

THE METAPHYSICAL SYMBOLISM OF THE CHINESE TORTOISE

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Summary

The objective of the thesis is two-fold: 1) to examine the metaphysical symbolism of the Chinese tortoise and establish the visual grammar of the tortoise symbolism. As the topic will be approached in a visual communication point of view, infographics such as diagrams will be illustrated to demonstrate how Chinese cosmogony and cosmology are reflected on the metaphysical symbolism of the tortoise. 2) To investigate the myriad layers of meanings embedded within the tortoise symbol. By doing so, we will attempt to foreground any obscured meanings and at the same time, enhance and deepen our understanding towards both the tortoise symbol and the methodology of analysis and answer the question towards the meaning of the entwined form of the tortoise and snake symbolism. The established scholars of Chinese philosophies such as Wing Tsit Chan and Feng Youlan tackle the discourse and tenets of Chinese philosophy, ethics and metaphysics, yet there remains a missing link of transition from the written to visuals. On the other hand, the Research Institute of Asian Design The Research Institute of Asian Design aims to rediscover vital formative arts in Asia, where rich and traditional cultures, which are different from Western culture, are still rooted in daily life, and to establish “Asian Design” based on its unique usage. Through research on such projects as “Asian headgear,” “Asian plants and trees,” “Asian spirals” as well as the already launched study on “Asian floats,” we will reaffirm the values and meaning of the vast number of formative arts embraced by Asian cultures to use them in modern art. Hence, the paper attempts to synthesize these classical thoughts with the modern above-mentioned methodology to demonstrate how visual language can be scaled to apply visually to a macrocosmic and to a microcosmic view at the same time. This demonstrates the flexibility and attempts to apply the vernacular of Chinese metaphysical tenets to contextual application.

The paper analyzes the typologies of the tortoise in the Chinese cosmogonic myths and at the same time, introduce the Chinese cosmology namely their model of the cosmos, which includes the Yinyang thought, and the five elements theory to demonstrate the above-mentioned rationale. To further

substantiate the research and expand the lateral scope, the paper will draw on different viewpoints and methodologies of scholars such as René Guénon and Mircea Eliade specializing in traditional symbolism and their macrocosmic view on symbolisms to aid in connecting these seemingly unrelated concepts from text to image.

Hence, the images of the tortoise and the structure of the whole thesis will be classified into ‘typologies’ to reflect the cosmogonic pattern to further demonstrate this progression. From the undifferentiated ‘One’ or the primordial chaos, we will be introduced to the beginning of the universe as told in myths involving the tortoise. The next part of the process is the differentiating, which brings us to the ‘Two’ complementary force of Yin and Yang, namely Heaven and Earth and their symbolic shapes reflected on the form of the tortoise as well as the tortoise entwined with snake (black tortoise). The next part is the ‘Five’ elements generated by the interaction of the two which we will cover the black tortoise along with the three other important cardinal creatures in bronze mirrors, Feng Shui and select material cultures containing the four cardinal creatures. Finally, we will conclude with our immediate experiences of the tortoise in Singapore and in the contemporary under the ‘ten thousand things’ as it is considered the final stage of the cosmogonic process and where we are currently situated.

Introduction

“Restoring symbol to its status as an instrument of knowledge, our world is only returning to a point of view that was general...”

– Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*

This thesis will study the metaphysical symbol of the tortoise in Chinese culture to reveal hidden meanings embedded within. Many literature, art history, Chinese philosophy, and symbolism studies describe the tortoise symbol in a textual fashion.¹ This textual approach has its merits but also has its limitations. One merit is that it provides a source of literature and material for this study to build upon, but on the other hand, this textual approach lacks consolidated imageries that allow the analysis and to see beyond how the tortoise symbol correlates with its literary counterparts. Therefore, the thesis aims to consolidate past knowledge and to connect it with existing knowledge from visual media, allowing us to reaffirm the meaning and position the tortoise holds. Hence, the thesis will investigate the meaning of the tortoise symbol in the context of Chinese culture and deduce its usage from its appearance in various art forms and material culture.

The tortoise’s form is believed to be the embodiment of natural phenomena, mysterious forces, or supernatural power that impact human life and the universe. It holds great significance in many ancient cultures of the world as well as in the fields of cosmology, myth, rites, rituals, and medicine. More often than not, it is perceived as an object of support, the foundation for the beginning of things, or an emblem of time and earth². The reason for this is due to the tortoise’s habit of burying itself underground and then emerging, hence its association with emerging things or movement after stillness.

The tortoise in this study belongs to the genus *Chelonia*³, which is found in most parts of the earth, excluding the harsher, colder regions. All members of *Chelonia* are

¹ Examples of ‘dictionaries’ of symbols describes motifs and symbols in a textual fashion: Allan, S. (1991). *Shape of the Turtle, The: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*: State University of New York Press; Cirlot, J. E., &

² Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.45.

³ Dubois, A. B., R. (2010). The distinction between family-series and class-series nomina

oviparous and deposit their eggs in sandbanks. Immediately after hatching, hatchlings emerge and seek out safe territory where they burrow and develop for a season. Due to their slow development and long lifespan, some tortoises have a recorded lifespan as long as two hundred and fifty years⁴; because of its longevity,⁵ Chinese religious offerings tend to be fashioned in the form of tortoise (Figure 1). While the turtle is strictly a marine creature, tortoises mainly dwell in fresh water.⁶ They grow to different sizes, ranging from the terrapin to the Aldabra giant tortoise that weighs over 300 kg.⁷ On the other side of the scale, the miniature tortoise, according to Chinese records, does not exceed 5 cm in length and is known as “qian gui”⁸, the golden coin tortoise.⁹

in zoological nomenclature, with emphasis on the nomina created by Batsch (1788, 1789) and on the higher nomenclature of turtle. Bonn zoological Bulletin, 57(2), 149-171.

⁴ <http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2014/02/04/6-of-the-worlds-longest-lived-animals/>

⁵ Another contributing factor is the male comes out in spring to change its shell and subsequently return to torpid state in winter. Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing, p.382.

⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/pets/difference-between-turtles-and-tortoises/>

⁷ Hennessy, K., Alexander, B., Baggaley, A., Institution, S., & Dennis-Bryan, K. (2010). *Natural History: The Ultimate Visual Guide to Everything on Earth*: DK, p.376.

⁸ 钱龟

⁹ Ibid, p.378.



Figure 1: Tortoise made from rice vermicelli. Photographed by author in Taiwan.

In Chinese culture, the Classics of Mountains and Seas (*Shan hai jing*)¹⁰ has a record of a three-legged tortoise known to grant immunity against severe illnesses and be a remedy to carbuncles when consumed (Figure 2)¹¹. The tortoise has consistently been used as medicine, according to the *Materia Medica (Bencao Mengquan)*¹² (Figure 3). Their shells, along with similar animal materials, such as scales, antlers, and skins, are among the commonly used animal substances mentioned in the Chinese *Materia Medica*. These materials are rich in collagen and calcium compounds; collagens are the proteins that help determine the overall physical structure, and calcium compounds contribute to rigidity of the structure.

¹⁰ 山海經

¹¹ 徐客. (2014). 圖解山海經. Taiwan: 西北國際文化有限公司.

¹² 本草蒙筌

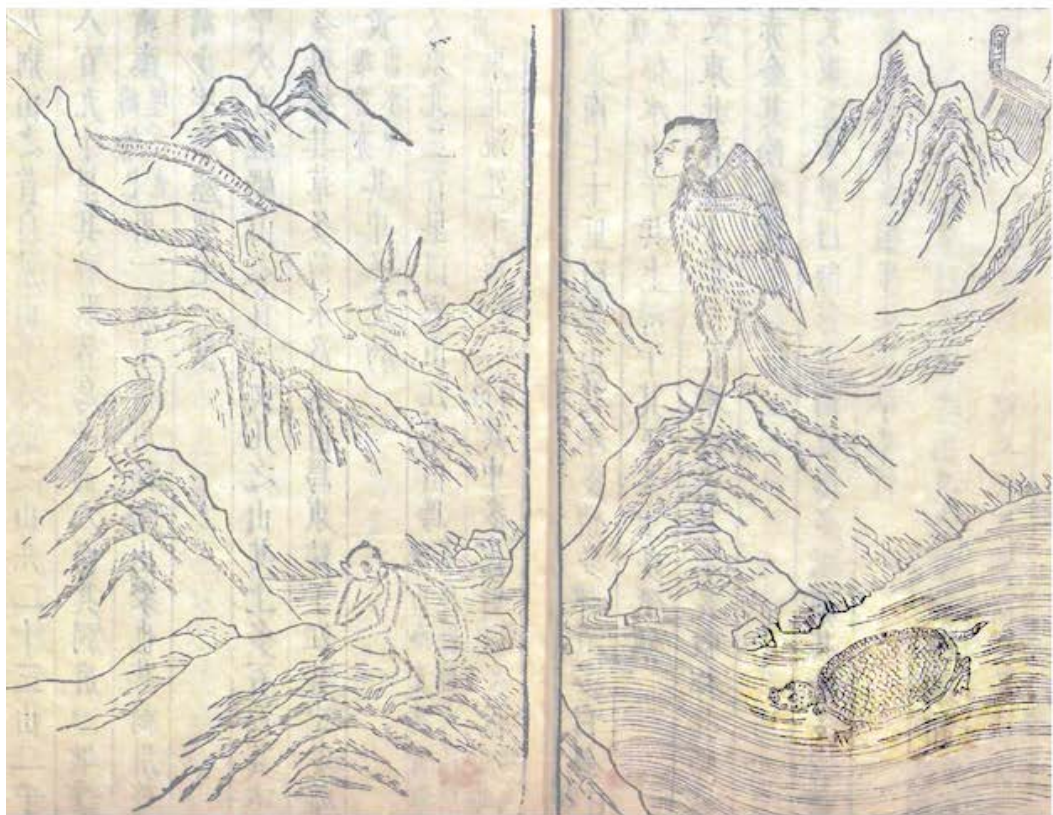


Figure 2: Tortoise illustration from the Classics of Mountains and Seas. Image extracted from classic scrolls from <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/4447/#q=classics+of+mountain+and+seas>



Figure 3: Tortoise and a soft-shelled tortoise known as 'Bie,' depicted in the scroll of Materia Medica. Original scanned credit to: <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/4678/#q=materia>

To elaborate the universality of the tortoise's symbolism, in the ancient Indian conception of the world, the tortoise is used as a support for four elephants standing upon it, along with an entwined serpent.¹³ It holds a special place as the animal played an important role in the cosmogonic, cosmographic, and genealogical conceptions of Indian people. The stability and strength of the tortoise's upper shell and its associations with the ocean and longevity contributes to its universality in its symbolism.¹⁴ In another part of Hindu mythology, the narrative about the churning of the milk ocean depicts the tortoise as an incarnation of Vishnu. In the story, he transforms into the form of a tortoise that supports a mountain, preventing it from sinking to the bottom of the ocean (Figure 4).¹⁵ The word "Kāśyapa" means tortoise and is referred to as the polar star, while other meanings refer to it as the progenitor of immortals and mortals. This parallels the Chinese view of the tortoise's relationship with the northern constellation. In another Hindu creation myth, the tortoise was originally an egg, and when Prajāpati threw it into the waters, the substance that flowed out from the egg touched the waters and transformed into a tortoise.¹⁶

In Japan, there exists a myth about a young fisherman named *Urashima Tarō* who returned a tortoise that was caught, gently putting it back into the water (Figure 5). The tortoise turned out to be a beautiful princess belonging to the Dragon King who resided in a palace at the bottom of the Sea.¹⁷ In Japanese material culture, the tortoise accompanied by a crane is a favored motif in wedding ceremonies as they are associated with *Fukurokujiu*, the god of longevity and one of the seven gods of happiness.¹⁸ In other instances, the tortoise symbol is represented by a nearly hexagonal shape of a tortoise shell.¹⁹ Also, the Japanese worshipped the deity

¹³ Ibid, p.46.

¹⁴ Desai, D. (2009). KŪRMA IMAGERY IN INDIAN ART AND CULTURE. *Artibus Asiae*, 69(2), p.317.

¹⁵ Wilson, H. H. (1850). The Vishnu Purana. Retrieved from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/vp/vp044.htm>; Desai, D. (2009). KŪRMA IMAGERY IN INDIAN ART AND CULTURE. *Artibus Asiae*, 69(2), p.321.

¹⁶ Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.44.

¹⁷ Ozaki, Y. (1908). The Story of Urashima Taro, the Fisher Lad. *Japanese Fairy Tales* (Lit2Go Edition). Retrieved October 03, 2016, from <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/72/japanese-fairy-tales/4881/the-story-of-urashima-taro-the-fisher-lad/>

¹⁸ Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.52.

¹⁹ Hibi, S., & 丹羽基二. (2001). *Snow, Wave, Pine: Traditional Patterns in Japanese Design*: Kodansha International, p.73.

portrayed as a young prince holding a sword, mounted atop a tortoise vehicle with a snake, known as *Myōken Bosatsu* (Figure 6).²⁰

In Vietnam, the reverence of the tortoise dates back to the mid-15th century during the reign of Emperor *Ly Thai To* (King Le Loi). He fought back an invading Chinese army with a magically enchanted sword, reputedly bestowed upon him by the gods. After his victory, a giant golden tortoise surfaced while he was boating along a lake in Hanoi and snatched the sword from the king and swam off into the depths, returning it to its divine owners.²¹

The various cultural versions of the tortoise's stories enabled us to compare the significant impact of the tortoise in their respective cultures. The tortoise symbol and iconography is not exclusive to the Chinese culture. However, the variations and depictions of the tortoise in the respective cultures are 'visually tied' to the geographic locations of the various ethnicities, yet there are some similarities such as the tortoise being a support, an impenetrable fortress and also its association with the notion of the "eternal" due to its long life-span in the natural world.

²⁰ Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.43.

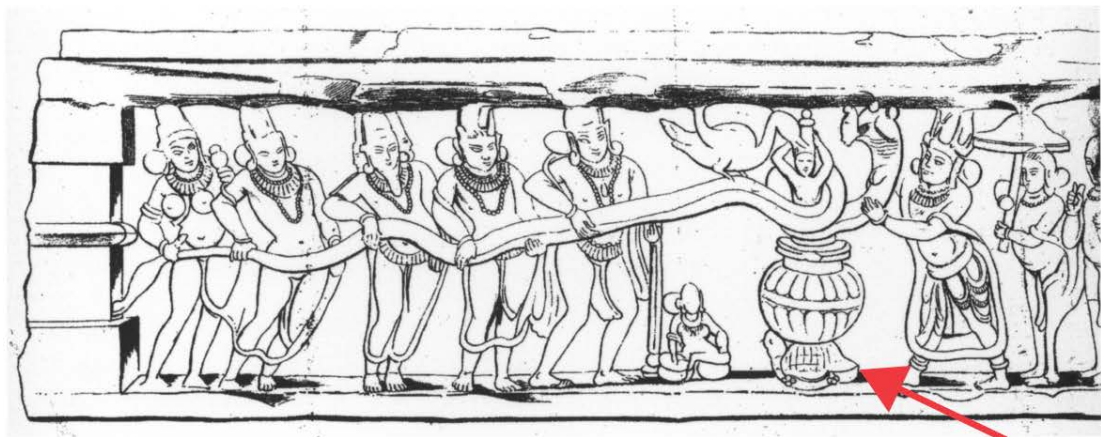
²¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/8368265/Why-is-the-turtle-revered-in-Vietnam.html>



a)



b)



c)

Figure 4: A) A tortoise as support for a lamp-stand (dīpa-stambha) in a temple courtyard, Kerala. Photo by Paul Martin-Dubost. B) Meru Yantra supported on the back of a tortoise. C) F.C. Maisey's drawing of the Churning of the Ocean based on a sculptural relief at Kālāñjar. After Maisey, 'Description of the Antiquities of Kalinjar,' *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 17, 1(1848). Image lifted from Desai, D. (2009). KURMA IMAGERY IN INDIAN ART AND CULTURE. *Artibus Asiae*, 69(2), 317-333.



Figure 5: Urashima Taro Returning from the Dragon King's palace by Yoshitoshi Tsukioka, 1886. Image from <http://jpninfo.com/40842>



Figure 6: *Myōken Bosatsu*, **Tortoise on the bottom**. Image from Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.43.

The Importance of Metaphysical Symbols

Metaphysical symbols provide a connection between human beings and time and space, through the context of religion or mythology, which is passed down in the form of doctrines or narratives. All religious rituals contain symbolic significance; without it, rituals are merely empty superstitions. However, this does not mean that symbolism is only restricted to religious institutions or erudition²²; it also concerns man's knowledge of himself. Mircea Eliade describes religious symbols as instruments that reveal certain aspects of reality that may not be readily understood by many. In other words, the symbol is an image that can reveal and interpreted in myriad ways that words otherwise fixates. The myth, the symbol, and the image invoke something greater and archaic—an art of communication that has existed since antiquity. It fulfills a function that connects mankind to a greater “whole” through as images are by their very structure are multivalent.²³ Hence, the use of images, symbols, and myths as an instrument of knowledge is an open language and interpretation otherwise too restricted by the limitations of words or is too complex to be adequately expressed through written words.

Furthermore, Eliade asserts with the aid of religious symbolisms, or in traditional symbolisms in this context, would “help to rescue the modern man from his cultural provincialism, and above all, from his historical and existentialist relativism.”²⁴ He also observes that when the modern man surpasses history, he will ultimately retrace his steps in an archetypal position. Through the simple fact act of rediscovering the cosmic rhythms – the alternations of day and night and of cyclical seasons can he come to a more complete knowledge of his own destiny and significance. Therefore, traditional symbolisms may aid in teaching the various archetypes for the modern man to realize the existence of such knowledge have been around, condensed into symbolic image to enable its teachings to be transmitted through time. Images, as mentioned above are not fixed by definition or words and could only be interpreted at the point of time and the man's level of understanding and intellect.

²² Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press, p.20.

²³ Ibid, p.15.

²⁴ Ibid, p.35.

Firstly, we need to establish the difference between the meanings of the symbol in popular speech and the metaphysical symbol. The word “metaphysical” describes things that are concerned with first principles, ultimate grounds, being, time, or substance.²⁵ *Meta* describes the idea of something “beyond” or “transcendental”, and *physical*²⁶ refers to things that are material and corporeal. Mircea Eliade refers to these types of symbols as religious symbols or ‘hierophany’. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, the term ‘hierophany’ refers to the manifestation of the sacred; in Greek, *hieros* refers to the idea of the sacred and holy while the verb *phainein* means ‘to show’ or ‘to reveal’.²⁷ Therefore, this thesis will discuss how metaphysical symbols reflect the model of the world where all things conform or refer to these sacred models established by ‘hierophanies’.

The word “symbol” is a versatile and convenient term used in various fields, such as semiotics, language, linguistics, psychology, and science. According to the dictionary definition,²⁸ a “symbol” refers to something that represents or is used in place of something else, for example, a material object like an emblem, token, or sign that represents something else, often something immaterial.²⁹ This specific meaning shows “symbols” that represent something can be conceived by the human mind and exist within the perimeters of empiricism or science. However, in this paper, the difference between the common meaning of a “symbol” and the meaning of a metaphysical symbol is described by a “supra-empirical” position that suggests that the metaphysical symbol exists beyond empiricism and cannot be known by conventional perception or thought.

Metaphysical symbols allow us to relate to their physical manifestation, enabling the penetration of the deeper meaning of the symbol, that we understand as being “metaphysical”. The metaphysical symbol is also intrinsically connected with myths: “As do graphic symbols, the myth affirms the silence that lies beyond words: the

²⁵ Metaphysical. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved July 29, 2016 from the Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/metaphysical>

²⁶ Chroust, A.-H. (1961). The Origin of "Metaphysics". *The Review of Metaphysics*, 14(4), 601-616.

²⁷ "Hierophany." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. . *Encyclopedia.com*. Retrieved March 18, 2017. <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

²⁸ symbol. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved July 6, 2017 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/symbol>

²⁹ Symbol. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved July 29, 2016 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/symbol>

narrator of the myth remains silent while speaking.”³⁰ Therefore, myth represents the proper language of metaphysics and embodies the deepest knowledge man has.³¹ It is also claimed by Joseph Campbell that myths are symbols: “A whole mythology is an organization of symbolic images and narratives...”³² Whereas some perplexing symbols may be understood by a trained mind, many others are meant to be incomprehensible. It is this incomprehensibility of images that triggers mystical and mythical depictions and narratives beyond here and now, thus guiding the initiate to the otherworldly realm. Furthermore this view is also supported by Cooper’s view on images: “It is the business of art to grasp the primordial truth, to make the inaudible audible to enunciate the primordial word...Every symbol was a window on to a realm that is greater than the symbol itself.”³³

The study of the metaphysical symbol of the tortoise and its connected concepts is fundamentally interdisciplinary. Rather than fixating on the identification and interpretation of iconic images, the thesis endeavors to encompass the metaphysical symbolism of the tortoise across the web of Chinese visual culture within what Clifford Geertz calls a cultural system of symbols, which acts as both a model *of* and *for* reality.³⁴ The images should not be seen as isolated and irrelevant to other cultural categories, such as those readily labeled “Southeast Asian art”, “science”, or “native art.” Rather, this study of the metaphysical symbols of the tortoise integrates all related images holistically (conceptually and visually), beyond the sectarian, media-based, methodological boundaries that seemingly compartmentalizes image-related issues into what Eugene Wang calls “entrenched enclaves.”³⁵

Geertz’s concept of a cultural system of symbols is useful in helping us see the metaphysical symbol of the tortoise in a larger sphere based on cultural context. It is also pertinent to note that there is also a shift in paradigm “from the study of theological or intellectual meanings of texts and images to the investigation of their production, consumption, and physicality.”³⁶ In other words, the analysis of literature

³⁰ Snodgrass, A. (1992). *The Symbolism of the Stupa*: Motilal Banarsidass, p.6

³¹ Ibid, p.6

³² Joseph Campbell and Myth. (2014). In J. W. Menzies (Ed.), *True Myth* (pp. 88-141): Lutterworth Press, p.89.

³³ Ibid, p.96

³⁴ Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation Of Cultures*: Basic Books, p.93-94 for the differences of both modes.

³⁵ Wang, E. Y. (2005). *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China*: University of Washington Press, xix.

³⁶ Morgan, D. (2008). *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*: Taylor & Francis, p.136.

pertaining to symbols has evolved into a new platform that attempts to bridge textual information to the intention behind what an image tries to convey. Keeping in mind the concepts discussed in this section, the following studies will attempt to develop our understanding of the tortoise's visual languages through the typologies of the Chinese tortoise. This is to enable us to consider it in all possible angles and aspects to establish the fundamental meanings before we proceed to combine more complex meanings with other metaphysical symbols.

The Significance of the Tortoise in Chinese Culture and Tradition

The Chinese ideogram for the tortoise is a pictogram depicting a snake-like head on top, with its claw on the left and its shell on the right, with its tail below (Figure 7).³⁷ Its long lifespan makes it a symbol of longevity and auspiciousness, a result of the Celestial Emperor Shang Di granting it a lifespan of 10,000 years.³⁸ It is also a symbol of immutability and steadfastness and is carried as a standard of the army when paired with a snake. This depiction shows that neither enemy is capable of defeating the other, which is symbolized by the snake being unable to crush the tortoise's shell and reach its vital organs; while the tortoise is unable to reach the serpent to attack it because of its short neck.³⁹

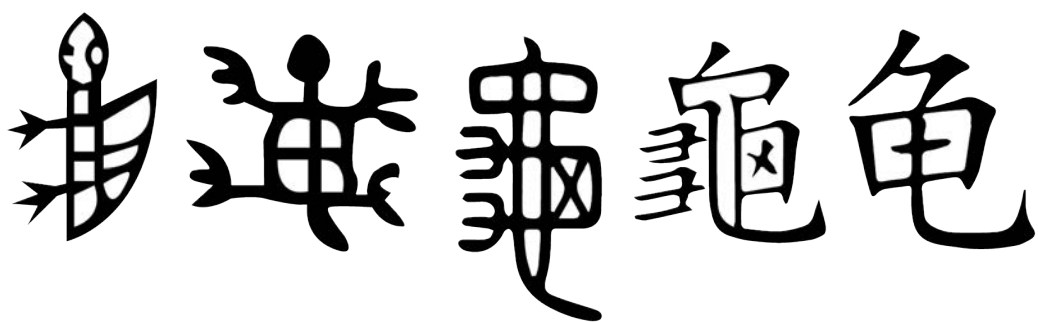


Figure 7: Evolution of the Chinese character for tortoise

³⁷ Williams, C. A. S. (1941). *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives: An Alphabetical Compendium of Antique Legends and Beliefs, as Reflected in the Manners and Customs of the Chinese*: Dover Publications, p.403. Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing.

³⁸ Eberhard, W. (2002). *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*: Taylor & Francis, p.295.

³⁹ Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.42.

The earliest use of the tortoise are found in oracle bones and amulets made from it through Pyromancy, a form of divination by fire.⁴⁰ It began in China in the fourth millennium B.C and subsequently evolved into an elaborate system during the Shang Dynasty. Apart from using tortoise plastron as a conduit for divination, various bones from other animals, such as boar, oxen, or sheep, were also used. The bones were ancestral offerings for a type of sacrificial ritual, and interpretations were made from the accidental cracks in the bones when heat was applied. The bones were carefully prepared before the process of cracking by boring holes through points in the bone where heat was to be applied.⁴¹

The use of tortoise shells was not limited to divination. People during the Shang Dynasty made models of tortoises made from jade and stone as well as motifs of tortoises in bronze art. The tortoise's association with water seems to be present in art, as evidenced by their position in the middle of bowls and water basins in Shang bronze art.⁴²

According to the Chinese Book of Rites, the black tortoise or “*Xuan Wu*”⁴³ is considered one of the four supernatural beings⁴⁴, known as “*Si ling*”⁴⁵, symbolic of the four directions—north, south, east, and west. The tortoise entwined with the snake represents the northern direction and is the symbol of winter. The other three directions are represented by the azure dragon of the east, the symbol of spring; the vermillion bird of the south, symbol of summer; and the white tiger of the west, the symbol of autumn.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Allan, S. (1991). *Shape of the Turtle, The: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*: State University of New York Press, p.103.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.104.

⁴² Ibid, p.107.

⁴³ 玄武

⁴⁴ 何謂四靈?麟鳳龜龍，謂之四靈。故龍以為畜，故魚鮪不滄；鳳以為畜，故鳥不獮；麟以為畜，故獸不狘；龜以為畜，故人情不失, Sturgeon, D. Chinese Text Project (中國哲學書電子化計劃). Retrieved from <http://ctext.org/liji/li-yun>.

⁴⁵ 四靈

⁴⁶ Welch, P. B. (2008). *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*: Tuttle Publishing, p.109; Mak, M. Y., & Ng, S. T. (2008). Feng shui: an alternative framework for complexity in design. *Architectural Engineering and Design Management*, 4(1), p.62.

From here, we observe the intertwinement of the myth and the natural world in the practice of rites and rituals as well as tools. In the subsequent chapters, we will analyse the various typologies of the tortoise and their different meanings when depicted alongside or combined with other icons. In order to achieve that, we will examine existing scholarships on the analysis of the tortoise symbolism and foreground its meanings as ‘visual grammar’ as the basis to further our study of its dynamic narratives. This aims to fulfil a more holistic understanding of the tortoise’s visual language and its myriad appearances in both contemporary and traditional.

Thesis Structure

The thesis is broadly organized to reflect the cosmogonic development rather than the chronological fashion. The reason for this was to systematically portray the tortoise symbolism in relation to the various stages of the unfolding universe beginning with myths describing the beginning of the cosmos with the involvement of the tortoise. Furthermore, this system of organization hopes to better orientate readers of the thesis at which point of the cosmogonic process they are currently in. Effectively, the whole thesis is organized in such a way that it begins from an undifferentiated state of the cosmos and finally concluding in the manifested reality and the myriad entities in the world around us, which is the tortoise in our immediate surrounding in Singapore.

There are two key areas of the study of Chinese metaphysical symbolism of the tortoise: the first is Chinese cosmological thought and the second is the metaphysical symbolism of the tortoise and the application of its tenets on material culture. The theoretical nature of Chinese cosmology has been a topic for literary discussion; the issue with this is the translation from words to image. Therefore, this paper will devote the initial chapters to introduce Yin-Yang theory and the five elements through the cosmogonic myths and subsequently, we will apply these concepts to the image and expand from there. The structure of the thesis and the various tortoise typologies is arranged as followed (Figure 8): One, Two, Four and Ten thousand. The reason for arranging the paper in such a way was to reinforce the Chinese model of the universe and the cosmogonic process prevalent throughout their philosophy which we will shortly discuss. When both content and structure of thesis reflects the cosmogonic model, it hopes to aid readers to familiarise themselves with the various stage of cosmogony.

One

The chapter of 'One' refers to the undifferentiated universe and we will learn how the unitary oneness of the universe came to be differentiated through the Origin myths in the Chinese culture and how this macrocosmic view is applied within the Taoist Inner Alchemy as a microcosmic environment. At the same time, recounting the narratives of the myths also introduces key terms within the Chinese philosophy and cosmology such as Yin and Yang, the five elements and the symbolic shapes of Heaven and Earth.

These concepts will be applied visually in subsequent chapters to analyse the visual language of the tortoise metaphysical symbol.

Two

The chapter of ‘Two’, as the title suggests, refers to the complementary terms, Yin and Yang and from which all things are categorized. The chapter will study the shape of the tortoise’s and its symbolic form’s correlation to the two polar opposite terms of Heaven and Earth as the circle and square symbolic shapes. Furthering our studies, we will examine how these complementary concepts of Heaven and Earth are expressed in the form of bird and tortoise as well as the Black Tortoise, the entwined form of the tortoise and snake.

Four

The chapter of ‘Four’ is the next stage of the cosmogonic process after the interaction between the two principle forces Yin and Yang which produced the five elements. As one have noticed, instead of titling it ‘Five’, it is ‘Four’ instead. This is because the focus of this chapter is placed on the four cardinal creatures,⁴⁷ which are correlated to the four cardinal directions with the center as the fifth. Therefore, the chapter will be studying how the four cardinal creatures are related to the temporal time and space in both Heaven and on Earth; expanding on this concept, we will examine its applications in the visual culture of bronze mirrors and the metaphysical practice of Feng Shui.

Ten Thousand

The chapter of ‘Ten Thousand’ refers to the countless permutations in the world produced by the Yin and Yang and categorized under the five elements. This closing chapter brings us to survey the usage of the tortoise in our immediate environment in Singapore as a symbolism of the manifestation of the Ten Thousand things. The broad stroke will foreground the tortoise symbolic meaning and also align itself with the topics covered in the thesis so as to examine how their meanings have changed over time in a different cultural setting.

⁴⁷ Also known as 四象 in Chinese. This is reason for the four way division of the Yinyang symbol in the diagram for the structure of the thesis as Yin and Yang are further divided into two categories: Lesser Yin (少陰), Lesser Yang (少陽), Greater Yin (太陰), Greater Yang (太陽). Lesser Yin refers to White Tiger; Lesser Yang refers to Azure Dragon; Greater Yin refers to the Black Tortoise and Greater Yang refers to the Vermillion Bird. 唐頤. (2015). 圖解易經智慧寶典：精解64卦384爻. Taiwan: 華威國際事業有限公司公瓦, p.47.

Cosmogonic Process

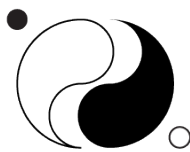
"Metaphysical"



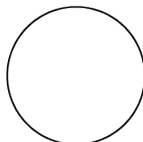
One



Two



Four



Ten Thousand

"Physical"

Chapters

- Pangu and the primordial origin
- Between the Square and the Compass:
The myth of Fuxi and Nüwa
- Myth of the Luoshu tortoise diagram
- Inner cosmos: Taoist inner alchemy

- Shape of the tortoise and the cosmos
- Heaven and Earth: Bird and tortoise
- Yinyang and the Black tortoise

- Temporal time and space
- Bronze mirrors
- Feng Shui practice

- Conclusion
- Tortoise symbolism in Singapore

Figure 8: Structure of this thesis illustrated by author.

Review of Literature

A review of symbolism in the literature can include but a fraction of studies from across the world. The reason for this is that existing studies are written in the fields of art history, linguistics, semiotics⁴⁸, and psychology. Most of the studies question the nature of meaning-making and deliberate the poetics of the symbol in art. Other studies investigate symbols through a comparative approach between religions. For this review, we will include the works of scholars who have written about the Chinese conceptual framework on religion, philosophy, cosmology, and metaphysics, as well as symbolism.

Kasoff Ira Ethan's *An analysis thought of Chang Tsai (1020-1077)* and Kim Yung Sik's thesis *The world-view of Chu-Hsi (1130-1200): Knowledge about natural world in Chu-tzu Chuan shu* and Feng Yu-Lan's *A short history of Chinese philosophy* examine the views of Zhang Zai⁴⁹ and Zhu Xi's⁵⁰ on Chinese cosmology and philosophy. On one hand, Kasoff's thesis leans heavily on the conceptual framework of the heaven and earth cosmology from the Book of Changes.⁵¹ His thesis is restricted to the thought process on moral ethicality. On the other hand, he provides us with a different perspective of the Yin-yang theory and five-elements cosmology, which helped me build my theory on tortoise symbolism.

Kim Yung Sik's *The world-view of Chu-Hsi (1130-1200): Knowledge about natural world in Chu-tzu Chuan shu* studies Zhu Xi's knowledge about natural phenomena. Zhu Xi's view on the natural phenomena is analogous to basic concepts such as Yin and Yang,⁵² the five phases, heaven, and earth. Kim offers a macroscopic analysis of Yin and Yang, observing that the concepts of Yin and Yang follow each other repeatedly in a cyclical fashion: "At the extreme of the yin emerges the yang as the yang grows and reaches its extreme the yin emerges again; and this process repeats all

⁴⁸ "Semiotics is usually employed in the analysis of texts, which can be verbal or non-verbal or both. It usually refers to a message recorded in some way (e.g. writing, audio and video-recording)." The term is clearly defined by Chandler in his journal, *Semiotics for beginners*, p.3.

⁴⁹ 张载. Zhang Zai is the pinyin whereas Chang Tsai is the Romanized version. He was a Chinese Neo-Confucian moral philosopher and cosmologist.

⁵⁰ 朱熹. Zhu Xi was an influential Neo-Confucian who lived during the Song dynasty.

⁵¹ 易经 Yijing is an ancient divination text that is influential in many fields throughout the world such as business, religion, literature, and art.

⁵² 阴阳

the time.”⁵³ Kim also observes that all things and affairs in the world can be viewed in terms of the five-phase categories or in terms of the Yin-Yang dichotomy. These categories are mentioned in Needham’s monograph, which associates the five phases with the natural and material realm, including factors such as cardinal direction, taste, seasons, viscera, etc. We will further this theory in our study of the synergy between the tortoise symbol and Chinese cosmology.

The authors and the thoughts of ancient scholars mentioned above provide the cornerstone works for the understanding of the Chinese view of the natural world and metaphysics. Their works cover important ontological concepts as well as natural phenomenon. These monographs followed a thematic system that included the fundamental concepts of qi; heaven and earth; the Yin-Yang duality, and the five phases.⁵⁴

J.E. Cirlot offers his view on the study of symbols and images: “Symbolism adds a new value to an object or an act, without thereby violating its immediate or “historical” validity.”⁵⁵ In other words, symbols function as vessels that transmit knowledge through time. Compressed knowledge, embedded within the form of each symbol, is “unlocked” every time new knowledge is discovered.

The significance of the topic of symbolism has drawn the attention of scholars. The likes of Mircea Eliade⁵⁶, J.C. Cooper⁵⁷, Adrian Snodgrass⁵⁸, J.E. Cirlot⁵⁹, Rene Guenon⁶⁰, and Joseph Campbell have offered a macroscopic view of symbolism in the myriad contexts of myth, religion, and visual culture. Mircea Eliade’s *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*⁶¹ identifies a pattern of traditional forms and symbols such as symbolism of the center, axuality, and cyclic manifestations. He asserts that symbolism “comes before language and discursive reasons”, maintaining that the

⁵³ Kim, Y. S. (1980). *The World-view of Chu Hsi (1130-1200): Knowledge about Natural World in Chu-tzu Ch'üan-shu*. Princeton University, p.73.

⁵⁴ 五行

⁵⁵ Cirlot, J. E., & Read, H. (2014). *A Dictionary of Symbols*: Welcome Rain Publishers, p.14.

⁵⁶ Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press.

⁵⁷ Cooper, J. C., & Fitzgerald, J. A. (2010). *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages*: World Wisdom.

⁵⁸ Snodgrass, A. (1992). *The Symbolism of the Stupa*: Motilal Banarsidass.

⁵⁹ Cirlot, J. E., & Read, H. (2014). *A Dictionary of Symbols*: Welcome Rain Publishers.

⁶⁰ Guénon, R., Fohr, H. D., & Fohr, S. D. (2004). *Symbols of Sacred Science*: Sophia Perennis, Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*.

⁶¹ Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press.

symbol “reveals certain aspects of reality—the deepest aspects—which defy any other means of knowledge.”⁶² At the same time, Guenon’s view on symbols being able to connect us with the deeper aspect of the metaphysical, or the deeper aspects of symbolism. He observes that myths and images are of the very substance of spiritual life, and that although they may evolve or degrade, they never expire⁶³. Additionally, he identified images and symbols as being multivalent while texts are not. Hence, it is possible for symbolism to ‘evolve’ over time as knowledge and scholarship increases. Therefore, symbolism is never extirpated and only renews. His views are also agreed with by J.C Cooper, who builds upon this observation that a symbol has, within itself, the evocative power of the myth.⁶⁴

J.C. Cooper’s *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages*, (although the book lacks any bibliographies and references) observes that symbols are intrinsically woven into the visual, narrative, and philosophical culture. This observation propelled forward areas of research in symbolism and in the study of motifs, including the investigation of tortoise symbolism in this paper.

Upon reviewing the existing literature in the scholarly environment, there exists an evident gap in bridging the written to the visual. At the same time, there exist scholars within the field of visual communications utilizing similar methodologies.⁶⁵ Research Institute of Asian Design The Research Institute of Asian Design, lead by Professor Sugiura Kohei, aims to rediscover vital formative arts in Asia, where rich and traditional cultures, which are different from Western culture, are still rooted in daily life, and to establish “Asian Design” based on its unique usage. Through research on such projects as “Asian headgear,” “Asian plants and trees,” “Asian spirals” as well as the already launched study on “Asian floats,” to reaffirm the values and meaning of the vast number of formative arts embraced by Asian cultures to use them in modern art. Hence, their methodologies will better substantiate this study of the metaphysical

⁶² Ibid. p.12.

⁶³ Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press, p.11

⁶⁴ Cooper, J. C., & Fitzgerald, J. A. (2010). *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages*: World Wisdom, p.96

⁶⁵ Examples of scholarly titles: Sugiura, K. (1999). *Uchū o nomu : ajia no uchū daikyoshin no keifu banbutsu shōō gekijō*. / Kohei Sugiura [cho]. Tōkyō : Kōdansha; (2004). *Uchū o tataku : kaen-daiko, mandara, Ajia no hibiki : banbutsu shōō gekijō* / Sugiura Kōhei. Tōkyō : Kōsakusha and Takeyama, N. (2004). *The symbolic meaning of the lotus flower symbol and its mirrored symmetry: A study on the visual grammar for Asian design*; (2007). Universal Metaphysical Symbols and their Role in Cross-Cultural Inspiration. *Forum on Cross Cultural Inspiration, F13-F43*. <http://english.kobe-du.ac.jp/riad/>

symbolism of the Chinese tortoise and its various expressed symbols. The visual language will be an amalgamation of the Chinese philosophy and metaphysics and the visual expressions of the tortoise alongside with any possible iconographies.

Methodology and research question

Throughout my investigation of the tortoise symbol, it became clear that the tortoise is a being that embodies multitudinous meanings, such as associations with the northern direction, constellations, longevity, and lessons that teach perseverance. The tortoise is held in high esteem, together with the azure dragon, vermillion bird, and white tiger, which belong to the same pantheon. Secondly, the tortoise is an actual animal and is not a product of myth and imagination but a reflection of it. Also, being a tangible being, it is commonly seen on religious ground, as it is believed to a meritorious act to feed them or release them of out mercy. The tortoise's shell is used as oracle bones in prognostication and burial practices (e.g. grave tortoise). The belief that the tortoise "conceals the secret of heaven and earth" is still very popular in China today. In some representations, the tortoise is entwined with a snake, in others it is positioned below a bird or is represented as a shell. Yet, despite its prevalence in popular culture and traditions, the tortoise remains enigmatic, and ironically, it is also known as the "mysterious warrior".

It is widely known that there is a systematic portrayal of Chinese cosmology and its metaphysical system, which includes the Yin-Yang theory and the five elements. However, this paper attempts to draw those concept and apply it visually where the tortoise appears as a graphic symbol. In the paper, we will examine the dynamics of the meaning of the in the myriad context in the material and visual culture. For example, how the tortoise represents the "microcosm" of the system; when placed with another symbol or put in a larger context, the meaning of the tortoise becomes part of the "macrocosm", effectively becoming a visual grammar⁶⁶ and starting point for further investigation. The utilization of the word grammar in the visual context was used as a title of the book "Grammar of Ornament",⁶⁷ published by Owen Jones. According to the book, he used the word grammar because it was believed there were visual laws governing the various expressions in ornaments. Hence, the group of visual laws that organized these shapes was called "grammar" and the term has been widely used in various literatures pertaining to the subject of the visual culture.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Definition of "grammar" from the [Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus](#) © Cambridge University Press

⁶⁷ Jones, O. (2008). *The Grammar of Ornament*: Herbert Press.

⁶⁸ Saiki, T., & Sugiura, K. (2012). *Mountain Floats to Connect This World and the Other*. Kobe Design University RIAD;

Therefore, the tortoise in this context is a singular ‘word’; together with other symbols in the material culture or image it then becomes a full sentence.

The thesis will then attempt to deepen our knowledge towards the universality of the metaphysical tortoise symbolism beyond common knowledge such as longevity. The study hopes to pick up traces of existing knowledge in the ways the tortoise reflects the Chinese cosmology. Eventually, through the understanding of the cosmogony and cosmology, we will derive a suitable conclusion as to why there exist yet another version of the tortoise, known as Xuan Wu, or the black tortoise. Hence, the starting point of studying the tortoise symbol will lead us to the understanding of the macrocosm of the Chinese visual language of the material culture.

This study aims to elucidate the metaphysical symbolism of the Chinese tortoise by connecting the text, which is derived from the study of the Chinese cosmologies and to the selected typologies of tortoise images. I emphasize the notion of deduction because there were limited resources and little literature about images of the tortoise as they are usually not the subjects of interest.⁶⁹ This was because the tortoise was used to be misunderstood as a creature of vulgar symbolism.⁷⁰ Regardless of its misunderstood meaning, the use of the tortoise as an auspicious symbolism such as the dragon tortoise is prevalent in our contemporary society in Feng Shui practices. As Hugh Urban eloquently points out, one of the basic strategies widely implemented by esoteric traditions of world religions is to “claim to possess very precious, rare, and valuable knowledge, while simultaneously partially revealing and largely concealing it.”⁷¹ Therefore, the deduction and collection of the existence of myriad typologies will serve as a “visual map” for us to understand how cosmology and metaphysics are

Saiki, T., & Sugiura, K. (2016). *Boats, Floats and Sacred Animals. Vehicles between this world and the other*. Kobe Design University RIAD; Takeyama, N. (2004). *The symbolic meaning of the lotus flower symbol and its mirrored symmetry: A study on the visual grammar for Asian design*.

⁶⁹ It is also not possible to retrieve the meaning of the traditional Chinese tortoise’s meaning as if it is contained within a vessel as meaning, afterall, is constructed by people. Therefore, the study aims to build upon those meanings and reveal the layers of meanings visually that were made by people over the course of time. In no way the paper will create new meanings but aims to synthesize meanings methodically through cross-reference and deductions.

⁷⁰ The tortoise was regarded as an immoral creature because there was a widespread belief there was no male tortoises. Hence, the females must mate with snakes. Therefore, the depiction of the black tortoise, tortoise entwined with snake. On the other hand, a ‘gui-gong’ is a swear-word referring to the father of a whore; while the wu-gui (black tortoise) refers to a pimp and is also a graphic metaphor for the penis. Eberhard, W. (2002). *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*: Taylor & Francis, p.295-296.

⁷¹ Urban, H. B. (1998). The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions. *History of Religions*, 37(3), p.235.

applied to the image and symbol of the tortoise. Using this approach, this study hopes to foreground the myriad potential meanings embedded within the metaphysical symbol of the tortoise.

Objective

As new complexities of visual language and alternative spirituality develop in the modern world, the modern man is gradually distanced from traditional metaphysical symbols that was once used as instruments of knowledge, eventually becoming obscured from it. Therefore, these symbols are vitally important for the transmission of knowledge to future generations. At the same time, the process of understanding metaphysical symbols contributes towards the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Hence, this study aims to present a structured framework and to develop a metaphysical symbol knowledge system, that can be used for studying other metaphysical symbols, guided by two aims:

- 1) To investigate the multiple layers of the metaphysical tortoise symbol by a structured analysis of its expressions in visual and material culture and its possible correlation with cosmology and myth.**
- 2) To demonstrate and adopt the methodology of correlating directly from text-to-image analysis of the tortoise symbol by comparatively study the existing patterns of Chinese cosmology and cosmogony. Subsequently, to apply the established visual grammar extrapolated from texts onto other typologies⁷² of the metaphysical tortoise symbolism in various expressions. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to gain a deepened understanding of tortoise symbolism through comparative study between text and image.**

⁷² Meaning of typology refers to “the [study](#) of [types](#), or a [system](#) of [dividing](#) things into [types](#).” Therefore, the thesis will divide the various artworks and images containing the tortoise into select topics to be studied and establish our establishment of the tortoise symbolic meaning. Definition of “typology” from the [Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus](#) © Cambridge University Press

Constructing the Cosmic View through Cosmogonic Myth

The Chinese traditional views of Yin and Yang and Wu Xing⁷³ originated mostly from cosmogonic tales. There are three cosmogonic tales that depicts the creation of the world from chaos. The first is the tale of Pangu⁷⁴, who awakened the universe from its original chaos (Pangu Kaitian)⁷⁵ known as the primordial unity or unitary oneness. The second tale depicts Fuxi and Nüwa saving the world from fires and a ravaging flood, restoring balance and harmony. The third tale depicts a sage king known as Yu, who devised an ingenious solution to tame a flood that rendered the lands of ancient China infertile and unsuitable for farming. In this chapter, we will review the various “Grand Origin Myths”⁷⁶ and at the same time, introduce the concepts of Chinese cosmology and the shape of the cosmos. The purpose of this is to establish the groundwork for the visual analysis of tortoise symbolism and how its symbolic form correlates to various artworks and artifacts in material culture. These narratives also provide us with a vision of the whole universe as well as its individual parts.

⁷³ 五行 Wu Xing is also known as the five elements. The word is widely translated as Five Phases in the five planets. “Xing” has two meanings: ‘to move’ and ‘a row of column’. The five planets fit both of those descriptions, as they are the only ‘stars’ that move and are conspicuous by their movement; and it was believed that the five planets lined up in a row at the beginning of each epoch, which lasted until the planets aligned into a row again. Hence, Han astronomy paid much attention to calculating the concordance cycles of orbital times to determine the length of this alignment.

⁷⁴ 盤古 Pangu

⁷⁵ 盤古開天 Pangu Kaitian

⁷⁶ The term was coined by deSantillana and von Dechend, who discovered that myths from different cultures and civilizations share a structurally identical body of myths with each other.

Pangu and the Primordial Origin

Although there are several versions of the Pangu myth, the core narrative is present in all early texts.⁷⁷ According to the *Huainanzi*, the universe was in an egg-like condition of chaos and indistinctness, called the *Hundun*,⁷⁸ Pangu awoke within this *Hundun*, a state of bubbling, turbid water created through the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang*.⁷⁹ He was born, endowed with perfect knowledge, and set about toiling to introduce order to the primordial chaos. The word “Pan” refers to a basin while “Gu” refers to solidness, and hence, the name “Pangu” was introduced to describe the first man who was hatched from the chaos by the complementary forces and separated the universe into two parts.⁸⁰ In some versions, he was depicted as a sculptor and architect in representations of a man holding a chisel and mallet in his hands. Along with his companions, the tortoise, phoenix, and dragon, he labored for 18,000 years, and, through his efforts (Figure 9 - Figure 11), the heavens rose and the earth spread out and thickened while Pangu grew in stature every day till the day he died.

His death resulted in the creation of a myriad things—his head was transmuted into mountains; his breath into wind and clouds, his voice into thunder; his left eye became the sun; his right eye became the moon; his beard transformed into star; his four limbs and five extremities into the four quarters of the globe and the five great mountains; his blood into rivers; his veins and muscles into the strata of the earth; his flesh into the soil; his skin and the hairs into plants and trees; his teeth and bones into minerals; his marrow into pearls and precious stones; his sweat descended as rain; and the parasites that infested his body, after being impregnated by the wind, were the ancestors of human race.⁸¹ In another version of the myth, the *Hundun* evolved without an external intervention and occurred because of an internal, unitary world-principle, the *Dao*. The *Dao* is described as something that can neither be apprehended nor

⁷⁷ Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.42, Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing, p.303, Yang, L., & An, D. (2005). *Handbook of Chinese mythology*: ABC-CLIO, p.64.

⁷⁸ The term is commonly translated as ‘chaos’ and has different uses and meanings both within and outside Taoism. In another meaning, the *Hundun* is a cinnabar-red animal shaped like a sack with six legs and four wings; it can dance and sing but has neither a face nor eyes. Pregadio, F. (2008). *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*: Routledge, p.523.

⁷⁹ 陰 yin 陽 yang

⁸⁰ Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing, p.303; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Gu>.

⁸¹ Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing.

named, for to do so would result in a contradiction. However, one principle characteristic of the Dao is change, hence the typical expression ‘One produces the Two, Two produces the Three and Three produces the multiplicity,’ which we will be analyzing shortly.

The Pangu myth follows the general explanatory pattern for the universe according to the grand origin myth, which involves a concept of time before heaven and earth were separated. Firstly, the most primordial state of the universe is described as Hundun, where there was no heaven and earth, no light and forms, only undifferentiated oneness.

According to the *Huainanzi*, Hundun is depicted in a chaotic beginning: “Cavernous and undifferentiated Heaven and Earth, chaotic and inchoate [Hundun] uncarved block, not yet created and fashioned into things: this we call the ‘Grand One.’ Together emerging from this unity, so that each acquired its distinctive qualities, there were birds, there were fish, there were animals: this we call the ‘differentiation of things.’⁸²

In the unitary origin, Hundun is not considered an external, independent entity beyond or outside other things, but remains as an intrinsic part of the world. The reason for this is that the Hundun came first and is in some sense distinct from what arose after it. Furthermore, the Hundun persists as a fundamental part of everything because it is the source of their existence.

⁸² Liu, A., & Major, J. S. (2010). *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*: Columbia University Press, chap.14 – 12 of 57.



Figure 9: Pangu with his companions, the tortoise, dragon, and phoenix. Image credit: Williams, C. A. S. (2006). Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages: Tuttle Publishing.



Figure 10: Pan Gu holding the yinyang symbol, 19th-century European print after a Chinese drawing; in the British Museum.



Figure 11: PANGU Kaitian Pidi (Pangu Creating the World) | From Tui Bei Quan Tu , 1820, copied by Wu-Yi Chao Xie, circa 1900 | Manuscript. Chinese Rare Book Collection

In the myth, the term “Yin-Yang” was mentioned. Hence, it is pertinent to introduce the vernacular meaning of Yin-Yang before we proceed to analyze the myth and its visual correlations. In the *Shijing* (The Book of Odes), the recorded usage of the terms suggests the sun reflected on the hill or the sunny side of the hill represents the Yang, while the shady side represents the opposite, the Yin.⁸³ This usage correlates the terms with concrete observations. However, Yin and Yang do not refer to a particular object, but rather, to a phenomenon. Therefore, the Yin-Yang concept was inspired by human observation of the sun, which farmers depended on for its light, thus dictating the daily rhythm of human life.⁸⁴ As the *Shijing* mentions, “When the sun comes out, one goes to the fields, and when the sun is going down, one goes to rest”.⁸⁵ Therefore, Granet interprets this consistent rhythmic alternation of Yin and Yang as an evocation of rhythm.⁸⁶

The complementary terms, Yin and Yang, are correlated with geographical location and direction in relation to the sun—in absence of sunlight, there is coldness; in its presence, warmth. Humans have observed how the sun affects certain spaces and concluded that the southern side of mountains are better for growing crops. Therefore, it is beneficial for a farmer to choose a location that faces the sun (Yang) because the area receives most of the sunlight and warmth; the practice is common in *fengshui* traditions as well.

Yin and Yang also refer to the complementary nature of our world. Everything that is active, positive, or masculine associated with Yang, while all that is passive, negative, or feminine associated with Yin. The two terms are also usually associated symbolically with light and darkness: all things that are bright are associated with Yang, and all dark things are associated with Yin.⁸⁷ However, one can never be found without the other as they complement each other.⁸⁸ Therefore, the symbol of Yin and

⁸³ Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.24; Chan, W. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: Princeton University Press, p.248; Feng, Y., & Bodde, D. (1948). *A short history of Chinese philosophy*: Macmillan, p.193.

⁸⁴ Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.24-25.

⁸⁵ 日出而作，日落而息。Z.Zhou, Commentary on *Shijing* (The Book of Odes) p.232.

⁸⁶ Sonya Ozbey translation of Marcel Granet (Chinese Thought) p.75.

⁸⁷ Kasoff, I. E. (1982). *AN ANALYSIS OF THE THOUGHT OF CHANG TSAI (1020-1077)*. (8213558 Ph.D.), Princeton University, p.80.

⁸⁸ 祖行. (2014). 圖解易經(新版). Taiwan: 華威國際事業有限公司, p.28; 李少君. (2010). 圖解皇帝宅經. Taipei: 華威國際, p.46-48.

Yang is a black dot within a white area and vice versa (Figure 12). According to Guénon, the Yang aspect corresponds to what is “essential” or “spiritual”; on the other hand, Yin corresponds to things related to “substance”.⁸⁹ In this sense, Heaven is considered to be entirely Yang, and the earth entirely Yin, which is the same as saying that the Essence is pure action and the Substance pure potency; but they are only so in the pure state, insofar as they are at the two poles of universal manifestation. In all manifested things, there is no Yang without Yin and no Yin without Yang, for their natures are simultaneously connected in both heaven and earth.

Semantically, the word order of the term “Yin-Yang” depicts the birth of light in the universe. During unfolding of the cosmogonic process, there was darkness (Yin); in the myth of Pangu, this is known as the Hundun. This chaos existed in the beginning before light (Yang) was introduced by Pangu, which, in a way, introduced order from chaos. Effectively, light comes after darkness, and so, in this context, Yin comes before Yang,⁹⁰ therefore, the word order of the term “Yin-Yang”. Yin-Yang is also a non-exhaustive system that the Chinese use to categorize the myriad aspects of the natural world and phenomenon (Figure 13).

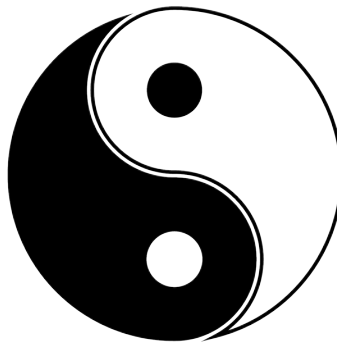


Figure 12: The symbol of Yin-Yang.

⁸⁹ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.27.

⁹⁰ Guenon, R., Fohr, H. D., & Fohr, S. D. (2004). *Perspectives on Initiation: Sophia Perennis*, chap.46.

| Yang | Yin |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| Warmth | Cold |
| Bright | Dark |
| Hard | Soft |
| Light | Heavy |
| Dry | Moist |
| Expand | Contract |
| Clear | Turbid |
| Male | Female |
| Positive | Negative |
| Active | Repose |
| Penetrating | Absorbing |
| Heaven | Earth |
| Unbroken Line | Broken Line |
| Mountain | Valley |
| Above | Below |
| Left | Right |
| Front | Back |
| Upwards | Downwards |
| Outwards | Inwards |
| Odd | Even |
| Hairy | Carapace |
| Feathered | Scaly |
| Sunny side of hill | Shady side of hill |
| Spring - Summer | Autumn - Winter |

Figure 13: Table of Yin-Yang's correlations with the natural world. Reference table from: Lee, S. H. (1986). *FENG-SHUI: ITS CONTEXT AND MEANING (CHINA)*. (8607264 Ph.D.), Cornell University.

The *Huangdi Neijing*⁹¹ (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classics) provides a comprehensive description of Yin-Yang: "The Yellow Emperor claims that yinyang is the Dao of heaven and earth, the net (gangji⁹²) of the ten thousand things,⁹³ the parents of transformations, the origin of life and death, and the residence of spirit and insight."⁹⁴ In this passage, the concept of Yin-Yang is perceived to be a naturally

⁹¹ 黃帝內經

⁹² 綱紀

⁹³ 黃帝曰：陰陽者天地之道也，萬物之綱紀也，變化之父母，生殺之本始，神明之府也， original text from <http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=931130>.

⁹⁴ Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.41

occurring pattern of all things, including things like rhythm. This world view weaves together man, heaven, earth, and the Dao in such a way that Yin-Yang interaction is intrinsic in their existence. When seen together, they show that everything are tied together in an interrelated net or web caused by the interaction of Yin and Yang.

The cosmogonic pattern of the world was the result of the ‘One’ from the Dao.⁹⁵ The ‘Two’ refers to the forces, Yin (earth) and Yang (heaven), and the result, ‘Three’ gives birth to the myriad things of the world.⁹⁶ This pattern is also observed in the Chinese saying by Laozi⁹⁷: “Way (Dao) generate ‘One’. ‘One’ generates ‘Two’. ‘Two’ generates ‘Three’. ‘Three’ generates 10,000 natural kinds. 10,000 natural kinds endure yin and embrace yang” (Figure 14).⁹⁸ After the complementary concepts of Yin and Yang are differentiated from each other, they rejoin and generate the ‘Three’, reestablishing Oneness on the level of material entities. The ‘ten thousand things’ are the totality of the entities produced by this natural continuous reiteration of this process. Note that Taoist inner alchemy advocates “retracing one’s step along the road of bodily decay” by extracting the true Yin (zhen yin)⁹⁹ from the Yang force and the true Yang (zhen yang)¹⁰⁰ from the Yin force, this way, they may return to the stage of emptiness, which is freed from the cycle of conditioned existence in the manifested world; in other words, enlightenment and immortality.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ 道. It refers to ‘the path’ and guidance. It was subsequently developed into a complicated and multilayered term. However, it generally refers to the origin and source of myriad things, which brings us to assume it is the notion of the underlying workings of the universe. It was also further emphasized that the Dao is the unitary source of heaven, earth, and human beings, and it is the model of pattern they all follow (Daodejing 25). The Dao becomes the source of all existence, so that there is nothing beyond the Dao. Hence, the Dao is generally understood as the ultimate origin, source, and principle of the universe and the myriad things. See Chan, W. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: Princeton University Press, ch.8 on the discussion of Dao.

⁹⁶ The Huainanzi makes an explicit point that: “Dao begins in oneness, yet one cannot generate, so it divides into yin and yang. The harmony (合 he) of yin and yang generates the myriad things.”

⁹⁷ 老子

⁹⁸ Laozi, & Hansen, C. (2009). *Tao Te Ching: On the Art of Harmony : the New Illustrated Edition of the Chinese Philosophical Masterpiece*: Duncan Baird Publishers.

⁹⁹ 真陰

¹⁰⁰ 真陽

¹⁰¹ Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*: Harvard University Asia Center, p.65.

"Continuation" (*Shun* 順)
Cosmogony of the universe

"Inversion" (*ni* 逆)
Inner alchemy

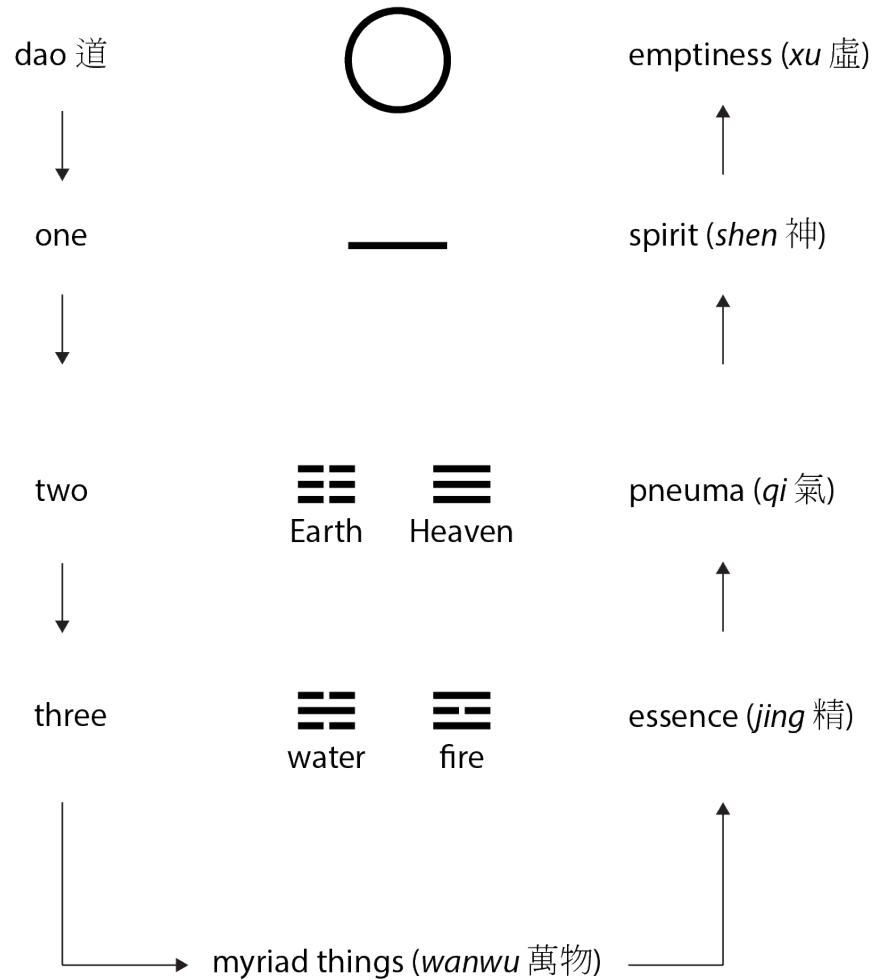


Figure 14: Diagram of the cosmogonic process. The *dao* as the natural progress and the universe begins with the unitary One. Within the One contains two polar opposites, the Earth and Heaven, which are symbolized by Yin and Yang. Water and Fire the manifested Yin and Yang in our world, which can be seen and experienced by us. Through the continuous interaction of the polar forces, it generates and pervades in all material entities in the world.

In the following diagram (Figure 15), Zhou Dunyi¹⁰² depicts the unfolding of the universe in a condensed framework.¹⁰³ This pattern can also be observed in the Pangu myth: the ‘Dao’ in this context refers to the fundamental workings of all things in the world. Although there are several ways of reading the diagram, we will first proceed from the top to the bottom in order to observe the creation of light from chaos by Pangu. Afterwards, we will analyze the diagram from the bottom up, analogous to the construction of a building which starts at the base; we start with what can be most immediately grasped and proceed upwards, towards something more hidden.

¹⁰² Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤) was a Song dynasty Chinese Neo-Confucian philosopher and cosmologist. He conceptualized the Neo-Confucian cosmology of the day, explaining the relationship between human conduct and universal forces.

¹⁰³ See Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.74 for the discussion on Yinyang and the development of the Chinese cosmology. The text also discusses the way to read the diagram.

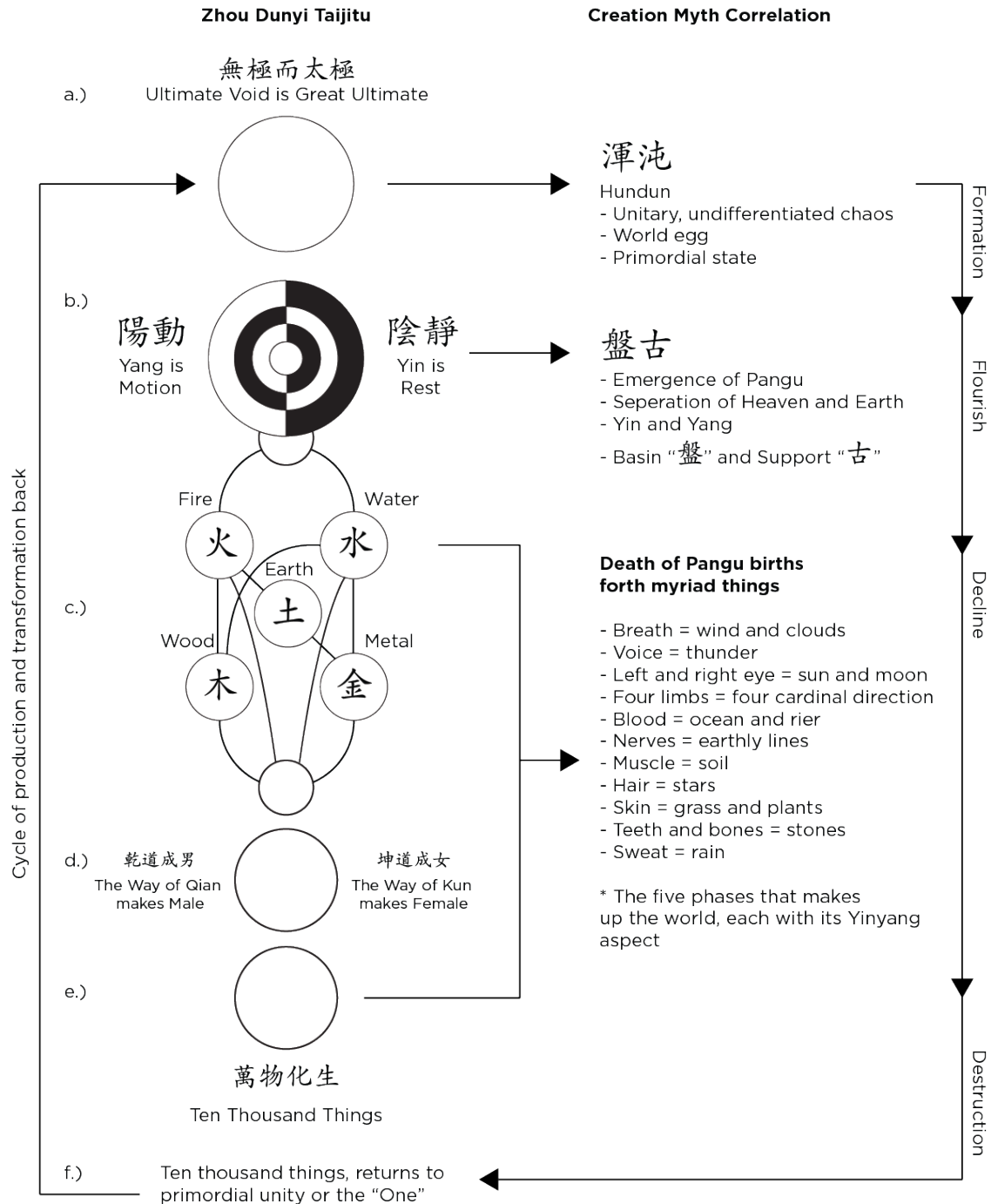


Figure 15: Correlation of Zhou Dunyi's cosmological diagram with the myth of Pangu and the cosmos. Left: Zhou Dunyi Taijitsu, diagram from Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.75.

The Great Ultimate, known as *Wuji*¹⁰⁴ (Figure 15a), evokes the image of the axis mundi¹⁰⁵ because it is the center from which all things were generated, it correlates to the ‘One’ which generated the ‘Two’, which are the trigrams *li* and *kan*¹⁰⁶ (Figure 15b) turned on their sides. These two trigrams refer to fire and water respectively. Since both elements are opposite in nature, it is the extension of the concept of Yin and Yang.¹⁰⁷ This is followed by the five phases or five elements, which come after the interaction of the two primal elements, fire and water.¹⁰⁸

The expression of the two to the five phases was expressed amongst the early writings on Chinese cosmology and the metaphysics, Joseph Needham’s *Science and Civilization of China* vol.2, which broadly covers the fundamental framework of scientific developments in China; this includes religious, philosophical, and metaphysical thought. The concept of the five-elements¹⁰⁹ theory was stabilized during the Han dynasty. It is a concept of a cyclical system of mutual production and mutual destruction which can be observed in Figure 16, a reflection of the Chinese view of the natural world. Furthermore, the five elements are categorized in varying degrees of correlation to relate to all possible categories of things in the world.

One clear reason for the association with these two elements is their characteristics, which are similar to Yin and Yang—lightness and heaviness, clearness and turbidity. When Pangu separated heaven and earth, the first things to be differentiated were light and darkness, thus both phenomena are observed as being complementary. The light objects tend to rise while heavy objects tend to sink,¹¹⁰ Therefore, *Wuji* is represented by the unitary one and produces the two trigram symbolizing fire and water, by extension light and darkness, light and heaviness. Also, *Wuji* is considered to be a

¹⁰⁴ 無極

¹⁰⁵ It is the highest geographical point believed to be the navel of the earth and where all creation began. It expresses a point of connection between heaven and earth and four cardinal directions meet and measures out from. It was believed that at this point, communication and correspondence between the higher and lower realm were made. It is from this center that the sacred manifests itself in its totality in the form of elementary hierophany. Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press, p.40-51.

¹⁰⁶ 離 (li) and 坎 (kan) and their trigram ☲ and ☵ respectively.

¹⁰⁷ The characteristic of fire is to ascend towards heaven while water descends. Therefore both are the extension of Yin and Yang principle. Refer to Figure 13.

¹⁰⁸ The method of reading the diagram was also further discussed in Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.217

¹⁰⁹ Known as 五行 in the Chinese. The five phases include: fire, water, earth, metal, and wood which serve as the fundamental categories to understanding the natural world.

¹¹⁰ 唐頤. (2015). 圖解易經智慧寶典：精解64卦384爻. Taiwan: 華威國際事業有限公司公瓦, p.43.

‘primordial’ center that is without form and does not belong to any order of individual existence, except when it situates itself in space. Multiplicity is only realized after the interaction of two differentiated forces (Yin and Yang). Measuring out from the ‘center’ refers to the ten thousand things that were ultimately derived from the principal point (*Wuji* or the Great Ultimate) through the generation of the two forces.

The interaction between the two primal forces is further expanded and correlated to the five elements: water, wood, fire, earth, and metal. The relationships between the five elements stem from the framework of the Yin-Yang concept, which is further expanded to include various elements of the natural world.¹¹¹ Wing-Tsit Chan’s *A Sourcebook in Chinese philosophy* provides further elucidation for the five elements and the Yin-Yang theory. According to Chan, each distinct element contain unique characteristic were derived from the natural world – Water is to moisten and descend; Fire is to burn and ascend; Wood to be crooked and straight; Metal to yield and provide; Earth to provide for sowing and reaping. He proceeds to elucidate how the varying degrees of correlation in the world are represented by the five elements such as their taste; water that moistens and descends produces saltiness, that which burns and ascends produces bitterness; that which is crooked and straight produces (?) sourness; that which yields and is modified produces acidity; that which produces (?) sowing and reaping produces sweetness.

The second category is the correlation to the Five Activities; namely appearance, speech, seeing, hearing and thinking. Followed by the Five Arrangements of Time, which are referring to the year, month, day, stars and planets as well as the Chinese zodiacal signs and calendric calculations. In addition, it provides us with an aesthetic view of heaven and earth where: “Qian¹¹² is heaven. It is round... Kun is the earth, black soil among the various kinds of soil...”¹¹³

This systematization allowed greater flexibility in application of the Yin-Yang concept and describes its worldview in greater detail. The element’s relationships revolve

¹¹¹ Needham, J. (1956). *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 2, History of Scientific Thought*: Cambridge University Press, p.253; Kasoff, I. E. (1982). *AN ANALYSIS OF THE THOUGHT OF CHANG TSAI (1020-1077)*. (8213558 Ph.D.), Princeton University, p.36-37.

¹¹² 乾. Qian is a symbol consisting of three parallel solid lines ☰ to represent Heaven.

¹¹³ Chan, W. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: Princeton University Press, p.249.

around the notion of balance through mutual creation, destruction, and exhaustion (Figure 16). According to the Zhou Dunyi's diagram in Figure 15c, the left side (wood and fire) are Yang elements, while the right side are the Yin elements (metal and water).¹¹⁴ Due to its ability to nurture both metal and wood and its role as a mediator of the other four elements, earth is uniquely positioned in the middle. This concept of the earth as the 'center' is important because of ancient China's history as an agricultural nation.

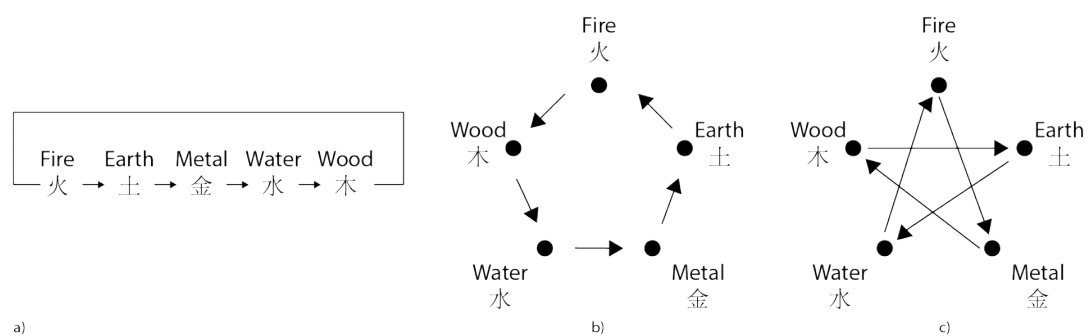


Figure 16: The interaction between the five elements. a) Mutual creation. b) Mutual exhaustion. c) Mutual destruction.

Below the five elements are two more elements (Figure 15d)—“The way of Qian makes Male” and “The way of Kun makes Female” and finally we reach the ten thousand things. Here, we observe that the left and right are then split once again, before they intermingle with the ten thousand things. This demonstrates that there are no extremities or polar opposites, rather, it shows a state of intermingled existence. The five elements can be attributed to the dissolution of Pangu into the various parts in the world. The subsequent two circles represent the complementary aspects of the world within the ten thousand things that were birthed from the conditioned existence and interaction of preceding forces. Once Man has reached this state and has successfully assimilated the wholeness of this existence, he becomes a ‘Transcendental Man’ as he has passed from the circumference to the center, which means he is free from any conditioned state of existence.¹¹⁵ Eliade adds that what

¹¹⁴ Wood contains life and grows upwards towards the sun like and Fire being formless and rises upwards, therefore wood and fire are categorized under Yang based on their characteristic in nature. Water descends and gathers while metal is buried underneath earth, therefore hidden, therefore these two holds the characteristic of Yin.

¹¹⁵ Rene Guénon differentiates the ‘Transcendental Man’ (identified as the Universal Man) and the ‘Primordial Man’

motivates the shaman when he enters his ecstatic trance is his desire to ascend to heaven and thus momentarily restore the contact between heaven and earth prior to the ‘fall’.¹¹⁶

Studying Zhou Dunyi’s diagram and the events that unfold from the primordial chaos to the ten thousand things (Figure 17) suggests that the Great Ultimate can be considered a self-contained concept. If we were to view it from the perspective of visual language, it seems to be connected with the idea of rhythm where everything eventually ‘returns to the center’ or to the beginning and the cycle begin anew. On the other hand, the whole diagram and the myth can be interpreted as a description of how multiplicity emerged from a unitary origin, how heaven manifested into ten thousand things on earth and where substance manifests itself for us to perceive.¹¹⁷

The function of the tortoise in the myth of Pangu appears to be a companion depicted in Figure 9. We observe its presence alongside with various other mythological creatures such as the dragon and phoenix with the presence of Sun and Moon symbols reinforces the concept of time; the visual expression of the dichotomy of Yin and Yang expressed in a complementary manner such as the masculine and feminine, Heaven and Earth as the conscious and unconscious.

(identified as the True Man). The differences between them correspond to the concept of greater and lesser, although there is really no common measure between them than between the axis and one of its points since what differentiates them is precisely what lies beyond the human state. Therefore, if the ‘transcendent man’ manifests himself, it does not imply a ‘return’ to the limiting conditions of human individuality. In other words, he who arrives at total realization and obtains ‘supreme identity’ is no longer considered a man in the individual sense of the word, since he has passed beyond humanity and is entirely freed from its conditioned existence. This conditioned existence, as inferred, is the relationship of the being and the environment. See Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.113 for discussion on the topic of True Man and Transcendent Man.

¹¹⁶ Eliade, M. (2005). *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*: Princeton University Press.

¹¹⁷ Wang asserts the Zhou Dunyi Tajitu emphasizes the movement from the unitary source into a diversified world. Wang, R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.219.

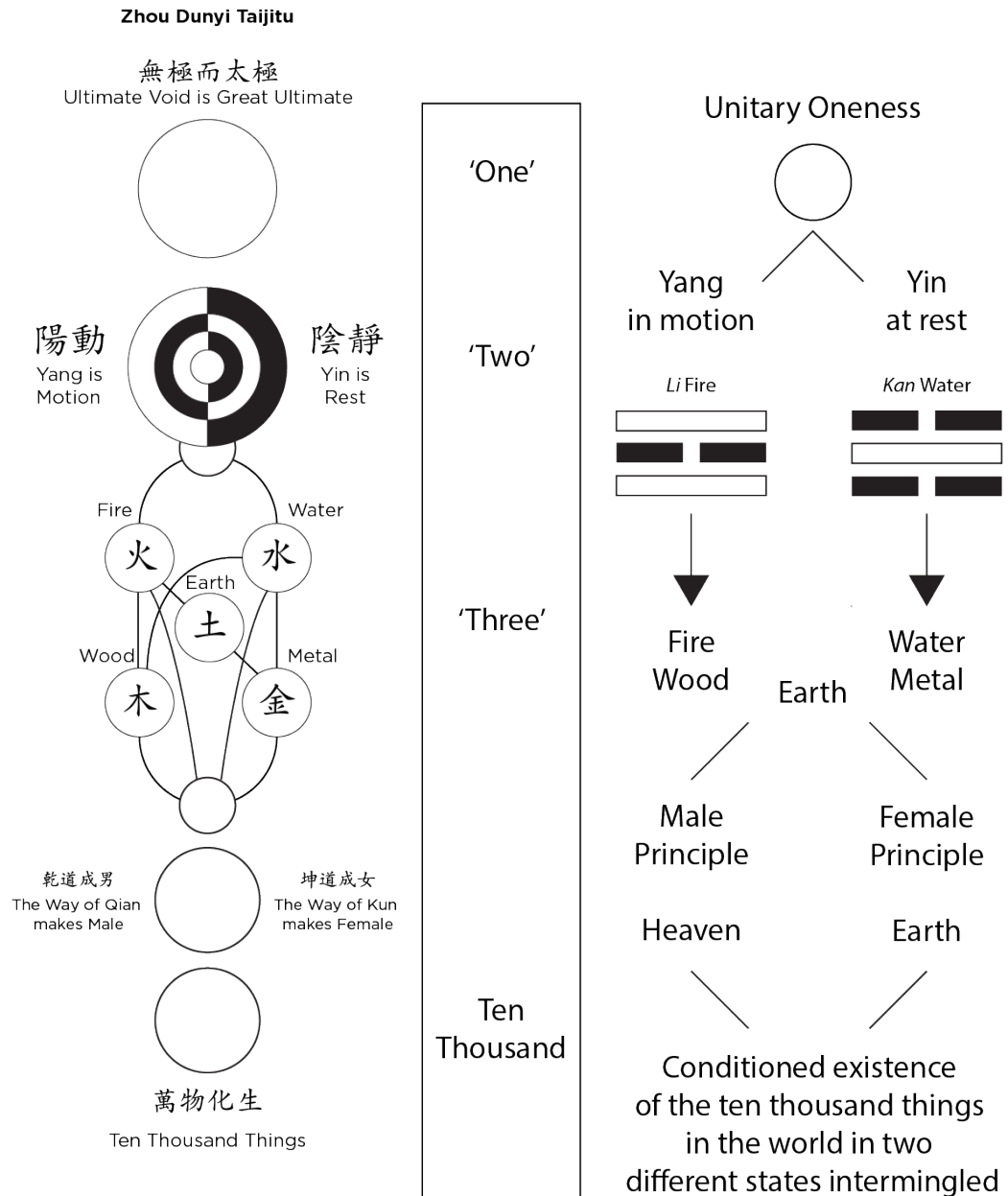


Figure 17: The creation of the universe from the Unitary One to the manifestation of the ten thousand things.

Between the Square and the Compass: The Myth of Fuxi and Nüwa

There are two separate versions of the myth of Nüwa¹¹⁸ which describe the origin of chaos in the world. The first myth is from Lun Heng¹¹⁹ and describes how Mount Buzhou was tilted during the battle between Gong Gong and Zhuan Xu for the lordship. However, the battle damaged Mount Buzhou, one of the sky pillars, and the sky's ties with the earth were severed. This caused the sky to incline to the northwest and, as a result, astral bodies move in a westerly direction, while the rivers of China flow towards the ocean (in the east). In the *Huainanzi* version, the world was engulfed in a catastrophic deluge and was saved by Nüwa who mended the sky with five magical stones. Both versions include Nüwa cutting of the legs of a tortoise to hold up the sky and repairing the sky with five magical stones. The following text is from the *Huainanzi*:¹²⁰

“The four pillars were broken; the nine provinces were in tatters. Heaven did not completely cover [the earth]; Earth did not hold up [heaven] all the way [its circumference]. Fire blazed out of control and could not be extinguished; water flooded in great expanses and would not recede... Nüwa smelted together five-colored stones¹²¹ in order to patch up the azure sky, cut off the legs of the great tortoise to set them up as the four pillars...”

The myth follows a general explanatory pattern. The first example is the four pillars that hold up the sky and fall into a state of disrepair. These four pillars belong to a cosmological belief found across different cultures: that heaven is supported by pillars or on some kind of foundation. According this myth, the pillars are in the form of mountains. The second example is the existence of fire and water in this myth before anything else, which infers the intermingling of Yin and Yang before the introduction of order from the chaos and the separation of heaven and earth. Furthermore, the ‘five

¹¹⁸ For a survey of the cosmogonic and other myths of Nü Kua, see Birrell, Chinese Mythology: An Introduction, Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 33-5, 69-72, 163-65. There is some uncertainty whether the goddess's name should be pronounced Nü Kua or Nü Wa. I follow the earliest authority, Shuo-wen chieh-tzu (An explanation of script, an explication of graphs, Hsü Shen, Shuo-Wen jie du, comp. ca. A.D. 100) which gives a guttural initial, ku+wa>古+蛙 = 蝸. 4. The Shuo-wen defines Nü Kua as "A sage goddess in antiquity who metamorphosed the universe."

¹¹⁹ The Lun Heng version was believed to be a derivation of the *Huainanzi* version.

¹²⁰ Liu, A., & Major, J. S. (2010). *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*: Columbia University Press, chap.6 - Surveying Obscurities, 19/32.

¹²¹ In the footnote of The *Huainanzi* text is noted: “That is, stones embodying the essence of each of the Five Phases (Elements), Ibid, chap.6 – Surveying Obscurities, 19/32.

colored stones' actually represent the five elements created by Nüwa to repair the sky (heaven) and replace the broken pillars with the legs of a tortoise. Although the myth contains no images that explicitly illustrate the tortoise supporting the earth like in other cultures,¹²² we can assume that the tortoise, or at least part of it, does actually support the sky.¹²³

Images of Nüwa usually depict with a partner figure, Fuxi. In many rubbings and images, they are depicted with human upper bodies with serpentine tails (Figure 18). If their tails are entwined, it symbolizes the interaction of Yin and Yang,¹²⁴ depicting male and female aspects co-existing as complementary pairs rather than polarities. Similar intertwinement can be observed in images of the tortoise and the snake. Nüwa and Fuxi¹²⁵ appear together holding a compass (*gui*)¹²⁶ and a square respectively (*ju*)¹²⁷. Together, they represent stability and order, and this was exactly what the pair introduced into the world when it was engulfed in turmoil and unrest. Fuxi was known as the sage that taught mankind how to hunt and cook, and, together with Nüwa, he established the four seasons.¹²⁸ The introduction of order and harmony in the world was achieved by the use of two special tools, the compass and the square. Nüwa holds the compass while Fuxi holds the square; the tools are correlated with the circular heaven and the square (or rectilinear) figures of Earth and Heaven respectively (Figure 19).¹²⁹ Guénon suggests that the opposition of the square and circle suggests a passage from the human state, represented by the earth and can be directly perceived by man, to the supra-human states, represented by heaven. In other words, the tools

¹²² The world tortoise in Hindu culture holds up four elephants and in turn they supported the world above; Next, the myth "Churning of the milky ocean" depicts Vishnu incarnated as a tortoise as the base supporting the pillar where the asura and devas were wrestling to churn the milk ocean.

¹²³ Allan, S. (1991). *Shape of the Turtle, The: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*: State University of New York Press, p.106.

¹²⁴ Guénon suggested the joining of their serpent tails represents the exchanged 'celestial' and 'terrestrial' qualities. Therefore, when we extrapolated the notion of celestial and terrestrial, they both refer to Heaven and Earth, by extension, Yin and Yang in Chinese cosmology. Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad*: Quinta Essentia, p.97. This view is further reinforced by Tseng's claim the Han people paired both Fuxi and Nüwa to embody Yinyang harmony. Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.287.

¹²⁵ It is widely known the pair is commonly called Fuxi and Nüwa. However, we are following the cosmogonic myth whereby darkness came before the introduction of light, hence Nüwa precedes Fuxi, Nüwa is female and therefore identifies with Yin principle; Fuxi is male and therefore identifies with Yang principle. It was also stated by Guénon that the cosmogonic process was identified with darkness and chaos and it is "in the beginning", and light which orders this chaos to draw it from the Cosmos, is 'after the darkness'. This amount to Yin comes before Yang, darkness before light, hence the term Yinyang.

¹²⁶ 規

¹²⁷ 矩

¹²⁸ Liu, A., & Major, J. S. (2010). *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*: Columbia University Press, chap.6 19/32.

¹²⁹ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad*: Quinta Essentia, p.96.

represent a passage from the domain of the ‘lesser mysteries’ to that of the ‘greater mysteries.’¹³⁰

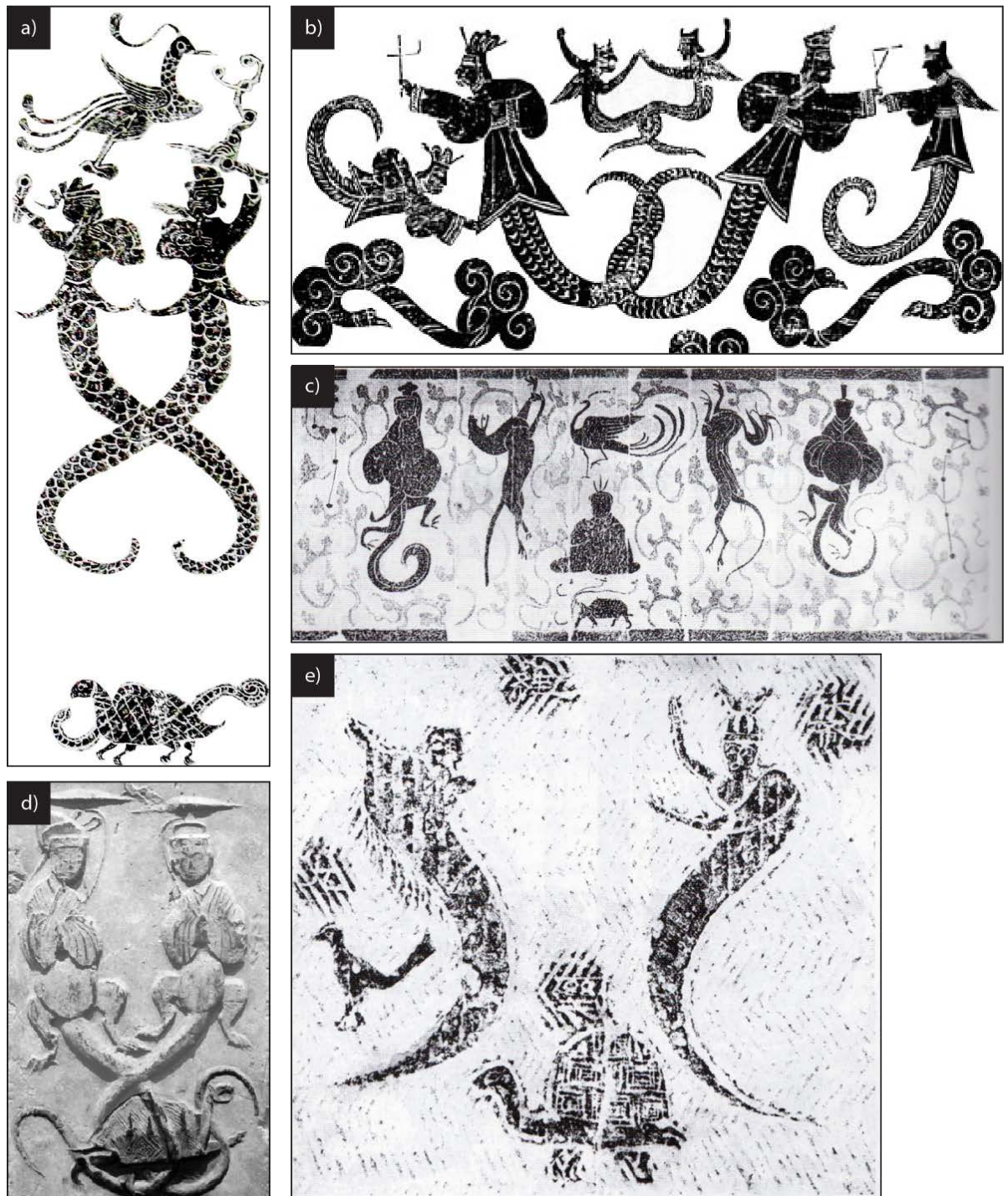


Figure 18: Various depiction of Nüwa and Fuxi. 13a) Image from: <https://kknews.cc/culture/8m4x2qe.html>. 13b) Image from: Eberhard, W. (2002). *Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*: Taylor & Francis, p.210. 13c) Celestial images. First to second century CE. Stone carving. 327 x 164 cm. Unearthed in 1988 at Qilangang in Nanyang, Henan. Ink rubbing. Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.360. 13d) Image from: <https://kknews.cc/culture/ennnnr.html>. 13e) Fuxi and Nüwa on a sarcophagus. Second century CE. Sandstone. Unearthed in 1986 at Guitoushan in Jianyang, Sichuan, Ink rubbing of a detail. Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p. 287.

¹³⁰ Guenon, R., Fohr, H. D., & Fohr, S. D. (2004). *Perspectives on Initiation*: Sophia Perennis, ch.39.

The compass, being a ‘celestial’ symbol,¹³¹ represents the Yang and the masculine, and therefore should belong to Fuxi (Yang principle) as the symbol of Heaven is circular or spherical. The square, being a ‘terrestrial’ symbol,¹³² represents the Yin and the feminine, and therefore should belong to Nüwa (Yin principle). This does not seem to be the case, it is Fuxi who holds the square (Fuxi being male and correlate to yang principle, which is symbolized by Heaven and circle shape) and Nüwa who holds the compass (Nüwa being female and correlate to yin principle, which is symbolized by Earth and square shape). If we were to recall, within the symbol of the yinyang, there is a yin within the yang and the yang within the yin, this is symbolized by entwined serpentine tail. The images showing Nüwa holding the compass are a sign of the world’s stability as she repaired the heavens using it. While the compass is associated with the tangibility of manifestation, and the shape of the square represents the weight of stability.

The square, held by Fuxi, does indeed belong to him, being the ‘Lord of the Earth’, mentioned by Guénon, whom rules by the square. He is no longer considered to be related to Nüwa as he is a manifestation of Yin-Yang after being reintegrated into the state of a ‘primordial man’.¹³³ From this viewpoint, the symbol of the square takes on another meaning, and the two rectilinear arms in Figure 19 demonstrate the two squares being joined to form a rectilinear form is interpreted by Guénon as a union of the horizontal and the vertical.¹³⁴ The *Zhou Bi*, a mathematical classic attributed to the Duke of Zhou, analyzes the problem of fitting the square within the circle and vice versa.¹³⁵

¹³¹ The compass is used to draw the circle or the sphere. It is intrinsically the primordial form because it is the least ‘specified’ of all, similar to itself in every direction in such a way that in any rotatory movement about its center, all its successive positions are strictly superimposable one on another. Therefore the sphere is considered by Guénon to be the most universal form of all, containing in a certain sense all other forms which will eventually emerge from it by means of differentiations taking place in certain particular directions. Guénon, R. (2001). *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*: Sophia Perennis, p.137.

¹³² The cube or square is opposed to the sphere as being the most ‘arrested’ form of all, and therefore related to the earth as the ‘terminating and final element’ of manifestation in the corporeal state. It is also called the ‘stopping point’ of the cyclical movement. Furthermore, it is in a sense above all that of the ‘solid’ and symbolizes stability as it gains equilibrium of a cube resting on one of its faces and is considered more stable than any other body. Ibid, 138.

¹³³ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.97.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.97.

¹³⁵ It was stated by the author of The Zhou Gnomon that tried to explain that the square was attempted to form the circle and a square. “To rotate a try square is to make a circle, and to join two try squares is to make a square. The square pertains to Earth, and the circle pertains to Heaven. Heaven is circle, and Earth is square.” Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.51, quoted from: Lu, B., & Chen, Q. (1988). *Lu shi chun qiu xiao shi*. Tai bei shi: Hua zheng shu ju.

Each shape can fit within each other by using two methods. The first method involves ‘circling the square’, which makes a circle within a square, while ‘squaring the circle’ involves making a square within a circle.¹³⁶ It is further explained in the Zhou Gnomon that rotating a square can make a circle and that joining two try squares can make a square. ‘The square pertains to Earth, and the circle pertains to Heaven. Heaven is circle, and Earth is square.’ This observation, together with the intertwined tails of Nüwa and Fuxi, further suggests that Fuxi, the ‘Primordial Man’¹³⁷, has the potential to assimilate both heaven and earth (Yin and Yang), transcending the ordinary man. By extension, this harmonious unity applies to the earth and heaven as well as Yin and Yang.

¹³⁶ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.51; Lu, B., & Chen, Q. (1988). *Lu shi chun qiu xiao shi*. Tai bei shi: Hua zheng shu ju.

¹³⁷ The ‘Primordial Man’ is considered to have passed from the circumference to the center (Buddhism expresses this term anāgamī, that is, ‘he who returns not’) to another state of manifestation. In other words, the ‘Primordial Man’ is no longer affected by his conditioned existence despite being in that current state. On the other hand, in the eyes of ordinary men, he is considered as an ‘agent’ or representative of Heaven, which through his actions and influence, is the ‘center’ and the conduit of the ‘activity of Heaven’ itself. Just like the Emperor, without ever leaving the Ming Tang, he controls all the regions of the Empire and regulates the course of the annual cycle, for ‘To be concentrated in non-action, that is the Way of Heaven’.

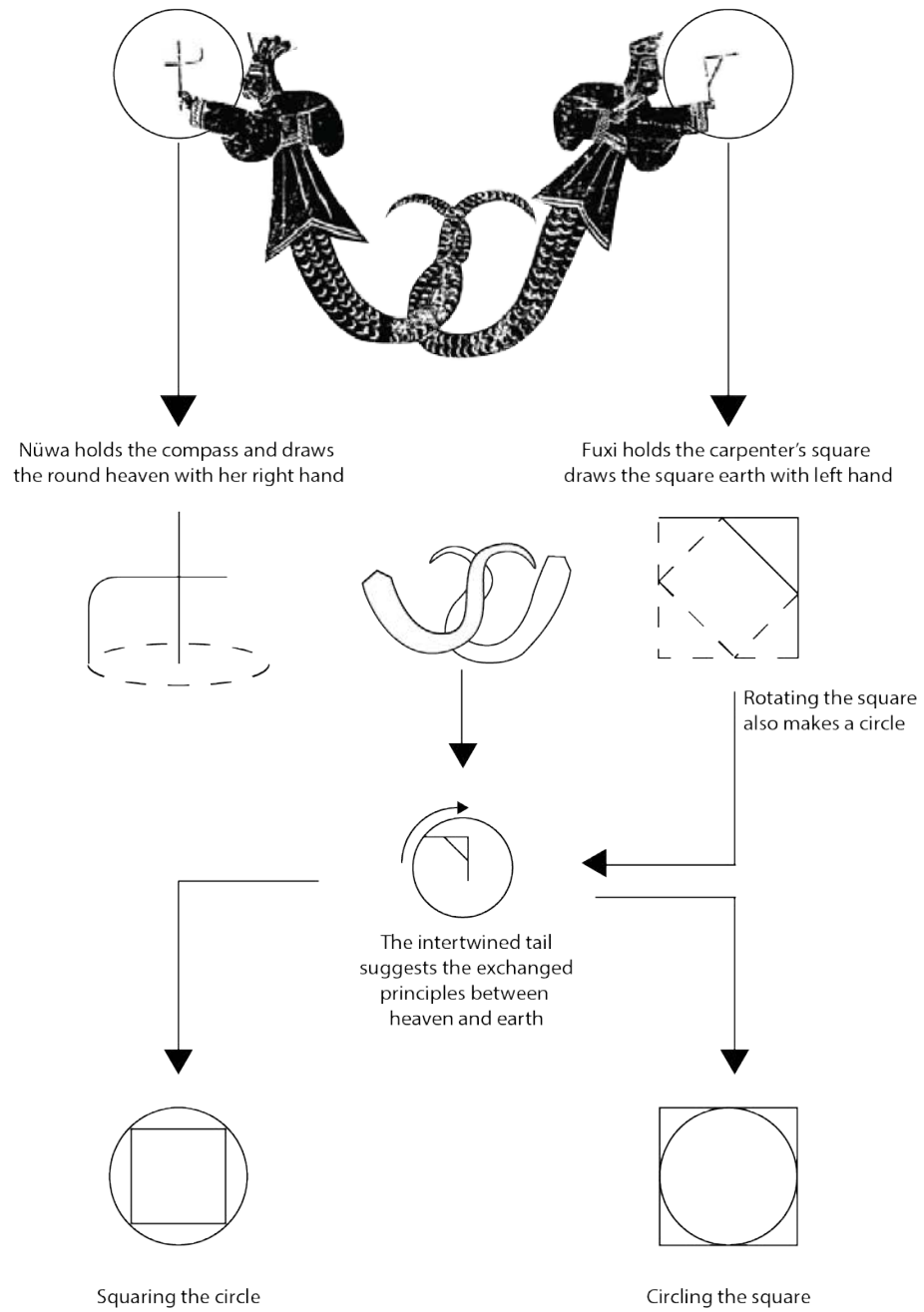
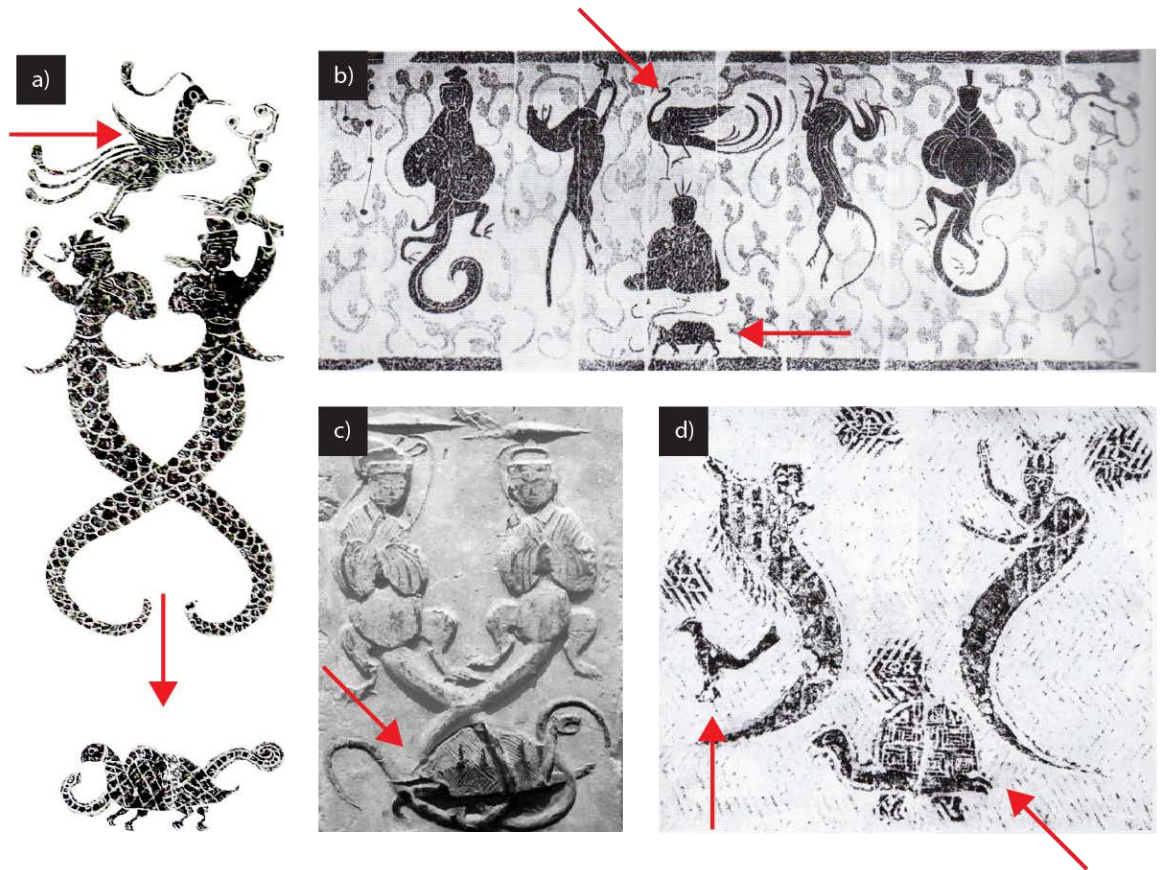


Figure 19: The square and compass of Nüwa and Fuxi who draw the circular heaven and square earth.

From the myth of Pangu and the tale of Nüwa and Fuxi, it can be inferred that the fire and water have a strong connection to the concept of Yin and Yang. In the various depictions of Fuxi and Nüwa, this view is indeed reinforced and in some images, we notice the presence of the tortoise at the bottom and a bird on the top (Figure 20). In all four images the tortoise is situated at the bottom; a plausible reason for this is its strong association with the earth and the Yin principle. Furthermore, anything above the tortoise shell is considered to be ‘Yang’ or heaven, because the shell symbolizes the round, domed shape of heaven. Hence, the tortoise ‘supports’ images that are above it in the realm of heaven. The myth of Nüwa and Fuxi supports this idea as the legs of the tortoise were cut and used to support the azure sky. It is also widely known that the black tortoise represents the Northern direction; therefore, from the table of correlations (Figure 21), the tortoise belongs to the category of “north”¹³⁸ and all things associated with it. Also, what is ‘below’ the tortoise is actually earth and water. From the image, we can infer that where the tortoise is situated represents the northern sector. Directly opposite north is the south and therefore, the bird-like figure is identified as the vermillion bird of the south.

¹³⁸ Welch, P. B. (2008). *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*: Tuttle Publishing, p.106; Wang, M. L., & Tan, J. (2012). Four Orientation Gods of Ancient Chinese Architecture. *Applied Mechanics and Materials*, 209-211, 61; Wang, P. (2003). Symbolization and Conceptualization of Cardinal Directions in Central Eurasia1. *Mankind Quarterly*, 44(2), 125-154;



| Visual Analysis | | |
|-----------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Bird | Tortoise | Nüwa & Fuxi |
| Above | Below | Left & Right |
| Flying | Crawling | Middle |
| Light | Heavy | Balanced |
| Yang | Yin | Female/Male Principle |
| Near Heaven | Near Earth | Middle |
| Active | Passive | Circle & Square |
| Fire | Water | Moon & Sun |

Figure 20: Visual correlations of Nüwa and Fuxi with the tortoise and bird.

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| Element | Water |
| Seasons | Winter |
| Cardinal points | North |
| Heavenly stem | Ren (壬) Gui (癸) |
| Earthly branch | Hai (亥) Zi (子) |
| Celestial body | Moon |
| Weather | Rain |
| Yinyang | Greater yin |
| Color | Black |
| Class of living animal | Shell-covered |

Figure 21: The relationships between the five elements and various things in the world. Table reproduced from 樊巧玲. (2010). 中醫學概論: 中國中醫藥出版社, p.18.

The tortoise therefore assumes the role of an indicator of a larger context; it contains the whole Chinese cosmological view of Yin (earth) and Yang (heaven) symbolized by its plastron and shell respectively, aspects which we will examine more closely in the following chapter. The tortoise is also part of the visual language of our reference, indicating its principles are firmly rooted in the north and its associated aspects. As a macrocosm, the bird and the tortoise both function as indicators of fire and water, heaven and earth, Yang and Yin, as both animals are respectively light and heavy. Together with images of Fuxi and Nüwa, they symbolize the male and female principles under heaven (bird) and atop earth (tortoise). From Zhou Dunyi's diagram, we can observe the relationships between heaven/earth, fire/water, and male/female (Figure 22).

In summary, we observe the tortoise's legs replace the pillars supporting the Heaven, Nüwa using the five stones which parallels the five elements that was believed to be the fundamental building blocks that was believed to make up the world between Heaven and Earth. Fuxi and Nüwa instruments, the compass and the square are used to draw order from chaos through the symbol of square and circle that corresponds to Heaven and Earth. In a way, these repeated shapes could be found within the tortoise form – the round dome or circular depending on which view we look at it and the plastron of the tortoise, that corresponds to the four directions on the terrestrial as well as in the celestial sphere.

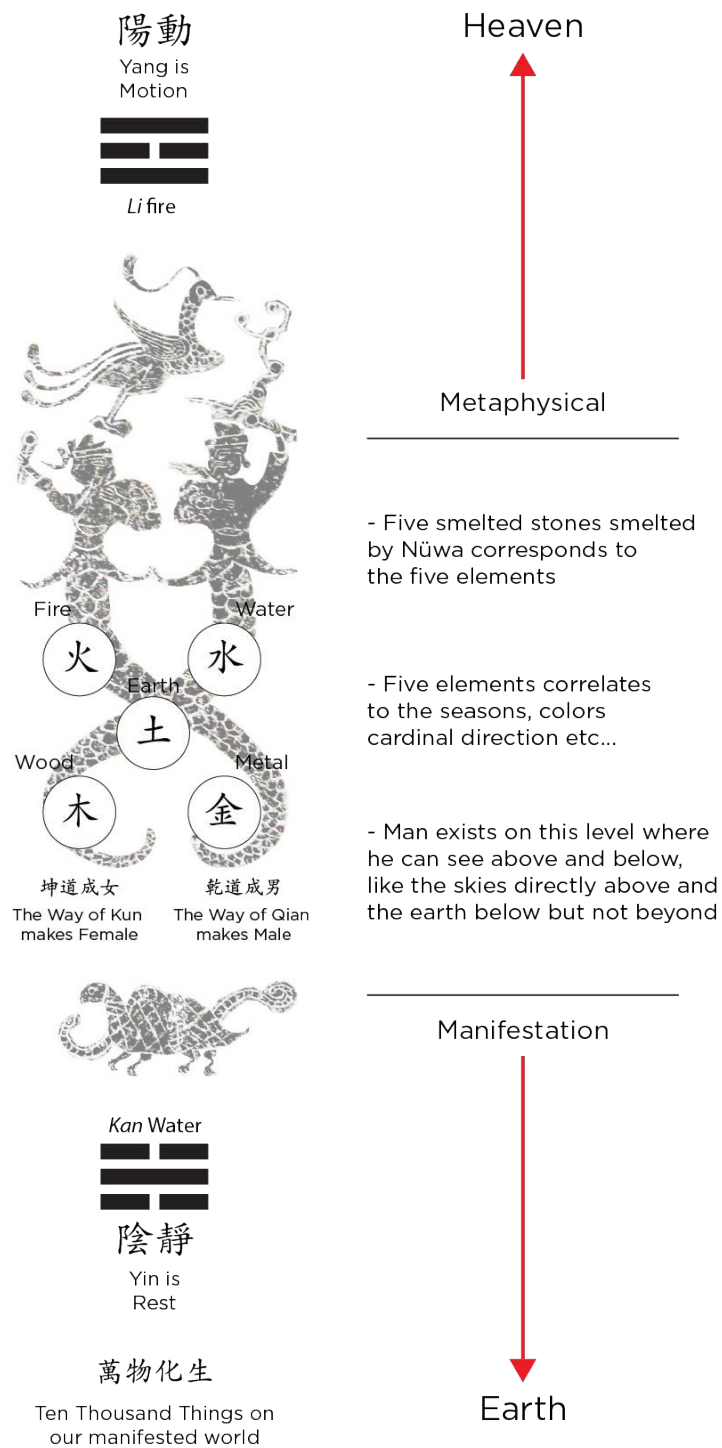


Figure 22: Relationship between Zhou Dunyi's diagram and Chinese cosmology including the Nüwa and Fuxi myth along with other various principles.

Myth of the *Luoshu* Tortoise Diagram

We studied the circle and square in the myth of Nüwa and Fuxi and their instruments and how the world was created by them. The *Luoshu* diagram was introduced by Yü the great to the back of a tortoise from the river Luo, thus the name of the diagram—*Luoshu* (Figure 23).¹³⁹ In several accounts of the myth, Gong Gong broke the bonds connecting heaven and earth and as a consequence of this disaster, a catastrophic flood washed away the old earth and a new one was brought into being after Yü devised an ingenious method which used magical earth to dam the waters and drain the flood. His diagram was constructed to reflect the eight directions, the four cardinal directions, and the four intermediate points (Figure 24). According to the myth, Yü surveyed the nine provinces of earth and, as we had learned before, the square represents the earth, and according to the *Luoshu* diagram, the earth has a square shape that is divided into nine equal grids (Figure 25).

The *Luoshu* diagram is known by many names, such as ‘Luo River Writing’, ‘Document of the Luo River’ or sometimes ‘Tortoise Writing’ (Gui Shu).¹⁴⁰ The diagram consists of white and black dots; the white ones represent Yang and the black ones represent Yin, and they are arranged in nine groups, each containing one to nine dots. The *Luoshu* diagram usually appears with a companion chart, the *Hetu*,¹⁴¹ which appears in the form of a dragon-like horse. The two diagrams are complementary with the *Hetu* representing the concept of permanence while the *Luoshu* represents change.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ 落書

¹⁴⁰ The *Luoshu* was quite referred to as the *Hetu*, but it was later used to name a different diagram altogether. Cammann, S. (1961). The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion. *History of Religions*, 1(1), 37-80.

¹⁴¹ 河圖

¹⁴² Wang, R. R. (2012). *Yinyang The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*: Cambridge University Press, p.208.



Figure 23: Luoshu tortoise diagram. Top left: Tortoise carrying the rolled Luo Writ in its mouth, detail from the Dunhuang manuscript, Picture of Auspicious Omens. Tang dynasty, eighth century. Handscroll. Ink and color on paper. Image from . Top right: Horse diagram and Tortoise diagram. Zhouyi Tushu Zonghui, 周易圖書總匯, p.181. Bottom: Enlarged Tortoise diagram.

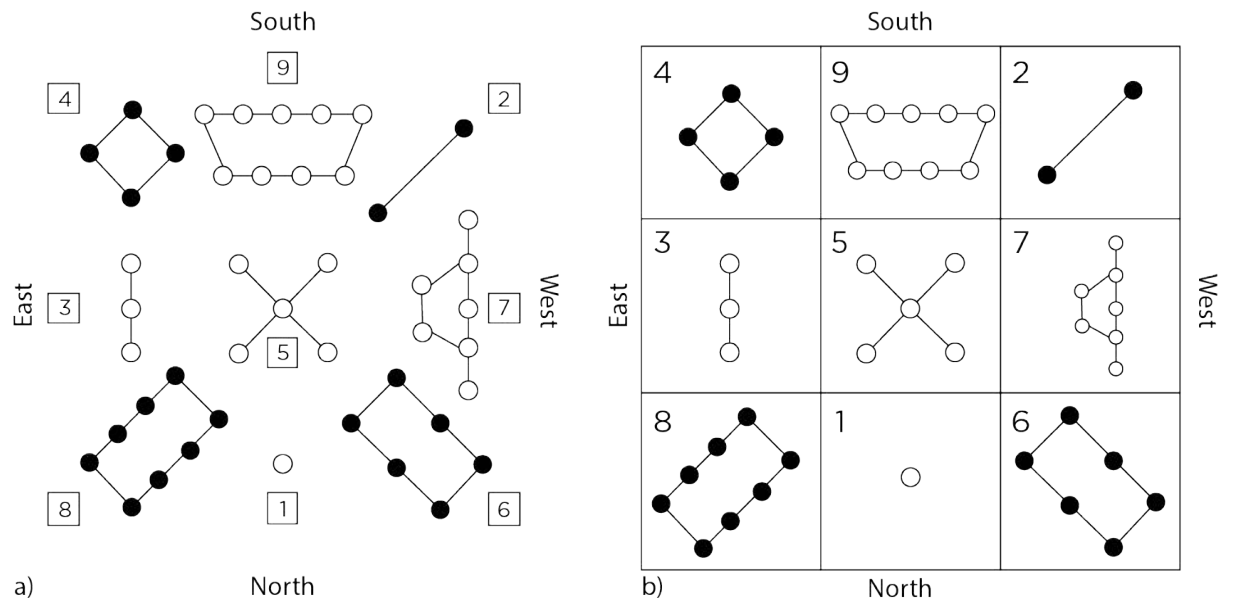


Figure 24: Close-up of the Luoshu diagram and its relationship with the four directions.

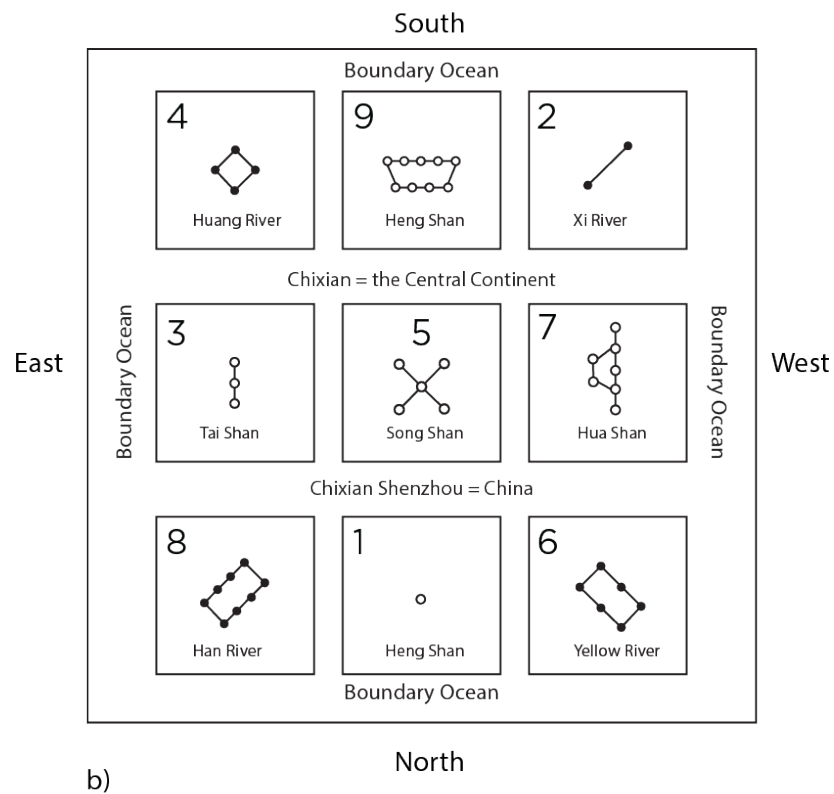
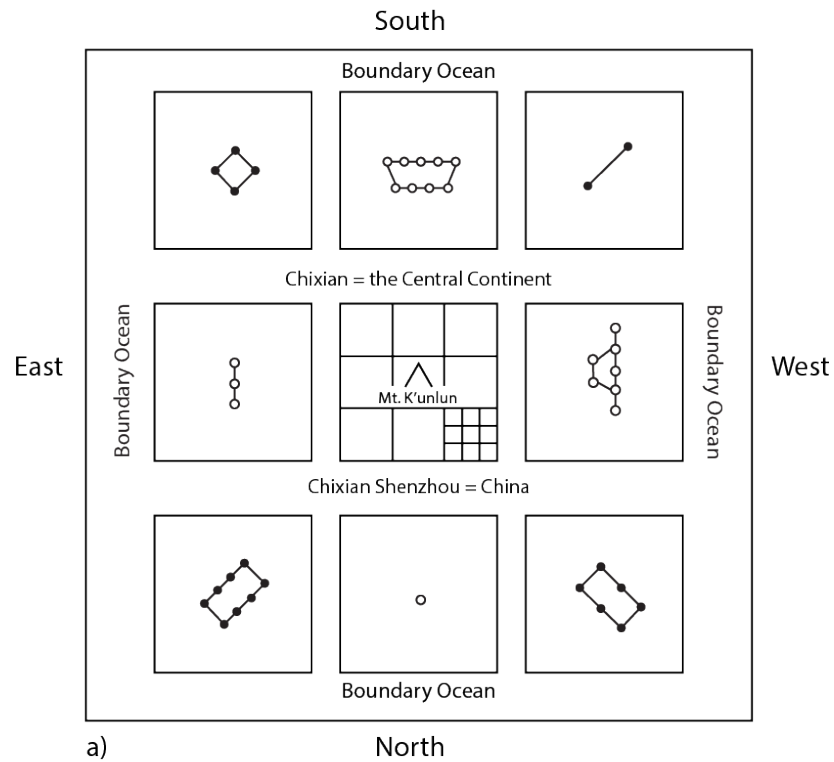


Figure 25: a) The nine continents reproduced from the *Huainanzi*. b) The groupings of dots correspond to the mountains and rivers from the Han dynasty, textual information from Cammann, S. (1961). *The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion. History of Religions, 1*(1), p.51.

The *Luoshu* diagram is an indispensable and powerful tool that was designed to simplify Chinese cosmological thought into nine grids containing dots. It represents the notion of ‘centrality’ in accordance with the geography of China (the Central Kingdom), Yin and Yang, and the five elements. According to Cammann,¹⁴³ the middle of the nine numbers reveals an important mathematical property in relation to the rest of the numbers: when the middle number, 5, is multiplied by 3, the result is 15, which is the sum of all the rows, columns, and the two diagonals. The number five is a fundamental organization construct in Chinese thought, for example, the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water; colors, metals: gold, silver, bronze, lead, and iron, the five directions, the five virtues: benevolence, courtesy, trust, justice, and wisdom, etc.¹⁴⁴ Anything that came in a set of five was believed to be auspicious, and also, the image of the number five resides in the central square where the axis mundi, Mount Kunlun, is located.¹⁴⁵

This particular configuration is also reminiscent of the Ming Tang model which precisely expressed in his analysis of the Ming Tang¹⁴⁶ in *Architecture, time and eternity: studies in the stellar and temporal symbolism of traditional buildings*, Adrian Snodgrass demonstrates the contextualization of Chinese cosmological thought. Citing Chinese creation myths, he describes the cosmogenesis of order through chaos through the demarcation of the cardinal directions. He relates the five phases to the directions within the space of the Ming Tang: “by way of these correlations that five phases are allocated to the five directions... Fire, manifesting the yang qualities of heat, luminosity and dryness and associated with solar attributes, is placed in the direction of maximum yang, the south.”¹⁴⁷

If we were to consider the following factors: the first being the *Luoshu* diagram on the shell of the tortoise, the second being the image of the number five as the ‘center’ of Mount Kunlun, and the last being the Yin-Yang symbolized as black and white dots (heaven and earth), we can infer that the tortoise in this myth does indeed carry the

¹⁴³ Cammann, S. (1961). The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion. *History of Religions*, 1(1), 37-80.

¹⁴⁴ Welch, P. B. (2008). *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*: Tuttle Publishing, p.226.

¹⁴⁵ Major, J. S. (1978). Myth, cosmology, and the origins of Chinese science. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 5(1), p.5.

¹⁴⁶ 明堂 is translated to mean the five rooms within a building, with four rooms in the cardinal directions surrounding a fifth room in the center. Snodgrass, A. (1990). *Architecture, time and eternity: studies in the stellar and temporal symbolism of traditional buildings*, p.374.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p.379.

cosmic mountain on its back, presenting it above the ‘deluge’ which possibly symbolizes the primordial chaos where sacred space (Ming Tang/ Luoshu model) was created from profane space¹⁴⁸ (Figure 26).

Thus, Chinese cosmology can be divided into two categories, descriptive and operational. The former includes a cosmography describing heaven as round and earth as square. The interlocking circle and square suggests that both exist on parallel planes, akin to a polar axis/equatorial plane orientation, effectively forming two sides of a same coin. From the *Luoshu* tortoise and its myth, we learned that the earth was divided into nine squares or a three-by-three grid. The operational characteristics of Chinese cosmology include an organic conception of the cosmic process, expressed in a cosmogony without a first cause or creator,¹⁴⁹ the Yin-and-Yang complementary forces, and the five elements. This can be readily observed in the various cosmogonic myths covered in this chapter—in the Pangu myth, the multiplicity of things generated from the unitary one, known as Hundun, through the Dao of Yin and Yang; Nüwa and Fuxi establishing order on earth and heaven by restoring the sky and earth using the five stones, which are representative of the five elements; Nüwa and Fuxi’s roles also represent Yin and Yang and correlated with heaven and earth as well; Fuxi’s status as a ‘true man’ who has assimilated both heaven and earth. Lastly, the *Luoshu* diagram’s depiction of the earth as square and heaven as round is due to the upper circular shell of the tortoise depicting the dichotomy of heaven and earth and of Yin and Yang.

To summarize, we learned in this chapter that the division of the terrestrial plane is reflected on its shell divided into nine equal grids. The luoshu diagram is also a demarcation of the sacred space from the profane. At the same time, it can be inferred the tortoise carries Mount Kunlun, the world mountain or the axis mundi on its back even though it was not explicitly depicted.

¹⁴⁸ Mircea Eliade defines the sacred space as a strong, significant space that reveals the fixed point, a center. It is also a break in the homogeneity of space and reveals an absolute reality. The profane is experienced as homogeneous and neutral, with no break qualitatively and differentiation. Eliade, M. (1959). *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*: Harcourt, Brace, p.21-22.

¹⁴⁹ On the contrary, the cosmogonic myth of Pangu appears to have Pangu take on the role of creator of the cosmos and a sculptor. This version was included to depict the tortoise along with three other spiritual animals that were aiding him. Some versions explain that the world evolved from the Hundun because of an internal unitary world-principle known as the Dao ‘happened’. Therefore, the subsequent manifestation of all things was deemed as the result of the ‘operation’ known as Dao, and it worked through the two complements of Yin and Yang.

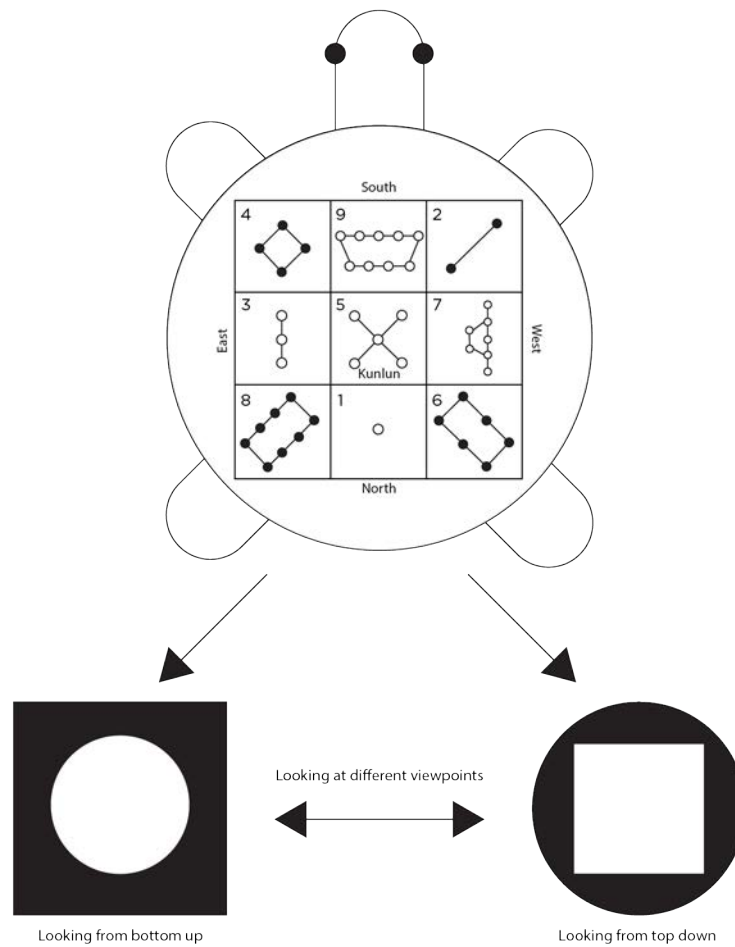


Figure 26: The Luoshu tortoise diagram can be viewed from the top down or the bottom up; both ways are essentially two sides of a same coin.

Inner cosmos: Taoist inner alchemy

Like several other cultures, the ancient Chinese developed different forms of macrocosm-microcosm model. The cosmos, human beings, society, and rituals are analogically related to each other; any event or action that occurs within these domains is relevant to the others. This is determined by the principle of “resonance” or “interaction” (*jiaogan*),¹⁵⁰ where things belonging to the same class or category influence each other.¹⁵¹ This concept is reinforced by Joseph Needham’s claim, “conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a ‘pattern’, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of ‘inductance’.”¹⁵² He maintains “this intuitive-associative system has its own causality and its own logic. It is not either superstition or primitive superstition, but a characteristic thought-form of its own.”¹⁵³ In many cases, the conduits linking each domain to the others are the abstract emblematic symbols of correlative cosmology, for example, the circle and square, the tortoise shell and plastron, images of the sun and moon, trigrams, and the five elements. These symbolic images, and in some cases numbers, play a central role in establishing these relationships, such as the manifestation of the Dao in the macrocosm and the reverse process to the Dao.

Shih-Shan Susan Huang’s *Picturing the True Form* is, as a whole, an exemplary study. It is considered an important addition to the current bibliography of Taoist studies. The book is a scholarly investigation into the formulation of the rich visual vocabulary and diverse formats used to express the complex and manifold corpus of Taoist beliefs and practices. In her analysis of the evolution of pictorial counterparts to Taoist religious teachings, her coverage of the early Taoist artworks is highly extensive and detailed. Huang, being an expert in Taoism, is able to organize the complicated material into a comprehensible structure for readers. By employing a systematic approach to the use of the visual materials in Taoist practices, she clarifies the Taoist worldview, cosmic organization, pantheon of immortals, and meditative and scriptural texts.

¹⁵⁰ 交感 The notion of resonance is also similar with the Chinese concept of parallelism, which is explained.

¹⁵¹ In the later part of this section, we will cover the correlation of the Five Elements to the different organs and behavior. The concept of resonance refers to the varying degrees of correlation of the Five Elements to the various categories specified in different practices such as the Traditional Chinese Medicine or the metaphysical divination practices.

¹⁵² Needham, J. (1956). *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 2, History of Scientific Thought*. Cambridge University Press, p.280-281.

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.280

This section aims to deduce the role of the black tortoise as a metaphysical symbol from various depictions in a macro- and micro-context. The current working theory states that four emblems (the black tortoise, the azure dragon, the vermillion bird, and the white tiger) are images conjured to orientate man when he transcends the world. This theory is based on the emblems' original functions, which were celestial markers in astronomy corresponding to the four directions.

In Figure 27a, the black tortoise is situated at the back and is correlated with the north and the North Star. The man, in this context, is the adept whom positions himself like the Son of Heaven seated in the north like the North Star while his subjects are standing to his south.¹⁵⁴ Hence, the black tortoise visually indicates the northern direction while the adept faces the south to his bodyguards, who are his ephemeral subjects similar to the Son of Heaven's subjects.

In the Taoist tradition, the earliest imagery of the four cardinal emblems correlated them with various parts of the body known as body gods (*shen shen*).¹⁵⁵ The body gods were believed to be divine entities that represented major body centers such as the head, the eyes, the navel, and the five inner organs (*wu zang*).¹⁵⁶ Visualizing the body gods and their associated body parts in detail allows for them to be kept in place, thereby promoting the person's health and longevity.¹⁵⁷ The following depiction (Figure 27) is from a series of illustration from a manual known as *Secret Instructions and Illustrations of the Great Visualizations (Da cunsi tu zhujue)*.¹⁵⁸ It depicts a pantheon of body gods in an assembly, visualized by an adept who is on the left side during his meditation that aims to prevent sickness.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*: Harvard University Asia Center, p.260.

¹⁵⁵ 身神

¹⁵⁶ 五臟

¹⁵⁷ Robinet, I. (1993). *Taoist Meditation: The Mao-shan Tradition of Great Purity*: State University of New York Press, p.64-65.

¹⁵⁸ 大存思圖注訣

¹⁵⁹ Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*: Harvard University Asia Center, p.27.

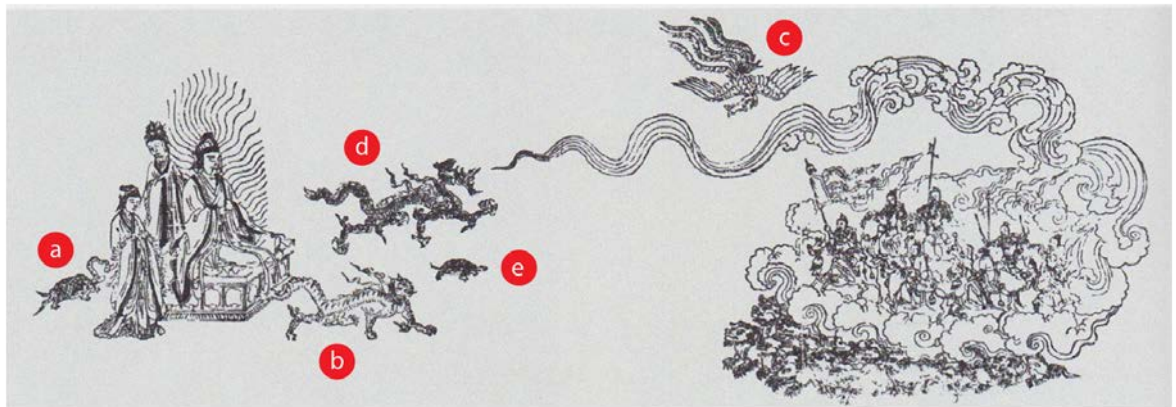


Figure 27: Visualization of the bodyguards while ascending to the rostrum to preach. Daozang. Ming dynasty, dated 1445. Woodblock print. Ink on paper. Image from Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Harvard University Asia Center, p.38A) The black tortoise B) The white tiger. C) The vermilion bird. D) The azure dragon. E) Tortoise

The tortoise is also present in the depiction. As we have learned, the deities on the right represent the body gods corresponding with the organs within the man. On the left, the figure seated on a platform represents the adept who is meditating and visualizing the various body gods through the cloud motif. The host of inner gods comprise: “celestial boys, jade maidens, heavenly deities, earth deities, sun and moon, stars, five emperors, and nine billion riders coming out of the adept’s organs.”¹⁶⁰ Surrounding the adept are the four numina—the azure dragon, white tiger, and vermilion bird are in front, and the black tortoise is behind the adept. One puzzling feature is the appearance of a second tortoise without a snake, located in front of the adept (e), who we will investigate in relation with another microcosmic view of the body.

The four cardinal creatures represent the four elements, with the fifth unrepresented element being earth and symbolizing Man or the “invariable middle”. According to traditional Chinese medicine, the five elements represent the viscera, sensory organs, and emotions within the human body. The following tables correlate the five elements with the adept and the four cardinal creatures (Figure 28 - Figure 30).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p.36.



| | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Denotation | Adept (True man) | Black tortoise |
| Yinyang | Yin and yang | Greater Yin |
| Five directions | Central | North |
| Orientation | - | Back |
| Five elements | Earth | Water |
| Five organs | Spleen | Kidney |
| Five secondary organs | Stomach | Urinary bladder |
| Five sensory organs | Mouth | Ear |
| Five fluids | Saliva | Spittle |
| Five manifestations | Muscle | Bone |
| Five external manifestations | Lips | Hair |
| Five emotions | Contemplation | Panic |
| Five resources | Thought | Willpower |

Figure 28: Chinese cosmological aspects correlated with the Taoist adept and the black tortoise.



| | | |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| | b | c |
| |  |  |
| Denotation | White tiger | Vermillion bird |
| Yinyang | Lesser yin | Greater yang |
| Five directions | West | South |
| Orientation | Right | Front |
| Five elements | Metal | Fire |
| Five organs | Lungs | Heart |
| Five secondary organs | Large intestine | Small intestine |
| Five sensory organs | Nose | Tongue |
| Five fluids | Mucus | Sweat |
| Five manifestations | Skin | Blood vessel |
| Five external manifestations | Hair | Complexion |
| Five emotions | Anxiety | Joy |
| Five resources | Spirit | Vigour |

Figure 29: Chinese cosmological aspects correlated with the white tiger and vermillion bird.



| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| | d | e |
| |  |  |
| Denotation | Azure dragon | Drinking tortoise |
| Yinyang | Lesser yang | Sublimation of Yin principle |
| Five directions | East | |
| Orientation | Left | |
| Five elements | Wood | |
| Five organs | Liver | |
| Five secondary organs | Bile duct | |
| Five sensory organs | Eyes | |
| Five fluids | Tear | |
| Five manifestations | Tendon | |
| Five external manifestations | Nails | |
| Five emotions | Fury | |
| Five resources | Soul | |

Figure 30: Chinese cosmological aspects correlated with the azure dragon and the drinking tortoise.

The inner body is considered ‘hidden’ and is not immediately grasped from the outside, therefore it belongs to the Yin. This is asserted in the book on the discussion of Traditional Chinese Medicine (*Zhong Yi Xue Gai Lun*), Whatever that is visible, faces outwards, warm, bright, ascends and formless belongs to the characteristic of Yang. While whatever that invisible, faces inwards, cold, dark, descends, contains a fixed form belongs to the characteristic of Yin.¹⁶¹

As the initiate meditates, he journeys inwards, visualizing the body gods. The militaristic depiction of the body gods portrays their intention to “eliminate” any negative elements from the body known as ‘worms’ that cause illness. The four symbolic emblems orientate the initiate as he journeys into an abstract realm while meditating and positioning himself with his back to the north represented by the black tortoise. This is similar to the northern polestar being used as a fixed point in astronomy¹⁶².

The following image provides us a clue to the symbolism and meaning of the second tortoise in the illustration. According to Huang, the tortoise embedded in a circular configuration in Figure 31e, emanating radiant light amid waves, is known as the drinking tortoise (*yin gui*).¹⁶³ It symbolizes the “sublimation of true yin.”¹⁶⁴ The word ‘sublimation’ according to the dictionary, the word refers to ‘purification’ or ‘refinement.’ Also, as a scientific term, ‘sublimation’ refers to the process of an object changing directly from the solid to vapor state.¹⁶⁵ According to its Latin etymology, it was derived from the word *sublimare*, which means “to lift up” or “raise to higher status”.¹⁶⁶ Hence, these definitions of the word ‘sublimation’ suggest that the heavy substances in the body sink and are drunk by the tortoise hence its name, the drinking tortoise. As a result, the tortoise becomes the embodiment of Yin as being located at the bottom refers to being “descended”. Both tortoises are situated either at the back or

¹⁶¹ 樊巧玲. (2010). 中醫學概論: 中國中醫藥出版社, p10. “凡事運動的，外向的，上升的，溫熱的，明亮的，無形的等都屬於“陽”的特徵；凡事相對靜止的，內向的，下降的，晦暗的，有形的，抑制的都屬於“陰”的特徵

¹⁶² The cardinal emblems originated from observations of the sky and were later contextualized by the Han people. Tseng, L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.255.

¹⁶³ 飲龜

¹⁶⁴ Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*: Harvard University Asia Center, p.70.

¹⁶⁵ Sublimate. (n.d.). Retrieved April 24, 2017, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublimate>

¹⁶⁶ sublimation. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Retrieved April 24, 2017 from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/sublimation>

at the bottom, which reinforces the tortoise's symbolism of the north and embodiment of Yin in material culture.

From another viewpoint of the image, we can correlate the cosmogonic process with the natural world as well. Based on the orientation of parts of the image, the area above corresponds with the Yang principle; this is reinforced by the ambiguous text (Zhen ren),¹⁶⁷ which is translated as 'True man' and the vermillion bird, which is both above and in front (qian zhu que).¹⁶⁸ The white tiger and azure dragon below a flaming wheel correspond with the concept of lesser Yin and Yang (Figure 31f). The image of a turning wheel can be inferred to be a symbol of the passage of time and the rhythmic processes of the natural world. Therefore, advanced Taoist thinkers stress the mystical ideal of seeking union with the Origin or the Great Ultimate by establishing control over the Self by keeping contrasting elements (the five elements) balanced around a central point. Hence, the azure dragon and white tiger turning the flaming wheel is inferred as a subtle and balanced force as neither are as overpowering as the greater Yang and greater Yin (vermillion bird and black tortoise).

From the different cosmogonic myth, we have established the Yin and Yang thought and five elements in the Chinese cosmology. Within the Oneness of the cosmogony, it represents the potential and beginning of all things, thus, we have foregrounded and expanded the potential meanings of the tortoise's symbolism of the Yin principle and all its varying degrees of correlation such as Earth, moon, water and passivity. Furthermore, we also argued the tortoise does indeed carry a symbolic cosmic mountain, vis-à-vis center of the world on its back even though it was not explicitly stated. The tortoise also symbolized two organs, kidney and urinary bladder in the Taoist inner alchemy, this is also in agreement with traditional Chinese medicine. Therefore, from this beginning, we will move on to the "Two" generated from the "One".

¹⁶⁷ 真人

¹⁶⁸ 前朱雀

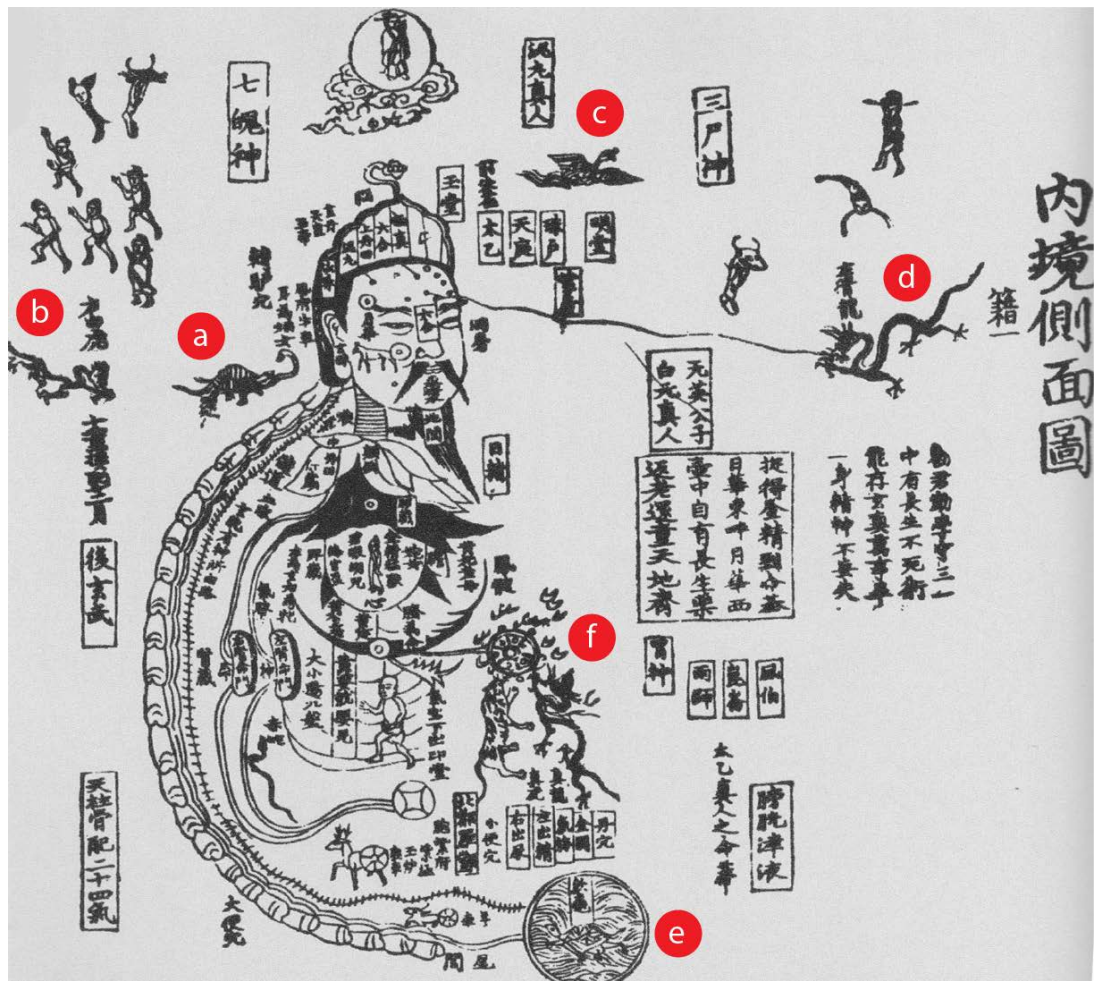


Figure 31: Chart of the Side View of the Inner Realm, detail. Daozang. Ming dynasty, dated 1445. Woodblock print. Ink on paper. Image from Huang, S. S. (2012). Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China: Harvard University Asia Center, p.70.

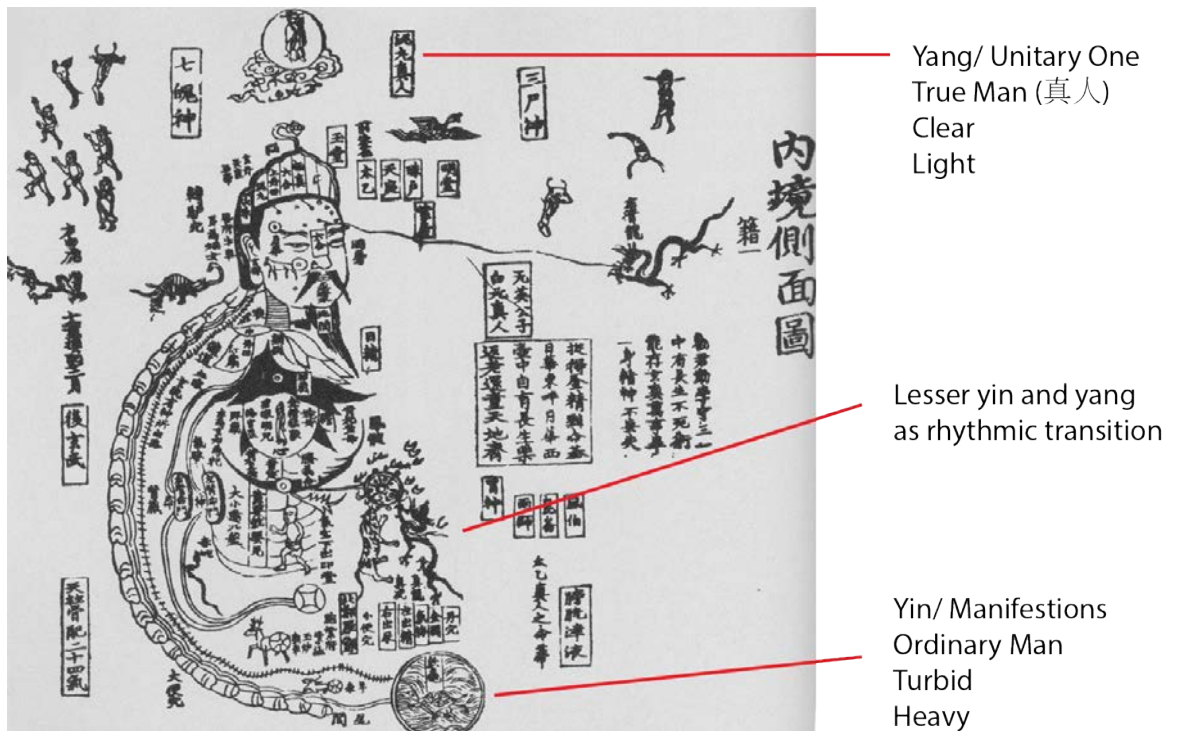


Figure 32: Correlation between the True Man and the process of cosmogony within the human body

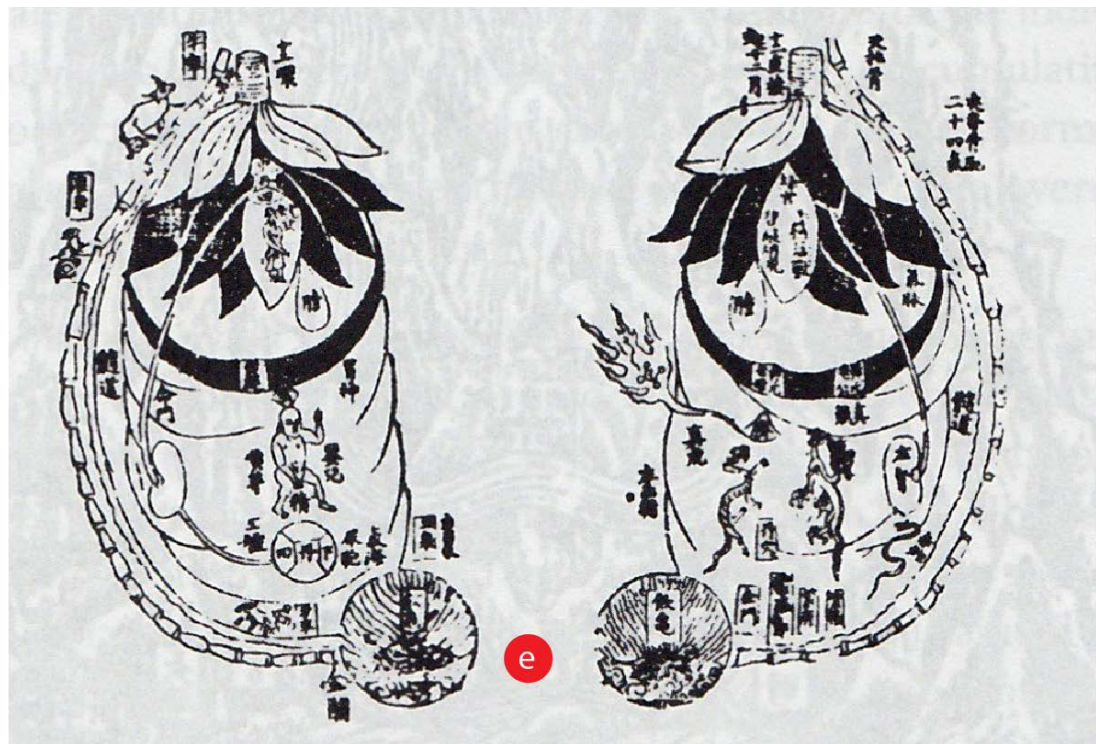


Figure 33: Detailed sectional body charts by Yanluozi. Daozang. Ming dynasty, dated 1445. Woodblock print. Ink on paper. Left: Chart of the Right Side of the Inner Realm. Right: Chart of the Left Side of the Inner Realm. Image from Huang, S. S. (2012). Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China: Harvard University Asia Center, p.68.



Figure 34: Four numina emphasizing the central position of the adept in the Picture of *Paying Homage to Perfection* by Yanluozi. Daozang. Ming Dynasty. Ink on paper. Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Harvard University Asia Center, p.64. a) The black tortoise. b) The white tiger. c) The vermillion bird. d) The azure dragon.

Shape of the Tortoise and the Cosmos

In the previous chapter, we discussed the myth of Pangu and the cosmogonic tale of the universe, from primordial chaos to the introduction of Yin and Yang and the five elements. In this chapter, we will analyze these concepts further to demonstrate how Chinese cosmology relates to the tortoise's symbolic form. Firstly, we have to understand that Yin and Yang and the five elements play a crucial role in the world view of the Chinese. The Chinese world view involves a systematic organization of the natural world and may play a part in its derived visual language and in the cosmogony of the world.

The traditional saying 'Heaven covers, Earth supports' establishes that the shell of the tortoise is correlated with the domed shape of the sky (like the shell that covers the tortoise) and also refers to heaven, while the plastron of the tortoise is correlated with the flat, square shape of the earth (like the plastron what supports the tortoise). The saying defines, with great conciseness, the roles of the two complementary principles, which have the symbolic positions of above and below in relation to the 'ten thousand things', which is the totality of universal manifestation.

Allan's *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China* is the closest to being a study about the tortoise and its myths during the Shang dynasty. A large portion of the book traces the development of early Chinese thought. Quantitative data is derived from archaeological data about the Shang Dynasty. An interesting observation of the tortoise is given: "The plastron of the turtle which was used in Shang divination was also, roughly speaking, *ya*¹⁶⁹-shaped and it functioned as a model of the Shang cosmos."¹⁷⁰

Heaven is identified as a 'non-acting'¹⁷¹ activity while, in contrast, the passivity of the earth enables the 'ground' or 'support' for manifestations. Earth is a plane of resistance against celestial forces and influences that act in a descending direction.

¹⁶⁹ 𪚩

¹⁷⁰ Allan, S. *Shape of the Turtle, The: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*: State University of New York Press, p.75.

¹⁷¹ The phenomenon of non-action is driven by neither motive nor the desire to interfere with human affairs, in other words, it describes letting nature take its course. Chan, W. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*: Princeton University Press, p.136.

These forces can be applied at every level of existence, since, for every state of manifestation, one can envisage an essence and substance in the relative sense.¹⁷²

In this chapter, we will be examining the shape of the tortoise and its correlation with Chinese cosmology. The purpose of this study is to establish a visual grammar of the tortoise that enables analysis through ‘correlative thinking’. From this lateral viewpoint, we will associate the symbolic form of the tortoise with the sun (Figure 35). The tortoise in the natural world is an amphibious reptile that crawls on the ground and basks in the sun. Its shell, well known for its association with the round dome of Heaven, faces the sky in the natural world.

During the day, the tortoise’s shell faces the sun, hence it represents Yang and heaven. Furthermore, the shell also represents the metaphysical energies from the movement of the stars and celestial bodies; on another level, it also represents the constant change of the four seasons and of day and night which are ‘movements’. The plastron of the tortoise, on the other hand, is correlated with the earth. In the natural world, the plastron constantly faces the earth, away from Sun, and hence is cooler than the shell and is used to represent Yin. When a tortoise emerges from water, it is reminiscent of the introduction of order from the primordial chaos.

¹⁷² Guénon defines the complementary examples of Heaven and Earth in his Great Triad. Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.21.

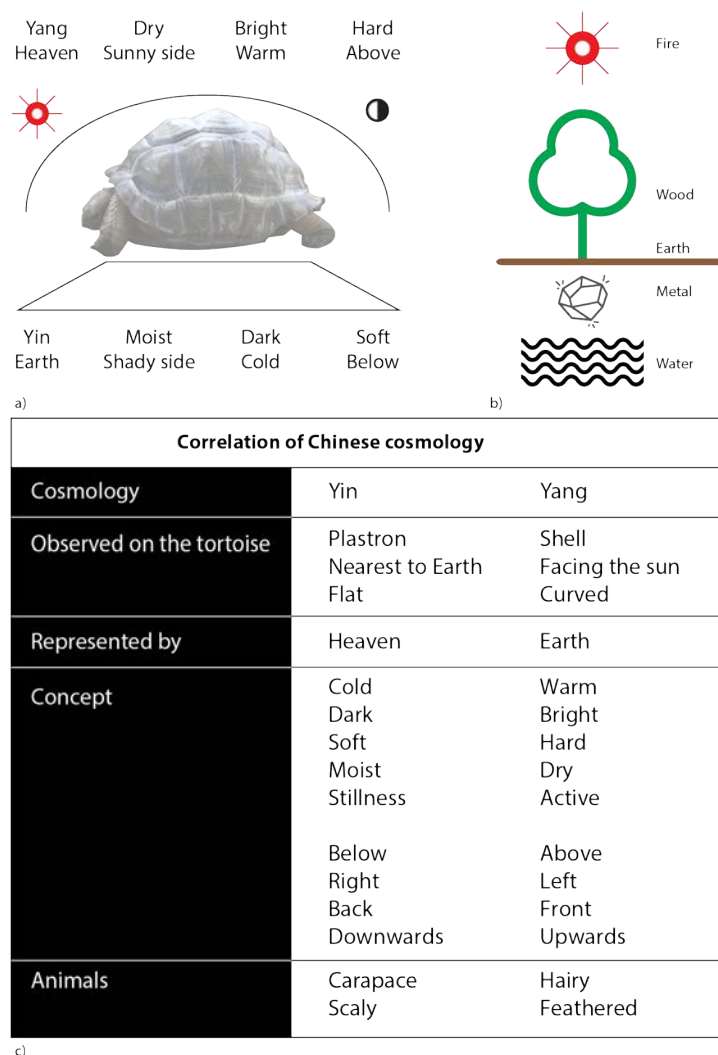


Figure 35: Analysis of the tortoise symbol and the natural world and its correlation with Chinese cosmology

The tortoise symbol relates to the five elements, based on the cosmogonic myth that states that the five elements are intrinsic and follow the Dao. The relationship between the natural world and mankind has pervaded across Chinese culture at all levels. The Yin-Yang and five-elements theories¹⁷³ are applied in the field of traditional Chinese medicine. The fundamental framework of traditional Chinese medicine involves viewing the body holistically—as a balanced state of Yin and Yang. Each complementary principle is interdependent and mutually inclusive, hence a change in one will necessarily produce a change in the other. As mentioned previously, each of the five elements influences and shapes the others through the cycle of production, creation, and exhaustion. The following table provides a reference that further expands

¹⁷³ The relationship of the five elements are of mutual creation, destruction and exhaustion. This is covered in Figure 16.

the system of the five elements' correlation with various aspects of the human body and the natural world (Figure 36).

| Natural world 自然界五行 | | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Element 五行 | Taste 五味 | Color 五色 | Transformation 五化 | Energy 五氣 | Direction 五方 | Seasons 五季 |
| Wood 木 | Sour 酸 | Green 青 | Germination 生 | Wind 風 | East 東 | Spring 春 |
| Fire 火 | Bitter 苦 | Red 赤 | Growth 長 | Heat 暑 | South 南 | Summer 夏 |
| Earth 土 | Sweet 甜 | Yellow 黃 | Transformation 化 | Humidity 濕 | Central 中 | Late summer 長夏 |
| Metal 金 | Pungent 辛 | White 白 | Harvest 收 | Dryness 燥 | West 西 | Autumn 秋 |
| Water 水 | Salty 咸 | Black 黑 | Storage 藏 | Coldness 寒 | North 北 | Winter 冬 |

Figure 36: Correlations of the five elements with the natural world based on traditional Chinese medicine.

Reference from: 樊巧玲. (2010). 中醫學概論: 中國中醫藥出版社, p. 18.

From the figure, assuming that the five elements represent natural phenomenon, the five elements can be categorized into two groups: the elements above the earth and the elements below the earth. Plants (wood) require sunlight (fire) and warmth to grow while minerals (metal) and water can be found beneath the earth, although fire and water can be found above and below earth as well (for example, lava is both fire and water at the same time). At the same time, they are also representative of the notion of tangible and intangible in the Chinese cosmology. Because of this reason, fire and water hold a unique position in the cosmology. Another reason we know of is indefinite shape of both fire and water. Also, their characteristics closely resemble the properties of Yin and Yang: hot and cold, rising and falling, bright and dark; this dialectic view of the five elements will be further expanded later.

We have learned that the shape of the tortoise and its symbolic form correlates in microcosmic manner with the cosmos. The tortoise's circular shell represents heaven, and its plastron represents the earth.¹⁷⁴ The shape of the cosmos contributes to the perception of the natural world and is present in subsequent philosophical cosmology, for example, in Yin and Yang, which are a visual derivation of heaven and earth and their symbols, the circle and the square. The Yin is associated with earth, femininity, coldness, darkness, and many other qualities derived from natural phenomenon. The Yang, on the other hand, is associated with the opposite. The five elements are equally important to the categories of complementary principles. They are represented by the symbols of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, and the natural world is the source for their different activities and changes. As we have demonstrated above, the five elements can also be perceived as observable phenomenon in the natural world.

Since the symbolic form of the tortoise reflects of the universe, this implies that its image also reflects the totality of time and space. The concept of time can also be categorized into the macrocosmic and microcosmic view. Obviously, there are four seasons as well as the cycle of night and day, and like all things in Chinese cosmology, these time periods can be put into the Yin or Yang category. The Chinese system of time is organized into a system known as the Twelve Earthly Branches (*di zhi*)¹⁷⁵ which are paired with the Ten Heavenly Stems (*tian gan*)¹⁷⁶.

Stating an example to demonstrate the above-mentioned concepts in a tree metaphor, the stems correspond to the Yang principle (macrocosmic) while the branches that grow from the stems correspond to the Yin principle (microcosmic). Together, the Ten Heavenly Stems (Figure 37) and the Twelve Earthly Branches (Figure 38) are used to form the cycle of sixty years (*jiazi*)¹⁷⁷. These signs play a great part in Chinese divination, owing to their supposed connection with the elements of essences, which are believed to exert influence over them.¹⁷⁸ The earthly branches, on the other hand, by their own merits, are used for chronological purposes, designating the hours, days,

¹⁷⁴ Rappenglück, M. A. (2006). The whole world put between to shells: The cosmic symbolism of tortoises and turtles. *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, 4, 223-230.

¹⁷⁵ 地支

¹⁷⁶ 天干

¹⁷⁷ 六十甲子

¹⁷⁸ Mayers, W. F. (1874). *The Chinese reader's manual: A handbook of biographical, historical, mythological, and general literary reference*: American Presbyterian mission Press, p.296.

month, and years. Each year is symbolized by one of twelve different animals, which are supposed to exert some influence over the period of time and are represented by a special character, as illustrated in the following table, Figure 38.

We can correlate parts of the tortoise with the heavenly stem and earthly branches (Figure 39). The square plastron of the tortoise corresponds to the earthly plane (material realm), with the four cardinal directions and corresponding five elements. The celestial plane (heaven) depicts day and night, seasonal energies, and the macrocosmic environment (immaterial). This is due to the combined vision of the cycle of space and time which depicts the totality of man's immediate experience of the world.

| Celestial Stem | | | Element | Image of |
|----------------|---|------|---------|-------------------|
| 1 | 甲 | Jia | Wood | Tree |
| 2 | 乙 | Yi | Wood | Grass and flowers |
| 3 | 丙 | Bing | Fire | Sun |
| 4 | 丁 | Ding | Fire | Candle-fire |
| 5 | 戊 | Wu | Earth | Mountain |
| 6 | 己 | Ji | Earth | Sand |
| 7 | 庚 | Geng | Metal | Metallic tools |
| 8 | 辛 | Xin | Metal | Jewellery |
| 9 | 壬 | Ren | Water | Ocean |
| 10 | 癸 | Gui | Water | River |

Figure 37: Table of the Ten Heavenly Stems correlated with the five elements. Table referenced from: Feuchtwang, S. (1965). *Anthropological analysis of Chinese geomancy*. (U286954 M.A.), University of London, London School of Economics (United Kingdom).

| Twelve Branches | | Symbolic Animals | | Corresponding Hours | Element |
|-----------------|------|------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|
| 寅 | Yin | 虎 | Tiger | 3-5am | Wood |
| 卯 | Mao | 兔 | Rabbit | 5-7am | Wood |
| 辰 | Chen | 龍 | Dragon | 7-9am | Earth |
| 巳 | Si | 蛇 | Snake | 9-11am | Fire |
| 午 | Wu | 馬 | Horse | 11-1pm | Fire |
| 未 | Wei | 羊 | Sheep | 1-3pm | Earth |
| 申 | Shen | 猴 | Monkey | 3-5pm | Metal |
| 酉 | You | 雞 | Chicken | 5-7pm | Metal |
| 戌 | Xu | 狗 | Dog | 7-9pm | Earth |
| 亥 | Hai | 豬 | Pig | 9-11pm | Water |
| 子 | Zi | 鼠 | Rat | 11-1am | Water |
| 丑 | Chou | 牛 | Ox | 1-3am | Earth |

Figure 38: Table of the Twelve Earthly Branches correlated with the five elements and the time of day. Table referenced from: Feuchtwang, S. (1965). *Anthropological analysis of Chinese geomancy*. (U286954 M.A.), University of London, London School of Economics (United Kingdom).

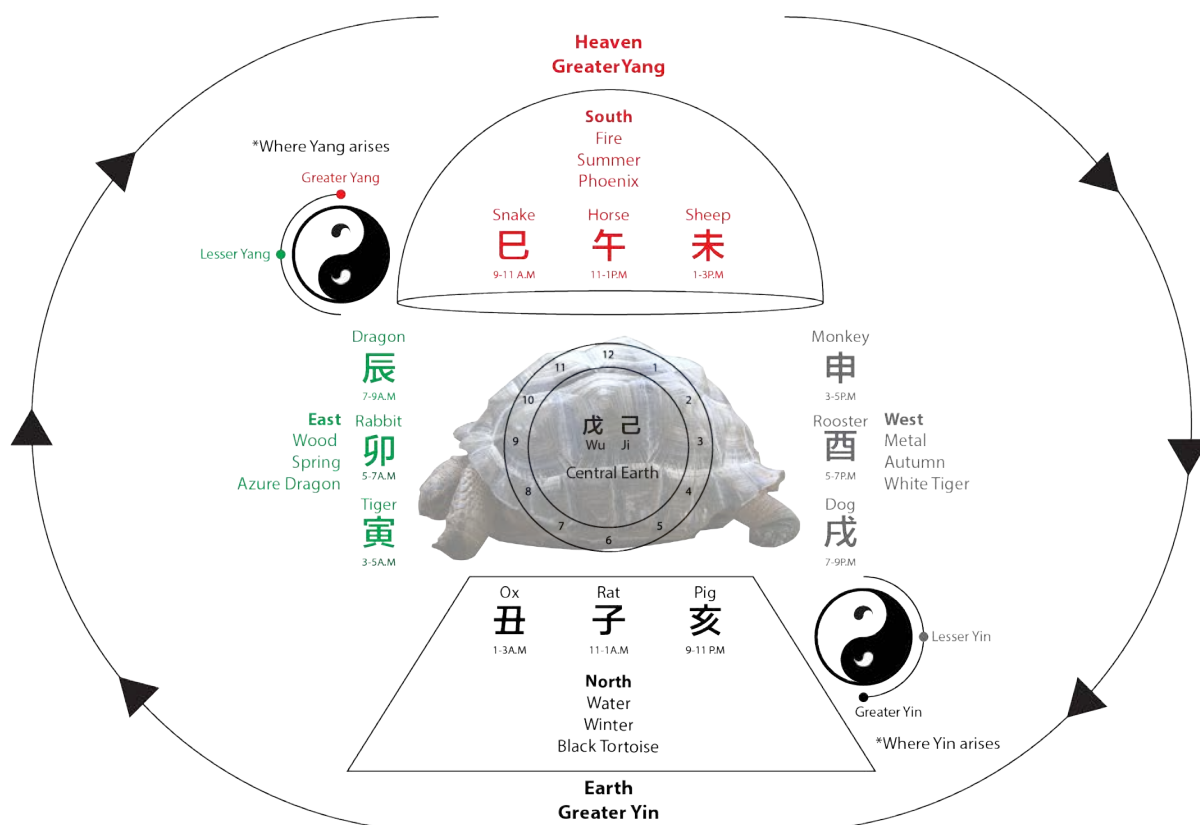


Figure 39: The Ten Heavenly Stems and Twelve Earthly Branches correlated with parts of the tortoise.

The book, *The Great Triad* by Rene Guenon's is an extensive work of scholarship that describes the views of Far-Eastern traditions, in particular, Taoism.¹⁷⁹ Even though Guenon's view of symbols is a universal one, he provides an acute analysis of Far-Eastern metaphysical symbolism. Notably, he differentiates between the Western concept of trinity and the Far-Eastern concept of ternary.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, it was his work that provided clues about the connection between of the tortoise's round shell (and its plastron) and the "roundness of heaven and the flatness of earth". This effectively shifted our perspective of the tortoise as being a symbolic representation of the universe. Also, we see the concept of ternary being present in the tortoise symbol.

¹⁷⁹ There are two different types of Taoism, the religious and the philosophical. The religious form of Taoism refers to Chinese religion while philosophical Taoism refers to the traditional thought of Confucianism. However, these two terms are very much like two peas in the same pod. The philosophical aspect concerns ethics and morality, while Confucianism governs state matters.

¹⁸⁰ The ternary is a vernacular term referring to the heaven-earth-man classification in Chinese thought used by Rene Guenon. It is otherwise known as the triad.

Its shell and plastron represent heaven and earth respectively while its middle section represents mankind.

Returning to the tortoise, between its shell and plastron is the tortoise itself, hence, it naturally represents the Man from the great triad of Heaven, Man, and Earth. Guénon succinctly summarises this:¹⁸¹

“The whole shell is therefore an image of the universe, and between its two parts the tortoise itself naturally represents the middle term of the Great Triad, that is to say Man; in addition, its withdrawal into the interior of its shell symbolizes concentration in the ‘primordial state’,¹⁸² which is the state of ‘true man’; and this concentration is moreover the realization of the plenitude of human possibilities, for although the center is apparently only a point without extension, it is nonetheless this point which, principally, really contains all things.” (Figure 40). In other words, what is outside the circumference of the tortoise is considered the profane space. Inversely, within the space of the tortoise is where non-manifestation exists within and contains the immutable origin of all differentiation and modalities, hence the sacred space.

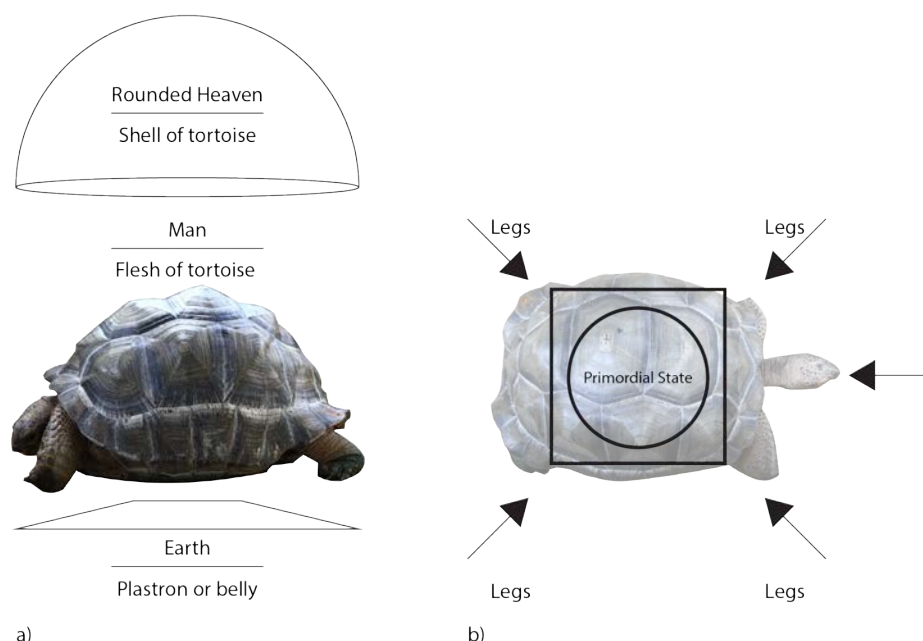


Figure 40: The reproduction of the primordial state where the tortoise withdraws to its shell.

¹⁸¹ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.91.

¹⁸² The notion of return is neither to begin again nor to return to the process of manifestation, but rather, to return to the point of origin where non-manifestation occurred. Guénon, R., & Macnab, A. (2001). *The Symbolism of the Cross: Sophia Perennis*, p. 130.

There are many metaphysical symbols in the material culture that represent Man as being the middle entity of the Great Triad by being placed between Heaven and Earth. This includes ritual objects that symbolize heaven and earth through the shape of the circle and square, and ritualistic architecture known as Ming Tang with interlocking circles and squares. The Great Triad is related to the meaning of the trigram in the Book of Change (*Yijing*)¹⁸³ whose three lines correspond respectively to the three entities of the Great Triad (Figure 41). The top line symbolizes Heaven, the central line symbolizes Man, and the bottom line symbolizes Earth. On the other hand, the hexagram no longer depicts the middle entity, Man, but rather, the totality of the hexagram unites celestial and terrestrial influences, thereby having the function of a ‘mediator’.

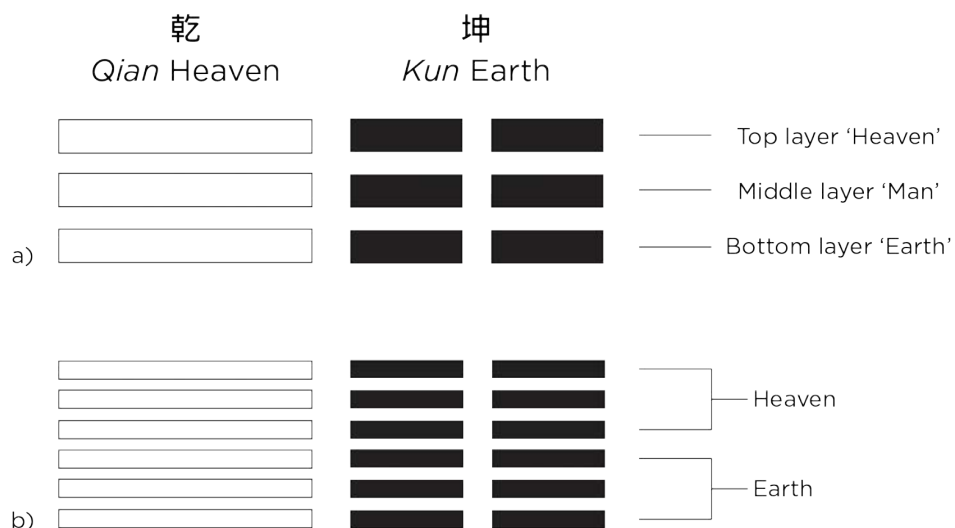


Figure 41: Qian and Kun, Heaven and Earth. A) Trigram expressing the middle entity. B) Hexagram expressing Heaven and Earth as complements.

From the above-mentioned Guénon’s claim and Allan’s¹⁸⁴ claim of the image of the universe corresponding to the body of the tortoise, its upper shell and its plastron, are like the triad of Heaven, Man, and Earth. The upper shell, which ‘covers’ the animal, corresponds to the rounded form of heaven, while the lower plastron, which ‘supports’

¹⁸³ 易經

¹⁸⁴ Allan, S. (1991). *Shape of the Turtle, The: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*: State University of New York Press, p.106.

the animal, corresponds to the flatness of earth.¹⁸⁵ The whole animal is therefore a symbolic image of the universe. The Lingjiatan¹⁸⁶ plaque, inserted in a jade tortoise shell, may prove that the *shih* device was a one of the earliest divinatory instrument used during the Han Dynasty.¹⁸⁷ The device has a lacquered square base and a circular top with a pin connecting the two parts (Figure 42). At the center of the circular top is a group of dots connected by lines that represent the Northern Dipper. Along the border of both the top and the base are inscriptions of various calendric and celestial systems. The diviner was to orient the Northern Dipper in a certain direction by rotating the circular top and then derive an answer to an inquiry by interpreting the calendric and celestial marks on the rims. After the diviner goes through the process of deriving answers from milfoil stalks and hexagrams, he will proceed to discuss what is beneficial and harmful between the Dao of heaven and earth.

Subsequent divinatory practices involving the trigram and the tortoise can be found in an image of Fuxi with a tortoise and trigram beneath his feet (Figure 43).

Traditionally, the trigrams functioned as symbols of nature and human society and were closely related to divinatory practices. Since the world began with the formation of heaven and earth from a unitary source, the act of divination reunites the two primordial forces, enabling the perception of the underlying cosmos and allowing the diviner to foretell how the future will unfold. This is similar to how the world unfolded through a predetermined operation known as the 'Dao'. Hence, divinatory practices aim to reveal the 'Dao' of the cosmos and to foretell what could potentially unfold.

¹⁸⁵ A plane surface is related directly to the straight line, an element of the square, and both can be equally defined in a negative way without the presence of any curvature.

¹⁸⁶ 凌家灘

¹⁸⁷ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.49

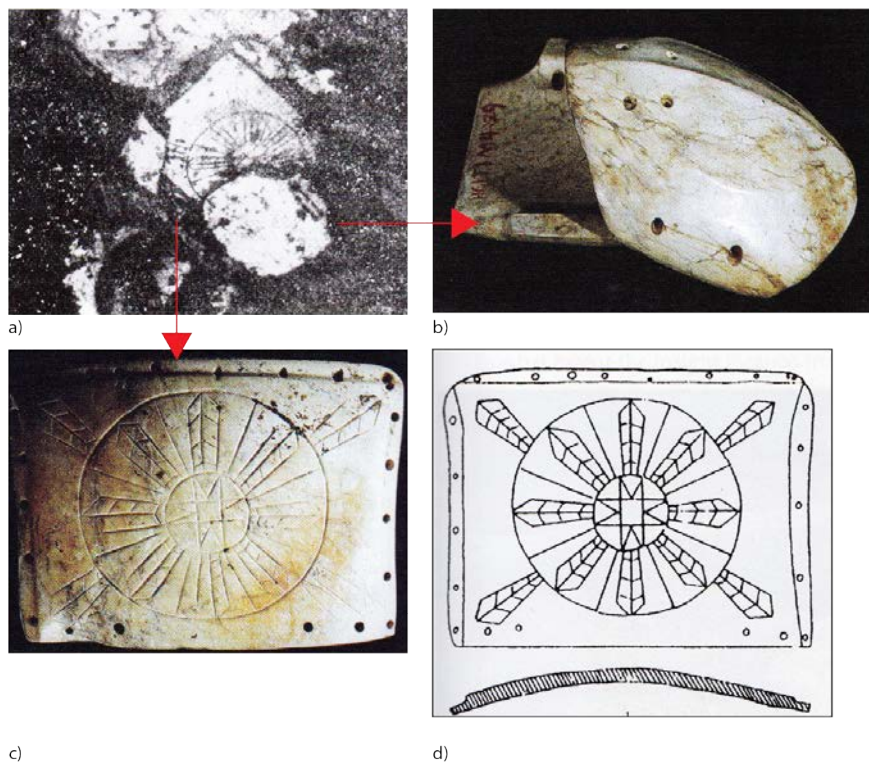


Figure 42: a) Photograph showing how the jade tortoise contains the jade plaque, shown in b) and c). d) A diagram.
Image from Tseng, L. L. (2011). PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA: Harvard University Press, p.45.



Figure 43: Fuxi with the trigram and tortoise beneath his feet. Image from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fu-Xi>.

In modern times, divinatory practices also involve the use of the tortoise shell as a ritualistic divinatory instrument (Figure 44). Eight coins, with one containing the emblem of the eight trigrams¹⁸⁸, are placed into the shell of the tortoise. The consultant then poses a question to the oracle, and the oracle then tosses out the coins from the tortoise shell. Based on the arrangement of the fallen coins, the diviner will interpret the pattern, taking into consideration the number of coins facing the same direction.¹⁸⁹ The use of the tortoise for divination can perhaps be attributed to the tortoise symbolizing the image of the universe and the belief in the power of the universe to enact its will through the tortoise shell. Perhaps this was why tortoise shells are used as divinatory tools as the tortoise is considered a ‘messenger’ and conduit of the universe. Along with these two primordial forces, yin and yang, the ancient Chinese believed that the tortoise shell improved the efficacy of their divination.

From the shape of the tortoise, we have established that the shell and the plastron of the tortoise correspond to the Heaven and Earth dichotomy as its symbolic form of the square and circle. At the same time, the tortoise also represents the temporal space and time – space being its shell and plastron both representing space above and below, which are the cardinal directions and the astronomical quadrants. We deduce its cardinal direction on the tortoise when we infer by the Yinyang thought that Heaven correlates to south and Earth to north, east and west naturally falls into their fixed positions. We have also correlated the five elements into two simple categories of Yin and Yang and the tortoise; wood and fire being readily seen above the ground hence it belongs to Yang while water and metal are not immediately seen therefore belonging to Yin; Earth being the middle path as it exists on both above and below, just as how we are only able to perceive one side of the mountain at a time. In the next section, we will expand on the Yin and Yang dichotomy and study how the visual language of the tortoise changes when placed with another symbol, the bird.

¹⁸⁸ The trigrams, *bagua* (八卦), of the Book of Change that is also known as Yijing, are different combinations of three rows of lines, known as yao (爻) that consists of two different types of lines, broken (--) and unbroken (-). When the trigrams are joined above each other, they form the sixty-four hexagrams. There are two different arrangements, the pre-celestial and the post-celestial. The pre-celestial arrangement is associated with Fuxi and was only initially alluded to in the Yijing but was developed by later scholars and finally formulated by Shao Yong (1012-77). On the other hand, the post-celestial arrangement was credited to King Wen. The pre-celestial arrangement represents the primordial structure of the universe, and the eternal and original nature of the world before the state of things begins to change and time starts to unfold. The post-celestial arrangement represents the phenomenal world, the state of things after change had begun, and the universe in operation.

¹⁸⁹ Taylor, G. (2012). *Discovering the Book of Changes - a Journey*: Paragon Publishing, Rothersthorpe, p. 53.



Figure 44: Tortoise shell used for divination, also known as Bu Gua (卜卦). Photograph by author in a Taiwan Taoist temple.

Heaven and Earth: Bird and Tortoise

Inside the tomb at Mawangdui, a painted silk banner, which had the shape of a letter 'T' known as *fei yi*¹⁹⁰, was found (Figure 45). The dragon, crow, and toad imagery, as well as the assortment of other supernatural and celestial beings, was mentioned in Tseng's analysis of the tomb. Though the nature and function of the banner is widely debated by scholars¹⁹¹, we will not cover this and it digresses from our main subject matter.¹⁹² The banner (Figure 46) can be categorized into three distinct areas: the top representing Heaven, the middle representing Man, and the bottom representing Earth. Above Heaven is the 'higher principle' from which Yin and Yang were derived from.

The bird figure symbolizes Heaven. Although it may not necessarily be the vermilion bird, its presence can be inferred that it is 'near heaven'. There are two birds above a canopy-like object, and directly opposite them is the tortoise; hence the positions of the animals show that the top of the banner represents Heaven and the bottom represents Earth. Visually, two dragons intersect and emerge from the central hole of the *Bi* disc. As we discussed earlier, the disc is a symbol of Heaven in cosmology with its circular shape. The dragons' tails begin in the Earth realm, and rise and intersect with each other in the *Bi* disc. This suggests that the disc is a transitional point between Earth and Heaven, from the 'fixed' and manifested realm to the formless realm of Heaven.

Key visual elements, including the tortoise image, allow us to make a comparative analysis between the Chinese cosmogonic process and the silk banner (Figure 45). Referring back to Zhou Dunyi's Taijitu diagram, Yang symbolizes motion and Yin symbolizes rest, and both are critical to the generation of the universe. Yin and Yang occur in fluctuating or alternating patterns, and as Feng Yu-lan observes, "It is possible for these both phases to be concurrently present."¹⁹³ Hence, neither Yin nor Yang has more power than the other, or is more dominant as their concurrence is logically and metaphysically necessary. Therefore, the sun and the moon are located on the same level (a). The interaction of Yin and Yang generated the five elements and

¹⁹⁰ 非衣

¹⁹¹ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.170.

¹⁹² For a further discussion of the silk banner, refer to Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.169 to 188.

¹⁹³ Feng, Y., & Bodde, D. (1983). *A History of Chinese Philosophy*: Princeton University Press, p.443.

the way of Qian and Kun, which are the female and male principles according to Zhou Dunyi's Taijitsu (b). Both principles exist within Man's realm in the natural world as every species is composed of the five elements, which can be categorized by Yin and Yang.

Directly below Man is the third term of the Great Triad, the Earth. Heaven and Earth are a pole apart from each other, and therefore Man can only partially perceive them and cannot comprehend their metaphysical side. The tortoise, as well as the fish, supports the idea that things 'below' or at the 'bottom' correspond with the Earth and the water realm as both are related to the Yin principle. The two dragons on both sides face upwards, which suggests that they are ascending upwards. At the same time, their intersection in the *Bi* disc evokes the image of Nüwa and Fuxi's intertwined serpentine tails, which eventually intermingle to become the Great Ultimate from where Yin and Yang were derived from.

The tortoise's correlation with Yin and its respective principles is strongly supported by the peripheral symbols in the banner. Rene Guénon asserts, "The symbol of Heaven must be placed entirely above that of the Earth."¹⁹⁴ In Figure 79, the 'summit of Heaven' is formed by two lines, branching from a point in the altitude and joining a third line at the base thus forming a triangle. This symbolically delineates the Earth's surface and the triangle serves as a 'foundation' that supports manifestations. This model is also present in the tortoise symbol. The ventral, inward-facing tortoise shell symbolizes Heaven, and its dorsal, outward-facing plastron symbolizes the Earth that supports all manifested things.

Therefore, the tortoise and things above it, including Heaven, can be identified as the ten thousand things and the myriad manifestations. Beyond Heaven is the 'higher principle' or the Great Ultimate. We can infer that the location of Heaven is where the bird figure is on the banner, being nearest to the sky in the natural world. The bird symbolizes Heaven while the tortoise, being nearest to the earth and being at the bottom to support manifestations, symbolizes the Earth. Therefore, Man, who is 'above Earth', is situated in the middle of the manifestations

¹⁹⁴ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.23.



Figure 45: Painted Banner. Second half of the second century BCE, after 168 BCE. Silk. 205 x 92cm. Unearthed in 1972 from Tomb 1 at Mawangdui in Changsha, Hunan. a) Photograph, b) Drawing, c) Close up of the tortoise. Image from Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.172.

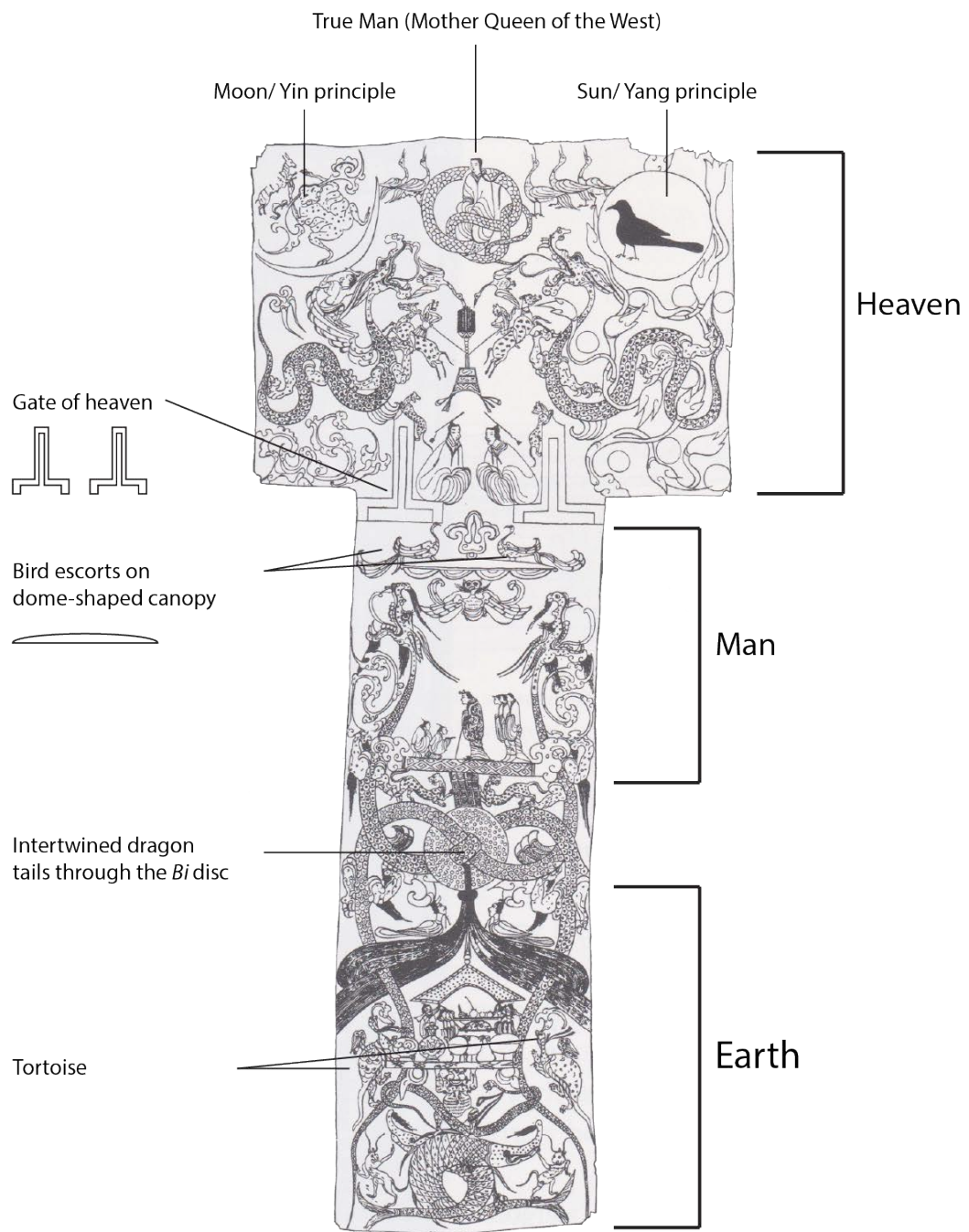


Figure 46: Analysis of the painted banner

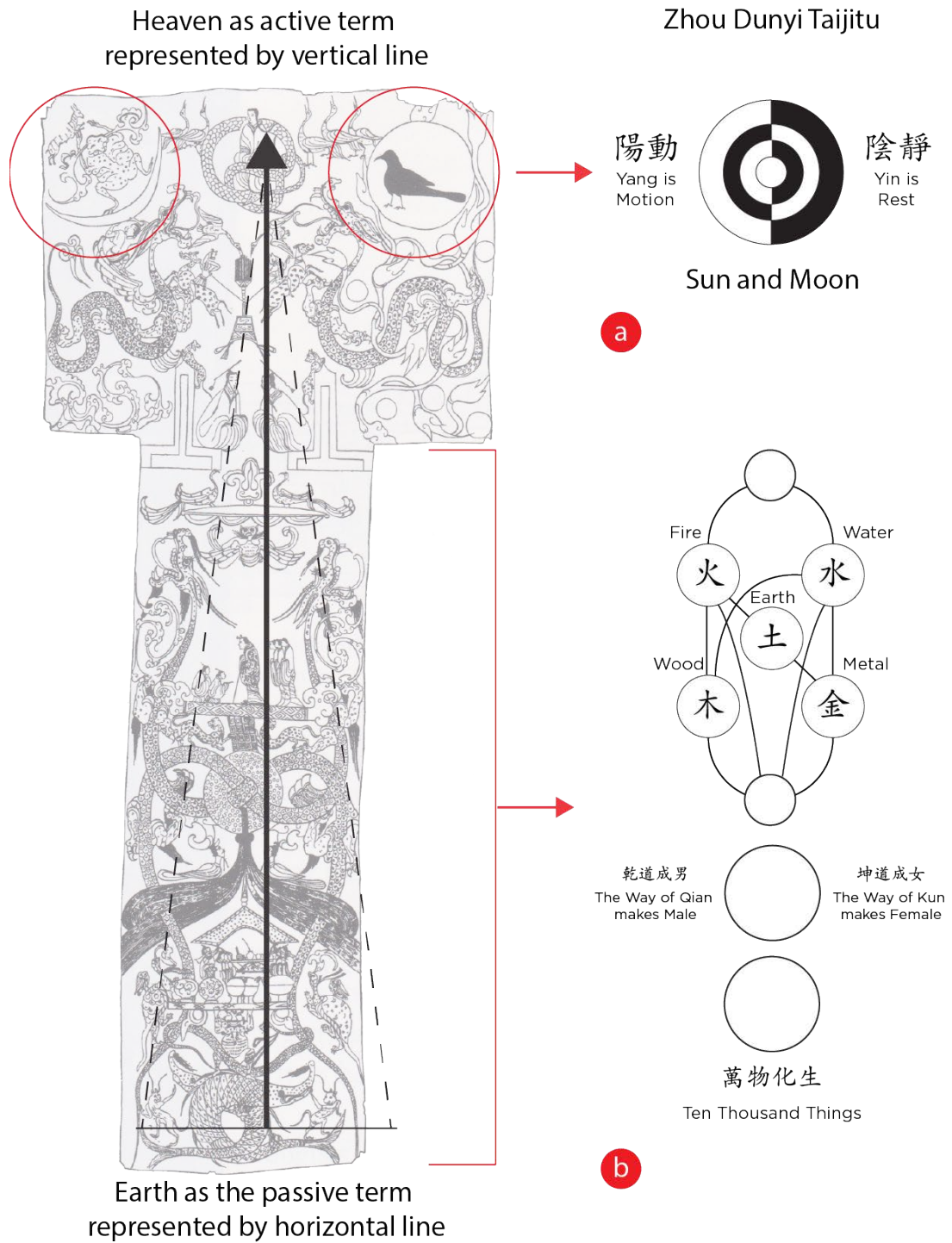


Figure 47: Rene Guénon's ternary model with Zhou Dunyi's diagram depicting the positions of Heaven and Earth. Progressing from Earth to Heaven is represented by the upwards arrow.

We observe a pattern in the positions of the tortoise and the bird, which are positioned opposite each other, below and above, respectively. They form a unique complementary yet dynamic visual composition in Chinese cosmology. The tortoise, as it was inferred strongly by its positions in previous artworks, is evidently a representation of the Yin principle. We will attempt to deepen our analysis of the tortoise, using the previous examples as a starting point.

The various images shown below demonstrate that the pattern of the bird and tortoise are present in both ancient and modern times (Figure 48, Figure 49). Images of the bird on top the tortoise symbolized academic excellence during Chinese dynasties, and symbolized longevity if the bird was a crane. However, despite existing cultural depictions of the tortoise and bird, we must observe that both creatures represent opposite and complementary concepts. The complementary concepts of Chinese cosmology include fire and water, Heaven and Earth, and Yin and Yang. Therefore, the tortoise and the bird reflects a particular point within the process of the Chinese model of cosmogonic process.

The mountain censors, known as boshanlu, symbolize the universal mountain, Mount Kunlun, and are frequently present in tombs from the mid and late Western Han period.¹⁹⁵ Erickson relates the use of the tortoise as a support for the bird and the mountain in a myth recorded in the “Heavenly Questions” (Tian wen):¹⁹⁶ “When the Great tortoise walks along with an island on his back, how does he keep it steady?”¹⁹⁷ The enigmatic question is elucidated in the Lie zi:

“Yet the bases of the five mountains used to rest on nothing; they were always rising and falling, going and returning, with the ebb and flow of the tide, and never for a moment stood firm... The immortals found this troublesome, and complained about it to God. God was afraid that they would drift to the far West and he would lose the home of his sages. So he commanded Ya-chiang to make

¹⁹⁵ Erickson, S. N. (1992). Boshanlu: Mountain Censors of the Western Han Period: A Typological and Iconological Analysis. *Archives of Asian Art*, 45, 6-28, p.20.

¹⁹⁶ 天文

¹⁹⁷ “Tian wen” is composed of 172 questions concerning cosmogonic theory, mythology, and legendary heroes. The text refers to the chaos before Heaven and Earth were formed, along with the structure of Heaven and the pillars linking Heaven to Earth by an axis mundi, and the flood myth along with elements of the “Grand Origin Myth”; see Major, J. S. (1978). Myth, cosmology, and the origins of Chinese science. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 5(1), 1-20.

fifteen giant turtles carry the five mountains on their lifted heads, taking turns in three watches, each sixty thousand years long; and for the first time the mountains stood firm and did not move.¹⁹⁸

We have observed that previously mentioned artworks refer to the cosmogonic process, and in this case, images of the tortoise, bird, and mountain symbolize a similar process. If we look at its analysis in Figure 50, everything begins with the tortoise as the base of support, then an arrow indicates the progression from the myriad things towards the primordial unity. From another viewpoint, if the image is read from a reverse direction, from the Great Ultimate that generates Yin and Yang to Heaven and the Earth. The round plate holding the incense burner is similar to the shape of a coin, where the void space between the square and circle represents the ten thousand manifested things. Also, the straight design of the incense burner is reminiscent of the cord connecting Heaven and Earth through the universal mountain. Therefore, the boshanlu is a symbol of the universal axis and the structured form of Chinese cosmology.

This section has demonstrated how the visual language of the tortoise symbol has now become a vital piece to the overall visual language of the image. With the tortoise and bird, it offers an alternative viewpoint to indicate the position of Heaven and Earth. The bird being a symbolism of Yang because of its constant activity in relation to the tortoise, when placed together within the same composition, it becomes a Yin and Yang model. In the next section, the Yin and Yang thought will be further expressed in a form of the intertwined tortoise and snake, known as Xuan Wu or the black tortoise.

¹⁹⁸ Graham, A. C. (1990). *The Book of Lieh-tzu: A Classic of the Tao*: Columbia University Press, p.97.



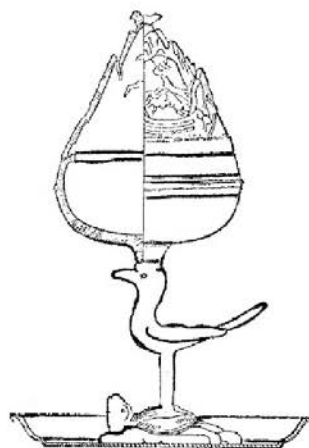
a)



b)



c)



d)

Figure 48: Tortoise and bird mountain censers. A) Image from Shaughnessy, E. L. (2009). *Exploring the Life, Myth, and Art of Ancient China*: Rosen, p.90. B) Image from <http://www.comuseum.com/bronzes/qin-han/>. C) and D) from Erickson, S. N. (1992). Boshanlu: Mountain Censers of the Western Han Period: A Typological and Iconological Analysis. *Archives of Asian Art*, 45, p.12.



a)



b)



c)



d)

Figure 49: Images of tortoise and bird typology from various contexts. A) Image from National Palace Museum. <http://catalog.digitalarchives.tw/item/00/59/c8/e0.html>. B) Bronze statue photographed by author in the Tortoise Museum, Chinese Garden. C) Stone carving on wall photographed in Taipei Temple. D) Grave marker of the tortoise and bird photographed by author in Choa Chu Kang cemetery.

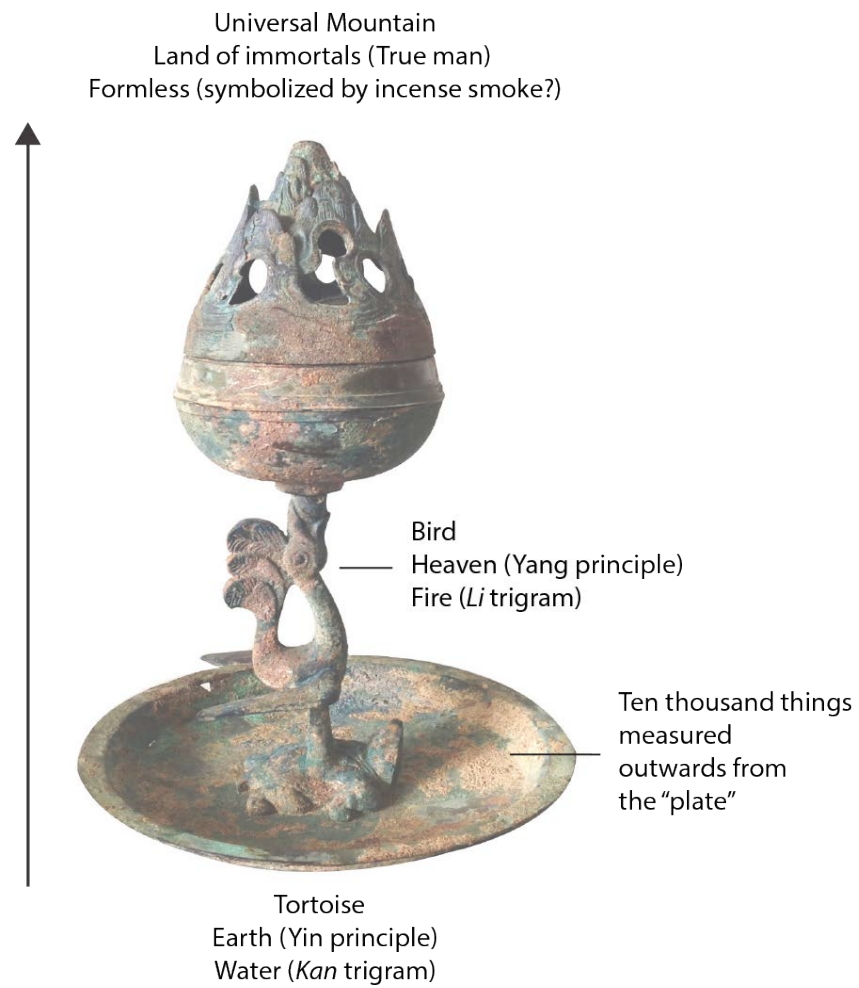


Figure 50: Analysis of the visual language of the mountain censer

Yinyang and the black tortoise

A prominent depiction of the tortoise is the entwined tortoise and snake, known as *Xuan Wu* (Figure 52 - Figure 54).¹⁹⁹ It is known by other names such as ‘mysterious warrior’, ‘dark warrior’ or ‘black tortoise’ and is considered to be one of the four spiritually endowed creatures (*si ling*).²⁰⁰ In contrast with its four cardinal counterparts, the black tortoise is the only animal that is a combination of two different animals, the snake and the tortoise (Figure 55). The association of these animals with the four directions has astronomical origins; the black tortoise represents the northern sky known as ‘mansions’ (*xiu*).²⁰¹

The symbol of the tortoise entwined with the snake was also expressed as an emblem on a standard (Figure 51) which was always carried in the front and rear of an army. The pair of reptiles in a deadly embrace was symbolic of the tactics of warfare: the serpent is unable to crush the shell of the tortoise, and the head of the tortoise cannot reach the serpent. As a Chinese saying goes: “When the dragon and tiger fight, both die, but when the tortoise and serpent fight, neither dies.”²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ 玄武

²⁰⁰ 四靈

²⁰¹ 宿. There are a total of 28 mansions corresponding to the four directions. Within each mansion are seven sections. The black tortoise mansion contains the Dipper, Ox, Girl, Emptiness, Rooftop, Encampment, and Wall. Xu, J. Ancient Chinese constellations. *The Role of Astronomy in Society and Culture, Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union, IAU Symposium*, 260, 107-115.

²⁰² Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.42.

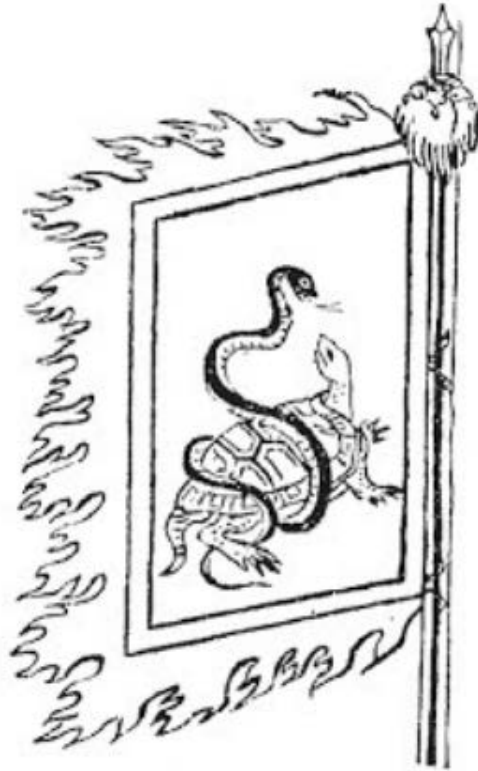


Figure 51: Xuan Wu on a standard. Image from Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.42

The entwined form of the tortoise and snake reflects the complementary Yin and Yang principles as analysed in Figure 56. At the same time, the entwined form of *Xuan Wu* also is reminiscence of the entwined serpentine tails of Nüwa and Fuxi, entwined to symbolize the interaction between both principles, neither one greater than the other. Both the snake and the tortoise are in perpetual interaction, paralleling the complementary relationship of Yin and Yang that exists in the myriad manifested entities in the world, fast and slow, hard and soft, heaven and earth.

According to Tseng's *Picturing the Heaven*, an ancient scholar, Sima Qian, provided a comprehensive description of how the Han people viewed the system of lunar lodges in his *Book of Celestial Offices (Zhou Li)*.²⁰³ It described the sky as an array of bureaucratic offices, divided among five palaces, and imperial subjects were assigned in equal numbers to the Eastern, Western, Southern, and Northern Palaces. Each palace had its governor known as Emperors—the Eastern Palace had the azure dragon,

²⁰³ 周禮

the Western Palace had the white tiger, the Southern palace had the vermillion bird, and the Northern Palace had the dark warrior (*Xuan Wu*). Sima Qian provided an explanation for the imageries of the three cardinal creatures, but he neglected to make any attempt to link the dark warrior with the lunar lodges of the Northern Palace.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, there are no visual examples from the Han that connected the dark warrior with its celestial references, therefore the mystery surrounding this symbol.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, the tortoise and snake are intermediaries of the Taoist deity known as Zhen Wu²⁰⁶ (Figure 57 - Figure 63) and are symbolic of the trigram Li and Kan (the trigrams for fire and water respectively).²⁰⁷ The tortoise and snake association with Fire and Water in this context strengthens our investigations thus far by its correlation to Yin and Yang. According to Stephen Little,²⁰⁸ Zhen Wu was also known as the ‘Perfected Warrior’ and was the ancient symbol of the north and was visualized as the deity of one of the cardinal directions. Later on, he was titled the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven, Primal Sage and Benevolent Majesty (Xuantian yuansheng renwei shangdi).²⁰⁹ Regardless of its anthropomorphic form, the tortoise and snake remains an integral part of the Taoist deity as its symbolic animal, its symbolism of the north further strengthens the position of the black tortoise’s correlation to the north.

²⁰⁴ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.249.

²⁰⁵ We will be relying heavily on its meanings and correlations in the Chinese culture to deduce its symbolism visually. For example, the snake entwining itself around the tortoise symbolizes the dichotomies of shell versus scale, hard versus soft, and fast versus slow, which stem from the concept of Yin and Yang.

²⁰⁶ The original name of Zhen Wu was changed to avoid a taboo on the name of the Song imperial ancestor Zhao Xuanlang. Little, S., & Eichman, S. (2000). *Taoism and the Arts of China*: Art Institute of Chicago, p.291.

²⁰⁷ 馬書田. (2015). 中國諸神大觀 (*Zhongguo zhu shen da guan*). Taiwan: 國家出版社, p.123.

²⁰⁸ See Little, S., & Eichman, S. (2000). *Taoism and the Arts of China*: Art Institute of Chicago for further discussion on the history and the various artworks curated.

²⁰⁹ 玄天元聖仁威玄天上帝



a)



b)



c)



d)

Figure 52: Various depictions of the black tortoise, Xuan Wu. A) Dark Warrior on a decorated brick. First century BCE. 1175 x 37.5 cm. Unearthed in 1974 in Xingping, Shaanxi. Ink Rubbing. Image from Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.255. B) Xuanwu on clay tomb brick. Eastern Han period. Excavated in 1988, Jinqieshan Lunyi Municipality, Shandong. Collection of Linyi Municipal Museum. Image from Giuffrida, N. (2008). Representing the Daoist god Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in late imperial China. (3307180 Ph.D.), University of Kansas, p.265. C) Xuanwu on clay tomb brick. Eastern Jin period, dated 398. 18 x 31.5cm. Nanjing Museum. Image from Giuffrida, N. (2008). Representing the Daoist god Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in late imperial China. (3307180 Ph.D.), University of Kansas, p.267. D) Xuanwu on clay tomb brick. Han period. Yangling Museum, Xi'an. Image from <http://art-and-archaeology.com/china/xian/ym01.html>.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 53: Various images of the black tortoise, Xuan Wu. A) Black tortoise, Marble Relief. Shōsōin, Nara. Image from Rowland, B. (1947). *Chinoiserie in T'ang Art*. *Artibus Asiae*, 10(4), 265-282, p. 267. Tortoise entwined with snake, stone rubbing after Wu Tao-Tzu, renowned painter of Tang dynasty. Image from Cooper, J. C., & Fitzgerald, J. A. (2010). *An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages*. World Wisdom. Tortoise entwined with snake on a sword hilt. Image photographed by author in Taipei.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 54: Various images of the black tortoise, Xuan Wu. A) Xuanwu on foot slab of sarcophagus. Northern Wei period. Early 6th century. 52 x 52cm. Private collection. From Little, S., & Eichman, S. (2000). *Taoism and the Arts of China*: Art Institute of Chicago, p.293. B) Xuanwu on painted coffin panel. Tang period. Excavated in 2002 at Guolimu near Delingha City, Qinghai province. From Giuffrida, N. (2008). *Representing the Daoist god Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in late imperial China*. (3307180 Ph.D.), University of Kansas, p.271. C) Dark warrior. Diameter 18.5cm

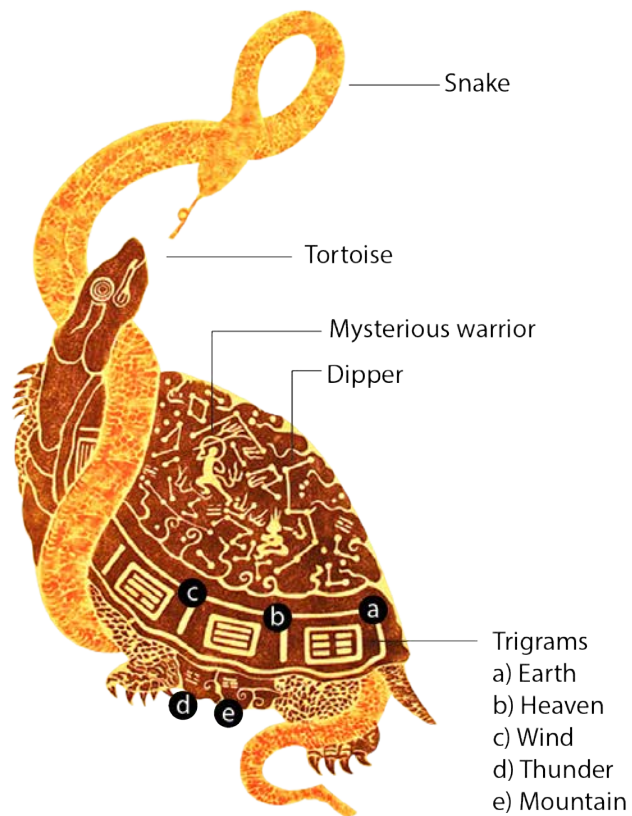


a)



b)

Figure 55: Tortoise and snake made of coral in Beiji Xuantian Shangdi, Liantang Road, Zuoying District, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, . Image photographed by author.



Xuan Wu 玄武

| Tortoise | Snake |
|-------------|---------|
| Yin | Yang |
| Slow | Fast |
| Rigid | Flexile |
| Carapace | Scale |
| Hard | Soft |
| North | |
| Winter | |
| Greater Yin | |
| Moon | |
| Water | |

Figure 56: Visual analysis of Xuan Wu



Figure 57: Zhenwu. Tangut Xia period (1038-1227). Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. 71 x 47cm. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. From Mikhail Piotrovsky, ed. *Lost Empire of the Silk Road: Buddhist from Khara Khoto*. Milan: Thyssen-Bornemisza Foundation, 1993: 24 (Catalogue number 64). Image from: Giuffrida, N. (2008). *Representing the Daoist god Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in late imperial China*. (3307180 Ph.D.), University of Kansas.



Figure 58: Zhenwu and His Court. Yuan dynasty (1260 – 1368). Hanging scroll; ink and colors on silk. 122.7 x 63.3cm. Reiun-ji, Tokyo. Image from: Giuffrida, N. (2008). *Representing the Daoist god Zhenwu, the Perfected Warrior, in late imperial China*. (3307180 Ph.D.), University of Kansas.



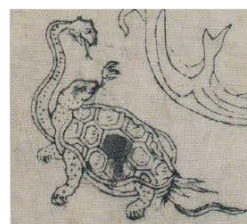
Figure 59: Zhenwu, Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heaven. Ink rubbing of a stele from the Six Harmonies Pagoda, Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. Ming dynasty, Wanli reign, dated 1586. Hanging scroll; ink on paper. 148.6 x 67.6cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. Little, S., & Eichman, S. (2000). Taoism and the Arts of China: Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 60: God of the North, Chinese ink-rubbing. Image from Ball, K. M. (2014). *Animal Motifs in Asian Art: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meanings and Aesthetics*: Dover Publications, p.42.



a)



b)

Figure 61: a) Wanfa jiaozhu 萬法教主 (Zhenwu) from Yushu jing 玉樞經 [Precious Scripture of the Jade Pivot]. Yuan period, dated 1333. Accordion-folded, woodblock-printed book. 33.2 x 12.5 cm (each page). British Library.
真武帝君. 三才圖會. 28.5 x 31cm.



a)

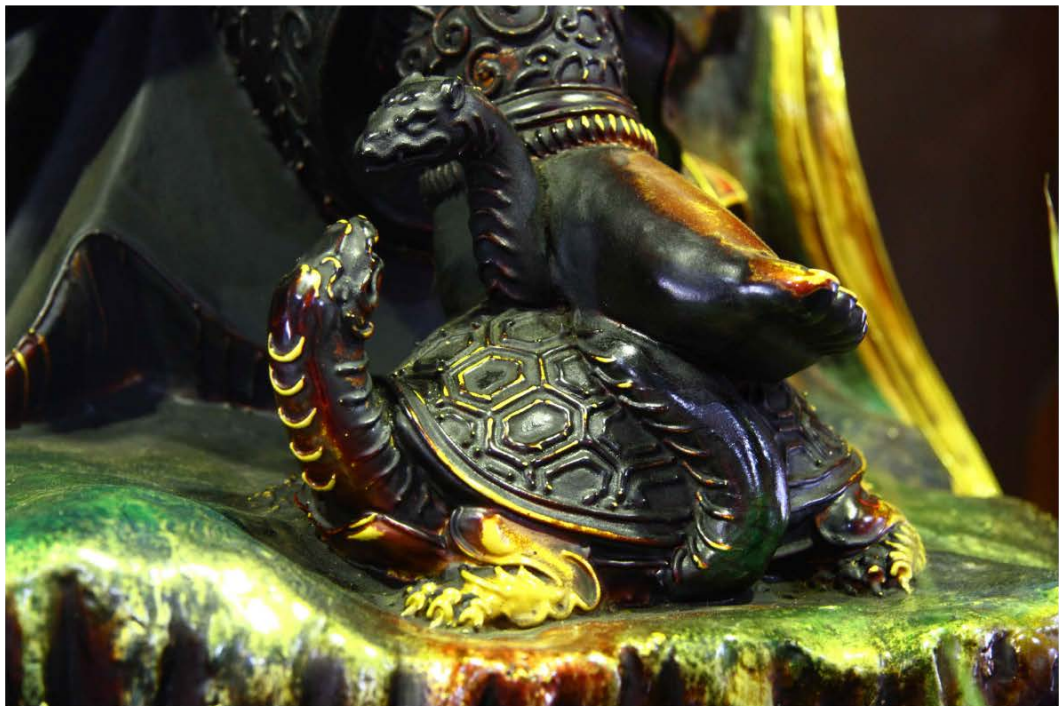


b)

Figure 62: Xuan Tian Beidi Statue above the temple in Beiji Xuantian Shangdi Temple, Liantang Road, Zuoying District. Photographed by author.



a)



b)

Figure 63: Xuan Tian Beidi bronze statue in Beiji Xuantian Shangdi Temple, Liantang Road, Zuoying District.
Photographed by author.

It remains unclear why a snake was added to the tortoise symbol to form the image of the dark warrior, but it became a standard symbol of the north after the reign of Emperor Wu.²¹⁰ As the origin of the tortoise and snake symbol is not within the scope of this thesis, we will examine its visual language and contextualize it with various artworks to prove its relationship with Chinese cosmology. As we have mentioned in the preceding chapter, the tortoise represents the Yin principle and the north. In this chapter, we will examine how the meaning of the tortoise symbol changed when it was combined with another symbol, the snake. Since ancient times, the Northern Dipper (*Ursa Major*) has played a fundamental role in Chinese religion and official life due to its importance in astronomical calculations and its protective powers that ward off evil spirits or bad luck.

As we know, the black tortoise is correlated with the northern sky²¹¹, and the Northern Dipper reinforces this view. Yang Xiong elucidated this idea in *The Grand Mystery (Tai xuan)*²¹²:

As soon as the sun turns south, the myriad things die.
 As soon as the sun turns north, the myriad things are born.
 As soon as the Northern Dipper points north, the myriad things empty out.
 As soon as the Northern Dipper points south, the myriad things fill up.
 The sun in its southward path proceeds toward the right [of the Pole Star], and then returns in a leftward path.
 The Northern Dipper in its southward path proceeds toward the left of [the Pole Star], and then returns in a rightward path.
 Sometimes going left, sometimes going right; sometimes dying, sometimes living.²¹³

In other words, when the sky and the sun cross paths in the south, the Northern Dipper points south and the sun turns north, and consequently, the Yang force is replenished and things are born. On the other hand, when the heavens and the sun cross paths in

²¹⁰ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.255.

²¹¹ Xu, J. Ancient Chinese constellations. *The Role of Astronomy in Society and Culture, Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union, IAU Symposium, 260*, 107-115.

²¹² 太玄

²¹³ Yang, X., & Sima, G. (1981). *Tai xuan jing: shuo xuan : ji zhu tai xuan : 10 juan*: Taiwan Zhonghua shu ju, p.346-347.

the north, the Yin force is replenished and things die. These opposing celestial movements reinforce the Yin-Yang concept in the natural world. In the Taoist context, the dipper lies in the North, symbolizing the great ultimate (origin); it contains both a beginning and an end, subsuming both the Yin and Yang within it.²¹⁴ The dipper therefore has dual characteristics, including the concept of life and death, as the journey from life to death is akin to the notion of passage or a ‘movement’ from the center outwards. This unfolding of time and the passage from the unitary oneness is echoed in the myth of Pangu and various other similar cosmogonic myths we have covered, where all things manifest from the interaction of Yin and Yang, eventually progress towards death, and ultimately ‘return to the origin’ (*huiyuan*).²¹⁵

According to the observation of Tseng, the image depicting Nüwa and Fuxi appear together with the Northern and Southern Dippers (Figure 64) along with the four cardinal creatures and an ambiguous central figure. The pairing of the dippers with the sun and moon infers the concept of Yin and Yang,²¹⁶ which is reinforced by the fact that they are embraced by Nüwa and Fuxi who represent the female and male qualities respectively. The position of the dippers relative to the two mythical figures is notable—the Northern Dipper is correlated with Yin while the Southern Dipper is correlated with Yang. The Northern Dipper appears beside Fuxi, who is an embodiment of Yang, while the Southern Dipper appears beside Nüwa, who embodies Yin. This principle of exchange can also be observed in the entwined serpentine tails of Nüwa and Fuxi in a version of the myth covered previously. This steady alternation of Yin and Yang can be seen as expanded from the initial imagery to human experience in general. Granet observes that the fundamental aspect of the Yin-Yang concept is ‘the idea of rhythm.’²¹⁷

The meaning of “Two” is foregrounded through the viewpoint of Yin and Yang, the meaning of the tortoise is expanded from its detailed analysis by its juxtaposition with the snake and the bird. From it, we have learned the direction of north belongs to the greater degree of Yin principle, which in opposite to Yang, we also learned that the

²¹⁴ Pregadio, F. (2008). *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*: Routledge, p.224.

²¹⁵ 迴元

²¹⁶ According to the Lamp depicting the Mother Queen of the West flanked by the Sun and Moon is established to symbolize Yang and Yin respectively. <http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/61132>

²¹⁷ A Sonya Ozbey translation of Marcel Granet, (*Chinese Thought*) p.75.

tortoise also symbolized Earth and the manifestation of all things. Through the notion of the “Two” as the interaction of two complementary forces, the Chinese have connected the north as the end and beginning of all things, such as all things die in the winter (death refers to passivity, hence it points to Yin principle) to spur the growth of other things in spring (life refers to activity, hence it points to Yang principle), therefore, the black tortoise is also a symbolic reminder of the impermanence of all things. In Figure 64, we observe the tortoise is placed together with the three other cardinal creatures. Together, the visual language of “two” is expanded to “four” as a representative of temporal space and time which we will proceed to further analyse in the next chapter.

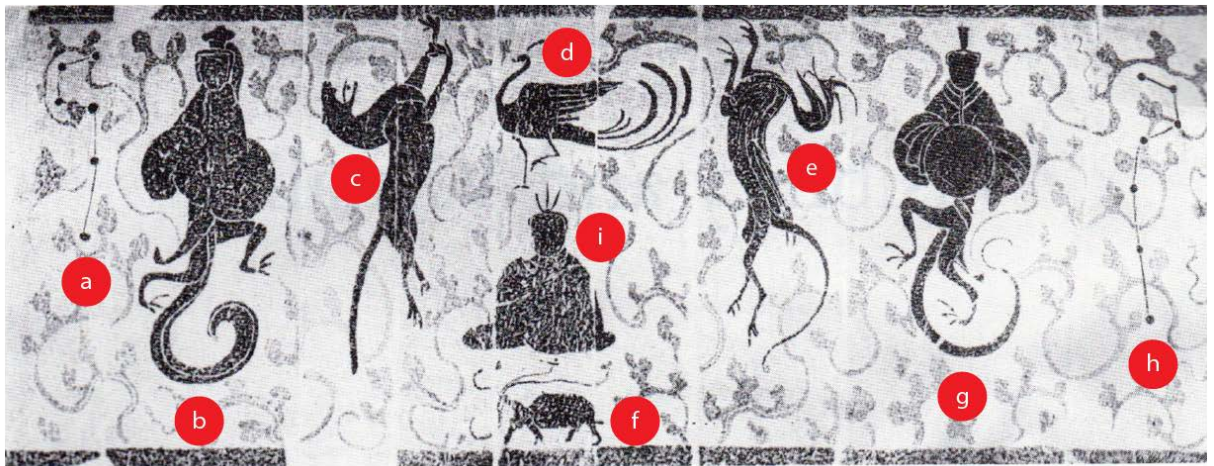


Figure 64: Celestial images. A) The Southern Dipper. B) Nüwa holding the moon. C) White tiger. D) Vermillion bird. E) Azure dragon. F) Black tortoise. G) Fuxi holding the sun. H) Northern Dipper. I) Unknown figure. First to second century CE. Stone carving. 327 x 164 cm. Unearthed in 1988 at Qilangang in Nanyang, Henan. Ink rubbing. Image from Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.360.

Temporal time and space

As we have seen, Taoism perceives the human body as a microcosm that reflects the Dao of the natural world. The existence of Yin and Yang are also evident when represented by the four cardinal creatures, the white tiger (to lesser degree) and the black tortoise (to a greater degree) represent Yin, while the azure dragon (to lesser degree) and the vermillion bird (to a greater degree) represent Yang.²¹⁸ This is reinforced visually by their positions. For example, the vermillion bird is at the top, reinforcing the notions of Yang and heaven. The black tortoise and the drinking tortoise strengthen the tortoise's correlation with the Yin principle. The four cardinal creatures are perceived to be guardians and escorts, due to their ability to ascend and descend to and from heaven,²¹⁹ and to exist inside and outside the human body. Hence, the notions of 'inside' and 'outside' are considered complementary principles of Yin (inner) and Yang (outer) as well. This also alludes to the transcendental man, who have conquered all diseases and thus not affected by mortal ailments, is able to manifest himself at different stages or exist outside of conditioned existence.

The following image is a floral-shaped, patterned bronze plaque discovered in *Wushan* (Figure 65).²²⁰ Although its function is not specified, the motifs on the plaque correspond with the cardinal creatures' symbolic correlations with the four directions, accompanied by various animals and deities. In the middle of the plaque is a *Bi* disc, which, as we have understood, represents heaven. Along with the other various signs of heaven, the disc provides evidence that the four cardinal creatures represent the constellations in the sky and the four cardinal points. The artwork of the plaque alludes to the realm of heaven overlooking the four corners of the earth. The tortoise, however, has two meanings —being at the bottom, it represents the earth (Yin) as well as the northern direction. Directly opposite the black tortoise is the vermillion bird who represents the Yang principle.

²¹⁸ 唐頤. (2015). 圖解易經智慧寶典：精解64卦384爻. Taiwan: 華威國際事業有限公司公瓦, p.47.

²¹⁹ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.261.

²²⁰ 巫山



Figure 65: Bronze plaque depicting the four cardinal creatures. Second to early third century BCE. Gilt bronze. 40 x 40 cm. Discovered in 1982 in Wushan, Sichuan. Drawing. Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.201.

Both animals are in the natural world, the black tortoise being the closest to the earth and the vermillion bird nearest to the sky. Above the vermillion bird is a seated figure identified as the Mother Queen of the West.²²¹ Hence, the plaque forms a cosmic map that can to guide mankind to heaven in the afterlife.²²² This claim is reinforced by the presence of the Mother Queen of the West, who is believed to reside in the land of the immortals, between the Kunlun mountains and heaven, together with the cardinal custodians who move between earth and heaven to assist those who wish to ascend to heaven after death. Another object (Figure 66) pertaining to the subject of the Mother

²²¹ Tseng, L. L. (2011). *PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA*: Harvard University Press, p.261.

²²² Ibid, p.200.

Queen of the West is observed to rest upon a tortoise. As we have observed, the role of the Mother Queen was to guide mankind, while the tortoise, on the other hand, is situated at the bottom, supporting Heaven and the myriad entities in between. We can infer from this that the tortoise's role does indeed symbolize Yin as well as the Earth and the myriad 'fixed' form.



Figure 66: Lamp Representing the Realm of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu) supported on a tortoise. 1st–2nd century C.E. Red earthenware with traces of pigment. 98.11 x 53.66 cm (38 5/8 x 21 1/8 in.). Image from <http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/61132>

Therefore, the presence of the four cardinal creatures strongly suggests that their role as a cosmic messenger and guide and thereby a cosmic map evident in Figure 67. As we have found out that the origin of the four cardinal creatures symbolizes the four quarters of Earth; then within the context of the Heaven, it refers to the four quadrants in the sky as well as the constellations. Therefore, the image stronger infers that the four cardinal creatures functions as guardians and also as a guide.

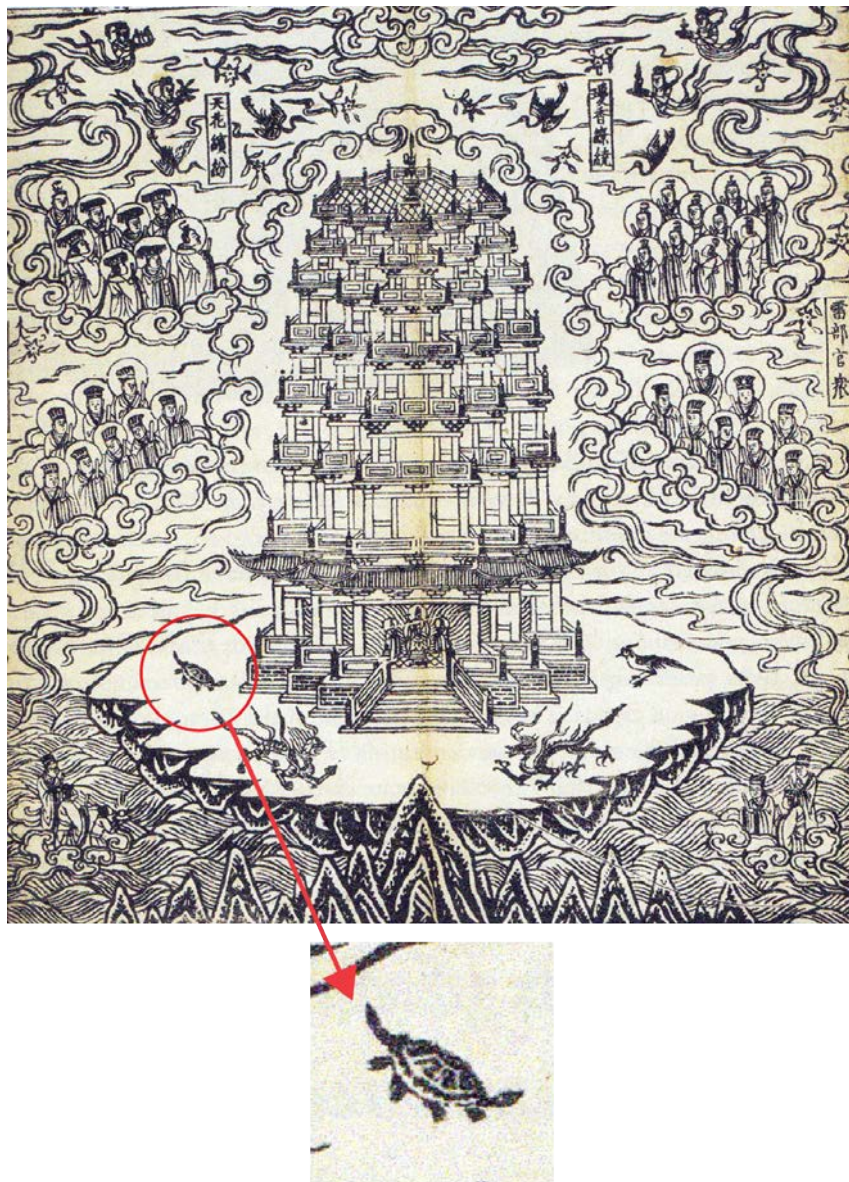


Figure 67: Illustration of the Taoist Heaven, from the Previous Scripture of the Jade Pivot, detail. Yuan – Ming dynasty, ca. fourteenth to fifteenth century. Woodblock print. Ink on paper. Image from Huang, S. S. (2012). *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Harvard University Asia Center, p.101.

The floral design (Figure 65), when simplified, depicts the pattern of the cosmogonic process and the ternary (Figure 68)²²³, discussed by Guenon in *The Great Triad*. The first type of the ternary is a triangle whose apex²²⁴ corresponds to the Mother Queen of the West (Great Ultimate). Together with the vermillion bird, they produce two complementary terms. Also, the azure dragon and the white tiger represent Yang and Yin respectively. This first ternary (Figure 68a), according to Guénon, was formed by the Great Ultimate (Taiji), which produced Heaven (Tian) and Earth (Di), and by extension, the Yang and Yin principles respectively. This was followed by a second ternary (Figure 68b), an inverted triangle, which produced a third member, the result of the union between Yin and Yang, known as the mediator or Mankind. Therefore, according to the ternaries elucidated above, we have come to understand the process of cosmogony and by extension, a “cosmic map”.

²²³ Rene Guénon defines the great triad “heaven-earth-man” as ‘ternaries’. He then proceeds to differentiate ‘ternary’ with the Christian ‘trinity’ and the Hindu *Trimurti* and asserts that the only similarity shared by all three examples is the three divine aspects. Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad*: Quinta Essentia, p.9.

²²⁴ Rene Guénon claims that the two terms proceed from a single principle, which is referred to as the Great Ultimate, also known as the “higher principle” which transcends Heaven and Earth.

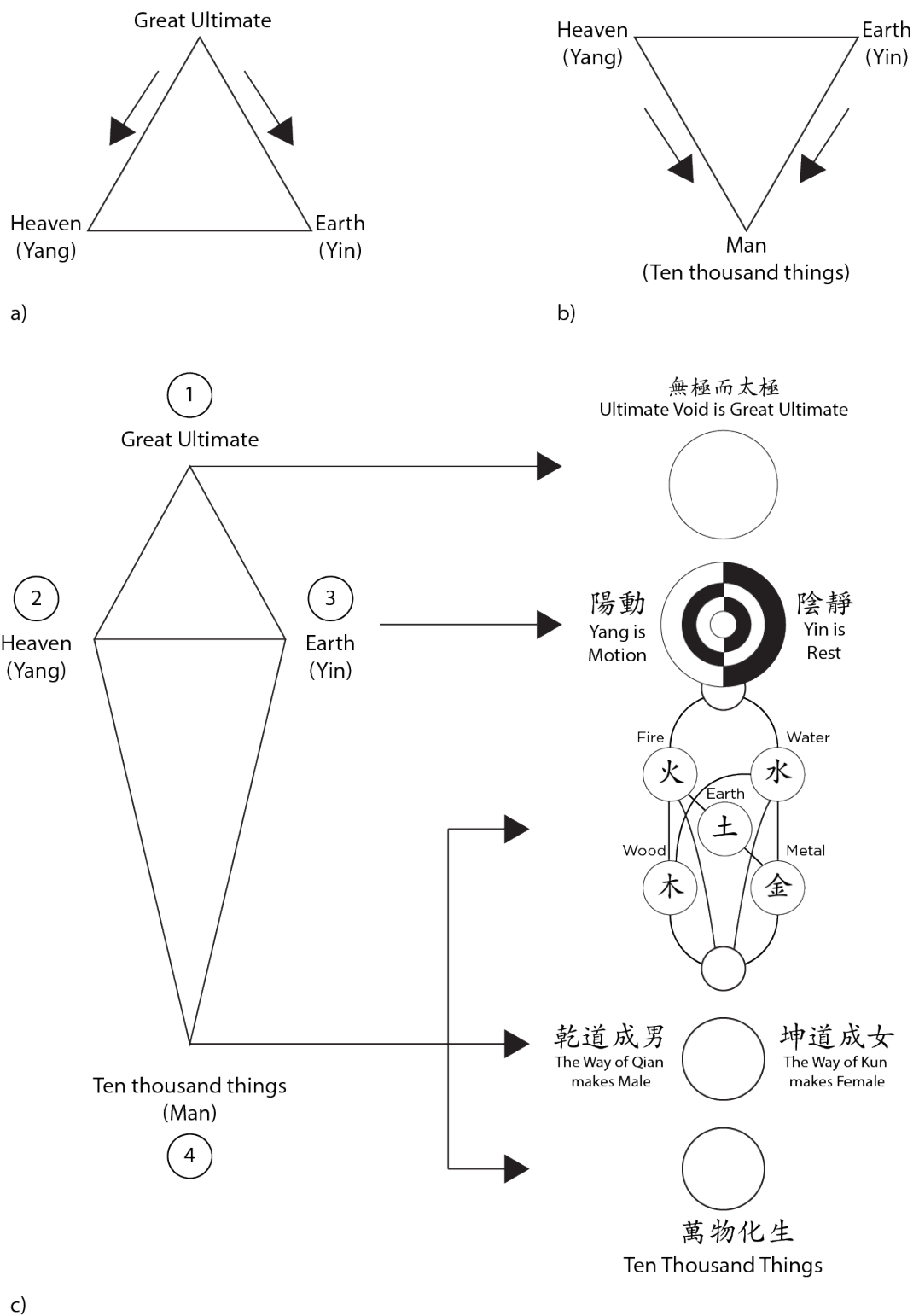


Figure 68: René Guénon's model of the ternary and quaternary, correlated with Chinese cosmology. a) The first ternary where the Great Ultimate generated the two poles, Yin and Yang, Heaven and Earth.

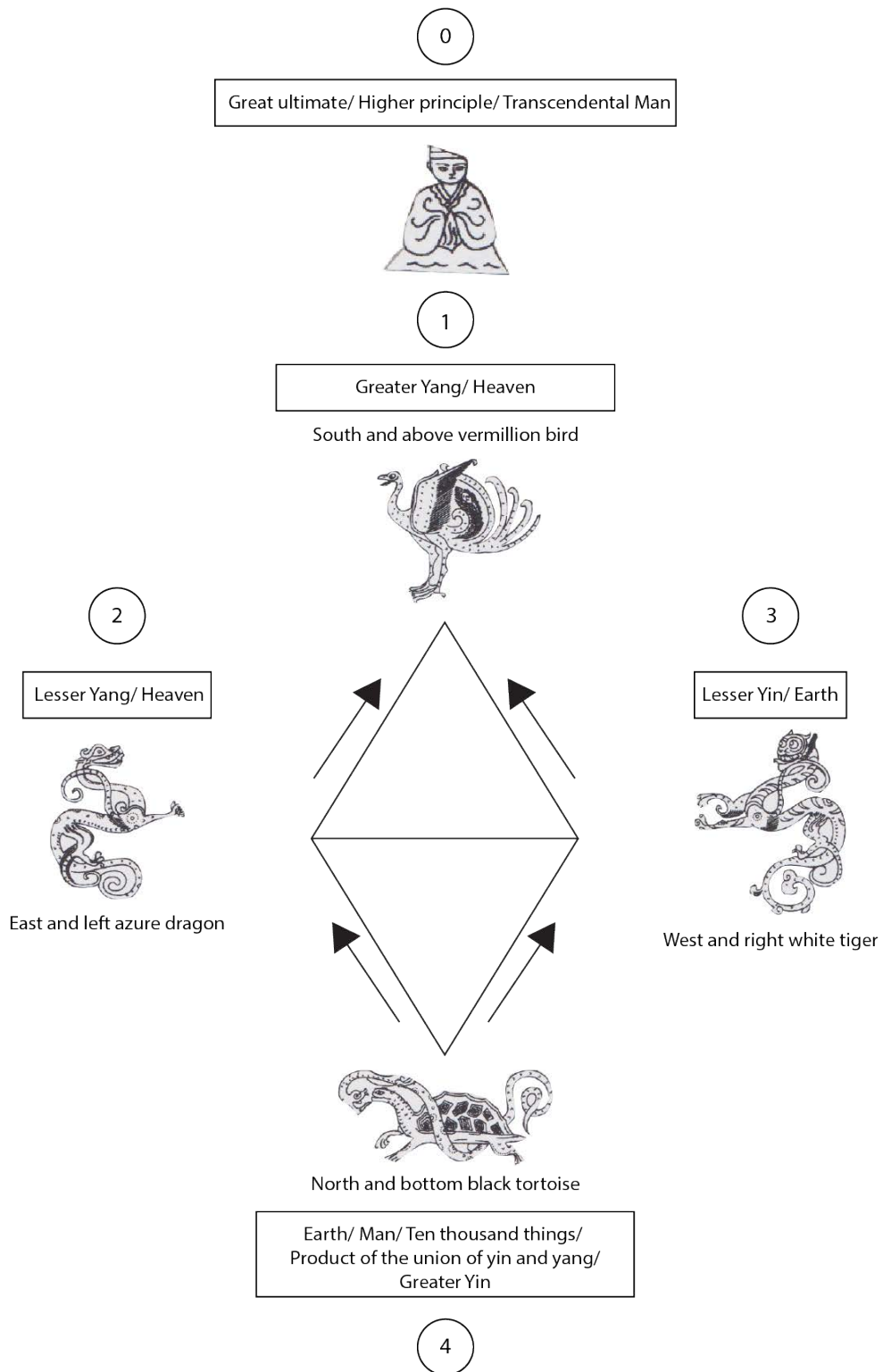


Figure 69: Analysis of the bronze plaque and the correlation of the circle and the square with Heaven and Earth.

According to Figure 69, the black tortoise could be a symbolic representation of the union of Yin and Yang, as it is situated at the bottom of the image, symbolizing the ten

thousand things of the manifested world. This view is reinforced by Guénon's observation that Yin and Yang are both considered "pure states"; he correlates Yang with the Essence and 'pure act', and Yin with the Substance and 'pure potency'. Together, they are two poles of universal manifestation and are in all manifested things: "there is no yang without yin and no yin without yang, for their nature partakes simultaneously in both Heaven and Earth."²²⁵ In other words, Yin and Yang both pervades within every entity in the world.

To further substantiate the tortoise as a symbol of Yin and Yang and as a representation of the support of the manifested world, the presence of the four cardinal creatures drawn on a Taoist talisman (Figure 70) and on the façade of a tomb (Figure 71) must be observed. The black tortoise is positioned below, and although the context and function of the talisman is not known, we can infer that either the tortoise or the bird functions as the starting point.²²⁶ Starting with the bird from the top invokes a metaphysical concept and, as we move down, the 'non-acting' characteristic of Heaven increases the passivity of Earth which is, as we have briefly mentioned before, a plane of support for the descending celestial influences. Hence, this is a process of evoking the 'metaphysical' in the manifested realm, with Earth being the plane of resistance against descending celestial forces.²²⁷

This chapter questions the way the four cardinal creatures is viewed by traditional means as the guardians of the four cardinal directions. If we turned the whole view in a vertical orientation, each of the symbols communicates a different meaning, it becomes a cosmogonic process and this is further substantiated by Guénon's model of the ternary; the great ultimate generates the two complementary Yin and Yang, which proceeds to generate the myriad things, which is symbolized by the black tortoise as a result of the union of the two poles. In the next section, we will further our study on the four cardinal creatures on bronze mirrors.

²²⁵ Guénon, R. (1991). *The great triad: Quinta Essentia*, p.27.

²²⁶ It is my own interpretation living in the temple that the function of talisman in general is to evoke the aid of the higher power. Therefore, the black tortoise represents the myriad manifested entities including the Taoist priest to 'invite' the higher power down to Earth, which is the act of manifesting the sacred; from formless to a fixed form.

²²⁷ Ibid, p.21.

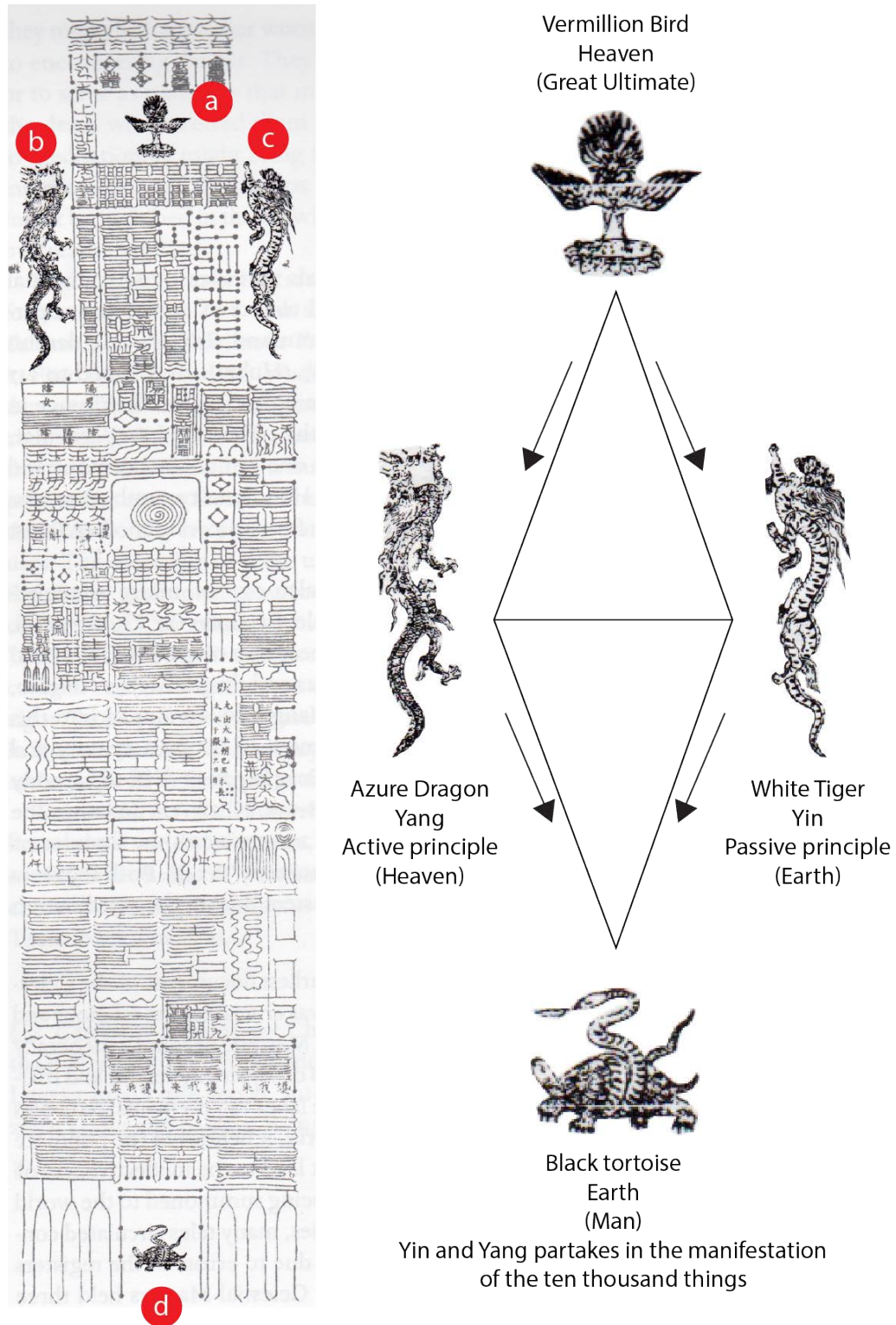


Figure 70: Taoist talisman with the four cardinal creatures. The black tortoise is at the bottom as support. Image from Pregadio, F. (2008). *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*: Routledge, p.40.

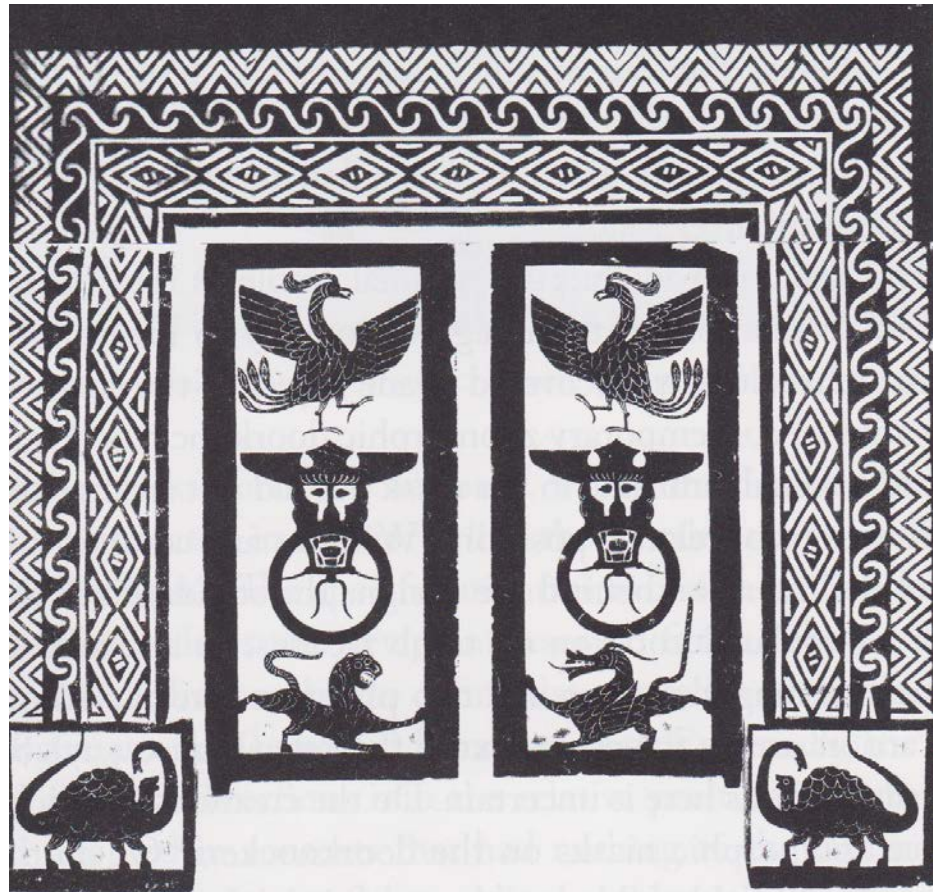


Figure 71: Cardinal emblems on the façade of a tomb. Second century CE. Stone carving. 180 x 163cm. Unearthed in 1951, Housijiagou in Suide, Shaanxi. Shaanxi. Tseng, L. L. (2011). Image from: PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA: Harvard University Press, p. 262.

Bronze Mirrors

Bronze mirrors inscribed with the four cardinal creatures can be viewed as representations of the typology of the quaternary, temporal space, and the Chinese cosmogonic process. Hence, the bronze mirrors included in this thesis will be ones inscribed with the black tortoise, a ‘visual anchor’, along with other three cardinal creatures. Here, the black tortoise is the representation of the greater Yin principle, the northern direction, and winter.

Schuyler Cammann’s *The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns* provides a comprehensive analysis about the use and meaning of the bronze mirror. He shows the influence of the Han cosmographical tradition on the bronze mirrors by extrapolating the meaning of the four directions. He furthers the analysis by correlating the Taoist idea of Yin and Yang, heaven and earth, etc. Furthermore, he observes that the meanings of the bronze mirrors must have been obvious to the artisans and their patrons in their day but that “it takes more than a casual glance to decipher them today.”

Although there are numerous types of bronze mirrors, their essential design consists of a large square around a central boss (Figure 72 - Figure 74), though some lack the square (Figure 75). The four sides of the square correspond to the four cardinal points, which correspond to the four directions of space. The four cardinal creatures represent both temporal space and celestial constellations, establishing Man’s position on Earth. As Stephen Little points out in *Taoism and the Arts of China*, the designs on the back of the bronze mirrors represent several levels of order in the structure of the universe.²²⁸ Apart from vanity reasons and as looking glasses, the function of the bronze mirrors produced from the late Zhou through Tang dynasty was primarily used for ritual and magic.²²⁹ Cammann asserts through comparative materials found in Chinese literature and arts, it is possible to decipher the less obvious ones.²³⁰ We have deepened our understanding of the entwined form of the black tortoise through Guénon’s model of the quaternary as a method of comparing materials.

²²⁸ Little, S., & Eichman, S. (2000). *Taoism and the Arts of China*: Art Institute of Chicago. P.141.

²²⁹ Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, xix(1), p.45.

²³⁰ Ibid, p.46.

The bronze mirror is arranged in a concentric outward design (Figure 76). Starting with the grotesquely large central boss is a symbolic representation of the center of the world (Figure 76a) and the dominating element of the universe,²³¹ it is also the symbolic meaning of the Great Ultimate.²³² It conforms with the idea of the center of the world²³³ that has a universal axis (the axis mundi) around which the ten thousand things exist. For example, the central square around the boss is similar to the design of the Ming Tang, as the circle and square represent the communion between Heaven and Man on Earth. Surrounding the central boss are twelve 'dots' and in between the dots are the twelve characters that symbolise the double-hours of the day represented by the Chinese zodiacs (Figure 76b). At the same time, it also represents the successive days, month as well as years in a sixty-year cycle. The black tortoise's appearance is observed to be depicted in (Figure 76c), hence we can deduce where it is depicted belongs to the Northern sector. Together with the center, they collectively represent the 'five squares' of space (*wu fang*)²³⁴ (Figure 76d).²³⁵ The exploded view (Figure 77) shows how the shapes are reminiscent of the shape of the tortoise, with the domed-shaped boss symbolizing the shell, and the flat surface symbolizing the plastron of the tortoise.

Therefore, the central boss being the Great Ultimate, the next step of the cosmogonic process as we have covered is Yin and Yang. Therefore, the circular form and the square in the middle strongly suggest the symbol of Heaven and Earth. Furthermore, according to the Yinyang thought, water and fire correlates to north and south respectively. Hence, we can deduce that the cosmogonic process started from the great ultimate and goes through the southern direction and moves downwards towards north, which is Earth.

²³¹ Ibid.,

²³² Williams, C. A. S. (2006). *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs: A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism in Chinese Art Through the Ages*: Tuttle Publishing, p.271.

²³³ For further discussions of the center of the world, see Eliade, M. (1961). *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*: Princeton University Press, p.41.

²³⁴ 五方, the five squares (North, South, East, West and Center).

²³⁵ Schuyler Cammann observes that the enormous boss is a distinctive characteristic of Later Han mirrors in general. Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, xix(1), p.47.

The concentric rings of certain types of bronze mirrors contain the Twelve Earthly Branches (Chinese zodiac signs) that represent the time of day, the twelve months, and the five elements. In Figure 78, the four cardinal creatures symbolize the seasonal cycles. The calendric ring of the bronze mirrors is also related to the cosmic flux of Yin and Yang. Hence, the shape of the bronze mirrors reflects the totality of the manifestations and cycles of the natural world.

The functional role of the image of the black tortoise on the bronze mirror is a visual indicator of the multilayered levels of meaning and correlations. The black tortoise as a symbol of Yin and Yang refers to a transitional point in winter, where all things become passive (Yin), to spring, where there is a subsequent proliferation of activity (Yang). On the other hand, most literatures views the bronze mirrors as a one-dimensional plane and only mentions its existence as a symbolic representation of the universe and the great ultimate, but did not mention how.²³⁶ For this, we have illustrated a diagram depicting the bronze mirror from the side view to validate. In the next section, we will examine how the cardinal creatures are applied in the practice of Feng Shui.

²³⁶ 張錯/著, A. Y. 協. (2015). *Bronze Luminescence: Bronze Mirror Collections from the Present-Past Dwelling*: 藝術家; Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, xix(1), 45 – 63; Welch, P. B. (2008). *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*: Tuttle Publishing.



Figure 72: TLV mirror. First century BCE to first century CE. Print.



a)



b)



c)



d)

Figure 73: Bronze mirror with a square around the central boss. Bronze mirror with a square around the central boss typology. A) TLV mirror in New Han dynasty by Wang Mang, The Second year of Xinfeng Reign, Xin dynasty, 15AD. Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). 21cm. B) TLV Mirror with 4 divine beasts and “ri you xi” inscriptions. Han dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD). 19.5cm. C) Han TLV Mirror with spiritual animals. D) Han TLV with four spiritual beasts mirror. Image from: 張錯/著, A. Y. 協. (2015). *Bronze Luminescence: Bronze Mirror Collections from the Present-Past Dwelling*: 藝術家. A) p.98. B) p.87 C) p.107. D) p.147.

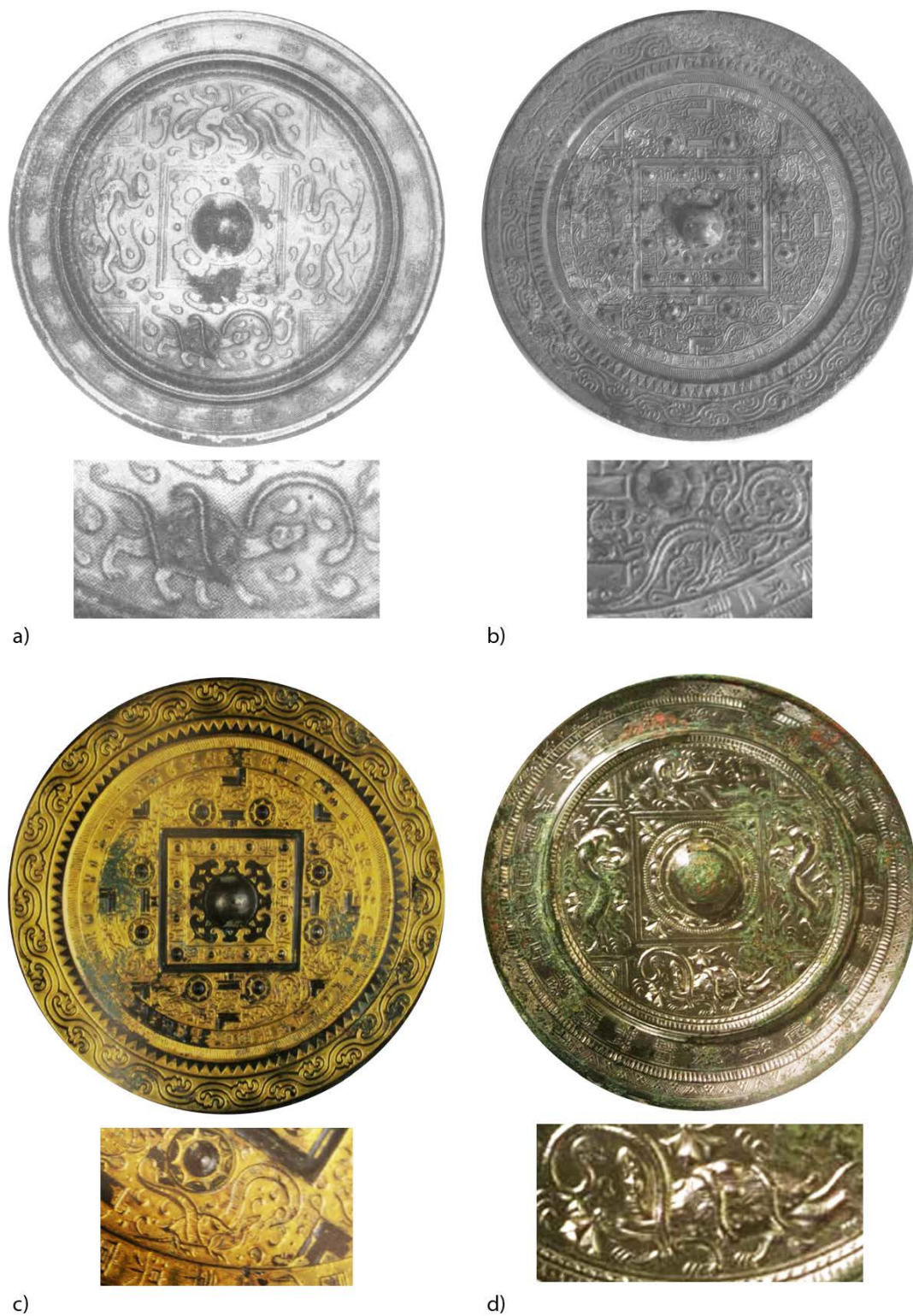


Figure 74: Bronze mirror with a square around the central boss. A) Image from Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, xix(1), 45 – 63, XI. B) Image from Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, xix(1), 45 – 63, X. C) Gilt bronze mirror with TLV patterns. Western Han period (206 BCE-8 CE). 21.5 cm. Tenri Sankokan Museum, Nara. From *Sekai bijutsu daizenshu* 世界美術大全集 [New History of World Art], vol. 2. Tokyo: Shôgakkan, 1997-2001: 185. D) Bronze mirror. Tang period, dated 650. Kurokawa Institute of Ancient Cultures, Nishinomiya, Hyogo. From *Sekai bijutsu daizenshu* 世界美術大全集 [New History of World Art], vol. 4. Tokyo: Shôgakkan, 1997-2001: 238



a)



b)

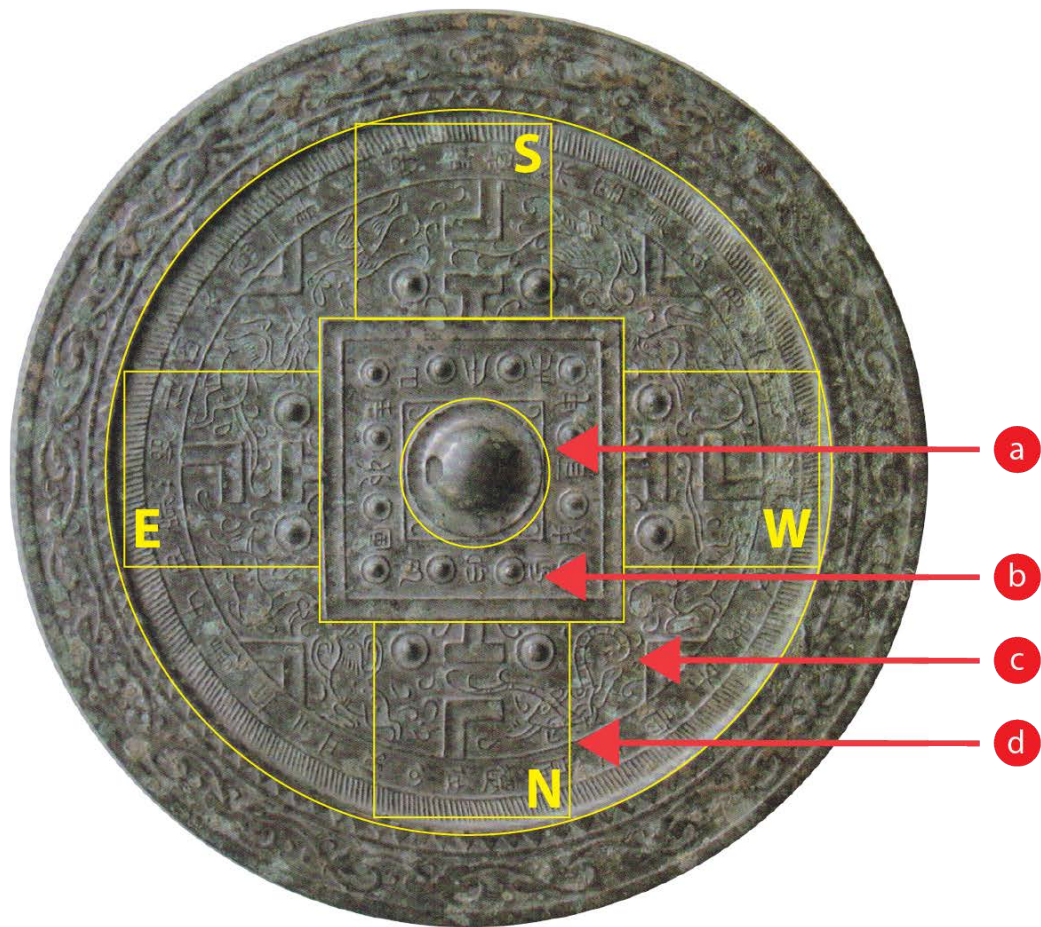


c)



d)

Figure 75: Bronze mirror with the black tortoise and without a central square. A) Mirror with “san-yang” inscriptions and 4 nipples, 4 divine beasts. B) Four divine beast. Image from <http://en.chnmuseum.cn/default.aspx>. C) Image from Cammann, S. (1953). The Symbolism in Chinese Mirror Patterns. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, XIV. D) Han four deities with twelve zodiac beasts mirror. Image from 張錯/著, A. Y. 協. (2015). *Bronze Luminescence: Bronze Mirror Collections from the Present-Past Dwelling*: 藝術家, p.103.



a) Central boss

b) Twelve Chinese zodiacs

c) Black tortoise

d) Five squares (五方)

Figure 76: Analysis of a bronze mirror with a square around the central boss, and its correlation with the structure of the cosmos.

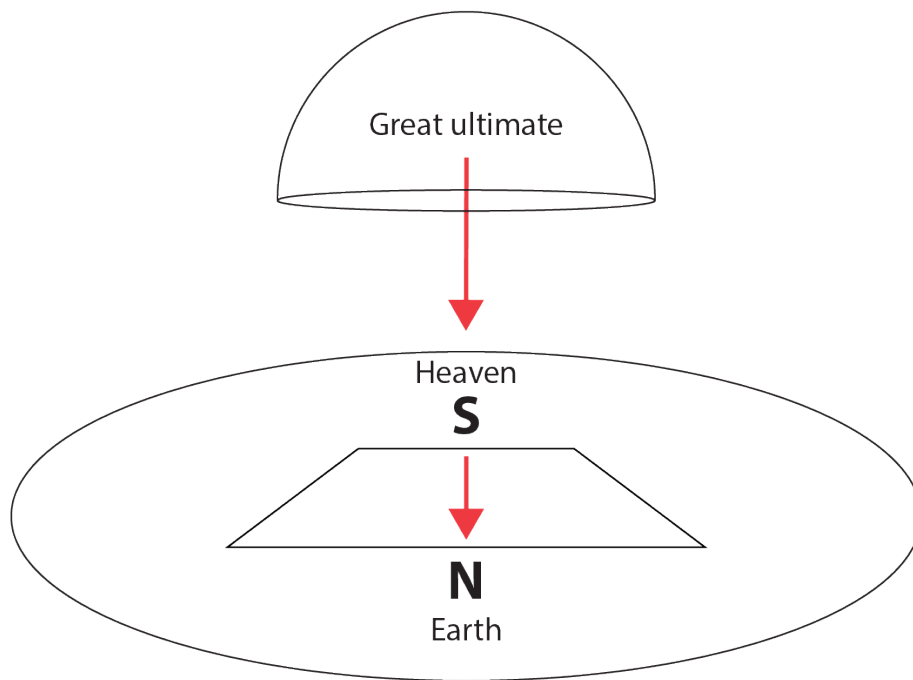


Figure 77: Exploded view of the bronze mirror analysis in Figure 76. Central boss as the Great ultimate, circle and square corresponds to Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang, South and North.

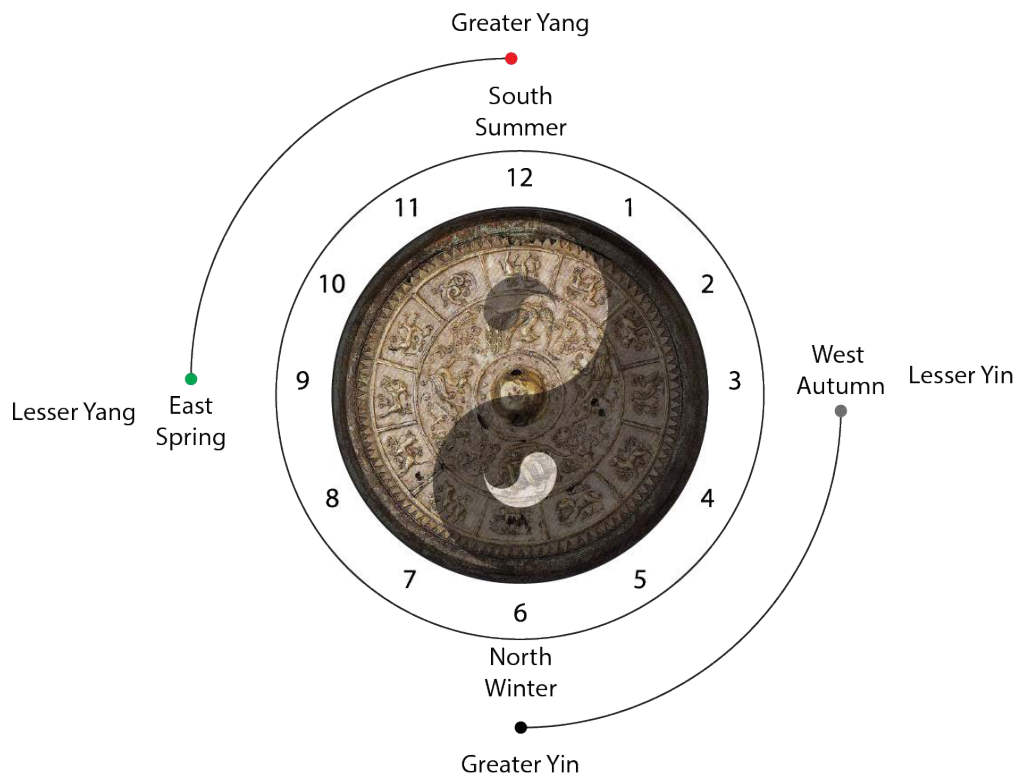


Figure 78: Cyclical time and seasons, macrocosmic and microcosmic applications of the Yin/Yang symbol.

Feng Shui Practice

The four cardinal creatures are symbols of things in both the celestial and terrestrial realms, for example the constellations and cardinal directions. In the practice of Feng Shui,²³⁷ this concept of parallelism²³⁸ is present in Chinese architecture and in the human body. We covered the belief that the celestial sphere consists of twenty-eight mansions, divided into four heavenly quadrants which are symbolized by the four cardinal creatures. In Feng Shui, the belief correlates the celestial sphere with the world under heaven. Territory on earth is organized in a similar way as the four quadrants in the celestial sphere.²³⁹ When facing south, a human dwelling follows the four cardinal directions—the left or east corresponds with the azure dragon, the right or west corresponds with the white tiger, the back or north corresponds with the black tortoise, and the front or south corresponds with the vermilion bird.

According to the Feng Shui text quoted by Lee, he observes two distinct ways to discern the black tortoise. The first is stipulated that the black tortoise must radiate from the backbone of the world. The main dragon, which is the oncoming backbone of the world to the site, is usually described as the form of the range of mountain located behind the Feng Shui spot.²⁴⁰

Feng Shui practitioners try to determine the ‘Feng Shui’ spot (Figure 80, Figure 81), using the four cardinal creatures as geographic reference points. The geological formation of the black tortoise is usually a high solid support at the back of the Feng Shui spot, which is usually a mountain, unmovable and passive. Directly opposite is

²³⁷ 风水.

²³⁸ Definition of parallelism: “Metaphysics. The doctrine that mental and bodily processes are concomitant, each varying with variation of the other, but that there is no causal relation of interaction between the two.” parallelism. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. from Dictionary.com website <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/parallelism>. The Chinese concept of parallelism has been called “associative thinking,” “coordinative thinking,” “system of correspondence.” In this sense, we see the application of the cardinal directions and its varying degrees of correlation such as directions and elements; Feng Shui scholars such as Lee recognized that the theories and practices of Feng Shui work in both macrocosm and microcosm. In Feng Shui, a building is considered an architectural as well as a cosmic structure. Mak, M. Y., & Ng, S. T. (2008). Feng shui: an alternative framework for complexity in design. *Architectural Engineering and Design Management*, 4(1), p.61; Lee, S. H. (1986). *FENG-SHUI: ITS CONTEXT AND MEANING (CHINA)*. (8607264 Ph.D.), Cornell University, p.68.

²³⁹ Lee, S. H. (1986). *FENG-SHUI: ITS CONTEXT AND MEANING (CHINA)*. (8607264 Ph.D.), Cornell University, p.177.

²⁴⁰ The Feng Shui spot is also called Ming Tang (Bright Court or Cosmic Court), while the space just in front of the Feng Shui spot is called Inner Ming Tang. While the outside of the Inner Ming Tang is called Outer Ming Tang. In the “Yue Ling” (Ordinances of the Month) section of the Book of Rites, the symbolism of the Ming Tang is stated in a sense as a model of the universe. The emperor as a symbolic representation of Man, clad in the robes of color appropriate to the season, faced the proper direction and carried out the ritual acts to signify the unity of Heaven and Earth in the cosmic pattern. Therefore the courtyard in the house and in front of the main hall of the palace is the space of Inner Ming Tang. The outer courtyard of the house and the big open space in the front of the inner palace front gate are equivalent to the Outer Ming Tang. Lee, S. H. (1986). *FENG-SHUI: ITS CONTEXT AND MEANING (CHINA)*. (8607264 Ph.D.), Cornell University, p.179.

the vermillion bird, usually symbolized by a river, which embodies the active principle. Similar to the bronze mirrors, the Feng Shui model correlates the establishment with the ‘center’ of the cosmos, thus giving Man a higher chance of survival when they live in harmony with the natural environment. Hence, the bronze mirrors are a symbolic representation of time and space on a smaller scale; the Chinese use this symbolic system for a larger environment to determine the Feng Shui spot, which is a symbolic representation of the universal axis and the center of the world.

From the viewpoint of the “Four”, it refers to the four cardinal creatures and the center, which represents wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The five elements symbolized the myriad manifestations which all things in our world are categorized. The four cardinal creatures together with the center also represent them. Through looking at the model of the cardinal creatures from a different viewpoint, we learned that the tortoise symbolized the myriad manifested entities and mankind in the larger context. At the same time, the tortoise’s functioned as a form of support for all manifested things as evident in the visuals as well.

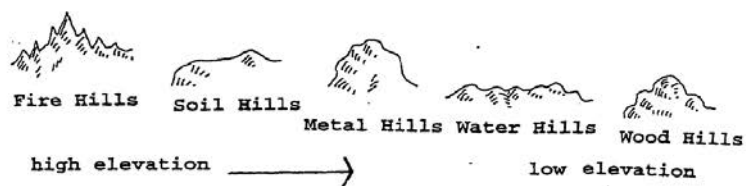


Figure 10. The Five Elements and Mountain/Hill Shapes

Source: Xu, 1997

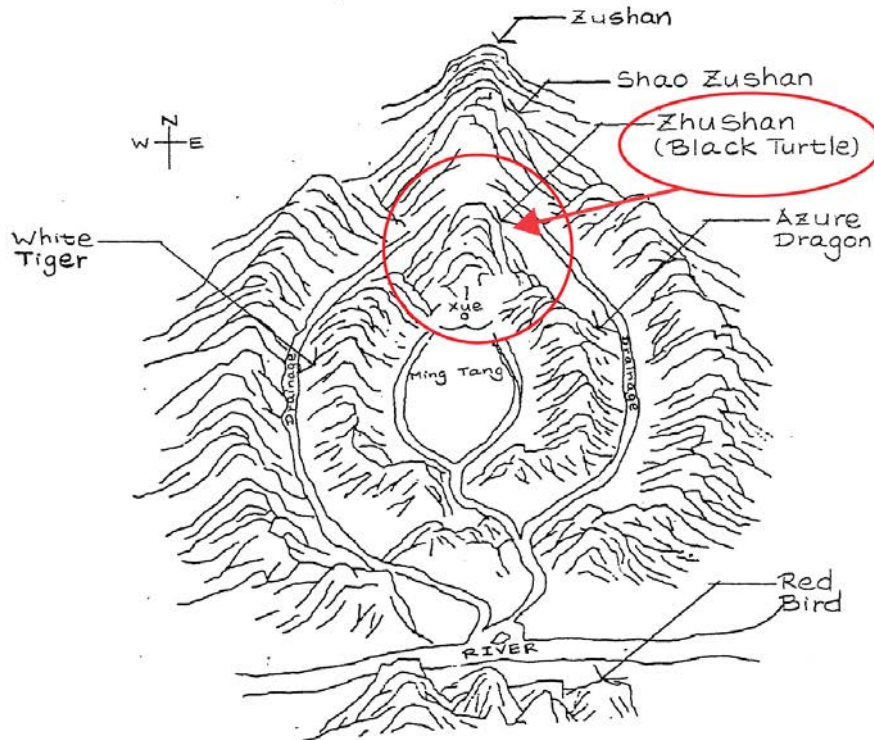


Figure 79: Black tortoise as the mountain behind the Feng Shui spot. Image from Fang, Z. (2000). *Feng shui in site planning and design: A new perspective for sustainable development*. (1401456 M.E.P.), Arizona State University, p.95.

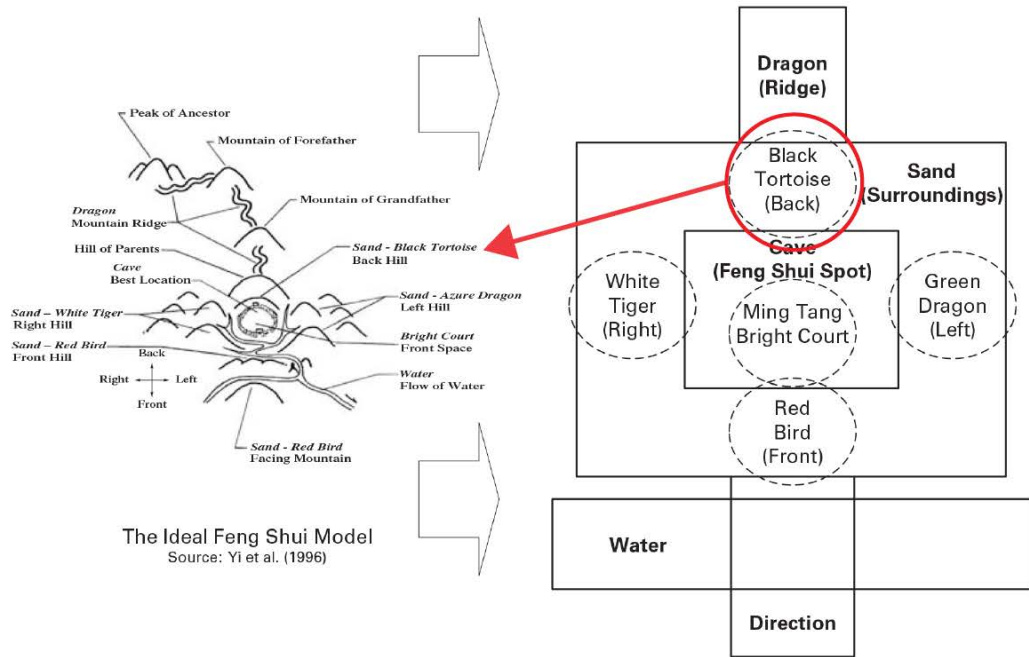


Diagram of the Feng Shui Model

a)

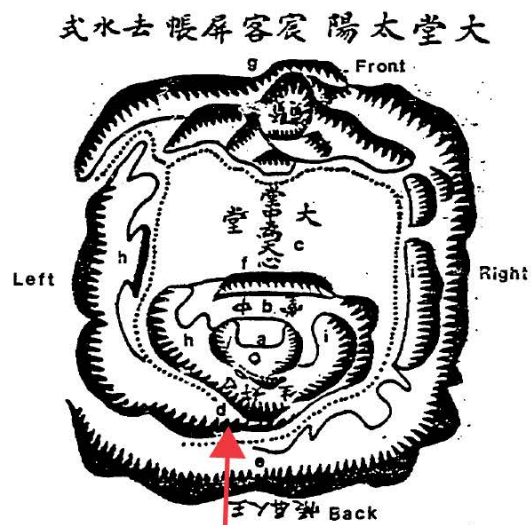


Figure 24: An Example of Ming-t'ang. (a. Feng-shui spot, b. Inner ming-t'ang, c. Outer ming-t'ang, d. Chu-shan [Black Turtle], e. Tsu-shan, f. An-shan, g. Chao-shan [Red Bird], h. Azure Dragon, i. White Tiger.)

b)

Figure 80: Fengshui model with the black tortoise at the back as a symbolic support. The black tortoise as the oncoming mountain behind the Feng Shui spot. Lee, S. H. (1986). *FENG-SHUI: ITS CONTEXT AND MEANING (CHINA)*. (8607264 Ph.D.), Cornell University, p.198.

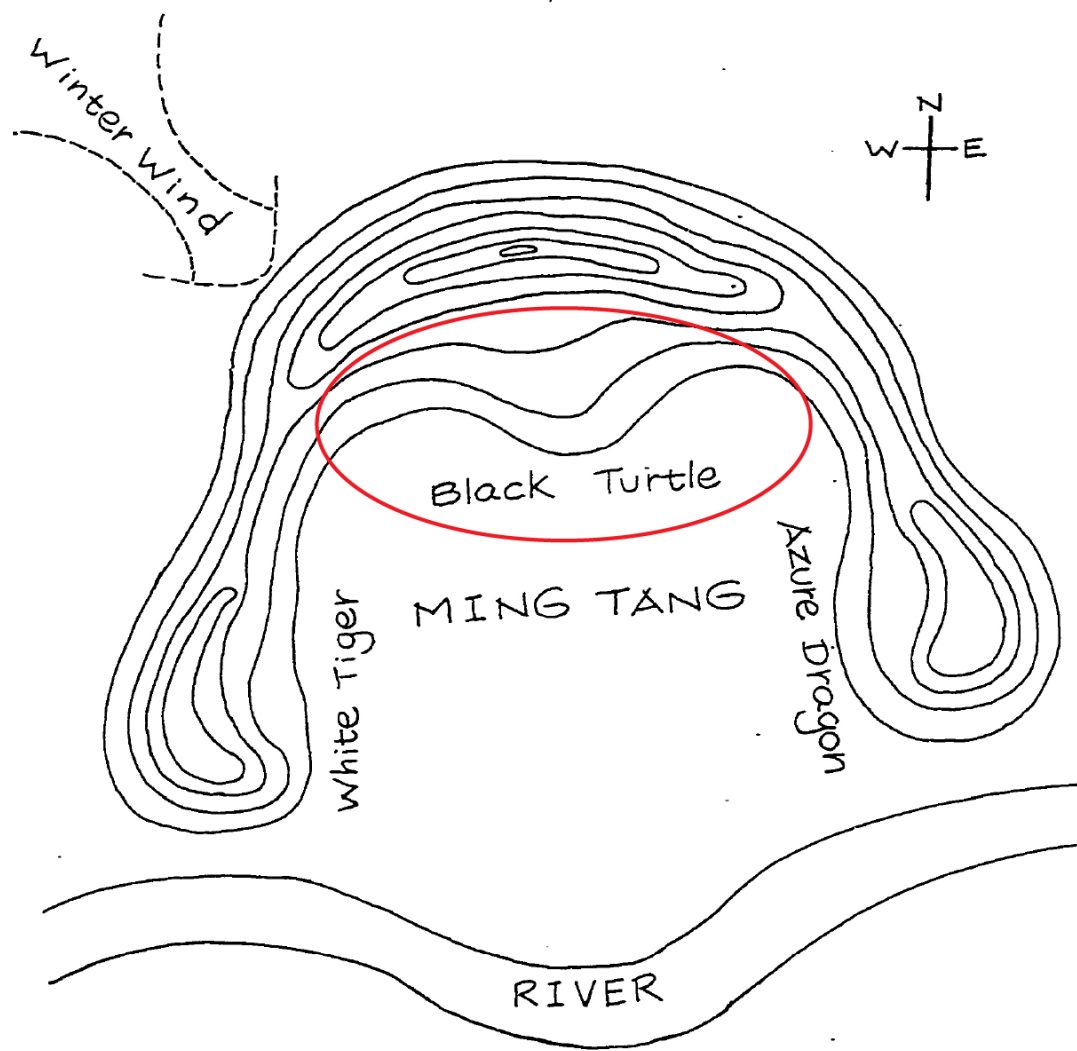
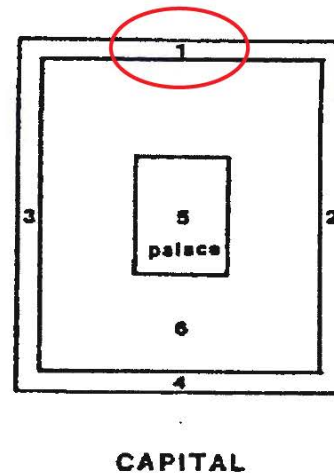
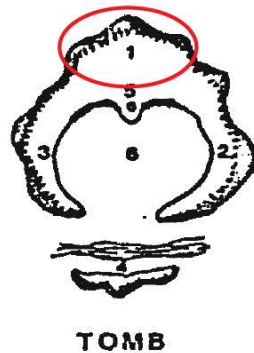
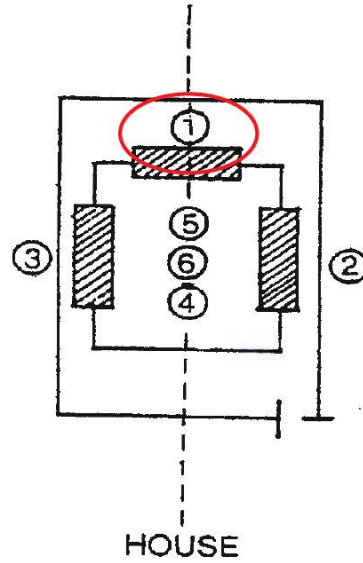
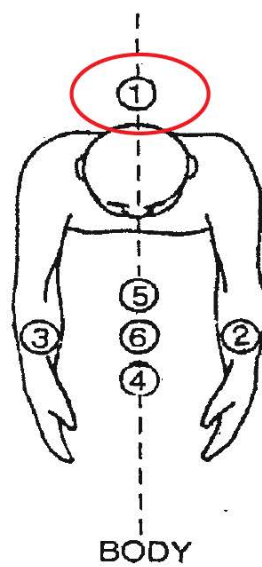


Figure 81: Fengshui model with the black tortoise at the back as a symbolic support. Example of the ancestral mountain behind the Feng Shui spot. Fang, Z. (2000). *Feng shui in site planning and design: A new perspective for sustainable development*. (1401456 M.E.P.), Arizona State University, p.96.



- 1. Black Tortoise
- 4. Red Bird

- 2. Azure Dragon
- 5. Cave

- 3. White Tiger
- 6. Bright Court

Figure 82: Black tortoise as the back support or the North in the 'armchair' ideal Feng Shui model. Image from Yui, M. M. (2004). *Application of Feng shui knowledge to preliminary design evaluation using knowledge-based expert systems approach*. (Ph.D), University of Newcastle, Australia, p.97.

Tortoise symbolism in Singapore

To conclude the study of the metaphysical symbolism of the Chinese tortoise, we will look into our immediate surrounding in Singapore. First, we begin with burial rites and graves. They are prefabricated due to space limitations and as a result, the graves all face a single direction (Figure 83). Hence, Fengshui practitioners, specializing in burial rites, uses the black tortoise (Xuan Wu) or the tortoise-and-snake symbol innovatively as grave markers to symbolize the north-south direction (Figure 84). The symbols of the bird flying south towards Heaven and the tortoise facing the northern side effectively symbolize the north-south, Yin-Yang dichotomy (Figure 85). In other instances, the snake is the primary iconography of the grave marker within the octagon with Chinese characters representing the tortoise as the northern direction (Figure 86).

The symbols of the circle and square were shown to be the prevalent shapes in the bronze mirrors. However, though these forms remained popular in today's Chinese culture, in Singapore, they are present in the Singapore dollar coin. It is an expression of the symbols of the circle and square as it represents the manifestation of the formless circle of Heaven into the fixed form of the manifestation of the octagon shape, a circle that is 'squared' into eight sides which is reminiscent of the eight trigrams which acts as a protection charm. The Singapore dollar coin (Figure 87) contains the eight-sided octagon. Therefore, the symbolism of the whole country holding the 'qian' grants to all Singaporeans safety and protection against malignant forces.

In an island off the coast of Singapore, it is named *Kusu* Island or Palau Kusu, which refers to "Tortoise island". According to the signboard on the island as well as several accounts historical accounts, all of which recounts a giant tortoise transforming itself into an island to provide respite for shipwrecked sailors and passengers as well as miraculously healing ill-stricken passengers who anchored near the island of Kusu.²⁴¹

The notion of prosperity and auspiciousness derived from traditional symbolisms remains prevalent in our contemporary society. The dragon head tortoise is an amalgamation of Dragon God and tortoise (Figure 88, Figure 89) that acts as a charm

²⁴¹ Chia, Jack MengTat. 2009. Managing the Tortoise Island: Tua Pek Kong Temple, pilgrimage, and social change in Pulau Kusu, 1965–2007. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 11(2), p.78.

that wards off negative forces and aids in accumulating wealth and fortune, usually placed facing the main door as the main door is believed to be the home's intake of *Qi*.

From the various case studies covered above, we observe the symbol of the tortoise have a positive connotation in relation to health and longevity. It is precisely this reason, through unforgettable and compelling narrative that its symbolism was able to last through time.

The thesis attempted to demonstrate that metaphysical symbolism can exist in images and words and in both physical and mental phenomena. The methodology of reading images over text-centric research may help expand our appreciation of historic artifacts and myths to a deeper level, even to a supra-empirical level. Symbols are images and are vessels of meaning that have been passed down through history, and some of their meanings may have been lost in time. Therefore, by returning to our roots to a time when images were the means for communication, we may gain substantial insights and a holistic understanding of our own respective cultures and traditions.

On the other hand, we have deepened our knowledge of the black tortoise and its entwined form through a key comparative studies through Guénon's model of the quaternary of the cosmogonic process – the black tortoise symbolized the myriad manifested entities and were the outcome of the union of Heaven and Earth vis-à-vis Yin and Yang. Therefore, the intertwining of the tortoise and snake symbolized the alternation of Yin and Yang within all manifested things. Through text-to-image, we applied its symbolic meaning on the various examples in the material culture where the tortoise symbol appears. Through this methodology, we are able to discern a recurring pattern pointing towards the process of the cosmogony and from it, the Chinese culture's desire to return to it.

To sum up, this thesis hopes to propel future research to transcend the mono-cultural analysis prevalent in art history as well as Chinese metaphysical symbol of the tortoise and make a poly-cultural comparative study that consolidates as much data as possible about the tortoise in different cultures. Such research will identify the convergence of

ideas concerning the tortoise across different cultures and discover deeper insights into the meanings of artworks and the reason for their creation.



a)



b)

Figure 83: Prefabricated graves. Photograph by author. Choa Chu Kang Cemetery



a)



b)

Figure 84: Choa Chu Kang grave marker, Xuan Wu, tortoise and snake. Photograph by author.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 85: Grave markers in Choa Chu Kang Cemetery. The tortoise and the crane that represents longevity. The crane flies south and tortoise faces backwards to northern side. Photograph by author.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 86: a) Snake tomb marker on an octagonal grave in Choa Chu Kang cemetery. b) “Xuan Wu”, Chinese words on the tomb marker behind the grave. c) “Gui-She” (Tortoise and snake), Chinese words on the tombstone.
Photograph by author.

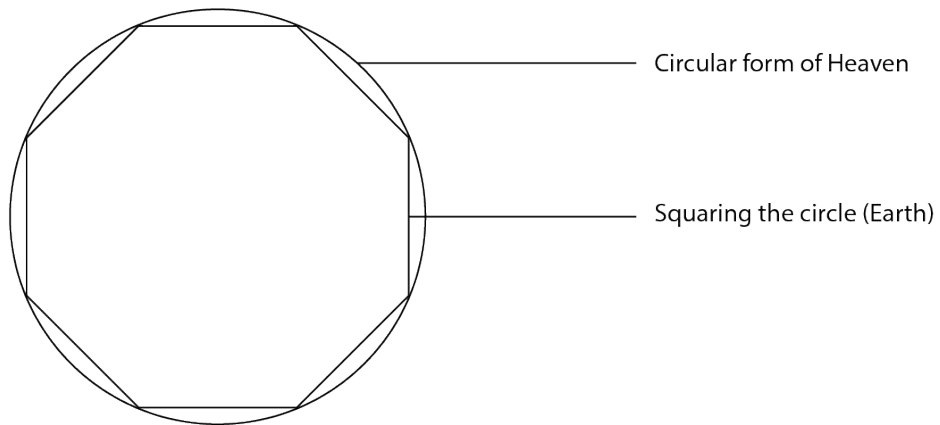


Figure 87: Singapore dollar coin and its correlations with Chinese cosmology.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 88: Dragon Head Tortoise with Eight Trigram and Yinyang symbol. Photograph by author in Singapore tortoise museum, Chinese Garden. Credit to Singapore Tortoise Museum.



a)



b)

Figure 89: Dragon Head Tortoise on ingots. Photograph by author, credit to Way Fengshui for providing artwork.



a)

Figure 90: Four cardinal creatures coin. Photograph by author, credit to Way Fengshui for providing artwork.

Conclusion

The ability to understand images and their visual language was once possessed by our ancestors. This thesis introduced a spectrum of analysis by actively comparing visual images with textual sources. This was achieved by translating the meaning of the textual sources into the multitudinous levels of symbolism concerning the tortoise. By connecting the meanings of images and texts, we have connected that tortoise symbolism reflects the textual meaning visually.

Throughout the investigation of various tortoise depictions in material culture, we can confirm that the tortoise symbol represents the support of the manifestations that exist above it. In the chapter of “One”, we covered the development of Chinese cosmogonic myths and learned the various stages of its manifestations. It showed us the Chinese perceived the world to be divided into nine sections, and from it, the sacred magic square of the Luoshu diagram (can you use the same format all over? In some instances you use lower case and others uppercase). Hence, the tortoise symbolized the image of the center and the world. On the other hand, through its visual counterpart, it supported its position as the Yin principle, by its situation at the bottom of the macro-view of Heaven and Earth within the Nüwa and Fuxi myth. At the same time, the tortoise symbolized the kidney and urinary bladder in the Taoist inner alchemy, together with the drinking tortoise at the base, it further strengthens its symbolic role as a support and also its correlation to water and Earth, which are the associated meanings of Yin principle.

In the “Two”, we proceeded to show how the tortoise embodied this cosmogonic vision of the two complementary forces, Yin and Yang, by making the respective correlations between its round, domed shell and Heaven, and its plastron and the Earth, which support the ideas of the influence of the celestial sphere. Furthermore, we theorized that the use of the tortoise’s shell and plastron as oracle tools was a result of the tortoise’s symbolism of the totality of universal manifestation, enabling the tortoise to function as a conduit and messenger of the universe, as it can ‘exist’ on both Heaven and Earth at the same time. The desire to align with the cosmogonic process of the universe was observed and the tortoise symbolized the polarity of Earth, and its opposite, the Heaven. We have also connected the north as the end and beginning of

all things, such as all things die in the winter (death refers to passivity, hence it points to Yin principle) to spur the growth of other things in spring (life refers to activity, hence it points to Yang principle), therefore, the entwined form of the black tortoise has changed from a focused meaning to a symbolic reminder of the impermanence of all things and the importance of maintaining a balance between the two complementary forces.

In the chapter of “Four”, the meaning of the tortoise evolved from the macro-view of the universe and Yin and Yang. The tortoise in this stage of the cosmogonic stage has become the symbolic support of the myriad entities, its correspondence to the north is even more pronounced. Together with the three other cardinal creatures, the black tortoise meaning becomes a part of the greater whole, symbolizing the winter and greater degree of Yin principle. Furthermore, the four creatures also represents the cyclical passage of time, seasons and month throughout the year. Together with the twelve zodiacs, the meaning of time becomes a dichotomy of macro-to-micro view. Furthermore, we were able to understand a deeper layer of the black tortoise through René Guénon’s model of the quaternary. Through viewing the four cardinal creatures alongside with the Mother Goddess of the West in a vertical model, it strengthens our theory that the black tortoise symbolized the end and beginning of things, from Yin to Yang, which all things then returns back to the source or the “One”.

Through the multitudinous layers, the thesis has attempted to elucidate the metaphysical symbolism of the Chinese tortoise symbol; we observe that it contains many layers of meanings that form a part of a web of interrelationships with other symbols, which is like a mutually reinforcing lattice of meanings. Today, symbolism remains commonplace and is not restricted to existing in historical art objects, as visual language transcends time and space. Therefore, through the application of this methodology of studying the image, we may ultimately reveal the true intentions behind the traditional symbols and finally understand what our predecessors’ attempts to transmit.

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