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Article

# Spiritual Alchemy: Centered on the Concept and Iconography of the “Three Corpses 三屍”

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## Abstract

Daoist Inner Alchemy (*Neidan* 內丹) takes the joint perfection of the physical body and the spiritual body as its core pursuit. Therefore, in its practice system, besides physical cultivation, spiritual cultivation is also an indispensable component, and the two together constitute the fundamental principle of “dual cultivating of *xing* and *ming*” (*Xingming Shuangxiu* 性命雙修) in *Neidan* theories. Spiritual cultivation in *Neidan* usually includes two aspects: one is the positive cultivation and elevation of inner-nature; the other is the confrontation with destructive spiritual entities. The common saying of “eliminating the *Sanshi*” (*Qu Sanshi* 去三屍) in *Neidan* texts is a typical representative of the latter. The “Three Corpses” (*Sanshi* 三屍) is an important category in *Neidan* theory, but relevant academic research remains relatively inadequate. An in-depth exploration of the concept of the *Sanshi* and its corresponding images helps to deepen the understanding of the theoretical, practical, and philosophical connotations of *Neidan*.

**Keywords:** *Neidan*; *Sanshi*; *Jiuchong*; *Qipo*; Daoist medicine

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## 1. Introduction

Existing studies on *Neidan* have mainly focused on the cognition of the physical body and the discussion of corresponding cultivation techniques, while the attention paid to the spiritual cultivation aspect in *Neidan* is relatively insufficient. Based on the core philosophical view of “the unity of body and mind” (*Shenxin Yiyuanlun* 身心一元) in Daoism, many *Neidan* practitioners have proposed the fundamental principle of “dual cultivating of *xing* and *ming*” (*Xingming Shuangxiu* 性命雙修), emphasizing that *Neidan* practice requires the joint refinement and perfection of the physical body level—“life cultivation” (*Minggong* 命功)—and the spiritual and ideological level—“inner-nature cultivation” (*Xinggong* 性功). Regarding spiritual cultivation in *Neidan*, on the one hand, it includes the self-cultivation of inner-nature, which is usually reflected in the visualization of positive spiritual schemas during *Neidan* meditation and the ethical tendency of tranquility and desirelessness in daily behavior; on the other hand, it points to the elimination of internal or external destructive spiritual entities, which is often referred to as “refining demons” (*Lianmo* 煅魔) in *Neidan* theory. Human mental defects as well as desires are personified into ghosts and gods with specific names, forms, and responsibilities, and practitioners need to confront them through mental restraint or special spiritual visualization methods. The *Sanshi* (三屍) are the main representatives of such negative spiritual entities, and eliminating the *Sanshi* is generally regarded as one of the key steps in *Neidan* practice.



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## 2. Academic Review of *Sanshi* Studies

In Daoist texts, the *Sanshi* are often collectively referred to as the Three Corpses and Nine Worms (*Sanshi jiuchong* 三屍九蟲). Currently, academic discussions on the *Sanshi* are mostly included in relevant studies on “*Sanshi jiuchong*”, covering four major fields: Daoist medicine studies, cultivation studies, iconography, and *Gengshen* Belief (*Gengshen Xinyang* 庚申信仰) studies.

Among the *Sanshi jiuchong*, the term *Jiuchong* mainly refers to worm-borne factors of physical damage. This concept is related to ancient China’s understanding of human parasites and other pathogenic organisms, and has always attracted the attention of traditional Chinese medicine researchers, especially Daoist medicine researchers, with the most sufficient relevant studies. Scholars such as Yoshimoto Akiharu 吉元昭治 (Yoshimoto 1992), Lin Fushi 林富士 (Lin 2001), and Gai Jianmin 蓋建民 (Gai 2001) hold that *Sanshi jiuchong* are mainly related to the ancient understanding of parasitic diseases; Jiang Sheng 薑生 (Sheng Jiang 2010) and Jiang Shoucheng 薑守誠 (Shoucheng Jiang 2008) propose that *Sanshi jiuchong* correspond to a wider range of pathogenic factors, including not only some parasites but also some bacteria and viruses. Studies by Liu Cunren 柳存仁 (Liu 1971), Zhang Xunliao 張勳燎 (Zhang and Bai 2006) point out that the *Sanshi jiuchong* mentioned in Daoism have a close connection with pulmonary tuberculosis.

Research on *Sanshi jiuchong* in cultivation studies also focuses on the *Jiuchong*. Toshiaki Yamada 山田利明 (Yamada 1989), Shawn Arthur (Arthur 2013), and Huang Yongfeng 黃永鋒 (Y. Huang 2008) have all elaborated on the relationship between *Sanshi jiuchong* and Daoist elixir ingestion techniques. Scholars such as Joseph Needham (Needham 2011), Cheng Lesong 程樂松 (Cheng 2017), and Yin Zhihua 尹志華 (Z. Yin 2023) have conducted a conceptual history interpretation of the meaning of the *Sanshi* from the perspective of the body concept in Daoist cultivation, arguing that they represent factors leading to human death. In addition, some scholars have specifically explored the conceptual significance of the *Sanshi* as demons in Daoist cultivation studies and conducted in-depth theological and cultivation method comparisons between them and the concept of demons in Christianity (Chen and Zhang 2025). Others have examined the relationship between the *Sanshi* and the Daoist understanding of negative personality traits, as well as the Daoist self-cultivation practices designed to counteract such negative traits (Lu 2024).

The iconographic research results on *Sanshi jiuchong* mainly come from Catherine Despeux and Shih-shan Susan Huang 黃士珊. In her research on the internal vision diagrams of *Neidan* practice, Catherine Despeux discussed some images and their meanings related to the Seven Po Souls (*Qipo* 七魄) and the *Sanshi* in Daoist atlases (Despeux 2012); in her research themed on Daoist Iconography, Shih-shan Susan Huang 黃士珊 carefully sorted out and analyzed the images and connotations of the *Sanshi* as well as their iconographic connection with the *Qipo*, suggesting that the image of the *Sanshi* may have originated from the descriptions of foreign life in ancient myths (S.-s.S. Huang 2012). In addition, based on iconographic analysis, she also explored the relationship between the *Sanshi* and the *Neidan* theory in Daoism (S.-s.S. Huang 2011).

The concept of the *Sanshi* has also given rise to research related to *Gengshen* Belief. In Daoism, the religious meaning of the *Sanshi* has developed into a religious taboo of keeping vigil on *Gengshen* days (*gengshen ri* 庚申日) to avoid harm from the *Sanshi*, and gradually formed the *Gengshen* Belief prevalent in China, Japan, and Korea. Japanese academic circles once debated the origin of *Gengshen* Belief: scholars represented by Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 advocated the indigenous origin theory of *Gengshen* Belief, while Daoist scholar Kubo Noritada 窪德忠 held the foreign origin theory of *Gengshen* Belief and wrote monographs such as *Gengshen Belief* (庚申信仰) and *Studies on Gengshen Belief—A History of Sino-Japanese Religious and Cultural Exchanges* (庚申信仰の研究 日中宗教文化交渉史), conduct-

ing detailed research on *Gengshen* Belief (Ohanami 1988). Chinese scholar Wang Guiping 汪桂平 specifically explored the folk *Gengshen* Scripture and *Gengshen* Associations (*gengshen hui* 庚申會) in Jiangsu and Zhejiang of China, pointing out that the custom of keeping vigil on *Gengshen* days has not disappeared in modern China. Although it originated from Daoist concepts, it has evolved into part of local folk beliefs in the process of development, which is significantly different from orthodox religious classics and activities (G. Wang 2012).

In summary, the current academic discussion on the *Jiuchong* in *Sanshi jiuchong* is relatively sufficient, but the existing research on the *Sanshi*, the focus of this paper, is relatively weak and mostly concentrated on the aspects of Iconography and related beliefs. As a core concept of spiritual cultivation in Daoism, the concept of the *Sanshi* is not only related to the integrity of Daoist cultivation theory but also closely connected with Daoism's understanding of human spiritual composition and human nature. Clarifying relevant concepts is of great significance for a comprehensive understanding of Daoist *Neidan* cultivation theory. Starting from this point, this paper takes the images of the *Sanshi* as clues, combined with relevant texts, to explore the formation and development of the concept and image of the *Sanshi* in Daoism and their core significance in *Neidan*.

### 3. The *Sanshi* in *Neidan* Atlas

In Daoist *Neidan* iconography, the *Sanshi* are uncommon yet significant visual elements that embody unique Daoist theological and spiritual cultivation values. A typical depiction of the *Sanshi* appears in the 15th figure of *Verification Diagrams of the Golden Elixir and Reverted Cinnabar* (金液還丹印證圖), attributed to the Song Dynasty (960–1279). Daoist Long (Long fl. 1208–1224) and currently housed at the White Cloud Temple 白雲觀 in Beijing (see Figure 1). This colored album, a rare intact *Neidan* atlas, was recreated in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) based on the original Song Dynasty woodblock version. It consists of 20 exquisite illustrations depicting distinct stages of *Neidan* practice. The 15th figure, titled “Extracting and Supplementing” (*Choutian 抽添*), combined with its accompanying inscription: “*Yinpo* and lead wane daily; *Yanghun* and mercury flourish instantly.” 陰魄和鉛隨日減, 陽魂與汞一時昌 depicts the transition from *minggong*, which focuses on physical refinement, to *xinggong*, which emphasizes spiritual cultivation. Xu Yilan 許宜蘭 identifies this as the process by which the soul transforms from a state of mixed Yin and Yang to a pure Yang entity (Y. Xu 2015).



**Figure 1.** The *Sanshi* in the *Verification Diagrams of the Golden Elixir and Reverted Cinnabar* tu (Long fl. 1208–1224).

Beneath the figure are the common *Neidan* symbols of the Elixir Cauldron (*Danding* 丹鼎) and Dragon-Tiger (*Longhu* 龍虎). Above, however, the divine figures attract particular attention: on the right stands seven conventional Daoist deities robed in official attire; on the left is a distinctive ensemble of two one-legged, beast-headed spirits paired with a robed humanoid deity. Based on iconographic features and the accompanying text, these figures are confirmed to represent the *Sanshi*<sup>1</sup>.

### 3.1. The Formation, Evolution, and Visualization of the *Sanshi* Concept

The Daoist concept of the *Sanshi* emerged early, with references in numerous ancient texts such as the Han Dynasty (202B.C.E.–220C.E.). Daoist classic *Taiping Jing* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace)<sup>2</sup>, the apocryphal text *Hetu Jiming Fu* 河圖紀命符 (Talisman of the River Chart Recording Destinies). The *Taiping Jing* describes the *Sanshi* as follows: “Within the body reside *Sanshi* worms, dwelling in the three *Dantians* 丹田. They delight in human nature and seek early death. On each *Gengshen Day*, they ascend to report to the Supreme Deity, requesting calamities upon humans, thus causing many to die prematurely or suffer misfortune. Practitioners who eliminate them through techniques and medicines can attain longevity.” 身中有三屍蟲，居三丹田，好感人性，欲得早亡，每至庚申日上逸於帝，請降災禍于人，故人多夭枉過厄。修煉者用術及藥去之，則年長不死 (M. Wang 1960). The *Hetu Jiming Fu* provides a more detailed account: “The *Sanshi* are akin to spirits, ghosts, and soul-essences. Desiring to hasten human death, they aim to become ghosts, wandering freely and feasting on sacrificial offerings. On the last day of each *LiuJia* cycle, they ascend to inform the Director of Destinies (*Siming* 司命) of the Daoist practitioner’s transgressions. Severe offenses result in the deduction of one’s lifespan (*Ji* 紀), while minor ones reduce one’s fortune (*Suan* 算). Thus, those seeking immortality must first eliminate the *Sanshi*—by cultivating tranquility, suppressing desires, calming the spirit, clarifying inner-nature, accumulating good deeds—only then will medicinal elixirs be effective, and immortality attainable.” 三屍之為物，實魂魄鬼神之屬也。欲使人早死，此屍當得作鬼，自放縱遊行，饗食人祭拜。每到六甲窮日，輒上天白司命，道人罪過，過大者奪人紀，過小者奪人算。故求仙之人，先去三屍，恬淡無欲，神靜性明，積眾善，乃服藥有效，乃成仙 (Yasui and Akira 1994). Both texts define the *Sanshi* as spirits dwelling within the human body, monitoring behavior, and seeking to induce early death—forming the core interpretation of the *Sanshi* in subsequent Daoist tradition.

By the Wei-Jin period, Daoist texts further elaborated on the *Sanshi*’ roles and assigned them specific names and forms. The Daoist scripture *Zhonghuang Jing* 中黃經 (Scripture of the Central Yellow) states: “The Upper Worm resides in the Upper *Dantian*, within the brain and heart. White-green in color, it is named *Peng Ju* 彭鋸, inciting gluttony and stagnant desires... The Middle Worm, named *Peng Zhi* 彭質, white-yellow in color, dwells in the Middle *Dantian*, provoking greed for wealth, emotional excess, and confusion of the true void, causing the *Sanshi* to transform and the *Qipo*... The Lower Worm, named *Peng Jiao* 彭矯, white-black in color, resides in the Lower *Dantian*, inducing obsession with clothing, wine, and sensual pleasures.” 上蟲居上丹田，腦心中是也。其色白而青，名曰彭鋸，使人好味，嗜慾癡滯…… 中蟲名彭質，其色白而黃，居中丹田，使人責財賄，好喜怒，濁亂真無，令三屍變易，七魄流蕩…… 下屍其色白而黑，名曰彭矯，居下丹田，使人愛衣裳，耽酒色 (Daozang 1988, vol. 18, pp. 385–86). The *Zhonghuang Jing* is listed in Ge Hong’s *Baopuzi Neipian* 抱樸子內篇 (Inner Chapters of the Baopuzi) among the Daoist scriptures collected by Zheng Yin 鄭隱, primarily recording practices such as *Qi* absorption (*Fuqi* 服氣) and grain avoidance (*Bigu* 辟穀). Alternative, rare names for the *Sanshi* appear in other texts—for example, the *Zhenzhong Ji* 枕中記 (Record from the Pillow) refers to them as Cyan Maiden (*Qing Gu* 青姑), White Maiden (*Bai Gu* 白姑), and Blood Corpse (*Xue Shi* 血屍) (Zhonghua Daozang 2004, vol. 23, p. 666).

By the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the theoretical system surrounding the *Sanshi* had matured. Together with the *Jiuchong*, the *Sanshi* developed into a theological and ontological description constructed around this concept, along with corresponding medicines, rituals, and cultivation methods. This maturation is marked by the compilation of the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* 太上除三尸九蟲保生經 (Supreme Scripture on Eliminating the *Sanshi* *jiuchong* to Protect Life), a text dedicated exclusively to the *Sanshi* *jiuchong*, which also includes specialized illustrations of the *Sanshi* (see Figure 2). This scripture provided the primary textual foundation for the *Sanshi* concept in subsequent Daoist medicine and *Neidan* practice, signifying its transformation from an isolated concept to a centralized religious theoretical system.

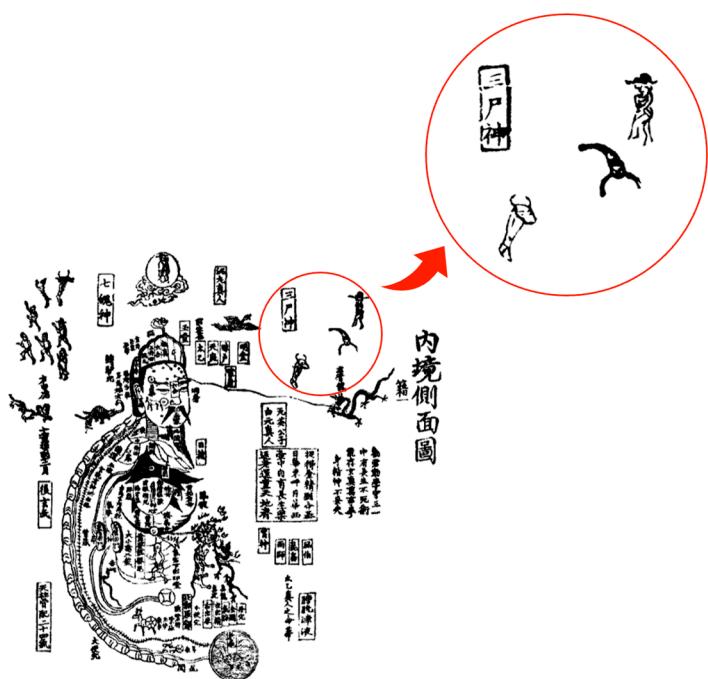


**Figure 2.** The *Sanshi* in *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* (*Daozang* 1988, vol. 18, p. 699).

Depictions of the *Sanshi* in Daoist art are not uniform. Beyond the combination of two one-legged spirits (one ram-headed, one lion-headed) and a humanoid deity in *Jinye Huandan Yinzhen Tu* (金液還丹印證圖), common representations in *Neidan* iconography include: (1) one-legged beast-headed, beast-form, and humanoid figures; and (2) one-legged beast-headed, reptilian, and humanoid figures. For instance: (1) In the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing*, the *Sanshi* appear as a one-legged ox-headed spirit, a lion-like beast, and a robed humanoid (see Figure 2); (2) In the Five Dynasties Daoist Yan Luozi 煙蘿子's *Yan Luozi Chaozhen Tu* (煙蘿子朝真圖), in the upper section, the *Sanshi* are faintly distinguishable as a humanoid, a one-legged beast-headed figure, and a beast-form—consistent with their depiction in the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* (see Figure 3); (3) The *Annotated and Illustrated Commentary on the Nanjing by Huangdi* (黃帝八十一難經纂圖句解), in its Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) woodblock edition, presents a Daoist anatomical diagram in the form of an “inner vision map” (*Neijing Tu* 內景圖). In the upper right, the *Sanshi* are depicted as a one-legged beast, a robed humanoid, and a reptile (see Figure 4). Analysis of Daoist *Sanshi* iconography reveals that despite variations in form and composition, at least one or two one-legged, beast-headed figures are consistently present—this is the key distinguishing feature of *Sanshi* imagery.



**Figure 3.** The Sanshi in *Yan Luozi Chaozhen Tu* (Daozang 1988, vol. 4, p. 690). This image was locally magnified to facilitate more distinct recognition of its elements.



**Figure 4.** The Sanshi in *Annotated and Illustrated Commentary on the Nanjing by Huangdi* (Daozang 1988, vol. 21, p. 595). This image was locally magnified to facilitate more distinct recognition of its elements.

### 3.2. Analysis of the Origins of the Sanshi Concept and Iconography

For religious terminology, sorting out the formation and development of a concept within its textual framework is fundamental to research. Exploring the origins of the concept and its iconography from a broader religious perspective represents a deeper exten-

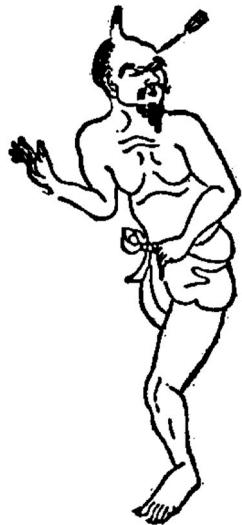
sion of this work, facilitating a more thorough understanding of the concept's theoretical evolution. For the *Sanshi*, two core clues guide origin tracing: their essential definition as spirits dwelling within the human body, tasked with reporting human behavior to heaven and seeking to induce early death; and their iconic one-legged, beast-headed form.

Shih-shan Susan Huang 黃士珊 argues that the key one-legged, beast-headed imagery of the *Sanshi* draws inspiration from the prevalent motif of one-legged demons in early and medieval Chinese art. For example, a one-legged, ox-headed pottery figurine unearthed from a Southern Song Dynasty tomb of the Yang clan 楊氏家族 in Mianyang 綿陽, Sichuan (see Figure 5), is described by He Guozhi 何國志 (cited by Huang) as "an animal head with two horns; its mouth carries an object; its body is shaped like a leg with a hoof." (S.-s.S. Huang 2012). This figure bears striking similarities to the one-legged, beast-headed *Sanshi* depicted in the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* and other Daoist atlases. Notably, the figurine's "object in its mouth" corresponds to the scroll-like items held in the beaks of the two one-legged, beast-headed *Sanshi* in *Verification Diagrams of the Golden Elixir and Reverted Cinnabar* (金液還丹印證圖) (see Figure 1)—a detail echoing the *Sanshi*'s role as monitors of human behavior and reporters to the Heavenly Court.



**Figure 5.** The Single-Legged, Beast-Headed Sculpture from the Song Dynasty Tomb in Mianyang (He 1988).

Shih-shan Susan Huang 黃士珊 further notes parallels between the *Sanshi* and certain disease ghosts (*binggui* 痘鬼) illustrated in *Binggui Wang Tu* 痘鬼王圖 (Diagram of the Disease Ghost King), a text derived from the Daoist-influenced Esoteric Buddhist scripture *Qiyao Xingchen Bie Xing Fa* 七曜星辰別行法 (Alternative Practices of the Seven Stars) (S.-s.S. Huang 2012). For instance, the demon controlled by the Literary Star (*Wenxing* 文星), a one-legged figure with a goat's beard and horns, is said to cause back pain (see Figure 6). The *Sanshi* also shares similarities with disease-symbolizing demons and mythical beasts like the *Kuiniu* (夔牛) in the *Shanhai Jing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) (see Figure 7). Huang concludes: "The material souls and deathbringers depicted in the *Scripture for the Protection of Life* gradually took shape as part of the visualization of disease demons pervasive in medieval China. The shared depiction of one-legged anthropomorphic diseases may have been inspired by a prototype derived from ancient mythological descriptions of life in foreign lands." (S.-s.S. Huang 2012).



**Figure 6.** The Disease Ghost in *Binggui Wang Tu* (*Dazhengzang* 1990, vol. 21, p. 456).



**Figure 7.** The *Kuiniu* as depicted in *Shanhai Jing Tu* (Hu c. 1558–c. 1617).

Beyond Huang's iconographic analysis, I also note that the term "Shi" (Corpse 屍) in *Sanshi* which carries distinct connotations differing from ordinary Daoist deities offers crucial insights into the *Sanshi*'s origins, reflecting connections to early Chinese religious beliefs. In *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters), "Shi" (屍) has dual meanings: first, the state of a body lying down, implying death; second, a ritual effigy representing a deity, symbolizing the physical form of a deity (S. Xu 1963). This duality is vividly manifested in the *Shanhai Jing*, which records numerous deities referred to as "XX屍", forming the unique concept of "corpse state" (*Shixiang* 屍象). Ma Changyi 馬昌儀 explains: "*Shixiang* is a distinctive mythological phenomenon in the *Shanhai Jing*, referring to certain gods who, having been killed for various reasons, continue to act in the form of 'corpses' with their souls remaining immortal." (Ma 2022). As a special state of existence for deceased gods, the "XX屍" in the *Shanhai Jing* are generally depicted with mutilated or alienated bodies—for example, "The Corpse of Jubi" (*Jubi zhi Shi* 据比之屍) is described as "having a broken neck, disheveled hair, and missing one hand," 折頸披髮, 無一手 (Luan 2019, p. 467) while "The Corpse of King Xuan of Rong" (*Rong Xuan Wang Shi* 戎宣王屍) is "a horse shape without a head." 馬狀無首 (Luan 2019, p. 601).

Clearly, the concept of *Shi* in the *Shanhai Jing*—both in meaning and form—shares significant parallels with the *Sanshi*. This further suggests that the origins of the *Sanshi* may be traced to early Chinese primitive religious beliefs, with the term *Shi* inherently convey-

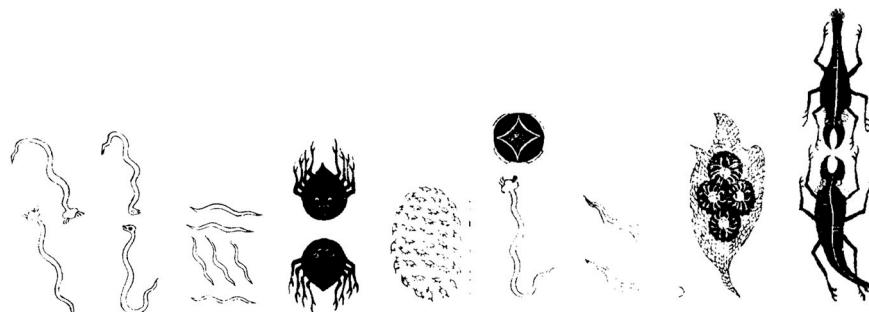
ing symbolic associations with death. As spirits in a *Shi* state, their inherent connection to death links them to disease and mortality: as physical remnants of death, corpses were seen as sources of illness and demise due to decay and contamination; as spiritual remnants of death, they were associated with spiritual decline, embodying the roots of negative human desires and spiritual flaws.

#### 4. *Jiuchong* and *Qipo* Imagery: An Interpretation of Its Connections with *Sanshi*

In addition to appearing directly in *Neidan* practice imagery, Daoist *Sanshi* imagery often features in “inner vision diagrams” (內景圖) that depict the structure of the human body and even the spirit, serving to intuitively express the physical and spiritual constitution of humans. In these *Sanshi*-related images, the *Sanshi* typically form fixed combinations with other body-concept elements such as the *Jiuchong* and *Qipo*, conveying the religious connotations of the *Sanshi* from different perspectives.

##### 4.1. The *Jiuchong* and the *Sanshi*

In Daoist iconography, the combination of the *Sanshi* and the *Jiuchong* is common, embodying the Daoist understanding of human decline and its triggering factors from both physical and spiritual dimensions. For instance, in the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing*, in addition to describing the *Sanshi* as ghostly figures, it also depicts the *Jiuchong* in the forms of worm or insects (see Figure 8), which demonstrates the typical understanding of insect/worm-borne disease factors in Daoist medicine.



**Figure 8.** The *Jiuchong* in *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* ([Daozang 1988](#), vol. 18, pp. 700–1).

According to the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing*, the *Jiuchong* have distinct names and colors and can cause various physical diseases. The Daoist concept of the *Jiuchong* evolved from the earlier concept of “Three Worms” (*Sanchong* 三蟲), which emerged no later than the Han Dynasty. For example, Wang Chong 王充 of the Western Han Dynasty (202B.C.E.–8C.E.) mentioned *Sanchong* in his *Lunheng* 論衡 (Balanced Discourses): “There are *sanchong* in the human abdomen. In the marshes of the lower realm, the worm is called leech, which eats human feet; the *sanchong* eat the intestines.” 人腹中有三蟲，下地之澤其蟲曰蛭，蛭食人足，三蟲食腸 ([C. Wang 1974](#)). These mainly refer to human intestinal parasites. By approximately the Jin Dynasty (266–420), the term *Sanchong* had evolved into *Jiuchong* and was combined with *Sanshi* to form the specialized term *Sanshi jiuchong*. Subsequently, this term began to appear frequently in medical texts. For example, in Chao Yuanfang 巢元方’s *Zhubing yuanhou Lun* 諸病源候論 (Treatise on the Etiology and Symptoms of Diseases) of the Sui Dynasty (581–618), *Sanshi jiuchong* primarily referred to gastrointestinal parasites in modern medical terms: “The *Sanshi Jiuchong* reside in the human intestines and stomach, and start to move when the intestines and stomach are weak. The upward movement will eat the five organs of a person, producing symptoms of panic and chest tightness, and the teeth, gums and lips will develop sores. The downward

movement will eat the intestines of a person, causing symptoms of anal injury and decay.” 三屍九蟲，常居人腸胃，腸胃虛則動，上食於五臟，則心懊而悶，齒齦、唇口並生瘡；下食於腸，則肛門傷爛，而穀道開也 (Ding 2013a). In the *Zhubing Yuanhou Lun* 諸病源候論 (Treatise on the Etiology and Symptoms of Diseases), Chao Yuanfang 巢元方 provides a detailed description of the names, sizes and shapes of the *Jiuchong*: The *Jiuchong* are as follows: the first is called the *Fu Chong* (伏蟲), approximately one centimeter long<sup>3</sup>; the second is called the *Hui Chong* (roundworm 蠕蟲), approximately one foot long; the third is called the *Bai Chong* (white worm 白蟲), approximately three centimeters long; the fourth is called the *Rou Chong* (flesh worm 肉蟲), shaped like a rotten plum; the fifth is called the *Fei Chong* (lung worm 肺蟲), shaped like a silkworm; the sixth is called the *Wei Chong* (stomach worm 胃蟲), shaped like a toad; the seventh is called the *Rou Chong* (weak worm 弱蟲), shaped like a melon petal; the eighth is called the *Chi Chong* (red worm 赤蟲), shaped like raw meat; the ninth is called the *Nao Chong* (pin worm 螺蟲), very tiny, shaped like worms inhabiting vegetables.<sup>4</sup> 九蟲者，一曰伏蟲，長四分；二曰蛔蟲，長一尺；三曰白蟲，長一寸；四曰肉蟲，狀如爛李；五曰肺蟲，狀如蠶；六曰胃蟲，狀如蛤蟆；七曰弱蟲，狀如瓜瓣；八曰赤蟲，狀如生肉；九曰螺蟲，至細微，形如菜蟲. (Ding 2013a, p. 352).

The *Jiuchong* mentioned in *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* mainly cite the descriptions of the *Jiuchong* “forms and disease-causing effects from *Zhubing yuanhou Lun*. In particular, the description of the *Fei Chong* holds that it causes contagious consumptive disease” (*Chuanshi Laobing* 傳屍癆病) (Daozang 1988, vol. 18, p. 700), linking the *Sanshi* and *Jiuchong* to pulmonary tuberculosis—a new account not found in *Zhubing yuanhou Lun*. From the Song Dynasty onward, the *Sanshi* and *Jiuchong* became largely specifically associated with pulmonary tuberculosis, and the theory of the *Sanshi Jiuchong* served as the foundation for the lung consumption treatment masters who emerged during the Song and Yuan dynasties and the anti-consumption rituals they practiced, which employed Daoist Thunder Magic (Leifa 雷法).

Overall, the concept of the *Jiuchong* mainly refers to the physical destructive factors within the human body, or more specifically to pathogenic organisms represented by internal parasites. This clearly corresponds to Daoism’s understanding of the destructive factors affecting the physical body of humans—for example, a large number of worms emerging from decaying corpses and insects growing in rotten grains. Worms and insects are regarded as one of the causes of human physical decline, thus forming the concept of the *Jiuchong*. Correspondingly, under the philosophical view of the balance between body and spirit, Daoism has constructed a spiritual factor of decline corresponding to the material and physical factors of decline, which is the concept of the *Sanshi*.

#### 4.2. The *Qipo* and the *Sanshi*

In Daoist images, the *Sanshi* and *Qipo* are also common combinations, expressing Daoism’s understanding of negative spiritual factors in human nature from two perspectives: internal and external origins. In Daoism, the understanding of the functions of the *Qipo* is placed within the framework of the Yin-Yang 陰陽 theory, holding that the human soul consists of the Yang-attributed Three Hun (*Sanhun* 三魂) and the Yin-attributed *Qipo*. Among them, the *Sanhun* are regarded as positive spiritual factors, while the *Qipo* represent negative spiritual elements such as negative emotions and desires, and thus are also considered spiritual factors leading to premature human death.

As Ge Hong 葛洪 stated in *Baopuzi Neipian*: “Although the *Sanshi* are formless, they are indeed among the spiritual beings like *Po*, *spirits*, and *ghosts*.” 三屍之為物，雖無形而實魄靈鬼神之屬也 (M. Wang 1983). The *Sanshi* and *Qipo* in Daoism share many similarities in connotation and even in image. For example, the diagrams of the *Qipo* recorded in *Taishang*

*Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* show numerous similarities with those of the *Sanshi*. In which, “Swallowing Thieves Tunzei” (*Tunzei* 吞賊) and “Eliminating Impurities” (*Chuhui* 除穢) among the *Qipo* are in human form, while “Flying Poison” (*Feidu* 飛毒) and “Sparrow Yin” (*Queyin* 雀陰) are depicted as one-legged beast heads. Additionally, there are “Stinking Lung” (*Choufei* 臭肺), “Crouching Excrement” (*Fushi* 伏矢), and “Corpse Dog” (*Shigou* 屍狗), all with incomplete or distorted body shapes (see Figure 9). These images not only feature the typical one-legged, beast-headed form commonly seen in depictions of the *Sanshi* but also include names with universal negative connotations, such as the character “*Shi*” (屍).



**Figure 9.** The *Qipo* in *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* (Daozang 1988, vol. 18, p. 698).

Beyond their iconographic similarities, the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* also describes the functions of the *Qipo* in a manner analogous to those of the *Sanshi*, in which states: “The *Qipo* are accumulated Yin Qi 陰氣, shaped like ghosts. They cause people to have excessive desires, suffer fatigue, feel stuffy and constrained, prefer filth, and dislike conflict. They can turn humans into walking corpses, directing them away from life and toward death, prompting flattery, deceit, obsession with female beauty, and the constant arousal of evil, hastening early death.” 夫七魄積陰之氣，其形類於鬼也。令人多欲傷勞，窒塞拘急，好穢不好爭。能使行屍，背生向死，諂曲詭詐，慕戀女色，日夜興惡，催人早死 (Daozang 1988, vol. 18, p. 698). This text attributes human sensory desires and negative mental traits entirely to the functions of the *Qipo*, and similarly holds that the existence of the *Qipo* “hastens early death.” It is evident that the *Sanshi* and the *Qipo* overlap substantially both in function and imagery. Their core difference lies in that the *Sanshi* are regarded as external, heterogeneous negative spiritual factors alien to human nature, while the *Qipo* are inherent negative spiritual components that constitute human essence. The *Sanshi* and the *Qipo* thus represent two distinct understandings of the origin of negativity in human nature.

In Chinese philosophical debates on the inherent goodness or evil of human nature, there existed a dispute between the theory of original goodness and the theory of original evil. Proponents of original goodness, represented by Mencius 孟子, argued that human nature is inherently good—like water flowing downward, a natural inclination—and that subsequent evil arises from environmental influences or self-indulgence. In contrast, advocates of original evil, represented by Xunzi 荀子, maintained that humans are born with desires for profit, sensual pleasure, and jealousy. Regarding human evil deeds, the divergence between the two schools lies in that one attributes evil to inducement by external, non-essential factors, while the other regards it as a manifestation of human nature itself. Although the debate between original goodness and original evil primarily emerged within Confucianism, the question of human nature was a concern across various ideological schools. In Daoist thought, human behavior is embodied by spiritual entities such as the *Sanhun* and *Qipo* or *Sansi*. In this sense, the *Sanshi* and the *Qipo*, which are associated with human spirit and symbolize negativity or death, thus can be seen as manifestations of

ancient Chinese debates on human nature within Daoist religious concepts. Many Daoist texts adopt a parallel description of the *Sanshi* and the *Qipo*, asserting that human nature inherently contains the negative spiritual component of the *Qipo*, which, combined with the inducement of the external *Sanshi*, jointly lead to spiritual decline.

Beyond the general understanding of the *Sanshi* as external and the *Qipo* as internal negative spiritual entities, some Daoist images and texts present more diverse interpretations of their relationship with human nature from an anthropological perspective.

First is the change in the images of the *Qipo*. In the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing*, some members of both the *Sanshi* and the *Qipo* are depicted as single-legged, beast-headed or beast-like figures, used to symbolize their evil nature. For the *Sanshi*, which represent external negative spiritual factors, they are generally portrayed as ghost-like images to express their heterogeneous nature distinct from humans; however, the *Qipo* are usually regarded as a part of human soul—an integral component of human essence—so their portrayal as ghost figures is controversial. Therefore, different representations of the *Qipo* can be seen in some images. In the *soul diagrams* (魂魄圖) from *Xingming Guizhi* 性命圭旨 (Essentials of Life and Inner-nature), a Daoist health-preserving text carved in the Qing Dynasty, the *Sanhun* and *Qipo* are depicted in images. It is noteworthy that the *Qipo* in *Xingming Guizhi* (see Figure 10) are portrayed as hermit figures dressed similarly to the *Sanhun* in the *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* (see Figure 11). This change in imagery precisely reflects the altered understanding of the *Qipo*. As noted in the image caption: “*Po* is the spirit of essence, both intangible and tangible, and the basis for the ears and eyes to see and hear.” 魂者，精之神。有虚有实，耳目之所以视听者。The *Po* were regarded as the bearers of human sensory functions rather than negative spiritual elements causing decline and death. Thus, in this case, the images of the *Qipo* transformed from inhuman, alienated forms to human figures, demonstrating the illustrator’s more positive understanding of the *Qipo*.



**Figure 10.** The *Hun* and *Po* Tu in *Xingming Guizhi* (Z. G. Yin 2012).



**Figure 11.** The *Shanhun tu* in *Taishang Chu Sanshi Jiuchong Baosheng Jing* (Daozang 1988, vol. 18, p. 697).

The second is A More Positive Understanding of the *Sanshi*. In certain Daoist texts, the *Sanshi* are also understood as essential elements constituting human personality, similar to the functions of the *Qipo*. For instance, the *Yunji Qiqian* 雲笈七簽 (Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel) includes an interesting allegorical text titled *Meng Sanshi Shuo* 夢三屍說 (Tale of Dreaming of the *Sanshi*), which discusses the significance of the *Sanshi* in human nature.

The allegory given there is about a man from Guangyang 廣羊 named Song Yanhua 宋彥華, who resided on the banks of the Pu River 潍上. He was fond of Confucian literature and various arts and techniques. Having obtained numerous methods and medicines from Daoist masters, he sought to eliminate the *Sanshi*. One night, he suddenly dreamed of three men standing in the hall, dressed in ancient official robes and hats.

In the dream, Yanhua reproached the *Sanshi* angrily: “I was born by the mandate of Heaven, and Heaven has assigned me a lifespan—whether long or short, it is predetermined. I have heard that you delight in abiding within my body, slandering and deceiving me, disturbing my spirit, and rejoicing in bringing me misfortune, evil, and premature death. What have I done to wrong you! Now, my Daoist masters have taught me techniques to kill you. If you do not leave at once, you shall suffer severe torment.”

The *Sanshi* said: “If you will listen to us, we will defend ourselves against these false accusations, and then take our leave. Will you allow it?”

Yanhua replied: “Speak.”

The *Sanshi* said:

Our clan is formed from the essence of *Yin* and *Yang*, linked to the Great Void 太虛, emerging from non-existence into existence. When a mortal is born with a physical form, the Supreme Deity dispatches my brothers and me to dwell within humans, governing their souls, safeguarding their nature, and preserving their inner harmony. Alas, when humans reach adulthood, they indulge in countless pursuits: coveting wealth and food, indulging in sensual pleasures, practicing deceit and fraud, being slanderous, cunning, and dishonest—appearing upright outwardly, yet harboring devious intentions inwardly. They are unfilial to parents, unfriendly to siblings, unkind to others, oppress the people and seize their property, flaunt their power and status, devise secret schemes to enrich their own families, rejoice in profit and envy the virtuous, disdain the poor and curry favor with the wealthy. They toil us day and night; my brothers and I are utterly exhausted! Weary as we are, we record their gravest offenses and bring harm upon them, hoping they will die soon so that we may find respite. Otherwise, how could we ever find peace? Now, if you truly desire the *Dao* 道, you need not eliminate us. Simply cultivate integrity, abandon glory and sensual pleasures, withdraw from the world and renounce desires, cease all toil and conceal your radiance, purify your Three *Dantians*, and stabilize your Nine Mansions (*Jiufu* 九腑). Let the sun and moon shine within you, and the stars and constellations overlook you from on high. Then my brothers and I will live in ease and tranquil-

ity; even for ten thousand years, we will remain by your side, guarding you from external harms. Free from toil, how dare we ever neglect our duties—let alone slander or deceive you! But now, you cling to glory and luxury, covet worldly fame and life, scheme for wealth and sensual pleasures, yet blame us for your troubles. We shall leave now. If the *Upper Peng* 上彭 departs, your words will become muddled, your ears and eyes will grow dull, and you will no longer derive joy from appearances or tastes. If the *Middle Peng* 中彭 departs, your plans will fail, your governance will be flawed, and your glory, career, literary works, and skills will no longer flourish. If the *Lower Peng* 下彭 departs, your passion for life will fade, you will struggle in all endeavors, and you will no longer be strong in sitting or standing. Your descendants will perish, and your soul will drift aimlessly. You will become a walking corpse—not a human being. When humans dwell in the world, they rely on my brothers and me for discernment, knowledge, and thought. You fail to cultivate integrity and preserve your primal *qi*, yet falsely accuse us of crimes. Is this not unjust?

Having spoken, they bowed to Yanhua and prepared to leave. In the dream, Yanhua grabbed their sleeves to detain them, saying: “Since ancient times, all humans must die, and no one can survive without wealth. Now, I can no longer preserve my true essence. Stay with me, and help me amass wealth—I will never turn back to the  *again.”*

The Three Peng suddenly leaped into his nostrils. Yanhua awoke with a start, confused and alarmed. From then on, he devoted himself entirely to accumulating wealth and never spoke of Daoism or its techniques again.

有廣羊人，宋彥華，家於濮上，好儒文及術伎，因於道者處受術及藥百計，求去三屍。忽一夕夢三人，古冠服而立堂閣之內。彥華問曰：君何人乎？答曰：吾即是君身中三彭也。欲辭子，故來相告耳。彥華夢中責之曰：吾受生於天，天賦有命，命有短長，必自悉矣。聞君好居吾身中，讒賊幻惑惱亂吾神，使邪夭禍厄，則喜而去，吾何負於君輩哉！今吾師道術以殺汝，汝不速去，必遭楚苦。三屍曰：子能聽我言，將以辨吾非罪，而以辭子，可歟。彥華曰：何也？答曰：吾之族，陰陽之精也。上系太虛，自無入有。凡人有生質，則上帝乃頒吾兄弟賦於人中，主其魂魄，護其性而保其中也。蓋人中及壯，則百緒之為，貪財食，溺邪淫，矯詐欺誣，奸狡妄，外示正直，內趨僻違，不孝友，不慈惠，抑民掠財，逞形恃勢，潛窺陰計，自豐其家，喜利忌賢，輕貧棄富，晝夜役使，兄弟甚勞苦哉！吾之疲倦，且錄其尤以害之得速死，冀吾有暇耳。不如是，何得適哉！今子若好道，不必去吾兄弟。子但修中正，拋榮去味，遠世棄欲，息役沉光，滌清三宮，凝定九府，日月內燭，星斗高臨。則吾兄弟優遊清閑，雖千萬歲，與子周旋，賓護外物，吾無勞役，又何敢怠？況讒賊乎！今子且愛榮好奢，戀世情命，矯謀財色，既而返逐於我，我今去矣。若上彭去，則子言語倒錯，耳室目暗，容貌滋味無復暢也；中彭去，則子規謀失算，治官乖政，榮業壯圖、文詞術藝無復適也；下彭去，則子風月蕩絕，馳騁艱難，坐立無復強也。子孫廢滅，魂魄飄沉，如此則子返為行屍，非人也。夫人之處世，賴我兄弟以為精識思慮。子不修中正，保元氣，而誣我以罪，豈非戾乎！言訖，揖彥華將去。彥華夢中牽其袂而留之，曰：自古皆有死，民無財不活，今吾不能保其真矣。子且為我留居，共子謀財，不復反覆矣。三彭倏然躍入其鼻，悅而驚乃寤。自後但以積財為業，不復更言道術 (Daozang 1988, vol. 22, pp. 587–88)

In this allegory, the *Sanshi* are regarded as constituent elements of human nature: the presence of the *Upper Corpse* (*Shangshi* 上屍) ensures the normal functioning of the senses; the presence of the *Middle Corpse* (*Zhongshi* 中屍) endows humans with wisdom as well as literary and political talents; and the presence of the *Lower Corpse* (*Xiashi* 下屍) provides humans with desires for reproduction and competition. If the *Sanshi* are eliminated, hu-

mans will become walking corpses. It argues that eliminating the *Sanshi* does not require technical means such as taking elixirs; instead, maintaining inner peace and minimizing desires is sufficient to avoid their harm. This text is a rare positive depiction of the *Sanshi*, similarly reflecting in-depth reflections on the relationship between human nature and desires in some Daoist texts.

## 5. Two Approaches to Addressing the *Sanshi* in *Neidan*

In general perception, the *Sanshi* are regarded as spiritual entities within the human body that induce decay and even death. Consequently, eliminating the *Sanshi* is a recurring theme in Daoist longevity practices. Early Daoism primarily employed methods such as taking elixirs or engaging in religious activities like observing the *Gengshen* vigil to dispel or mitigate the influence of the *Sanshi*. In *Neidan*, however, the *Sanshi* are mostly integrated into the realm of spiritual cultivation. *Neidan* texts outline two main approaches to eliminating the *Sanshi*: spiritual visualization and self-cultivation of inner-nature.

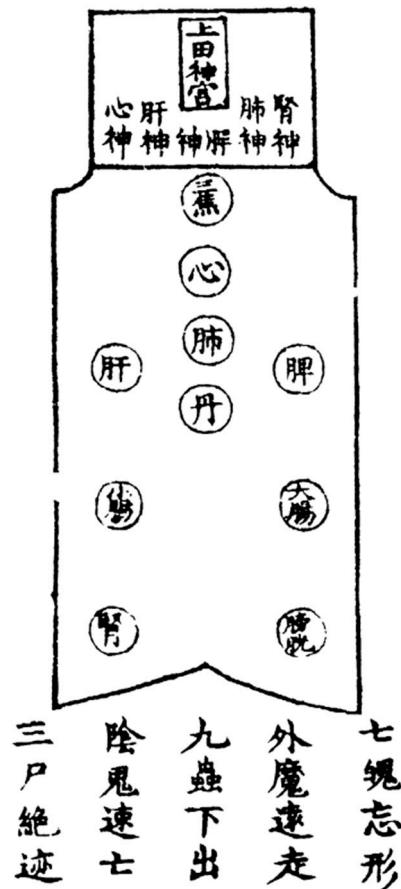
### 5.1. Eliminating the *Sanshi* Through Spiritual Visualization

Daoist *Neidan* formulas often include descriptions of eliminating the *Sanshi*. For instance, Zhang Boduan 張伯端, a representative figure of the Southern School of the Golden Elixir tradition (*Jingdan Pai Nanzong* 金丹派南宗), stated in his *Wuzhen Pian* 悟真篇 (The Awakening to Reality): “Only when the *Sanshi* are completely slain can the Dao be attained.” 殺盡三屍道可期 (*Daozang* 1988, vol. 2, p. 948). This reflects a particular understanding of the relationship between the *Sanshi* and the practitioner themselves —framing the *Sanshi* as demonic obstacles hindering *Neidan* practice, thus advocating active confrontation to eradicate them. Many *Neidan* classics mention the method of “internal observation and igniting fire” (*neiguan qihuo* 內觀起火) to eliminate the *Sanshi*.

Chen Nan 陳楠, a representative of the *Jingdan Pai Nanzong*, wrote in his *Ziting Jing* 紫庭篇 (Scripture of the Purple Court): “Who knew the flames would burn ten thousand feet red, slaying the *Sanshi* as the jade cauldron still cools.” 誰知火焰萬丈紅, 接殺三屍玉鑪寒 (*Daozang* 1988, vol. 4, p. 614). This *Neidan* formula describes the practice of visualizing flames to incinerate the *Sanshi*. Qiu Chuji 邱處機, a leading figure of the Quanzhen School (*Quanzhen Pai* 全真派), provided a more detailed account of this method in his *Dadan Zhizhi* 大丹直指 (Direct Instructions on the Great Elixir): “Guard against yin ghosts, external demons, the *Qipo*, and the *Sanshi* that follow, mingling with true essence to disrupt the yang spirit and prevent it from ascending to the heavenly palace. There is an inherent method of internal observation and igniting fire: promote the refinement of *Qi*, and *Qi* converges into spirit—timing must not be mistaken.” 防其陰鬼外魔, 七魄三屍相隨, 雜天真以亂陽神, 不能得上入天官。自有內觀起火之法, 推以鍊氣, 氣聚為神, 不可差其時也 (*Daozang* 1988, vol. 4, p. 399). Through internal visualization of the “true fire” (*Zhenghuo* 真火) generated by the *Wuzhang*, practitioners distinguish, burn, and dispel internal demonic obstacles such as the *Sanshi*.

Additionally, the *Dadan Zhizhi* includes an illustration titled “Diagram of Internal Observation, Igniting Fire, Refining Spirit, and Uniting with the Dao” (*Neiguan qihuo lianxing hedao tu*) 內觀起火煉神合道圖 which symbolically depicts the elimination of the *Sanshi* through spiritual visualization (see Figure 12). Named after “Refining Spirit and Uniting with the Dao” (*lianshen Hedao* 煉神合道)—a realm of *Neidan* practice—the diagram indicates its role in spiritual cultivation. In the center, texts label the five zang-organs (*Wuzhang* 五臟) and three *jiaos* (*Sanjiao* 三焦), small intestine, and large intestine of the six fu-organs (*Liufu* 六腑), with “Elixir” (*Dan* 丹) marked at the core. The upper section is labeled “Divine Palace” (*Shengong* 神宮) along with “Heart Spirit” (*Xinsheng* 心神) and the spirits of the *Wuzhang*. The lower section contains the inscriptions: “The *Qipo* lose their form; ex-

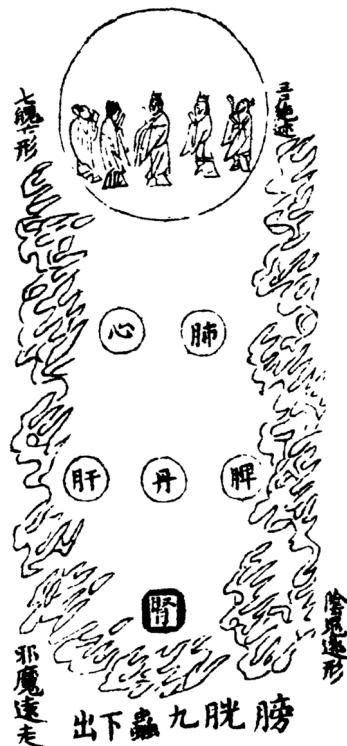
ternal demons flee far; the *Jiuchong* exit downward; yin ghosts perish swiftly; the *Sanshi* vanish without a trace.” 七魄忘形, 外魔遠走, 九蟲下出, 陰鬼速亡, 三屍絕跡. This expresses how refining the spirits of the *Wuzhang* through internal elixir fire dispels physical and spiritual destructive factors such as yin demons, the *Sanshi*, and the *Jiuchong* from the human body.



**Figure 12.** The Shanshi in *Neiguan qihuo lianxing hedao tu* (from *Dadan Zhizhi*) (*Daozang* 1988, vol. 4, p. 399).

Another *Neidan* atlas likely dating to the Song-Yuan period, *Xiuzhen Taiji Hunyuan Zhixuan Tu* 修真太極混元指玄圖 (Mysterious Diagram of Cultivating Truth, Taiji, and Primordial Chaos), includes the “Diagram of *Neidan* Fire Ignition and the Transformation Between Immortal and Mortal,” (*Neidan qihuo xianfan jiaohuan Tu* 內丹起火仙凡交換圖) which conveys the same theme of eliminating the *Sanshi* through the imagery of visualized flames as Qiu Chuji 邱處機’s diagram (see Figure 13). More vivid and detailed than Qiu’s work, this diagram features the character “Elixir” (*Dan* 丹) and the *Wuzhang* in the center, surrounded by flame motifs. Divine figures are painted in the upper section, accompanied by annotations: “The *Sanshi* vanish without a trace 三屍絕跡” and “The *Qipo* conceal their forms.” 七魄匿形 The lower section includes annotations: “Yin ghost (*Yingui* 陰鬼) hide their shapes” 陰鬼遁形 and “Demons (*Xiemo* 邪魔) flee far,” 邪魔遠走 with the bottom inscription “The *Jiuchong* exit downward by the bladder” 膀胱九蟲下出. Supplementary scriptures alongside the image state that visualizing the internal elixir fire can dispel various internal and external demonic obstacles in *Neidan* practice, such as the *Sanshi*, *Qipo*, and *Jiuchong*.

圖換交凡仙火起觀內



**Figure 13.** The *Neidan qihuo xianfan jiaohuan Tu* (from *Xiuzhen Taiji Hunyuan Zhixuan Tu*) ([Daozang 1988](#), vol. 3, p. 102).

### 5.2. Eliminating the *Sanshi* Through Inner-Nature Cultivation

In addition to the aforementioned meditation techniques for eliminating the *Sanshi*, another approach found in *Neidan* texts is self-cultivation of inner-nature. For example, Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾, another key representative of the *Jingdan Pai nanzong*, claimed in his *Neidan* formulas that the *Sanshi* could be dispelled through self-cultivation rather than taking elixirs or visualization. In his *Yinyang Shengjiang Lun* 陰陽升降論 (Treatise on the Rise and Fall of Yin and Yang), Bai Yuchan stated: “If one can focus the mind on guarding it without distraction, true essence will naturally assemble, primal *Qi* will naturally converge, the Valley Spirit will naturally connect, the *Sanshi* will naturally depart, and the *Jiuchong* will naturally perish—this is the path to longevity and eternal vision.” 人能一意守之而不散，則真精自朝，元黑自聚，穀神自接，三屍自去，九蟲自滅，此乃長生久視之道也 ([Daozang 1988](#), vol. 4, p. 625). He further noted: “If one can achieve a mind without thoughts, a thought without clinging, pure and unblemished—this is called pure yang (chunyang 純陽). At this moment, the *Sanshi* are eliminated, and the *Six Thieves beg* (liuzei 六賊) for surrender.” 人但能心中無心，念中無念，純清絕點，謂之純陽。當此之時，三屍消滅，六賊乞降 ([Daozang 1988](#), vol. 4, p. 625). Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 argued that eliminating the *Sanshi* could be achieved through ascetic self-cultivation. His perspective aligns with the allegory *Meng Sanshi Shuo* mentioned earlier, which advocates restraining the *Sanshi* through self-regulation of inner-nature.

Comparing these two approaches to removing the *Sanshi* reveals differing understandings of the relationship between the *Sanshi* and the practitioner: One views the *Sanshi* as entirely external, heterogeneous destructive factors, advocating the use of spiritual confrontation techniques such as visualizing elixir fire to dispel and eradicate them. The other considers the influence of the *Sanshi* within the framework of human nature, arguing that their destructive power is manifested through human inner-nature. Thus, elimi-

inating the *Sanshi* does not entail a spiritual confrontation between the practitioner and the Demons; instead, it emphasizes cultivating a Daoist ascetic inner-nature through practices such as tranquility, desirelessness, non-thinking, and returning to primal unity. This latter approach reflects a closer understanding of the connection between the *Sanshi* and human inner-nature, while also returning to the Daoist principle of selfless non-action advocated in the *Daode Jing* 道德經 which said “Can one embrace the soul (Ying 營) and essence (Po 魄), holding fast to the One, without separation? Can one concentrate vital energy to attain gentleness, like an infant? Can one purify the profound insight, remaining unblemished?”. 載營魄抱一，能無離乎？專氣致柔，能如嬰兒乎？滌除玄覽，能無疵乎？ (Lou 2008). It demonstrates a divergence in anthropological understanding compared to the confrontational visualization method for eliminating the *Sanshi*.

## 6. Conclusions

This study conducts a comprehensive investigation of the texts and images related to the *Sanshi* in Daoism, primarily from the perspective of *Neidan* studies. It argues that the Daoist concept of the *Sanshi* is a religious embodiment of negative spiritual factors: on one hand, it corresponds to the *Jiuchong*—destructive factors of the physical body; on the other hand, it relates to the *Qipo*—inherent negative spiritual elements. The formation of this concept may be linked to the *Shixiang* in the *Shanghai Jing*, while its iconography likely derives from the prevalent motif of one-legged disease- or death-inducing demons in ancient China. Based on different theoretical understandings of the relationship between the *Sanshi* and human nature, two main approaches to addressing the *Sanshi* emerged in *Neidan*: the confrontational path of spiritual visualization (through internal observation and igniting fire) and the self-cultivation path of inner-nature refinement. In summary, within *Neidan*, the *Sanshi* centrally embody the dimension of spiritual cultivation, while also encompassing Daoist understandings of the mind–body relationship and human nature.

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## Notes

- 1 In the book edited by Stephen Little and Shawn Eichman, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, when discussing this painting, the authors identified the three deities on the left as the Three souls (*Sanhun* 三魂). However, based on their iconographic characteristics, a more accurate conclusion should be that they are the Three Corpses (*Sanshi* 三屍). (Little and Eichman 2001).
- 2 The original text of *Taiping Jing* (The Scripture of Great Peace) has been lost. The passages cited in this book are taken from Mr. Wang Ming 王明's Collated Text of the *Taiping Jing*, which was compiled and emended on the basis of *Taiping Jing Chao* 太平經鈔 (Excerpts from the Scripture of Great Peace) included in the *Daozang*, combined with quotations from *Taiping Jing* preserved in other ancient texts.
- 3 To make it easier to understand, here I have converted the ancient Chinese expressions for units of length into the modern metrics of centimeters.

- <sup>4</sup> In the *Zhubing yuanhou Lun Xiaozhu* (Proofreading & Interpretation of Treatise on the Origin of Diseases) edited by Ding Guangdi, it is believed that the Fu Chong 伏虫 referred to here may refer to the hookworm in modern medicine, the Bai Chong (white worm 白虫) corresponds to the tapeworm, and Chi Chong (red worm 赤虫) may correspond to the ginger worm. (Ding 2013a, p. 370).

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