Here in one slender volume are the essentials to a tradition that dates back thousands of years. Among the topics covered are:

- The origins of Chinese alchemy
- The quest for gold and immortality
- The role of minerals and plants, medicines, astrology, yoga, and magic in Chinese alchemy
- Alchemy in the East and in the West

Chinese alchemy, largely associated with Taoism, has a recorded history of more than 2,000 years, but traditionally it goes back even further, to the Yellow Emperor and his Three Immortal Ladies, circa 3000 BC.

J. C. Cooper describes the history and development of Taoist alchemy, compares it with similar traditions in India and Turkistan, and gives it context by contrasting it with the rationale of the Western hermetic tradition. As she writes in her concluding chapter:

“The whole work of alchemy is summed up in the phrase ‘To make of the body a spirit and of the spirit a body’... The goal of the Taoist alchemist mystic was transformation, or perhaps more correctly, transfiguration, of the whole body until it ceases to ‘be’ and is absorbed into and becomes the Tao.”
There is little in Chinese alchemy that cannot be associated with Taoism and although the exact origins of that alchemy may still be in dispute in the light of present incomplete evidence, it is not questioned that it grew and was nourished in the soil of popular and religious Taoism. It is also recognized that there are two distinct branches of Taoism: the classical Tao Chia, the mystical, metaphysical aspect, stemming from Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, and the popular, religious, magical, alchemical side, the Tao Chiao, which arose traditionally with the Yellow Emperor and his Three Immortal Ladies, or Maids, who taught him magic, mysticism and love. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu probably represented a movement against these earlier animistic-magico practices and founded the Tao Chia as a protest, or rather a correction, at a time when such practices had lost their original meaning and become loaded with superstition.

Yet another viewpoint is that classical Taoism was original but was too austere and rarefied for the general populace and later, meeting the shamanism which flourished in the tribes of the regions north and west of China proper, absorbed shamanistic-animistic lore and degenerated into the religious, ritualistic, magical and alchemical branch, the Tao Chiao, which fulfilled the day-to-day needs of the people and which still exists in modern times as a popular religion. Thus, from being abstract philosophy, it became a concrete religion with a ceremonial Church, having a priesthood, liturgy and theology, a Pope, and a Trinity known as the Three Pure Ones. From the original non-theistic mysticism it became not only theistic but polytheistic, adopting the pantheon of popular Buddhism.

While the origins and dates of Chinese alchemy are still being researched and debated (there are literally hundreds of Taoists texts as yet untranslated) it is known for certain that it flourished well before 144 BC, for at that date the Emperor issued an edict which ordered public execution for anyone found making counterfeit gold. The making of counterfeit cash was also proscribed. However, in the year 60 BC the
then Emperor appointed a well-known scholar, Liu Hsiang, as Master of the Recipes so that he could make alchemical gold and prolong the Emperor’s life. He failed to make the gold and so was disgraced. This points to an already well-established and widespread practice in alchemy. It was also said to have been practised in the fourth century BC by Tsou Yen, who had a reputation as a miracle-worker and a following among the aristocracy. He was also reputed to have been the first alchemist to combine the search for the Elixir with the search for gold.

The Later Han dynasty (AD 25-220) was a time of great interest in science, astronomy, botany, zoology and medicine and in this period there appeared the first book on alchemy, the *Ts’an T’ung Ch’i* of Wei Po-yang. Its date was about AD 142 and its title is translated as ‘The Book of the Kinship of the Three,’ but it was written in terms which were too difficult for the understanding of all but initiates. But most of the alchemical texts derive from the T’ang dynasty (AD 618-960), which maintained this interest, especially in the alchemical branch of Taoism.

The language of the *Ts’an T’ung Ch’i* being too complicated and esoteric to be of general use, it is to Ko Hung that we must turn for the earliest complete treatise. He lived about AD 260 to 340 and is regarded as the most famous of writers on Chinese alchemy. He is supposed to have written several hundred books but his known work is the *Pao P’u Tzu nei p’ien*, usually referred to as the *Pao P’u Tzu*, though this was, in fact, a pseudonym he adopted and can be translated as ‘The Master who preserves his pristine simplicity,’ which has also been rendered as ‘Old Sobersides.’ The work is in two parts, the *nei p’ien*, comprising some twenty scrolls, and the *wei p’ien*, some fifty. He says: ‘My *nei p’ien*, telling of gods, genii, prescriptions and medicines, ghosts and marvels, transformations, maintenance of life, extension of years, exercising evils and banishing misfortune, belongs to the Taoist school. My *wei p’ien*, giving an account of success and failure in human affairs and of good and evil in public affairs, belongs to the Confucian school.’

It was Ko Hung who was responsible for the delightful definitions of classical Taoism and Confucianism. He was asked: ‘Of Confucianism and Taoism, which is the more difficult?’ He replied: ‘Confucianism is difficulty in the midst of facility; Taoism is facility in the midst of difficulties; in it all annoyances are lifted with an inner harmony that grows of itself; perfect freedom of action and thought; no fear,
no grief.’ Taoists ‘reject specialization in worldly matters, wash away all trickeries, forget wealth and neglect honours, block repression and encourage free expression, are not concerned about the loss of anything, do not glory in success and are not saddened by denigration and take no delight in praise.’

Ko Hung regarded the existing scrolls for medicines as incomplete, confused and often lacking in treatment for many critical illnesses. He said that they employed expensive ingredients only available to the rich, whereas his scrolls would be found to mention all the medicines and give full treatment for all serious illnesses: ‘Any household possessing this book can dispense with the services of a physician. Further, it is not always possible to find a physician at a moment’s notice and when you do find one he may not wish to come immediately.’ (This strangely modern passage was written nearly 2000 years ago!)

Chinese alchemy, being more concerned with longevity and immortality than with the making of gold, was naturally involved with finding the Elixir of Immortality and with prescriptions for prolonging life. When challenged that he was attempting the impossible in trying to overcome mortality in this life, Ko Hung replied that although the deaf could not hear thunder or appreciate music, and the sun and the splendour of the Emperor’s robes were invisible to the blind, it did not mean that these things did not exist. His recipe for long life was the use of appropriate medicines, breathing exercises and philosophical thought. Alchemy, like all esoteric lore, had to be learned from an adept and Ko Hung’s master, Cheng Yin, at over eighty, had black hair, a ‘full cheerful face’ and could draw a strong cross-bow and shoot a hundred paces; he walked hundreds of miles and could drink two demijohns of wine without becoming drunk; he climbed mountains with agility and crossed precipitous places and dangerous heights which daunted younger men. He ate and drank the same things as anyone else, but could go for unlimited days without food and without feeling hunger.

In his writings Ko Hung maintained that alchemical change was only one facet of the universal transformations in Nature. ‘It is clear, therefore, that transformation is something spontaneous in Nature. Why then should we demur at the possibility of making gold and silver from other things? Look at the fire obtained from heaven with the burning-mirror,
and the water got at night [dew] from the moon-mirror; are they different from ordinary fire and water? . . . I guarantee that mercury can vapourize and that gold and silver can be sought successfully . . . the Manuals of the Immortals tell us . . . that it is in the nature of gold and silver that one can make them.’ In his time there were treatises which contained recipes and formulae for ‘melting jade,’ ‘transforming gold’ and making ‘talisman water.’ But these obscure and probably esoteric terms notwithstanding, Professor Needham, the great authority on the development of Chinese science, says that Ko Hung’s Pao P’u Tzu ‘contains some scientific thinking at what appears to be a high level.’

Ko Hung disapproved of the recluse-alchemists seeking their own immortality to the neglect of their dependents, as so many did: ‘To turn one’s back upon wife and children and make one’s abode in the mountains and marshes, uncaringly to reject basic human usage . . . is hardly to be encouraged. If by some good fortune they can become immortal and still go on living at home, why should they seek to mount specially to the heavens?’ Once the preparation of the divine Elixir has been achieved successfully ‘you and your whole household, not just you alone, will become immortals.’ He also says that this state of immortality cannot be attained without good deeds, loyalty, friendliness and trustworthiness.

This condition of immortality was known as that of the hsien, the genie or immortal, and the alchemist aimed at achieving hsien-hood, of which there were several grades, as will be seen later. Strangely, Ko Hung’s death was said to be consistent with the lowest grade, the shih chieh hsien, the ‘corpse free,’ one whose corpse disappears, leaving only the clothes or some identifying object behind. At his death he was encoffined but later it was found that his body had disappeared, only his clothes remaining.

While Ko Hung, Wei Po-yang and other early alchemists can be traced in historical records, many of the early names and the stages of alchemy are found only in legend, for which the Chinese have the delightful phrase ‘wild history.’ The most important of these legendary characters is undoubtedly the Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, who traditionally reigned from about 2704 to 2595 BC. He was regarded as the first and greatest of Taoist immortals and alchemists and was said to have learned, not only from his Three Immortal Maids, but also from
an Immortal who lived on a mountain, who, after considerable persuasion, instructed the Emperor in the understanding of the Tao, of sciences, meditation and medicines. Huang Ti was reputed to have written the Inner Classics. He became an Immortal, or *hsien*, himself and after reigning for over a hundred years he ascended to heaven on the back of a dragon, taking with him some seventy members of his domestic household and court, in full view of the populace. Others
of his retainers, anxious to go heavenward with him, hung on to the whiskers of the dragon, but they gave way and the hangers-on, together with the Emperor’s bow, fell to the ground. The people gazed at the Emperor and dragon until they disappeared into the heavens. The fallen bow was collected and venerated. Although there was a tomb and a shrine built for the Yellow Emperor it was said that it was later found to be devoid of a corpse and contained only a sword and shoes.

Another legendary character was the Emperor Yü the Great, traditionally known as ‘the happy miner.’ He was a smelter who ‘pierced the mountains’ and ‘made the earth healthy.’ He knew the difference between male and female metals and employed the \textit{yin-yang} principles in all his work, dividing his cauldrons into \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}. There were nine of these, four \textit{yin} and five \textit{yang}. Here it is of interest to note the early appearance of the \textit{yin-yang} doctrine, the importance of the number nine, which runs through all alchemy and Chinese lore, and the division of the number into even (\textit{yin}) and odd (\textit{yang}) numbers. As we shall see, the \textit{yin-yang} symbolism is employed right through Chinese alchemy as the two powers of mercury and sulphur, the lunar and solar.

The legendary accounts of the origins of alchemy are not confined to the Chinese ‘wild history;’ in the West there is the story that fallen angels were responsible for teaching the science of alchemy to the women they married on earth. Another tradition claims that alchemy owed its inception to Hermes, the Egyptian Thoth, God of Wisdom, or that Isis won the secret from an angel in return for sexual favours, and handed it to her son Horus. Yet another legend is that God revealed the secrets of alchemy to Moses and Aaron, both master magicians.
Alchemy East and West

Chinese alchemy, while often running parallel with that of the West, and showing considerable similarity with Indian beliefs, for example the idea of a drug which could prolong life, the Elixir of Immortality, which appears in India a thousand years before Christ, holds no definite proof of common origins, but much of exchange of thought. The same argument rages over the beginnings of alchemy as over symbolism: whether such ideas and symbols ‘migrated’ from one country to another in trading and cultural contacts, or arose spontaneously in different civilizations and widely separated parts of the world.

In view of the universal similarities in the content and types of dreams and in the workings of the subconscious mind, as demonstrated by Jung’s work, it is reasonable to suppose that in waking life the same types and ideas also rise spontaneously in the human mind. In mythology, religion, symbolism, fairy tale and folklore and such early sciences as alchemy and astrology, while the local colouring of dreams and thoughts is naturally different, the basic contents, symbolism and psychological implications appear to be universal; but while there are similarities, there are also differences in East and West. The answer to the question of migration versus spontaneous growth lies probably in a degree of both. Military conquests, trade and cultural exchanges obviously spread ideas and knowledge, while, on the other hand, it is only natural that people the world over should have asked the same questions about their environment, the cosmos in which they lived and their relationship with it.

There seems to have been a considerable exchange of knowledge between China and India; it is known that alchemical practices were prevalent in both countries well before the Christian era and there was definite evidence of exchange when a Chinese Emperor of the T’ang dynasty sent an envoy, Wang Hsüan-ts’ē, to India between AD 643 and 665; there are indications that he made two visits during this time. He was a specialist in prolonging life—that is to say, an alchemist—and
a noted magician. He brought back with him an Indian Brahmin, Narayamasvamin, who was an alchemist and physician, while another Indian magician came over from Kashmir in 664-5 on the orders of the Emperor Kao Tsung: this magician was thought to have possessed the drug of longevity. Waley maintains that there is no doubt that ‘a definite give and take went on between China and India during the T’ang dynasty,’ but that Chinese techniques were already well developed long before any known contact with India.

Other branches of early alchemy were established in Babylonia and Chaldea; the Persians were skilled in magic, alchemy and medicine, while from Egypt came the great Hermetic tradition which passed to Greece, Greek culture being spread widely later by the conquests of Alexander the Great. Arabian alchemy also rose from the Alexandrian School in Egypt but was, at the same time, in touch with Chinese thought. From Greek and Arabic culture alchemy spread into Europe, but showed a direct inheritance from Hermes/Thoth. Arabic and Byzantine alchemy were, like the ancient Hellenic practices, a mixture of magic, astrology and mysticism touched with the tradition of Hermes Trismegistus.

Some authorities have maintained that all alchemy came from China originally and spread westward later; others believe that it arose in Egypt. Babylon has also been suggested as the source, while others again, as has been said, have propounded the theory that the same ideas and concepts arose spontaneously and existed simultaneously in different countries. However, the idea most basic to Chinese alchemy, the Elixir of Life, did not appear in the West until the twelfth century AD, when it was introduced there from China by the Arabs.

Similarities between eastern and western alchemy are seen in the concept of polarity and the universal symbolic reverence for gold as the great solar power, with its counterpart in the lunar silver. The Sol and Luna theme, presented in various guises, runs through all alchemy: Fludd, for instance, expressed this polarity as the Sun, the father, the heart, the right eye, with the left eye as the Moon, the mother, the womb, as well as the basic duality of sulphur and quicksilver. All branches of alchemy reverenced the Earth, the Great Mother, in whose womb were nourished the metals and from which they were born.

The essential difference between Chinese alchemy and that of the West was that while the latter was always associated with gold, whether
in the transmutation of base metals into gold or the transformation of the base metal of unregenerate man into the pure gold of the spiritual life and realization, Chinese alchemy was primarily concerned with the finding of the Elixir of Immortality—again, either at the lower level of prolonging physical life for its own sake, or for finding personal immortality, or, on the spiritual side, prolonging life in this world in order to gain more time to spiritualize the soul or to gain immortality as the enlightened being, the ‘True Man’ at one with the Tao.

The Chinese approach was through the fundamental doctrine of yin and yang; the influence of, and dependence on, the I Ching, the Book of Changes; and the teaching of the Five Elements School of thought, the whole outlook being more on a mental-spiritual level, even in its lower branches, than the gold-seeking slant of western alchemy. Materialism came later as a decadent growth in Chinese alchemy at certain periods; but, as Waley says, the work with metals and elixirs had practically ceased by AD 1000 and given place to the mystical path, which still used alchemical phraseology and symbolism. Of this stage he says that: ‘Whereas in reading the works of western alchemists one constantly suspects that the quest with which they are concerned is a purely spiritual one; that they are using romantic phraseology of alchemy merely to poeticize religious experience, in China there is no such disguise. Alchemy becomes there openly and avowedly what it almost seems to be in the works of Böehme or ‘Thomas Vaughan.’ Chinese alchemy, with its emphasis on longevity and immortality, is much easier to account for than that of the West. Serious western scholars and alchemists often had to cover their spiritual quest with the trappings of the laboratory and the search for material gold for fear of persecution as heretics; but the Chinese searcher after the Tao could reasonably study and follow experiments in which he ‘spiritualized’ himself: he did not need to make concessions to the material gold cult. A further difference between East and West lay in the theistic attitudes adopted in the Work. The western alchemist, if he were involved in the esoteric, spiritual branch of the Work, invoked the God of monotheism. His eastern counterpart in classical Taoism was non-theistic, living in accord with and working for Nature and the impersonal Tao and calling on no god; but the ‘bellows blowers,’ as the exoteric, personal seekers were called, invoked a host of gods, spiritual beings and powers and were closely
involved with spirits and demons, repelling the latter and depending on the aid of benevolent spirits.

There is no doubt at all that alchemy operated in two distinct branches existing side by side: the physical and the metaphysical. The true alchemy was the realm of the mystic, its aim being the transmutation of base man into perfection; but at the same time there existed the materialistically motivated gold seekers together with the seriously scientifically-minded knowledge seekers and experimentalists, of whom Paracelsus said: ‘They do not give themselves up to ease and idleness . . . but they devote themselves diligently to their labours, sweating whole nights over fiery furnaces. These do not kill time with empty talk, but find delight in their laboratory.’

Chinese alchemy, embedded in Taoism, was probably mystical in character before it became a science or art; it was sacred before it became profane, so that in a sense the scientific-chemical aspect was a decadent stage. The two branches could have little in the way of contact or mutual understanding, since the esoteric, mystical side could engender no desires, for these do not exist in the Tao; the reverse was true of the gold, or elixir, or longevity seekers. Ko Hung, in the Pao P'u Tzu, wrote that the adept in Taoism regards ‘a peerage as an execution cauldron, a seal of office as a mourning dress, gold and jade as dirt, a splendid hall as a prison. How different from those pseudo-alchemists who, clenching their fists, mouth empty phrases and wait for good luck, or who lead a leisurely life in a gorgeous room, endowed with countless grants, appointed to high office, and still are discontented with their power and wealth!’

The Chinese made a crucial distinction between external, inorganic, laboratory alchemy and the internal, philosophical side; the former was concerned with the Elixir, or Pill, of Immortality, with ingredients and recipes using minerals or plants, a work which incidentally gave rise to the experimental, metallurgic, chemical and material aspects; the latter, which operated within the adept's own body and soul, was concerned with the psychological and spiritual side, with immortality and the spiritual transformation into the True Man. The one was the exoteric ‘outer elixir,’ in Chinese the wei tan; the other the ‘inner elixir,’ the esoteric nei tan; the one was material, the other spiritual. Laboratory alchemy, dealing with material experiments, was quantitative; the
inner alchemy, striving towards spiritual perfection, was qualitative. For the spiritual work, the outward and exoteric aspect was merely a symbol of the inner work.

On the lowest level were those motivated by greed and hope of gain, either of material wealth or psychic powers; those who mistook the real work of spiritual gold for material riches. These were known in Chinese alchemy as the ‘bellows blowers’ or ‘puffers,’ in the West they were called ‘charcoal burners,’ ‘bunglers,’ or ‘messy cooks.’ There were also the charlatans who battened on the greed or credulity of emperors, princes, or the public. Some promised great results, or claimed to know of some place where the required minerals could be found, persuading princes and patrons to equip them with the money and necessities for the journey, and then disappearing. However, even here, on the lower level, experiments could lead to knowledge of the properties of the metals and herbs used in the processes and gave birth to early metallurgy and chemistry, while genuine experimentalists arrived at an understanding that was sometimes in advance of present-day scientific achievement.

The Taoism from which alchemy arose had as its main teaching that humanity should learn to live in harmony with Nature, with the Tao. Those who achieved this harmony did so through a spiritual-mystical understanding of the universe and its laws. The achievement naturally led to a balanced outlook, an acceptance of Nature’s way, and therefore to a relaxed and happy temperament that was naturally conducive to good health through lack of stress and strain. Others, the less discerning, who saw the results but were either incapable of or unwilling to follow the Way, might assume that the mystic had some hidden secret of success or long life and so might look for short cuts in drugs, recipes and elixirs—an attitude still evident today in those who seek spiritual or psychic experiences through the medium of drugs: the lower alchemy.

This lower alchemy appealed to all the least desirable qualities in human nature: greed of gold, envy, unhealthy curiosity, vanity. The true alchemy led to the exact opposite, the recognition of the need for improvement in oneself and the lot of others; it was the ‘hidden work’ which humbly sought for illumination and the transmutation of the base leaden qualities into the gold of the True Man, a work carried out
away from any publicity in the solitariness of one’s own soul. In the West, societies allied to alchemy, such as masonry and rosicrucianism, were also insistent that the majority misunderstood the true work and taught that: ‘Moreover the object of our guiltless guild is not the making of gold . . . Rather we remove the erroneous opinion from them [the disciples] in so far as they are infected with it, even on the first steps to the temple of wisdom. They are earnestly enjoined against these errors that they must seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.’

The Taoist aim was to become the True Man (chen jen), ‘true’ in the sense of purified—in alchemical terms, ridding oneself of the dross of the base metals, which then become ‘true.’ The True Man is beyond the hsiën; he is the fully realized individual who has attained enlightenment and is beyond the need for, or the idea of, ‘powers’ and personal immortality.