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Aihe Wang

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Introduction

Cosmology and Political Culture

This work examines the transformation of Chinese cosmology between two political ages – from the hegemonic states of the Bronze Age (Shang and Western Zhou, ca. 1700–771 B.C.) to the unified empires of the Iron Age (Qin and Han, 221 B.C.–220 A.D.) This historical transition produced two enduring traditions of Chinese civilization: the cultural heritage of a cosmology that has been seen as a “primordial and quint-essential expression of the ‘Chinese Mind’ ” or the “Chinese ‘structure of thought’ ”;¹ and the political heritage of a unified empire that has been considered the ideal model of Chinese government ever since. The task of this book is to unveil the interrelations and mutual production of these two heritages – the cultural and the political – in the historical process.

The role of cosmology in the formation of China’s early empires is a crucial question in Chinese history, one with great relevance to defining “Chineseness” today. This is because cosmology and the unified empire have been seen as the two most enduring structures of Chinese civilization. Two thousand years of official histories have repeatedly told the story of their eternal validity, transcending time and events, so that this unchanging order has become an unquestionable truth. Today, cosmology and a unified empire still serve as resources for forging China’s national identity. Revived by some, cursed by others, traditional cosmology is used to represent a cultural identity that is authentically Chinese, and a unified empire continues to be held by most Chinese as the only justified form of government for China.² By questioning the

1 This phrasing is borrowed from Schwartz, 1985, p. 351.

2 The search for identity at national and personal levels in modern China is discussed in Dittmer and Kim, eds., 1993, and Tu Wei-ming, ed., 1991. The rebel Chinese voices on this issue are best represented in Barmé and Jaivin, eds., 1992.

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social production of these two enduring structures of Chinese civilization, this study seeks to demonstrate how, beneath their unitary and recurring patterns, cosmology as a realm of the cultural and empire as a realm of the political were formed by a common dialectical process of mutual production and transformation in early China.

Chinese cosmology has been characterized as “correlative.” Cosmologies, using anthropologist Stanley Tambiah’s definition, are “frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter, and motion, and peopling it with gods, humans, animals, spirits, demons, and the like.”³ Chinese cosmology, as such a framework of conceptions and relations, is an immense system of correlation-building, based on interlaced pairs (correlated to *Yin-Yang* 陰陽), fours (correlated to the four directions), fives (correlated to the Five Phases or *Wuxing* 五行), eights (correlated to the Eight Trigrams), and so on. Such a correlative cosmology is an orderly system of correspondence among various domains of reality in the universe, correlating categories of the human world, such as the human body, behavior, morality, the sociopolitical order, and historical changes, with categories of the cosmos, including time, space, the heavenly bodies, seasonal movement, and natural phenomena. Schwartz has found that Chinese correlative cosmology resembles what Lévi-Strauss describes as the “science of the concrete” – “a kind of anthropocosmology in which entities, processes, and classes of phenomena found in nature correspond to or ‘go together with’ various entities, processes, and classes of phenomena in the human world.”⁴

A mode of thinking that has appeared in most civilizations,⁵ correlative cosmology nevertheless has different functions and meanings in different cultures and historical environments. In China, its first cultural-political manifestation occurred during the formative stage of China’s early empires in the last four centuries B.C. It was during this political transition that correlative cosmology became a common discourse by means of which competing social forces argued with one another, contested over the order of the new empire, and prescribed social practices in daily life. As such a common discourse, Chinese cosmology became a prevalent expression of political culture that was essential to the formation of the imperial order of early China, which continued to influence imperial history for two thousand years.

³ Tambiah, 1985, p. 3. ⁴ Schwartz, 1985, p. 351.

⁵ A. C. Graham has powerfully demonstrated that far from being an “exotic” mode of thinking uniquely Chinese, Chinese correlative cosmology-building is merely an example of the “correlative” thinking used by everyone, which underlies the operations of language itself. Graham, 1989, p. 320.

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The development of the core of Chinese correlative cosmology – the system called *Wuxing* – best illustrates how cosmology and the imperial formation were mutually productive. *Wuxing* is a cosmology symbolized by the five material elements – Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. It is a system of classification that became predominant over other systems, synthesizing and standardizing the other systems through these five categories. Yet more important than its role as a means of classification, *Wuxing* is a cosmology about interaction and change. The five cosmic energies exist in constant interaction, conquering and generating one another in circular sequence. As the core of correlative cosmology, *Wuxing* correlated events and actions with the ceaseless cosmic movements of the five interactive phases, serving to explain events in the human world and to dictate human actions.

The proper translation of the term *Wuxing* 五行 has long been debated by scholars. The traditional translation is “Five Elements,” a term most convenient for comparative studies of Chinese thought and thought in other civilizations.⁶ Yet “elements” does not fully represent the Chinese term *Wuxing*, which literally means five “goings,” “conducts,” or “doings,” nor does it convey the basic nature of *Wuxing* as a cosmology of interaction and change. Many scholars have proposed alternatives, including five forces, agents, entities, activities, or stages of change.⁷ Of these, “Five Phases” has acquired a wide acceptance among specialists.⁸ But some scholars have recently challenged “Five Phases,” among them A. C. Graham, who uses “Five Processes” for the pre-Han period.¹⁰

This difficulty in translation derives primarily from *Wuxing* cosmology itself, from its fluidity and diversity in function and meaning. As I shall demonstrate throughout this study, its meaning varied not only in different historical periods, but also in its different applications by diverse factions in the same society. *Wuxing* is not simply a set of concepts, a school of philosophy, a mode of thinking, or a commonly agreed-upon representation; instead, it is a cultural phenomenon that changes through history, a discourse for political argument and power struggle, and above all, an art of action in a world of conflict and change. Political actors used *Wuxing* cosmology in arguing about imperial sovereignty,

6 “Five Elements” has been used by scholars such as Marcel Granet and Derk Bodde.

7 See the list in Kunst, 1977.

8 John S. Major has strongly argued for using “Five Phases.” See Major, 1976; 1977.

9 Michael Friedrich and Michael Lackner suggest restoring the term “elements.” See Friedrich and Lackner, 1983–5. Bodde agrees with this suggestion and favors “elements” over “phases,” saying that the latter does not convey the dynamism of *Wuxing* in ceaseless interaction. See Bodde, 1991, p. 101.

10 Graham, 1986, pp. 42–66, 70–92.

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in contesting power and authority, and in defining power relations and the social hierarchy.

The changes in *Wuxing* cosmology epitomize the transformation of political culture in early China. With twentieth-century archaeological discoveries making it possible to reconstruct the history of the Bronze Age, more and more scholars have begun to trace the origin of *Wuxing* to this earliest historical period, to the archaic cosmology of the Four Quarters (*Sifang* 四方). Although a certain symbolic resemblance and some continuity can be found between *Sifang* and *Wuxing*, there are fundamental differences between the two in their structures, functions, and meanings. The early appearance of *Wuxing* can be found in data from the fourth to third centuries B.C., during the transition from the Bronze Age to the imperial era. These early forms of *Wuxing* absorbed certain structural and symbolic features of *Sifang*, and became one of many systems of classification that coexisted in mantic and ritual practices of the time. At this stage, *Wuxing* was loosely defined and unsystematically used. Later, in the course of the formation of centralized empires, it was elevated to become the core of correlative cosmology, the predominant system of classification, and a shared discourse among different interest groups in their political interactions.

Why did cosmology and the political structure go through such fundamental transformations simultaneously? What was the relationship between the cultural and the political aspects of this simultaneous transformation? How did the new meanings of cosmology and the new political institutions construct one another? In asking these questions, this work aims to unveil the process of mutual production of cosmology and empire, of the cultural and the political, in the process of historical change.

Different Approaches and Assumptions

To study the mutual construction of cosmology and empire demands a reevaluation of the methodologies and assumptions inherent in the scholarship on the subject. The close connection between politics – the total complex of power relations in society – and cosmology – the conception of the universe as an ordered system – has long been acknowledged as the fundamental principle of Chinese political order, a principle known in Chinese history as “the union of politics and the doctrine” (*Zhengjiao heyi* 政教合一). But modern disciplinary divisions have split this “union” into a long chain of binary oppositions, those of philosophy versus history, ideas versus institutions, words versus deeds, meaning versus power, culture versus politics, and so on.

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Historians' Concern with Origins

Historians of China have studied cosmology primarily as a form of thought, and have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with its origin. According to scholars living during the Han Dynasty, *Wuxing* cosmology was a sacred pattern of the ordered universe, which the sage imitated in creating human culture. These scholars attributed the authority of *Wuxing* cosmology to its sacred and antique origin, as images descended from Heaven and recognized by ancient sages.¹¹ This idea of the divine and antique origin of *Wuxing* cosmology was taken for granted throughout imperial history, and its influence is still felt today.

One great achievement of modern historical approaches has been the demystification of the origin of *Wuxing* cosmology. Henderson reveals the rise of criticism of correlative cosmology in late imperial times, mostly by Qing scholars of the so-called School of Evidential Research (*kaozheng xue* 考證學).¹² These scholars were engaged in distinguishing authentic classical texts from their interpolations or forgeries, and in establishing their chronology. In so doing, they challenged the passages in these texts about *Wuxing* cosmology with regard to dating and authorship. Their criticism of cosmology, as Bodde has pointed out, was unsystematic, concerned with its textual reference rather than its conception and system.¹³ But their sophisticated methods of textual and historical analysis became indispensable tools for the study of Chinese history.

With this heritage, the leading critics of Chinese history and culture in the early twentieth century – such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 – deconstructed *Wuxing* cosmology by revealing the political context within which it was formed and the political motivations of the forgers of *Wuxing* texts or textual fragments.¹⁴ Undermining the myth of its sacred and antique origin, these critics revealed *Wuxing* to be a product of political history. But, limited by the methods inherited from the Qing scholars, their criticism of this cosmology was concerned mainly with its textual reference. Furthermore, they treated cosmology only as a product of textual forgeries carried out by a few Qin and Han compilers motivated by utilitarian and political concerns. Such a conclusion reduced a profound cultural phenomenon – a cosmology that prevailed in all of Chinese society and persisted throughout history – to

11 This theory is recorded in the opening of “Wuxing zhi” in *Hanshu*; see *Hanshu buzhu* 27a (abbreviation *HSBZ*), Wang Xianqian, 1900, rpt. in facsimile, 1983, pp. 1a–b; and *Hanshu* (abbreviation *HS*), Ban Gu, (1962) 1987, p. 1315. For the translation of this statement and detailed discussion of this theory, see Chapter 4 of this book.

12 Henderson, 1984, chs. 7 and 8. 13 Bodde, 1991, p. 102.

14 Liang Qichao, (1926–41) 1986.

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a mere lie invented by a few cunning flatterers and usurpers to cover up the real matter of power. Such reductionism implies that politics was the reality, prior to and determinative of cultural life, and that cultural production was a fabricated deception used to mystify that power.

In contrast to historians who give analytical priority to the political, historians of philosophy and science have studied *Wuxing* cosmology primarily as a mode of thinking, a product of mind, or a school of philosophy. While varying in methodology and interests, they have commonly developed a theme suggested by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (b. 145 B.C.), attributing the creation of *Wuxing* cosmology to an individual thinker active at the eve of the imperial era, Zou Yan 鄒衍 (305–240 B.C.),¹⁵ and his school of philosophy, which has been retrospectively labeled *Yin-Yang jia* 陰陽家 (the school of *Yin* and *Yang*). This school of philosophy is a combination of magic and science according to Feng Youlan, or a school of “naturalists” according to Needham.¹⁶ In arguing against Needham’s distinction between Zou Yan’s “naturalism” or “protoscience” and Han Confucians’ “phenomenalism” or “pseudoscience,” Schwartz sees Zou Yan as a pioneer of Han Confucianism, initiating the fusion of cosmology with Confucian values.¹⁷ Xu Fuguan and Li Hansan have each conducted thorough research on classical texts, affirming that it was Zou Yan who transformed the archaic concept of Five Materials (*wu cai* 五材) into *Wuxing*, which then became moving cycles of cosmic energy.¹⁸ These scholars have explored *Wuxing* cosmology in terms of philosophy and science, comparing it to Western philosophy and science.

But treating cosmology as a school of philosophy or a mode of thinking represents another kind of reductionism: it gives ontological or analytical priority to the products of the mind, to ideas, meanings, and thoughts, reducing the social and political enactments of such ideas to mere background. This “mind-centered” approach has further reduced cosmology to pure philosophy, to thought represented in texts, neglecting or obscuring its immense symbolic manifestation in everyday cultural practice and material production. It thus dismembers an immense cultural-political phenomenon, reducing it to the invention of a philosophical school or even a single theorist and limiting the ground for discussion to philosophical texts only. Similar limitations are also found among scholars who are not satisfied with attributing *Wuxing* cosmology

15 The dating of Zou Yan’s life is adopted from Qian Mu, (1935) 1985, vol. 32, p. 619.

16 Feng Youlan, 1983, vol. 2, pp. 299–301; Needham and Wang Ling, 1956, pp. 232–53.

17 Schwartz, 1985, pp. 363–9.

18 Xu Fuguan, 1963, pp. 509–87; and Li Hansan, 1981, pp. 30–5, 51–62.

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to Zou Yan as the sole innovator. Henderson has tried to trace multiple sources for Chinese correlative cosmology, yet all the sources he traces are confined to the realm of philosophical schools and the syncretism of Han philosophers.¹⁹

Both historical approaches to Chinese cosmology, that of political history and that of the history of philosophy, have made tremendous contributions to the building of a solid foundation of textual analysis, which has made the present study possible. However, neither approach has proven sufficient by itself to explain how and why cosmology became a pervasive and profound cultural phenomenon, or to show the interrelation of the simultaneous transformations in cosmology and political structure in early China.

Classical Anthropology and Sinology

Structural anthropologists have led the study of Chinese cosmology in an opposite direction. Instead of treating it as a conscious invention of philosophers at a certain time in history, they see correlative cosmology as a mode of thinking universal to primitive cultures or even to all cultures, one that is particularly enduring in Chinese civilization. Instead of focusing on the problem of origins, anthropologists have been concerned with the structure and symbolism of cosmology and its connection to society and culture as a whole.

However, in their pursuit of a holistic reconstruction of the sociopolitical and the cultural, structural anthropologists repeat the chain of dichotomies between ideas and institutions or between the cultural and the sociopolitical, giving priority to one side or the other. Attributing ontological priority and causality to the social realm, Durkheim sees correlative classifications in general as “reflections” or “imitations” of preexisting social structures. He sees Chinese cosmology as one such reflection, even though a clear link between the social system and classification is unsupported by the evidence and therefore still undemonstrated.²⁰ In contrast to Durkheim’s social structuralism, Lévi-Strauss and Eliade attribute ontological priority to the symbolic structure of the human mind. They conceptualize cosmology as a given structure of mind common to most archaic peoples, which social reality imitates and repeats.²¹ Wheatley further applies this theory to the study of Chinese

19 Henderson, 1984, pp. 28–46. 20 Durkheim and Mauss, 1963, pp. 73–4.

21 Lévi-Strauss, (1962) 1966; Eliade, 1949, ch. 1; as summarized and developed in Wheatley, 1971, pp. 416–18.

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cosmology, contending that the reality of Chinese cities was a function of the “imitation” of a preexisting “Celestial Archetype” or “Symbolism of the Center.”²²

These two anthropological approaches are analytically polarized, viewing cosmology as either the reflection of a prior social structure or a preexisting conceptual model that social reality imitates. Both approaches reevaluate the connection between cosmology and social reality, and both conceive them holistically; but the unity each constructs preserves the dichotomy between the cultural and the sociopolitical, serving as a static and eternal structure that transcends history. Consequently, the question of cosmology’s historical development becomes irrelevant.

Some sinologists have adopted the principles of structural anthropology, especially the approach represented by Lévi-Strauss and Eliade, but have rejected its conclusion of a universal primitive mode of thinking. Rather than ascribing correlative cosmology to primitive cultures, for example, Granet stresses that Chinese cosmology is a highly ordered system based on the logic of numbers, which functions as classification and as protocol. Chinese cosmology, according to him, is a logical unfolding of structural principles of symmetry and centrality.²³

Granet’s insight has stimulated many sinologists to further develop his thesis and approach in their own research. For example, Needham carries out the theme that Chinese correlative thinking was not primitive thinking in the sense that it depicted not an illogical or prelogical chaos, but rather a picture of a highly and precisely ordered universe.²⁴ Bodde employs Granet’s structural principle of symmetry and centrality in explaining the growth of *Wuxing* cosmology.²⁵ And Major specifically traces the structural origin of *Wuxing* cosmology to the numerology of the magic square.²⁶

The most influential sinologist in this direction is A. C. Graham, who combines a sophisticated structural analysis with a notion of historical development. Graham challenges the classical structuralism that defines correlative thinking as a stage of prelogic at a lower level of evolution of human intelligence, one belonging especially to China or to primitive cultures, and argues instead that in both China and the West we find different levels of thinking, correlative and logical, in philosophy and protoscience.²⁷ Through structural analysis, he demonstrates that like correlative thinking in general, which is rooted in the interplay between linguistic “paradigms” and “syntagms,” the Chinese cosmology of

22 Wheatley, 1971, p. 418. 23 Granet, (1934) 1950.

24 Needham and Wang Ling, 1956, p. 286. 25 Bodde, 1991, pp. 103–21.

26 Major, 1984. 27 Graham, 1986, pp. 3–15; 1989, pp. 315–19.

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Yin-Yang Wuxing evolved from a universal structural scheme of binary oppositions.²⁸ Yet unlike classical structuralists, who stop at the universality of correlative thinking, Graham includes a historical notion in his structural analysis by tracing the early development of *Wuxing* cosmology. He points out two important historical phenomena. First, during the classical period (before 250 B.C.), correlative cosmology prevailed only in protoscience, and philosophers were indifferent if not hostile to cosmologies. Second, *Wuxing* cosmology was initiated by Zou Yan when he integrated the concept of Five Processes from protoscience into his political theory and was then systematized and elevated by Han philosophers to become the prime cosmology, again for political purposes.²⁹

While adopting the vocabulary and concepts of structural anthropology, these sinologists retrieve the basic themes and assumptions of historical approaches described earlier. Like Chinese historians Gu Jiegang and Feng Youlan, Western sinologists ponder the question of origin, and many agree that *Wuxing* cosmology was invented by Zou Yan and completed by Han philosophers. For evidence, they have commonly confined themselves to texts, mostly classical and philosophical texts, while with regard to subject matter they see cosmology as a form of human intellect.

Culture, Ideology, and Power*Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*

The disciplinary boundaries discussed earlier have divided the single historical process of forming and transforming cosmology and the political system into two separate subjects. Various disciplines have addressed the relationship between the two subjects only at the level of causality or ontological priority – that is, which one is prior to and thus determinative of the other. Institutional history gives such priority to forms of government and bureaucracy, viewing cosmology as the invention of certain individuals with political motivation to justify the existing system. The history of philosophy, on the other hand, studies cosmology as a pure mode of thought, one that is permanent and universal, and sees political use of this cosmology as corruption of the structure. Structural anthropology is also concerned with the causal relationship between cultural ideas and sociopolitical institutions, attributing causality and onto-

28 Graham, 1989, pp. 319–25, 331–56; 1986, pp. 16–66.

29 Graham, 1989, pp. 325–30; 1986, pp. 70–92.

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logical priority to one or the other. It has sacrificed history in the reconstruction of the relation between the cultural and the political, ignoring human agents, practices, and the process of change.

The present work breaks down these disciplinary boundaries and reconstructs the dialectic mutual construction of cosmology and the empire, that is, of the cultural and the political realms. In order to articulate the need for a total analysis of this phenomenon, the concept of a cultural-political “totality,” borrowed from the anthropologist Stanley Tambiah,³⁰ helps us to understand *Wuxing* cosmology as a unity of structure and events, of conceptions and actions, and of continuity and transformation. This unity, nevertheless, does not suggest a total history, nor a homogeneous equilibrium in a Durkheimian sense, nor an integrated system of ideology and class domination in a Marxist sense, nor a hegemony or homogeneity. On the contrary, it depicts a single, but highly dynamic, process of cultural-political change that is constituted by fragmentary events, by conflicts and disputes, and by contests for power and control.

To study cosmology as such a cultural-political “totality” requires an interdisciplinary approach that focuses its analysis upon the connection of the disciplinary boundaries, studying the process of interrelation and mutual construction of the cultural and the political rather than treating them as separate entities. The interdisciplinary approach also incorporates perspectives, methodologies, and materials from history, anthropology, archaeology, and philology, making connections between archaeologically discovered material culture and written records, between popular practices and state ideology, between philosophical debates and historical events, and between the symbolic construction of cosmology and the institutional construction of empire. Such an analysis is both a historical anthropology and a cultural history of early China. By applying such methods to the study of early China, I also mean to bring the history of early China – a field that is still seen as a unique and exotic “other” in the West and that remains isolated, accessible only to a limited number of highly specialized scholars – into general theoretical discussions about culture and power.

The Analysis of Culture, Ideology, and Power

Investigating ancient Chinese cosmology as an intrinsic component of power and as a discursive production of empire contributes to the the-

30 Tambiah, 1985, pp. 1–7.