (*Huiming Jing*, 慧命經), constructs a perceivable way for inner alchemy cultivation. The Rosary of the Philosophers illustrates the "Philosopher's Stone" as a substance which radiate golden light. Jung believes that this implies "the rising of the Self as the psychological sun" [8]. Li Xiafei believed that Wilhelm deliberately retained the plant image when he directly translated "Golden Flower" as "Goldene Blüte" (Golden Flower) to highlight "the transformation process of life from potential to manifestation." This interpretation made Jung realized that "Symbols of the Self possess a cross-cultural characteristic of growth" [4].

2.1.3. Philosophical Metaphors of the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone"

The "Empty Infinity" (*xukong fensui*, 虛空粉碎) described in SGF emphasizes dissolving the dualism between the primal spirit and the conscious spirit to achieve unity. Similarly, the coniunctio pursued by alchemy seeks to unify opposing elements such as matter and spirit, male and female in a symbolical manner. Jung regarded it as "the highest realization of psychological integrity" [11]. This transcendent integration is manifested as a cyclical movement at the operational level: Golden Flower cultivation requires the "true energy" (*xiantian yiqi*, 先天一炁) to circulate through the heavenly cycle (*zhoutian*, 周天) following the Two Energy Paths of Function and Control (*Ren Du Er Mai*, 任督二脈), forming a self-renewing energy system. Alchemy employs "circulation" (*circulatio*) making substance undergo death and rebirth in a closed container. In his comparative study, Wilhelm discovered that the Taoist concept of "heavenly cycle" and the alchemical "*Ouroborus*" shared the philosophical connotation of "eternal recurrence" (*die ewige Wiederkunft*), both of which metaphorically expressed "the infinite flow of creative energy in the Self system" [10].

As Jung said, the deep motivation for this cross-cultural resonance was "The Self, as the core archetype of the collective unconsciousness, is always looking for a symbolic coat suitable for the context of the times in human spiritual history" [12]. Although the "Golden Flower" and the "Philosopher's Stone" were born in different cultures—the former relying on the Taoist cosmology of the unity of man and nature, and the latter rooting in the mysticism of alchemical

material transformation. Both of them revealed the eternal pursuit of inner integrity of mankind.

2.2. The Practical Isomorphism of “Circulation of the Light” and “Active Imagination”

Although the “circulation of the light” in SGF and Jung’s “active imagination” are rooted in different cultures, both exhibit profound isomorphism in their practical methodologies. They begin with the reverse adjustment of the consciousness state, and ultimately lead to the realization of inner integrity through the dynamic interaction of symbolic systems. This process not only reveals the common logic of spiritual cultivation between the East and the West, but also highlights the universal pursuit of humanity to transcend the limitations of consciousness.

2.2.1. Symbolic systems as a medium of transformation

The core of “circulation of the light” is to reverse the normal state of consciousness straying outward (*yishi waichi*, 意識外馳), and to inwardly gather energy in the space between the eyebrows or the field of the Elixir (*dantian*, 丹田) by “gathering the thoughts” (*zhuxiang tianxin*, 注想天心). SGF requires practitioners to take “making the breathing rhythmical and protection of the center” (*tiaoxi shouzhong*, 調息守中) as the technical foundation by controlling breathing, such as counting breaths and listening to breaths, to make the mind calm down, to gradually decrease the interference of the acquired conscious spirit, to allow the light of the innate primal spirit (Golden Flower) to be revealed [7]. Similarly, Jung’s “active imagination” also begins with setting rational thoughts aside. Practitioners need to enter a non-judgmental relaxed state, allowing unconscious images to spontaneously emerge, and interact with them through painting, writing, or inner dialogue. Jung quoted Lullandus’s definition of “imagination” and “meditation” in *A Lexicon of Alchemy*, believing that “imagination is a condensed essence of life energy, which includes both physical and psychological life force” [8]. Meanwhile, meditation as an inner dialogue, is a method of seeking guidance during the alchemical process, and can provide natural and the supernatural insights. It has similarities to Jung’s active imagination [13].

In “circulation of the light” cultivation, the “Golden Flower” is not only a metaphor for the innate energy, but also the primary focus of practice. Practitioners visualize the circulation of “light” in the Two Energy-Paths of Function and Control, such as “heavenly cycle turning”, concretizing abstract energy into operable images and transforming seed (*jing*, 精), energy, and spirit (*shen*, 神) at multiple levels. Jung drew inspiration from alchemy and reinterpreted “imagination” (*imaginatio*) as the core mechanism of psychological integration. This “imagination” aligns with “active imagination”, emphasizing the symbolic operations, such as mandala drawing and dream recording, to give unconscious content form, thereby facilitating the dialogue between consciousness and the Self. In SGF, Wilhelm highlighted this link, observing that both the circulation of the “Golden Flower” and the creation of the alchemical “Philosopher’s Stone” served as a cosmic symbol of inner transformation [10].

2.2.2. The Practical Logic of “Enantiodromia” and “Backward-Flowing Movement”

Jung once used enantiodromia³ to analogize the inward turn of psychological energy, emphasizing that “consciousness must withdraw from its attachment to the external world in order to achieve a creative union with the unconsciousness” [12]. This resonates a cross-cultural echo with the “backward-flowing movement”⁴ (*nifa*, 逆法) of “circulation of the light”: whether it is suppressing the external movement of senses to condense the light of the primal spirit, or suspending rational thinking to accept unconscious images, both of them require individuals to break the “forward-flowing” (*shunxing*, 順行) inertia of consciousness, and open a transformation channel in reverse movement. These two practices are by no means passive meditation, but active and symbolic participation. In “circulation of the light”, practitioners

reconstruct their physical and mental energy by contemplating the circulation of light; In “active imagination”, individuals reshape their psychological structure through dialogue with archetypal images. Although they are different in forms, the ultimate goals of them are highly consistent: the Taoist pursuit of “Empty Infinity” through light circulation dissolves the tension between primal and acquired spirits, just as the Jungian process of individuation reunites ego and Self via active imagination. Both of them direct towards a totality that transcends internal division.

It is worth emphasizing that Jung’s formulation of “active imagination” was inspired by the concept of “imagination” in alchemy. It is a process of “participatory observation”. Alchemists project their inner psychological conflicts by observing the interaction of substances in the reaction vessel (*vas*), and complete the fusion of opposites at the symbolic level. Jung psychologized this mechanism, proposing that “active imagination” was essentially a modern reinterpretation of the “imagination” in alchemy: unconscious images were like the *prima materia*, and consciousness fostered its spontaneous evolution through non-interfering observation, ultimately generating the psychological philosopher’s stone (Self). By creatively transforming the alchemical symbolic system, “active imagination” emerged as a synthesis of traditions, inheriting Western alchemical motifs and embracing the Eastern spiritual technique of “circulation of the light”.

3. The Integration of Opposites in Alchemy and *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

3.1. Jung’s Psychological Interpretation of Three Stages of Coniunctio

In alchemy, the term *coniunctio* (conjunction) refers to a stage where different elements are mixed together to form the philosopher’s stone. This stage aims to unite the purified substances that possess opposing qualities. The process begins with the separation of naturally mingled opposites, followed by their refinement until only their essential natures remain. Ultimately, the true purpose of *coniunctio* is to achieve the reunion of these opposing essences. Through this process, alchemists aspire to create a perfect substance that is believed to possess extraordinary powers, being capable of healing all ailments, granting profound wisdom, and even offering immortality.

From a psychological perspective, the opposing forces that must be distinguished, refined, and ultimately integrated are the consciousness and unconsciousness. This process is directed toward the realization of the “Self.” Jung believed that the *mysterium coniunctionis* “is nothing less than a restoration of the original state of the cosmos and the divine unconsciousness of the world. . . . It is the Western equivalent of the fundamental principle of classical Chinese philosophy, namely the union of Yin and Yang in Tao.”[11].

In the 16th century, alchemist Gerard Dorn proposed that *coniunctio* should consist of three stages. Based on this concept, Carl Jung analyzed *coniunctio* from these three following psychological perspectives.

3.1.1. *Unio Mentalis*: The Union of Soul and Spirit

At this stage, the soul is separated from the body, followed by uniting the purified soul with the spirit. In his book *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Jung explained this process as “a turning away from sensuous reality, a withdrawal of the fantasy-projections that gives ‘the ten thousand things’ their attractive and deceptive glamour” [11]. This means that individuals will cut off the instinctive dependence on the external world such as emotional impulses and sensory pleasures through introspection and meditation, allowing the chaotic energy of the unconsciousness to be illuminated by the light of consciousness. This stage corresponds to the *nigredo*, which Jung psychologically defined as a state of depression resulting from the

confrontation with one's shadow and the dissolution of the individual's personal and worldly illusions. It should be noted that in Jung's understanding of the unconsciousness, the shadow was not the unconscious negative, nor was our repressed instincts. It contained vitality and creativity, serving as a force that helps individual to realize the Self [14]. Therefore, the *unio mentalis* yielded not only the ability to rationally control emotions, but self-knowledge in the deepest sense. In this stage, the merging of consciousness and the unconsciousness is portrayed as the separation of the soul from the body, followed by its reunification with the spirit. Within alchemical symbolism, the soul is represented by water, the body can be understood as substance and the spirit is associated with vapor or air. This transformation is enacted by heating the *prima materia* in the vessel, causing the water to vaporize into steam, which later condenses into droplets, which metaphorically represent the conjoining of soul and spirit.

3.1.2. *Unio Corporalis: Reuniting the Soul and Spirit with the Body*

The second stage requires reuniting the soul and spirit with the body to produce *caelum* or *lapis*. Alchemists believe these substances will imbue the reality with sacred or ideal qualities. Dorn emphasizes the importance of enclosing the psychological result of the *unio mentalis* within a secure "Hermetic vessel". This ensures the product does not dissipate or revert to its earlier fragmented and impure state. Jung interpreted this container as a symbol of the protective psychological structure, designed to safeguard initial spiritual insights from external interference. Psychologically, this stage involves bringing the transpersonal Self into the real world, enabling it to have a positive impact on its own attitudes and behaviors as well as the world around it.

3.1.3. *Unio Mystica: Unity of Soul-Spirit-Body and the Unus Mundus*

For most of Western alchemists, creating *caelum* or *lapis* was their ultimate goal. However, Dorn believed that *coniunctio* should also include the fusion of the whole man, i.e., the individual after re-combining with the soul-spirit, with the *unus mundus*, which means "the potential world of the first day of creation... the eternal Ground of all empirical being" [11]. However, Dorn did not provide specific operational methods or guidance for reaching the third stage, believing that the completion of the first two stages would naturally lead to the integration with *unus mundus*. Based on this concept, Jung suggested that the third stage was "to bring about a union of opposites in accordance with the great Eastern philosophies, and to establish for this purpose a principle freed from the opposites and similar to the atman or Tao." [11]. Jung again mentioned the Chinese "Tao", believing that it was closely linked to the process of individuation. He suggested that the third stage, the highest degree of *coniunctio*, was the combination of the complete individual and the One World, just as the Self is the basis and source of the past, present, and future of individual personality. In this way, Jung employed the metaphor of the alchemical term *coniunctio* to complete an interpretation of the individuation process and its goals.

3.2. The Integration of Opposites in Taoist Inner alchemy

There is an obvious parallel relationship existed between the goals and procedures of Taoist inner alchemy and Western alchemy. Just like Western alchemy's evolution, later Eastern alchemy focused on inner cultivation rather than chemical practice. The purpose of inner alchemy is to refine a "golden elixir" (*jindan*, 金丹) within the body by integrating the contradictory forces within it.

3.2.1. The Dual Structure of "Human Nature/Life" and "Animus/Anima"

SGF, as a longevity guide that integrates the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, centers on the cultivation and integration of an individual's "human nature and life" (*xing ming*, 性命) and "animus and anima" (*hun po*, 魂魄) to ultimately transcend the cycle of life and death. Here, "human nature" (*xing*, 性) refers to a individual's innate spiritual essence, which is

shapeless and like light, hidden deep in the “heavenly heart” (*tianxin*, 天心), positioned between the eyebrows. On the other hand, Life (*Ming*, 命) refers to an individual’s acquired energy of the seed (*jingqi*, 精氣), which is consumed with the body’s growth and must be transformed into a higher level of energy through cultivation. After a person’s birth, the human nature and life are separated, like the “light” and “oil” of a lamp being separated, with the spirit hidden deep in the space between the eyebrows and the energy scattered throughout the body. Simultaneously, one’s spirit is also divided into two parts: the “animus” (*hun*, 魂), which represents the clear, rational spiritual light, residing in the heavenly heart, and the “anima” (*po*, 魄), which represents the instinctive reactions of desires and emotions, residing near the heart. Ordinary individuals are typically dominated by anima, consequently dimming their spiritual light, dissipating their vital energy, and ultimately resulting in aging and death.

Richard Wilhelm translated “hun” as “animus” and “po” as “anima” in SGF, arguing that the essence of cultivation was to unify these two contradictory parts. Jung conceived this dynamic as a movement wherein the illuminating force of the conscious awareness penetrated the shadowed depths of the unconsciousness. When reason and emotion, consciousness and instinct are in complete harmony, a person achieves the perfection of the Self. The “golden elixir” mentioned in SGF is not only the energy crystal cultivated by Taoists, but also symbol of the final unified state of the human mind.

3.2.2. The Integration of Practices in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

The core method of Taoist cultivation is called “circulation of the light and protection of the center” (*huiguang shouzhong*, 回光守中), which is aimed at reversing the daily energy consumption pattern and the consciousness straying outward. The specific method involves closing your eyes, but leaving a slit, by lowering your eyelids properly (*chuilian*, 垂簾), so that the eyes gently fall on the tip of the nose, and concentrating your mind on the “heavenly heart” between the eyebrows. This position is like the body’s “main switch”, through which innate energy will light up like a lamp. In the initial stages of practice, one might experience a subtle sensation of heat or brightness between the eyebrows. However, with continuing for about one hundred days, the energy will condense into a “light bead”, which grows in the body like a pregnant fetus. Eventually, this energy will completely transform the body into a “spirit-body” (*chunyang zhiti*, 純陽之體) that transcends the physical body. When the animus and anima are merged together, the individual achieves a union of human nature and life, and the spirit control the life energy, no longer being limited by life and death.

Through this inner work, the relationship between animus and anima is subjected to a fundamental reordering. Cultivation is like abdicating a fatuous sovereign (anima) and inviting back the real king (animus) to power. By focusing on the heavenly heart and restraining distractions every day, the spiritual light becomes stronger and stronger, and gradually suppresses instinctive desires (*zhipo*, 制魄). When the yin energy of desire is completely transformed into pure yang energy, the individuals break free from the limitations of the physical body and reach the realm of “the one effective, true human nature” as described in the SGF.

In short, SGF uses the method of “circulation of the light” to bring back the vitality dissipated in desires and distractions, and transform it into a higher-level spiritual energy. When the human nature and life, animus and anima are fully integrated, individuals transcend the limitations of ordinary life and reach the realm of the unity of man and nature.

4. Re-examination of Jung's Psychological Interpretation of Taoist Inner Alchemy

Jung's psychological studies of alchemy not only helped him formulate fundamental concepts, but also enriched Jungian psychology with a metaphorical language capable of expressing the complex interactions and transformations of the unconsciousness. However, Jung's psychologization of Taoist inner alchemy concepts, especially his interpretation of SGF, also subjected some controversy. Jung correlated the symbolic system of inner alchemy cultivation, such as "circulation of the light" and "golden flower", with the collective unconsciousness and individuation, providing a pathway for Western psychology to understand Eastern wisdom. However, the simplifications and misinterpretations in his theoretical transformation reveal the complexity of cross-cultural interpretation.

4.1. Cultural Simplification and Decontextualization

Jung's main contribution to the dialogue with Taoist inner alchemy lies in translating the practice of "circulating the light" into the psychological language of "active imagination", while interpreting the "Golden Flower" as a symbolic actualization of the Self. For instance, he proposed that "the light of the Golden Flower" was "the ultimate goal of mental integration", corresponding to the unity of opposites in the process of individuation [10]. While this interpretation is illuminating, it remains highly controversial due to its oversimplification of the Taoist cultivation system.

The foundation of Taoist inner alchemy lies in the principle of the "dual cultivation of human nature and life". Its distinction between "the primal spirit" and "the conscious spirit" is based on Qi philosophy, which emphasizes the transformation and sublimation of seed, energy, and spirit within the human body. Through mapping the primal spirit onto collective archetypes and narrowing the conscious spirit to personal awareness, Jung effectively dematerialized Taoist "Qi", and detached it from its original function as an energy-bearing medium [15]. This simplification reduces the religious practice of inner alchemy to a psychological symbol, collapsing the complete cultivation chain of "refining seed into energy, energy into spirit, and spirit into unity with the Way" into single process of psychological projection. Luo Tao critically pointed out that Jung's interpretation ignored Taoism's ultimate pursuit of "the eternity of body and spirit", reducing the integrated cultivation of body and mind into a "disembodiment" abstract metaphor [2].

A deeper contradiction lies in Jung's substitution of inner alchemy's cosmological framework with a psychological model. The "heavenly cycle turning" of Taoist inner alchemy is closely related to the trigrams of the *I Ching* (易經) and the Five Elements Theory (*Wuxing*, 五行), forming an integrated cultivation system of man-nature unity. However, Jung only selected the "Golden Flower" as a symbol of the Self, while omitting its dynamic cosmological context of Taoism [16]. This decontextualization reduces the symbolic system of inner alchemy to a static psychological specimen, devoid of its original cultural vitality.

4.2. Textual Mistranslation and Interpretive Deviation

Jung's interpretation of SGF relies heavily on Richard Wilhelm's German version, which has been proved to contain systematic mistranslations and omissions. In an attempt to cater to Western readers, Wilhelm deleted paragraphs detailing specific cultivation methods, such as "making the breathing rhythmic (調息法)", and interpreted "circulation of the light" as "introversion", reinforcing its connection with Jungian psychology [17]. Furthermore, this translation strategy leads to semantic deviations in key concepts, significantly contributing to interpretive biases in Eastern and Western cultural understanding.

Taking the concept of “light” as an example, in the Taoist Canon, “light” is not only a symbol of mental clarity and spiritual awareness, but also the flow of energy channels in the body. SGF emphasizes that “the light is not the light seen by the eyes, but the true energy of the translucent great one” (光非目見之光，乃先天太乙之真炁) [7]. However, Wilhelm translated it as “the light of consciousness” (das Licht des Bewusstseins), stripping away the material connotation of “light” as an energy carrier. Jung further misinterpreted “circulation of the light” as the “reversal of consciousness”, completely ignoring the physiological practice of Taoism using techniques such as making the breathing rhythmical to guide the “light” to run in the Two Energy-Paths of Function and Control. This interpretive deviation had reconstructed Taoist inner alchemy in the West into a “de-technologized” psychological symbolic system.

More importantly, Wilhelm’s Christian background influenced lexical choice in translating Taoist terms. For example, he translated “primal spirit (元神)” as “divine spirit” (göttlicher Geist), imbuing it with a Christian connotation of the soul. Although Jung criticized Wilhelm’s religious inclinations, but there were still scholars who believed that Jung’s interpretation was “a mania for scrap-collecting, a selective appropriation that reduces the complex ritual practices and cosmological foundations of Taoist cultivation to mere metaphors of psychic integration” [18]. Thus, the textual mistranslation and interpretive deviation together acted as a dual filter, progressively diminishing the complexity of Taoist inner alchemy theory in cross-cultural translation.

4.3. Reflections on Mind-Body Dualism

Jung’s interpretation implies the Western dualism of mind-body, which limits the overall understanding of Taoist inner alchemy theory. Davy-Barnes argued that Jung equated “circulation of the light” with “active imagination”, emphasizing the integration of psychological images, while still ignoring the practical logic of Taoism in achieving “the eternity of body and spirit” through body adjustment [19]. Jung’s treatment of the “Golden Flower” revealed a distinct inclination towards mind-body dualism. This stood in contrast to the Taoist understanding, which conceived the “Golden Flower” as the goal of bodily practices, uniting seed, qi, and spirit together. Jung, however, interpreted it more as a symbol of psychological projection. Rosen pointed out that Jung’s interpretation essentially imposed Cartesian mind-body dualism on Taoism, ignoring the inner alchemy’s cultivation philosophy of “using the body as a crucible”. More seriously, Jung regarded the body as a carrier of “shadows” and believed that spiritual sublimation could be only achieved by “transcending the body”, which fundamentally conflicts with the Taoist view of the body as “the eternity of body and spirit”. The latter required using the body as a “Ding”(鼎)⁵ to achieve the overall transcendence of the body and mind through the transformation of seed, energy, and spirit.

Jung’s tendency towards dualism is also reflected in his interpretation of the concept of “Yin and Yang” (*yinyang*, 陰陽), just simplifying it as symbols of psychological opposites, ignoring balancing mechanism of the Qi’s flow and the body’s energy in Taoist Yin-Yang Theory. Although this interpretation provided cross-cultural examples for analytical psychology, it diminished the holistic nature of Yin-Yang Theory as a universal principle for governing the cosmos.

4.4. The Modern Value of Jung’s Psychological Adaptation of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*

Despite the controversies, Jung’s adaptation activated the modern value of Taoist inner alchemy culture in SGF. He opened up new paths for the integration of Western psychology and Eastern philosophy through a horizon-fusion framework for East-West dialogue. This adaptation is particularly significant at the level of text dissemination. After Wilhelm’s German version of SGF and Jung’s preface were translated into multiple languages, they were

“retranslated into Chinese from a foreign language (the book title directly translated as *The Secret of the Golden Flower*) ... Due to the influence of Jung’s preface, multiple new Chinese translations have appeared in recent years” [20], forming a closed-loop cycle of cross-cultural interpretation. Yu Wanting noted that although Jung was not faithful to the original meaning of Taoism, he used the concept of “Self” to govern the symbol of Golden Flower, making the collective unconsciousness theory gain cross-cultural rationality [21]. For example, Jung’s adaptation of the “Golden Flower” as the “archetype of the mandala” incorporated Taoist symbols into the symbolic system of analytical psychology. Although this transformation deviated from the original meaning of the text, it activated the cross-cultural vitality of symbols. More significantly, Jung’s interpretive paradigm revealed the inevitable production mechanism of cross-cultural dialogue. As Liu Xiangyu observed, “Cross-cultural textual journeys inevitably involve theoretical recoding, which constitutes the core mechanism for meaning reconstruction in cultural encounters.” [22]. Wilhelm’s translation and Jung’s adaptation together constituted a dual transformation, which endowed SGF with psychological significance. This transformation was not just a deviation of the original culture, instead it provided a new perspective of meaning generated through the fusion of horizons. Shen Heyong believed that Jung’s combination of “circulation of the light” with the individuation process provided modern people with a methodology to integrate psychological fragments although the technical details of Taoist practice was simplified [23]. This reflects Jung’s psychological exploration of Eastern and Western alchemy, that is, “Jung’s work is a modern articulation of alchemy’s spiritual heritage.”[24].

These insights suggest that the value of cross-cultural dialogue lies not only in seeking common ground, but also respecting differences. Currently, “research on the psychology of Taoism through a Jung’s viewpoints has emerged as an academic field” [20]. Jung’s transformative adaptation of Taoist inner alchemy is essentially a theoretical experiment that uses Western psychology as the foundation and Eastern thought as the application. Although this experiment was not perfect, it broke the cognitive framework of Eurocentrism, proving that non-Western traditions also contain universal psychological wisdom. As Clarke states: “Jung’s true legacy lies in his demonstration that cross-cultural interpretation can be a catalyst for theoretical innovation” [15].

5. Conclusions

By exploring the cross-cultural interaction between Jungian Analytical Psychology and the Taoist inner alchemy classic *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, this work demonstrates the profound resonance between Eastern and Western thoughts in the practice of psychological integration. Although originating from different cultures, the “Golden Flower” of Taoist inner alchemy and the “Philosopher’s Stone” of Western alchemy point to the universal pursuit of inner integrity, reflecting the harmony and unity between consciousness and the unconsciousness, the individual and the universe. The similarity between Taoist inner alchemy’s “circulation of the light” and Jung’s “active imagination” in practical methods reveals the commonality of Eastern and Western spiritual transformation methods. Despite that Jung’s adaptation of Taoist inner alchemy with analytical psychology has been criticized for cultural simplification and the tendency of mind-body dualism, his interpretation still effectively activates the modern significance of Eastern wisdom. This opens up promising avenues for theoretical exploration, and enables Eastern and Western wisdom to integrate together and learn from each other. This paper emphasizes that, on the basis of respecting cultural specificities, investigation of Jungian psychology’s absorption of Taoist inner alchemy culture can provide a more inclusive and inspiring path for the exchange of thoughts between the East

and the West, and promote the sustained development of modern values in Eastern and Western religious cultures.

Notes

¹ *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* (《太乙金華宗旨》) is a Taoist scripture that has been transmitted since the Qing dynasty. It was likely compiled during the Kangxi reign, though the exact date remains uncertain, and several different versions of the text are in circulation. For research on the textual history of *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi*, including the version translated by Richard Wilhelm, see [25] and Li [4].

² Jung broke with Freud in 1913 for theoretical and personal differences. While Freud regarded the unconsciousness primarily as a repository of repressed sexual desires, Jung introduced the concept of the “collective unconscious,” emphasizing universal archetypes beyond personal experience. Jung also rejected Freud’s sexual theory of libido, proposing instead a more general psychic energy. Their divergence intensified after Jung published *Psychology of the Unconscious* in 1912, which challenged Freud’s core ideas. Freud, who had once considered Jung his intellectual heir and the future leader of psychoanalysis, saw this as a betrayal. Their correspondence ceased shortly thereafter. This split marked the foundation of Jung’s analytical psychology [26].

³ *Enantiodromia* is a concept derived from the Greek words ἐνάντιος (*enantios*) meaning “opposite” and δρόμος (*dromos*) meaning “running course”. Jung introduced the concept of *enantiodromia* in *Psychological Types*, defining it as “the emergence of the unconscious opposite in the course of time” [12]. Olson argues that *enantiodromia* is manifested in Daoism as the transformation between yin and yang: “This principle was explicitly understood and discussed in the principles of traditional Chinese religion, as in Taoism and yin-yang. A central premise of the I Ching is that yang lines become yin when they have reached their extreme, and vice versa.” [27].

⁴ Forward-flowing (*Shunfa*, 順法) and Backward-flowing movement (*nifa*, 逆法) are two forms of dialectical movement in Taoism, representing forward and reverse modes of thinking in the Taoist understanding of phenomena. In Taoist inner alchemy, they correspond to two opposing types of vital energy. For studies on the dialectical relationship between the two, see [28].

⁵ *Ding* (鼎), originally is an ancient Chinese vessel used for cooking, typically with three legs and two handles. Later, it became primarily a ritual instrument used in sacrificial ceremonies. Therefore, *Ding* held its spiritual meaning in ancient China. In this context, likening the body to *Ding* implies that in Taoist inner alchemy, the body serves as a vessel for the circulation of life energy, and has the potential to transcend material existence.

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