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0521027497 - Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China

Aihe Wang

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COSMOLOGY AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN EARLY CHINA

Cosmology and a unified empire have long been considered the two most enduring structures of Chinese civilization. The role of cosmology in the formation of China's early empires is a vital question for historians of China and one with great relevance to the definition of "Chineseness" today. This book offers a radical reinterpretation of the formative stages of Chinese culture and history, tracing the central role played by cosmology in the development of China's early empires. Aihe Wang unveils the dynamic interaction between these two legacies – the cultural and the political – in the historical process.

Wang examines the transformation of Chinese cosmology between two political eras – from the hegemonic states of the Bronze Age (the 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.). Challenging the prevailing view of cosmology as a quintessential, unchanging, homogenous structure of Chinese culture, she demonstrates how cosmology was constructive to power while being at the same time constantly transformed by the political process. The ruling clans of the Bronze Age drew legitimacy through a cosmological system known as *Sifang* (the Four Quarters), in which the king and his ancestral line were believed to be the conduit of divine authority. Wang illustrates how beginning in about 400 B.C., the shift to *Wuxing* (commonly known as the Five Elements, in which the cosmic energies of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water constantly interact) both paved the way for and was subsequently refined by the politics of a unified, imperial order. Engaging social theory as well as philosophical, historical, and anthropological approaches, the author offers a model of dynamic and multifaceted political discourse as an alternative to the prevailing, more narrowly conceived theories of culture and power.

Aihe Wang is an assistant professor in the department of history at Purdue University. She grew up in Beijing and earned an M.A. from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1986. In 1995 she received a Ph.D. in social anthropology and East Asian languages and civilizations from Harvard University, supported by a Harvard Yen-ching scholarship. She has published in *East Asian Archaeology*, *Daojia Wenhua Yanjiu* [The Study of Daoist Culture], and various anthologies on Chinese history and culture.

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*To my teacher,
Kwang-chih Chang*

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