

4

Cosmos, Gods, and Governance

In this chapter

In addition to Shang ancestor worship and divination, the philosophy of Dao, Zhuangzi's ecstatic wandering, and personal body cultivation, the foundations of Daoism also rest on Han-dynasty cosmology. This cosmology structures the universe in patterns of correspondences, dividing all existence into the two complementary forces yin and yang, then detailing this organization with the help of the so-called five phases, energetic stages that are symbolized by five physical entities, such as wood and fire. Another important cosmological system of lasting influence is the Chinese calendar with its ten stems (signs for the ten-day week under the Shang) and twelve branches (zodiac animals).

The Han vision of the cosmos, furthermore, included a plethora of deities: celestial gods, starry constellations, nature deities, mythical sage rulers, divine ancestors, as well as various ghosts, demons, specters, and hobgoblins. Creating order in the universe accordingly meant matching the cosmic phases and pacifying the various gods and demons, aligning self and society in a larger context that included everything from the stars through the gods to the lowly creatures of Earth. The vision of ultimate harmony, then, was described in terms of Great Peace, a state of complete openness and pervasion of all.

Main topics covered

- Yin-Yang
- The Five Phases
- The Chinese Calendar
- Deities, Demons, and Divine Rulers
- The Ideal of Great Peace

Yin and Yang

The most fundamental cosmological division in traditional China is into the two complementary forces [yin and yang](#), commonly presented in the well-known circle with two black and white curved halves, plus a white dot in the black section and a black dot in the white section. The image shows the balance and yet interlocking nature of yin and yang, the fluidity of their interchange.

The system of yin and yang is based on correlative thinking, a basic pattern of the human mind that plays a role in all cultures. For example, to build the plural of *shoe*, we add the letter “s” to get *shoes*. The same applies to *cat/cats*, *stone/stones*, *road/ roads*. But then we learn that this correlative pattern when applied to the word *foot* is wrong and instead of *foots* we use another pattern and go from *foot* to *feet*, then apply the same to get *goose/geese*, and so on. In all cases, the organization of language is based on a simple pattern that is correlated and repeated in different concrete cases.

The correlative system of understanding also comes into play in a more general understanding of reality. For example, the image of the human body may be applied to politics, so that the mind in relation to the body is understood as similar to the ruler’s relation to his subjects. Or, vice versa, the workings of a motor engine may be used as a way to understand the functioning of the body, creating an understanding that all the different bodily parts work together like building blocs of a complex machine. In all these cases, similarities and differences between patterns are recognized and reality is understood in terms of the interaction of different aspects that impact on each other. In a further step, the correlation pattern itself creates a specific vision of reality and new realities are formed on the basis of further associations. These patterns tend to work particularly within a given culture and among people who share a common paradigm. Over time, the paradigms shift, allowing for new correlations and models to take over.

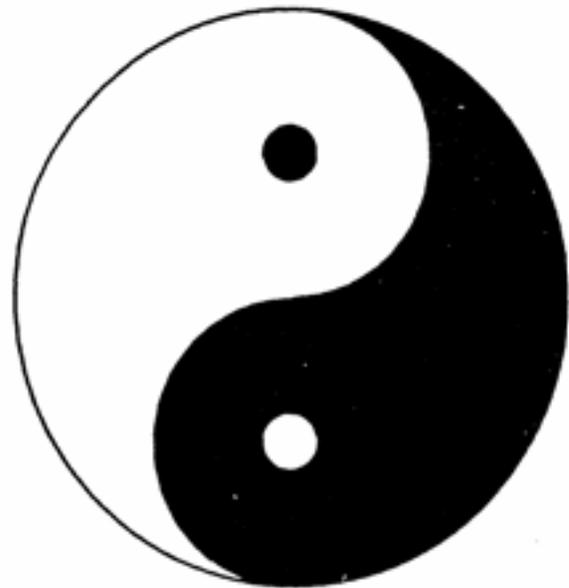


Fig. 4.1 Yin and Yang

Application

Yang and yin originated from geographical observation, indicating the sunny and shady sides of a hill. From there they acquired a series of associations: bright and dark, light and heavy,

strong and weak, above and below, Heaven and Earth, ruler and minister, male and female, and so on.

In concrete application, moreover, they indicate different kinds of action:

yang	active	birth	impulse	move	change	expansion
yin	structive	completion	response	rest	nurture	contraction

These characteristics were in turn associated with items in daily life:

yang	Heaven	spring	summer	day	big	ruler	man
yin	Earth	fall	winter	night	small	minister	woman

father	life	unfold	noble	marriage	soldiers	speech	give
mother	death	stagnate	common	funeral	laborers	silence	receive

It may at first glance seem that yang is “better” than yin. In the Chinese view, however, neither is better, stronger, brighter, or more preferable, and the two forces do not represent good and evil. On the contrary, the yin aspect of things is just as important as the yang, because one cannot be without the other. They are not opposites but complementary phases of *qi*-flow, one bringing forth the other in close mutual interdependence.

The Five Phases

The yin-yang system provides the working basis for understanding the patterns of Dao in the world and for seeing the concrete manifestations of *qi*-flow in the course of ordinary life. It is made more complex by a subdivision into [five phases](#):

minor yang—major yang—yin/yang—minor yin—major yin.

In other words, the rhythmic pattern of rise and decline in the structure of energetic exchange is finely tuned. It is best explained in terms of the original meaning of the terms yin and yang, by taking the rise and dips of hills and valleys as a metaphor. When one begins to climb a hill, as one first comes out of the valley, the sun hits just a little and there is slight warmth and light: yang in its minor phase. As one ascends further, the sun gets brighter, the views are broader, there is a feeling of expanse: the major phase of yang. Reaching the top, there is a balance between yin and yang, where neither one nor the other dominates: yin-yang in bal-

ance. Continuing the walk, it is not possible to go up any more, so the descent begins. There is again less light, views are more restricted, a cooling sets in: the phase of minor yin. Eventually one reaches the bottom of the valley, with its greater darkness, coolness, and shadiness: yin in its major phase. However long the sojourn at the bottom may seem, there is no other way but to go up again: one energetic phase forever moves into the next without stopping.

The Chinese further linked this phase system with five organic substances that symbolize the different stages:

minor yang	major yang	yin-yang	minor yin	major yin
wood	fire	Earth	metal	water

These are known as the “five phases” or “five agents” (*wuxing*). They are often also referred to as the “five elements,” because they have a superficial similarity with the Greek or Indian elements—water, fire, Earth, and air. However, properly speaking the appellation “element” is incorrect since they do not refer to solid substances and firm, unchanging building blocks of the world. Instead, these five indicate phase energetics and dynamic stages in a constant rhythm of transformation.

The Five Materials

Historically, the five phases underwent several stages of development. In the *Shujing* (Book of History), a record dating from about 800 B.C.E., they appear as the “five materials” and are concrete substances, resources used for human livelihood. They are, at this stage, not understood as *qi*—which is found in sunshine, shade, moonlight, vapors, and other atmospheric conditions—but substances that people actually use. As such, they should be treated with care and used with moderation and wisdom. They are offered to the gods on the altars of soil and grain; they have to be guarded by rulers to ensure their continued productivity without excess or deficiency.

In their natural rhythm, the five materials produce each other continuously in a harmonious cycle. Thus, water comes about through rainfall. It makes things grow, so that there is lush vegetation and wood arises. Wood dries and becomes fuel for fire, which burns and creates ashes. Ashes become Earth, and Earth over long periods of consolidation grows metals in its depths. Metals in the depths of mountains, moreover, attract clouds and stimulate rainfall, thus closing this so-called productive cycle.

At the same time, however, the five materials also serve as a system of mutual control or checks, keeping things in their proper order. Thus, water can extinguish fire, fire can melt metal, metal can cut wood, wood can contain Earth, Earth can dam water, and water can again

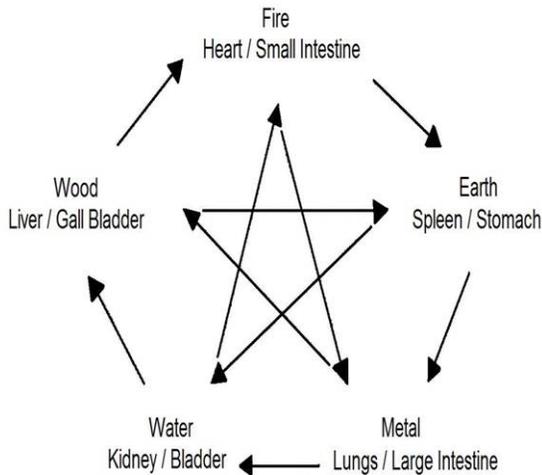


Fig. 4.2 The five phases

extinguish fire. Here the inherently dynamic nature of the five materials is not used to increase productivity, but to set boundaries and limit potential excesses. This is known as the controlling or conquest cycle. In all cases, the early vision emphasizes that although the five materials are substances for human use, they are not merely innate objects but contain dynamic powers that can be turned both to production or control.

The Five Powers

Expanding this early model, the cosmologist Zou Yan (c.350-270 B.C.E.) next created the concept of the “five powers” or “five virtues” by focusing on the potency inherent in the materials, such as wood’s power to grow and be lush and fire’s power to flame and rise. He then correlated these abstract powers with the political dynamics of succeeding dynasties, linking his own Zhou dynasty with the phase fire. He predicted that—following the controlling cycle of the five materials—it would be overcome by a new ruler under the symbolic power of the phase water.

Later cosmologists developed this into a great, encompassing scheme of dynastic succession and cosmological patterning so that, by the Han dynasty, the five energetic phases were associated not only with colors, but also with directions, seasons, musical tones, and with various functions in the human body, such as yin organs, yang organs, senses, emotions, and flavors. The [basic chart](#), at the root of Chinese cosmology, the diagnostic and analytical foundation of Chinese medicine, and the essential framework of Daoism—is as follows:

yin/ yang	phase	direct.	color	season	organ1	organ2	emotion	sense
mi yang	wood	east	green	spring	liver	gall	anger	eyes
ma yang	fire	south	red	summer	heart	sm. int.	exc. joy	tongue
yin- yang	Earth	center	yellow		spleen	stomach	worry	lips
mi yin	metal	west	white	fall	lungs	lg. int.	sadness	nose
ma yin	water	north	black	winter	kidneys	bladder	fear	ears

Practical Use

This set of correspondences served predominantly to identify relationships. As described in the “Monthly Commandments” of the *Liji* (Book of Rites) and in the early Daoist compilation *Huainanzi* (Book of the Prince of Huainan), it was used to explain why certain actions should be undertaken in certain seasons. For example, it became a general rule that because Heaven and Earth make the myriad creatures blossom in spring, one should in that season sleep and rise early, loosen the hair, relax the body, and allow all beings to live, abstaining from killing. Spring was a time of giving and not of taking, of reward and not of punishment. By following these injunctions, humanity was believed to act in proper alignment with the *qi* of spring and to secure health and harmony for both body and society. Any actions against the dominant *qi*-flow, on the other hand, would cause harm to the liver, the organ associated with wood and spring, and would create chills in the summer. They might also arouse aggression and anger, the corresponding emotions, and make for social upheaval and unhappiness.

In other words, the correspondence system provided a relational and dynamic vision of the universe, seeing all social, physical, and psychological occurrences in terms of natural cycles and ongoing patterns. It placed human beings in a world that was not, as in modern science, governed by invariable laws but subject to a pattern of interaction that could be orderly or chaotic. It thereby both limited and empowered people. It limited them by placing them into a natural cycle which responded to their actions and demanded total adaptation for success and fulfillment. Yet it also empowered them because it gave them an active role in the interaction with all things, the power to either support or disturb the natural and political order.

The Chinese Calendar

Another important aspect of Chinese cosmology is the traditional [calendar](#). Like its Western counterpart, it distinguishes four seasons—sometimes adding Indian summer as a fifth in the middle—and marks them with the solstices and the equinoxes. Unlike the Western system, however, in China the solstices and equinoxes are not considered the seasons’ beginnings. Instead, they are the high points of the seasons, which begin about six weeks prior to them. This creates eight major cadences in the year: two solstices, two equinoxes, and four seasons’ beginnings. They are known as the Eight Nodes and roughly match the festivals of pagan or Wicca religion

In addition, the Chinese divide the year into twenty-four solar periods of about two weeks each, which are named after natural and weather patterns such as Insects Stirring, Great Heat, Slight Cold, Winter Beginning, and the like. Both the Eight Nodes and the twenty-four solar periods have played important roles in Daoist ritual and organization.

Beyond this solar calculation, the Chinese is also lunar in that it measures the months according to the phases of the moon. The first of the month is always on the new moon, and the fifteenth on the full moon. Because the lunar year has only 354 days as opposed to the 365¼ days of the solar year, the New Year shifts backward every year. To correct for this and keep the beginning of the year in the spring, the Chinese add one month to their calendar, the so-called intercalary month, once every three years—a total of seven additional months in nineteen years. This keeps their time calculation on the correct level and maintains the continuity of always having the winter solstice in the 11th lunar month, the spring equinox in the 2nd, the summer solstice in the 5th, and the fall equinox in the 8th.

The Sixty-Year Cycle

For a larger count of years, the Chinese depend on Jupiter, which revolves around the sun once in twelve years. They assign a specific zodiac animal (e.g., rat, ox, hare) to each year, as well as a so-called cyclical character or “heavenly branch” (e.g., *zi*, *chou*, *yin*). They also, under the Shang, used to have a ten-day week as the foundation of ancestral sacrifices, in which they numbered the days with another set of nominal characters, known as “earthly stems” (e.g., *jia*, *yi*, *bing*). Combining the stems and branches in all possible permutations, a set of sixty combinations evolved, which was then used to count the years—the so-called sixty-year or sexagenary cycle. It looks like this

year 1 = <i>jiazi</i> (1-rat)	year 10 = <i>guiyou</i> (10-rooster)
year 2 = <i>yichou</i> (2-ox)	year 11 = <i>jiaxu</i> (1-dog)
year 3 = <i>bingyin</i> (3-tiger)	year 12 = <i>yihai</i> (2-pig)
year 4 = <i>dingmao</i> (4-hare)	year 13 = <i>bingzi</i> (3-rat)
year 5 = <i>mouchen</i> (5-dragon)	year 14 = <i>dingchou</i> (4-ox)
year 6 = <i>yisi</i> (6-snake)	etc., until
year 7 = <i>gengwu</i> (7-horse)	year 59 = <i>renxu</i> (9-dog)
year 8 = <i>xinwei</i> (8-sheep)	year 60 = <i>guihai</i> (10-pig)
year 9 = <i>renshen</i> (9-monkey)	year 61 = <i>jiazi</i> (1-rat) = year 1

This cycle was formally established in the Han dynasty and the first *jiazi* (1-rat) year known is the year 4 C.E. Each new cycle, moreover, was seen as a new beginning, based on the idea that human life lasted for approximately sixty years and that, once it was over, a complete renewal occurred. The set of sixty was further applied to designate months, days, and hours, and is at the root of Chinese fate calculation even today—especially important in the planning of suitable marriages. Religious rituals of all traditions are scheduled according to the auspicious or inauspicious nature of the signs, and many of the most important Daoist rites occur once every

sixty years to mark the renewal of the cosmos. In addition, Daoist and other millenarian movements have focused on certain years, such as the first year of the cycle (*jiazi*), as the starting point of a new age.

Deities, Demons, and Divine Rulers

Beyond the natural patterns of yin-yang, the five phases, and the calendar, the Han universe—and in its wake the Daoist cosmos—was also heavily populated by divine figures, including nature gods, ancestors, and various other supernatural entities from a large variety of cultural and geographical regions. Striving to establish an integrated cosmic pattern while joining together numerous previously warring states into a solid empire, Han officials systematized and structured the multiplicity of divinities into an organized structure.

The Five Emperors

To begin, they took local gods from the regional states and arranged them in a system based on the five phases to create a five-fold central pantheon of deities, each associated with a specific cosmic direction, a color, and an essential power. Thus, a figure known as Zhuan Xu (Good Xu) became also known as Yandi (Fiery Emperor) and was associated with the direction of the south, the color red, and the power of rise and ascension. The central gods of the so-called Five Emperors were accordingly:

name	translation	direction	color	phase	quality
Zhurong	Blessed Melter	east	green	wood	straightness
Huangdi	Yellow Emperor	center	yellow	Earth	planting
Shaohao	Lesser Brilliance	north	black	water	cohesion
Yandi	Fiery Emperor	south	red	fire	ascension
Di Ku	Emperor Ku	west	white	metal	sharpness

Not only spatially ruling the four quadrants of the world with the Yellow Emperor at the center, these five deities were also arranged chronologically—in this very order, which reflects the controlling cycle of the five phases—to represent the dynastic succession of Chinese prehistory. In this function they were placed between several other sets of sage rulers, beginning in high antiquity with the so-called Three Sovereigns (Sanhuang) and continuing through the Five Dynasties all the way into actual history. The Three Sovereigns were Fu Xi (Hidden Vapor) who first discerned the trigrams of the *Yijing* from patterns in the stars and arranged for Heaven and Earth to take their proper places; Nügua (Snake Woman) who fashioned the first



Fig. 4.3 The Yellow Emperor, worshiped in Taiwan today

human beings from mud and set up life on the planet; and Shennong (Divine Farmer), supported by Suiren (Fire Drill), who developed agriculture, social structure, and markets, and also brought fire to the people.

Dynastic Succession

In the time of the Three Sovereigns, the world was in complete harmony, free from strife, war, hunger, and early death. Nature functioned smoothly and interacted beneficially toward all beings, so that there was enough food for everyone and people lived in a state of great peace, reaching extreme longevity of hundreds if not thousands of years.

The Five Emperors listed above, next, saw the further expansion and development of culture so that, for example, the first war in human history occurred under the Yellow Emperor in his battle against an opponent for the throne known as Chiyu (Wormy Rebel). Their rule was still characterized by overall goodness, but the increased complexity of life caused various difficulties and people began to have shortened life expectancies.

Next came the Five Dynasties, led by the two paragons Yao and Shun, highly virtuous emperors who each ruled for a century or more. Great heroes in Confucian circles, these two are praised as foremost models of humility, personal sacrifice, and goodness among all Chinese emperors. The remaining three dynasties, often also listed as a separate entity, connect prehistory to the historical age. They are the Xia, Shang, and Zhou.

They, too, were arranged according to the five phases, but unlike the Five Emperors, whose succession was governed by the controlling cycle, implying that one ruler had to overcome the other, the Five Dynasties were seen to have produced each other harmoniously. The story thus goes that Yao selected Shun and adopted him as his son and successor, while Shun appointed Yu, the first ruler of the Xia, because of his uncanny engineering abilities shown in controlling the great flood.

The new pattern therefore meant that after Di Ku, who ruled under the phase metal, Yao ruled under the sign of water, followed by Shun (wood), Xia (fire), Shang (Earth), and Zhou (metal). The First Emperor of the Qin dynasty saw himself as an heir to the Zhou in this cycle and ruled under the sign of water, arranging all measures in multiples of six, garbing his officials in black, and in general manifesting water symbolism in various ways.

The Han dynasty, faced with a violent succession, dithered between using the productive or controlling cycles and had multiple legends that alternately associated the colors yellow (Earth) or red (fire) with their rule. They eventually settled on the controlling cycle and saw themselves as ruling under the power of fire. Their end, moreover, was presaged by numerous prophecies that (according to the productive cycle) a ruler under the color yellow would arise—a ruler, moreover, who was inspired by a divine connection to Dao and also the leader of the first Daoist movement.

Center Gods

Aside from the Five Emperors in charge of the main quadrants of the world, the Han pantheon also acknowledged various central powers located above and beyond them. Among them was first of all Heaven itself, the power of the Zhou pantheon that managed all life and stood in direct relation to the emperor, known as the “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*). Making offerings to the deities of the directions all year round in accordance with the seasons in a special sanctuary known as the Hall of Light, the emperor would also report to Heaven on a regular basis and receive divine communications from this power.

A close next in potency to Heaven itself, but slightly more visible and accessible was the starry constellation of the Northern Dipper (Beidou), already described in the *Shiji* as being “placed in the center; . . . it governs all four cardinal points, separates yin and yang, and determines the four seasons. It balances the five phases and arranges the divisions [of time] and the levels [of space]. It fixates the various measures.”

The Dipper, often also associated with the Pole Star (North Culmen, Beiji), was the central power of the universe and functioned in establishing its inherent order. Situated in the central palace of the sky, it was seen as the foundation of the world, the root of yin and yang, the pivot of all creative transformations, the bridge between sun and moon (day and night), and the ultimate source and arbiter of all living beings. The Dipper is the celestial match of the center on Earth, a vertical nub where the middle of the Earth is horizontal. What the Dipper is in the skies, Mount Kunlun is on Earth: the vertical axis of the world, the polar center of the cosmos.

The Great One

Another central deity important in the Han pantheon was the Great One (Taiyi) an astral and abstract power both at the center of the cosmos and at the root of creation. The god personifies four things: the primordial state of the world before beings were created; the principle according to which creation takes place; the material energy of the world in its primordial form; and the basic characteristic of all there is, an abstract mark of existence. The One as the root power of undifferentiation is a close second to Dao itself. It is like the cosmic chaos Hundun, the primordial energy of all there is, the root power necessary to create and, by extension, to rule.

Matching the characteristics of the Northern Dipper, who represents a more actively governing aspect of primordial power, the Great One was similarly placed in the stars and venerated as an astral deity. Formally installed as the god of the center during Han times, he took over the place of the Yellow Emperor, relegating him and the other four emperors to a position of attendants. Losing his place in the center, moreover, the Yellow Emperor was established between the Red and the White Emperors. He soon became a key mediator between the celestial and human realms, representing the eternal learner and serving as the interlocutor in certain tales of the *Zhuangzi*, in the medical classics, and in sexual manuals.

The Ruler of Fates

Another important central figure in the Han pantheon was the Ruler of Fates (Siming). Not quite at the core of the entire universe, he was the chief of an underworld bureaucracy that kept close records on human deeds and attitudes and ordered people to die and be delivered to the underworld—not yet a hell but a rather shadowy place called Yellow Springs, where the dead resided and received ancestral offerings until such time when their spirits should return to the great flow of cosmic *qi*.

The powers of this deity are first documented in a manuscript excavated at Fangmatan, which describes the resurrection of a man named Dan in 297 B.C.E. Having killed another, he committed suicide and was buried after three days of public exposure, only to reappear, alive but not quite hale, after three years. His resurrection was effected through the workings of the underworld administration, to whom a surviving friend petitioned on the grounds that Dan had been

taken before his allotted time had run out. Accordingly, “he made a declaration to the senior scribe of the Ruler of Fates, who then had a white dog dig up the pit to let Dan out.” Reporting on his experiences in the otherworld, the wronged man explained: “The dead do not want many clothes. People sacrificing at tombs should not spit.”

The Celestial Administration

The notion that the otherworld is hierarchically organized goes back to an ancient Chinese administrative ideal, formulated first in the *Liji*. According to this, the feudal ranking order consists of three dukes, nine ministers, twenty-seven high officials, and eighty-one secretaries, who are placed in concentric circles around one king residing in the center of his capital, which in turn is at the pivot of nine provinces, 120 prefectures, and 1,200 districts. Matching this complex Zhou bureaucracy, the supernatural realm was accordingly expanded from the original Shang pantheon to include multiple levels and intricate complexes.

Further formalized under the Han dynasty, the otherworldly administration was located to the inner depth of Mount Tai, the eastern of five sacred mountains who ruled the Earth. Here the mountain god sits in judgment over the good and bad deeds of the dead and decrees appropriate punishments to be enacted through their descendants. Numerous bamboo slips found in tombs of the period accordingly contain petitions addressed to the Yellow Lord, the Lord of the Earth, or the Lord of the Underworld, including lists of grave goods and presents to be given to the responsible bureaucrats. In addition, there are funerary texts that function as a kind of passport or letter of introduction, by which a celestial envoy recommends the deceased to the netherworld authorities, thus assuring new arrival of a satisfactory integration into the subterranean territory.

Ghosts and Demons

Should, however, the deceased not be received properly or miss the support of his descendants, he might well develop into a negative power and join the forces of demons, ghosts, specters, and hobgoblins that also populated the Han world. Hungry and desperate, these were a veritable horde of nasty creatures that lurked on the fringes of the visible world, ready to pounce on unsuspecting creatures. They could be unhappy or discontented dead, supernaturally empowered animals, or Earth-based monsters. Some were people who had died violently, come back to wreak vengeance; others were ancestors neglected by their kin, hungry and in search of sustenance; yet others were mutant animals, creatures that somehow gained the power to change their shape and cause trouble.

To deal with these, people took basic precautions such as hanging demon-dispelling branches (preferably of peach wood) or talismans over their doors, muttering spells against ghosts whenever they entered an unknown area, or performing a divination before venturing out.

Once a demon or ghost had made itself known, more active measures could be taken, such as throwing a slipper at it, holding up a mirror to reveal its true shape, or calling it by its name. Normally, these creatures could not stand these acts and would vanish forthwith. Sometimes, however, more extensive rites of exorcism were necessary, or perhaps a shamanic séance in which the demon was called out, identified, and properly vanquished.

However difficult the navigation of the supernatural realm, throughout all their interactions with the gods the Han people never lost sight of the ultimate state of perfect harmony that was at the foundation of all existence and could be recovered with proper personal and political action.

The Ideal of Great Peace

Great Peace (Taiping) in ancient China meant a realm of total happiness and freedom, where justice prevailed and all cosmic and social energies circulated in a continuous, smooth rhythm. The term occurs first in a musical context, describing the total harmony and perfect accord of sounds. In its more political sense it appears in the historical records of the *Shiji*, denoting the establishment of perfect order. Great Peace was effected by good government that satisfied not only the common people but also the forces of Heaven and Earth, thus leading to a state of blissful harmony that would find the natural forces always beneficent and never destructive.

The state of Great Peace, Han people believed, had been fully realized in the time when the world was first created, under the rule of the Three Sovereigns. It had declined somewhat, but not too much, under the Five Emperors and been recovered again when the sage king Yao came to power. According to some readings, notably those of a more Daoist persuasion known as the Huang-Lao school, it was most extensively realized under the government of the Yellow Emperor and could be recovered through veneration of this figure in coordination with following the guidance of Laozi.

Measures of Attainment

In either case, Han officials saw the way to recovery in paying close attention to cosmic patterns, closely observing the portents, reading the signs of Heaven and Earth, and performing the right rituals at the right times. It was also essential that ruler perfected his virtue and observed the proper rites in accordance with the five phases. Through these various measures, it was believed, human government could ensure the proper cooperation of yin and yang and thus establish a realm of Great Peace on Earth—possibly after first passing through a period of chaos and destruction. Although attainable in the present, however, this state was not considered permanent nor was it seen as in total discontinuity with the present.

The emperor, moreover, who was to realize Great Peace and obtain the full blessings of Heaven, was believed to either be a sage himself (like Yao) or have the support of one (like the Yellow Emperor and his adviser Guangchengzi). Being part of the natural movement of Heaven, such a sage supposedly appeared at regular intervals, as part of a cyclical event that occurred every couple of hundred years or so.

Following this belief, Qin and Han emperors summoned magical practitioners to court in the hope that one of them might prove to be the key sage or that at least their insights into the workings of the cosmos would help them establish perfect government. Later, with a shift toward Confucianism, which became the foundation of the imperial examination system established in 136 B.C.E., Confucius rose to the status of main sage, his teachings venerated and interpreted with great devotion. At this stage, and unlike in later Daoist visions of Great Peace, none of these protagonists was considered a supernatural agent or divinely appointed. The ideal state of governance could still be obtained at the right cosmic moment with human means alone, provided the ruler proved himself worthy of the Mandate of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven

The [Mandate of Heaven](#) (*tianming*) appears first in the historical classic *Shujing* of the eighth century B.C.E. as a way in which Heaven (*tian*) directs the course of mundane events by ordering (*ming*) certain kings or feudal lords to take specific actions. Heaven, in these early days still closely linked with the high god of the Shang dynasty, referred to five different entities: a quasi-personified divine agent, the materially visible sky, the course of nature, the inherent pattern of events, and the representation of highest moral principle. Its order to govern, moreover, is closely linked with a moral dimension and a sense of temporality. “Nobody gets the mandate forever,” the *Shujing* says. “As long as you have personal virtue, you can keep the throne. When you do not have the virtue anymore, the Nine Provinces will slip through your hands.”

In the course of the Zhou dynasty and under the impact of five-phases cosmology, thinkers came to see Heaven increasingly as a natural force, the sum-total of cosmic organization that governs the inherent structures and cycles of life. Thus the Legalist Xunzi says: “Heaven has a constant regularity of activity. It did not exist for the sake of [the sage ruler] Yao nor cease to exist for the sake of [the cruel tyrant] Jie. Respond to it with good government, and success will result. Respond to it with misgovernment, and calamity will result.” The Mandate of Heaven, already linked with the virtuous nature of a sincere and good ruler, was accordingly connected to specific omens or portents, such as the appearance of wondrous stones and charts or mythical animals (phoenixes, unicorns, and dragons). More explosively, however, it was also connected to the will of the common people whose contentment or distress become signs of a ruler’s ability to govern. Good harvests and prosperity as well as peace and social harmony thus showed Heaven’s acceptance and support of a certain ruler.

Cosmic Cycles

The inverse of this doctrine meant that if a ruler was about to lose the Mandate, Heaven would signal this fact through omens and portents, such as eclipses, falling stars, untimely weather, and natural disasters; the common people would be unsettled and even rise in rebellion. The notion, moreover, that “nobody gets the Mandate forever,” that cosmic cycles as much as royal virtue change over time, was then connected with the doctrine of the five phases. Cyclical revolutions in government were seen as part of the natural course of events; dynasties actively began to govern under the auspices of certain phases.

As a result of this doctrine, whenever odd celestial phenomena were spied, floods or droughts occurred, or some form of social discontent arose, people looked to potential new rulers matching the next cosmic phase. They were expected to be associated with certain colors, symbolic numbers, and virtues. Ditties circulated, prophecies abounded, and omen-lore was rife. When the overall situation deteriorated more seriously, messianic figures arose and rebellions began. The stage, in other words, was set for the arising of the first organized Daoist movements with their own visions of ideal governance and a pervasive state of Great Peace.

Key points you need to know

- Traditional Chinese cosmology, which pervades the culture, works with a correspondence system based on the complementary forces yin and yang, terms originally referring to the shady and sunny sides of a hill.
- Their developmental stages are divided more subtly into a system of five phases, which is then matched with seasons, directions, colors, bodily organs, senses, and political patterns.
- They also manifest more subtly in the Chinese calendar with its twelve-year cycle (zodiac animals) and ten-day week, combined into a sixty-year pattern.
- Aside from cosmic forces, the Han universe was also populated by numerous deities: ancient sage rulers (Three Sovereigns, Five Emperors, Yao, Shun, Yu), gods of the center (Northern Dipper, Great One, Ruler of Fates), and other figures (celestial bureaucrats, ancestors, ghosts, and demons).
- This divergence could yet be pulled together in harmony through the attainment of a state of Great Peace, universal perfection on all levels of life. Key to this realization was the ruler, whose Mandate of Heaven was linked with natural phenomena and the happiness of the people.

Discussion questions

1. How can we apply yin-yang and the five phases in our lives? Is there merit in seeing life as continuously unfolding from one state into another?
2. How do the gods and celestial administrators create a sense of order in people's lives? Does it make sense to have a multiplicity of supernatural figures, both positive and negative?
3. What is the connection of religion and governance in other cultures? Is there still a tendency today to see government in cosmic terms?

Further reading

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