

# CONTENTS

Introduction: Ordering Chaos Comparatively	1
PART ONE: PRELIMINARY MEANDERS	
1. Soup, Symbol, and Salvation: The Chaos Theme in Chinese and Daoist Tradition	17
PART TWO: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS	
2. "Beginning and Return" in the <i>Daode jing</i>	37
3. Bored to Death: The "Arts of Mr. Hundun" in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	61
4. Chaotic "Order" and Benevolent "Disorder" in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>	90
5. Cosmogony and Conception in the <i>Huainanzi</i> and <i>Liezi</i>	107
PART THREE: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS	
6. Egg, Gourd, and Deluge: Toward a Typology of the Chaos Theme	135
7. Egg, Gourd, and Deluge: The Mythological Prototype of the Chaos Theme	166
PART FOUR: CONCLUDING SPIRALS	
8. The Order of Chaos: Symbolic Aspects of Daoist Mysticism	201
9. Conclusion: The Conundrum of Hundun	216
APPENDIX: Related Tales	245
BIBLIOGRAPHY	257
INDEX	273



# INTRODUCTION

## Ordering Chaos Comparatively

It is a queer enterprise, this attempt to determine  
the nature of something consisting of phantomic phases.

— V. Nabokov, *Ada*

Myth can only be understood mythically.

— Jean Rudhart

### ORDER AND SILENCE

In his discourse on the meaning of “order” in the human sciences, Michel Foucault starts with an amused and perplexed reflection on a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” which says that “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies” (1970, xv; see also Kuntz 1968).

Foucault is quoting from one of Jorge Borges’ fantastic literary universes wherein the “Chinese” encyclopedia in question is more imaginative than actual. Nevertheless, for both the social historian, Foucault, and the literary artist, Borges, this quotation does set out the overall problem of the cultural relativity of the idea and experience of order. This is an issue that is most directly raised by the comparative confrontation of differing cultural orders, especially in reference to the seemingly impossible order, the exotic chaos of order, of a Chinese system of thought outside the conventions and codes defining the Western perception and definition of the cosmos. The problem with either the imaginary or traditional “Chinese” conception of order is that it appears to be the antithesis of order in any meaningful or ordinary sense. The difficulty is, as Foucault remarks, “the stark impossibility of thinking that” (1970, xv). Confronting the fabulous absurdity of another culture’s ordering of the “wild profusion of existing things.” threatens our commonplace distinction between order and chaos (1970, xxi).

The fundamental question for Foucault is that “in every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being”(1970, xx). This is at heart the very same problem addressed by all philosophies and all religions: and for the discussion at hand, this aptly poses the question of chaos and order, or the meaning of the Dao, for the early Daoist texts. The real problem is that the pure experience of order, the “inner law” or “hidden network.” of our experience of life and

self, is that “which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language.” As the Daoist texts assert of the hidden Dao, the “Dao not spoken,” it “is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression” (Foucault 19790, xx). “The West,” to use the words of the poet Octavio Paz, “teaches us that being is dissolved into meaning, and the East that meaning is dissolved into something which is neither being nor nonbeing: in a The Same which no language except the language of silence names” (1971, 94).

The issue of the different human ways of perceiving order is also the problem of the various meanings of the Dao in Chinese tradition (Kaltenmark 1969, 24-37). Part of the perverse genius of the early Daoists was to question the cosmological determinism of the ordinary Chinese cultural grid imposed by an Emperor’s glance, Confucian ethics, or the Chinese language. The early Daoist vision sought to return to an experience of a deeper and more primitive life-order hidden by conventional language and culture and yet “waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.” To know and experience the hidden order of the Dao was to know that it was not just the ordinary, civilized, or cosmic order. Dao is somehow and in some way “that something which is neither being nor nonbeing.”

The oddity of early Daoist thought was its strange solicitude for chaos, its mystically austere passion for confusion. “The sage,” the *Zhuangzi* says, “steers by the torch of chaos and doubt” (5/2/47; Watson 1968, 42).<sup>1</sup> The Daoists affirmed that the silent, hidden, or real order of Dao embraced both chaos and cosmos, nonbeing and being, nature and culture. Grinning like obscene Cheshire Cats, the early Daoist sages anarchically, yet not nihilistically, alleged that it is the denatured order of the civilized cosmos that constitutes a destructive limitation and “fall” from the original and ongoing source of the creation of the world, man, and culture. The dilemma of the relativity of all orders, which is itself an Order, is for the early Daoists above all related to the mythological idea of a self-activated (*ziran* 自然) order of creation and nature. The secret of life, the mystical secret of salvation, is to return to the primitive chaos-order or “chaosmos” of the Dao. In early Daoism chaos, cosmos, becoming, time, and Dao are synonymous for that which is without an ordering agent but is the “sum of all orders” (Hall 1978, 278-79). It is the nature of human life to be spontaneous, *et cetera*.

## CHAOS AND COSMOS

The difficulty with the early Daoist nostalgia for the primal spontaneity and saving power of chaos, the “stark impossibility of thinking that,” is the overwhelming cultural compulsion to distinguish cosmos and chaos respectively in terms of absolute order and disorder, meaning and nonsense (Hall 1978, 271-72; also Hall 1979). In many archaic traditions this kind of dichotomy is apparently sanctioned by the mythical imagery of a primordial battle between the forces of chaotic disorder and the triumphant powers of the sacred order of cosmos.<sup>2</sup> The mythic chaos, however, is never just equivalent to nothingness, profanity, neutrality, unreality, nonbeing,

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<sup>1</sup> It can be noted that the term for “confusion” (*gu* 滑) is related to *huagu* 猾骨, which recalls the mythological chaos theme of the “mass of flesh” or “boneless ancestor.” See, for example, Eberhard 1968, 45.

<sup>2</sup> See Anderson 1967; Fontenrose 1959; Gunkel 1895; Siecke 1978; Wakeman 1973.

death, or absolute disorder (Smith 1978, 97-98). Despite the fact that chaos constantly threatens the cosmic order, frequently becoming synonymous with the demonic, a comparative assessment of creation mythology generally affirms that the cosmos originally came from, and continually depends on, the chaos of the creation time" (Sproul 1979, 5-14). The logic of myth claims that there is always, no matter how it is disguised, qualified, or suppressed, a "hidden connection" or "inner law" linking chaos and cosmos, nature and culture. Chaos, in other words, is Paz's inherently ambivalent "The Same" that stands between all dualities.

Jonathan Smith remarks that "chaos is never, in myths, finally overcome. It remains as a creative challenge, as a source of possibility and vitality over against, yet inextricably related to, order and the Sacred" (Smith 1978, 97). Even in those elite civilizational and literary mythologies that emphasize a seemingly decisive battle between chaos and cosmos, dragon and hero, monster and God, the chaos figures are in the final analysis "depicted as the very source of creative power" (Smith 1975, 442). The abiding creative power of the primordial chaos that is hidden within the measured order of the civilized cosmos is, for example, displayed by the inevitable and necessary return to chaos seen in the worldwide myth-ritual scenarios of the New Year and other important seasonal times of licensed folly (Smith 1978, 98; Eliade 1963, 41-53). Moreover, in mythologies from "primitive" or noncivilizational cultures (to some degree, also, in relation to the peasant/folk/barbarian/outsider dimension within early archaic civilizations) where the incongruities and anxieties of human life are more pronounced, there is sometimes reason to speak of a kind of "divine chaos" (Sproul 1979, 9). Mythologies of this type ultimately "insist on the interdependence of being and not-being, and it is the inexplicable transcendent unity of these two that they recognize in wonder and awe as absolute and call *holy* (1979, 10). *Holy*, it should be added, because chaos is that which makes the parts of phenomenal existence temporarily "whole" again.

In contrast to the elite-lore of ancient civilizations that sought to control the image and power of chaos in human life by making myth into an institutionalized religious and literary form (i.e., the "classics"), the myth telling of "primitive" cultures and the continuing oral tradition of folkloristic story telling within an early civilizational context tend more readily to remember chaos as the principle that finally re-members and refreshes all existing forms of life. This is a bit like the difference between the "primitivity" of oral discourse that is always to some degree open-ended and ambiguous and the civility of written expression that freezes thought and sentiment into a single mold.

There may, in fact, be some covert connection here since the cultural passage from early nonliterate, Neolithic traditions (i.e., "Developed Village Farming Efficiency" cultures)" to hierarchical, urban civilizations suggests, to borrow from both Octavio Paz and Claude Lévi-Strauss, that the civilized rite of writing was fundamentally the property of a religious/political "minority and was not used so much for communicating knowledge as for dominating and enslaving men" (Paz 1971, 74; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Wheatley 1971, 311-17). From this point of view, writing and civilizations represent a "fall" from a more primitive state that respected the prestige of oral dialogue in the affairs of men. While ceremonially drawing men together into a single hierarchically centered order of the city-state, written expression at the same time breaks the harmonious intercourse among men as, perhaps, official literary versions of earlier, more primitive and oral myths tend to sever and hide the originally intimate connection between chaos and cosmos. Writing clears up the confusion of verbal expression only by sacrificing the mutuality and nu-

ance of speech to the precision and power of abstract conceptualization. Writing, like all civilization technologies, speaks and controls but does not listen: it suppresses dialogue (Paz 1971, 76).

The English words *chaos* and *cosmos* derive, of course, from Greek terms that were originally associated with mythological images and themes. It is instructive in this sense to note that the earliest Greek uses of *chaos* carried little of the later extreme negative connotations of absolute disorder or meaningless nonbeing, interpretations that were in part due to the theological exclusivity found in the Biblical ideas of “genesis” and the antagonistic dualism of early Zoroastrian tradition and some forms of Hellenistic Gnosticism (Jaeger 1967, 13-14). Even in Hesiod’s synthetic literary rendition of earlier, more primitive mythologies (ca. 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.), the cosmogonic scheme found in the first part of the *Theogony*—scheme that is the structural basis for the other two sections telling the stories of Ouranos and Zeus as well as constituting the basis for the New Year’s festival presents *chaos* primarily as the “yawning gap” or the “empty separation” between heaven and earth during the beginning time (Comford 1953, 194-95). In like manner the word beginning comes from the Old Norse *gina* (cf. Saxo-Grammaticus’ *ginnunga-gap*) and the Old English *on-ginnan*, which means “to gape” or “to yawn.” The Old Norse and Old English are in turn etymologically related to the Greek *chaos* (see Hall 1979, ch. 2; also Ehrhardt 1968).

In Hesiod it is also the case that the primordial yawn of chaos, the toothless gaping emptiness of the beginning, is not an absolute nothingness or confusion but the fertile space of the center that established the dual cosmic form of heaven and earth and is filled with the power of Eros (= light), the personified third term of mutual attraction and reunion (Comford 1952, 197). Chaos as grinning gulf, the yawning dawn of creation, is therefore the very basis of a cosmogonic process that manifests itself in the gestalt of a Trinitarian form, a formless form that because of its emptiness mysteriously links the uncreated one and the created two into a meaningful whole.

If chaos is not in its mythological origins to be equated with the absence of all order, so also is cosmos not to be related entirely with the idea of order. *Kosmos* connotes basically the image of the “ornamentation” or “cosmetic” camouflage of chaos’ stupid “monkey-grin.”<sup>3</sup> *Kosmos* is the cultivated *persona* of chaos. While acquiring the general meaning of a world system or universal order, cosmos suggests a special kind of “unnatural” or cultural order that can be etymologically related to the various words of decorum, decoration, polite, police, cosmetic, costume, and custom (Fletcher 1964, 108-35). Cosmos is not necessarily associated with the creation of the world, order, nature, or culture per se but with the establishment of a measured, ranked, or ruling cultural order which masks a prior, more primitive kind of order (cf. *New Testament* 1, Cor. 1:21). In this sense of the word, the cosmos, cosmic order, or cosmological description of the world is especially related to the aristocratic codes of ritual propriety, status, decorum, merit, and “face” found within the context of a civilizational tradition. The acceptance of “civil” order as the definitive and true meaning of all order, as well as the basis for the very structures of reality, is to efface the intrinsic mythological connection between the wild and polite orders of chaos and cosmos, nature and culture (Liddell and Scott 1940, 985).

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<sup>3</sup> Liddell and Scott (1940, 985) list the following semantic range: shamefully; good, natural, or governmental order; discipline; fashion; epithets; praise; honor/credit; ruler/regulator; world-order; firmament; inhabited world; sinful world.

The gulf spontaneously created by the primal grin of formless matter is the empty source of the light and sound of created nature and human culture. It is not, however, polite to grin with a gaping mouth at a formal banquet. Civility and proper table manners require the control of one's bodily functions, one's inner organic demons of formless sound and gas, along with one's sense of humor, by maintaining the propriety of a stiff upper lip and only speaking when spoken to (see Douglas 1966). Even though there are times when a gentleman may feel a sudden urge to scratch and yawn, the ritual rule of civilized decorum rests on the idea that it is the appearance of cool control that counts. Daoists, as I will try to show, tend to grin somewhat idiotically while slurping their soup. This has its own kind of crazy logic and yeasty propriety.

## DOUBTS AND DEFINITIONS

The crazy logic which links chaos and cosmos suggests that one of the basic findings of this study is that early Daoist thought is most adequately understood in terms of its relation to a mythological theme of creation, fall and "salvational" return. Since in the pages that follow I will demonstrate as critically as possible the labyrinthine implications and structural coherence of the mythological cast of Daoist thought, I want in this introduction to set out in a synoptic way some of my general operating presuppositions.

The first issue to address is my methodological assumption that it is valid and necessary to consider the texts of early, classical, philosophical, or mystical Daoism as essentially and properly "religious" in nature. Most simply and without engaging in an elaborate defense of my point of view, this means that the philosophy of the early texts represents a system of symbolic thought and action that is "focused on salvation" and is interpretively grounded in mythical or cosmological "formulations of a general order of existence."<sup>4</sup> To define religion in this way is not to invoke an idea of salvation with a specific, once-and-for-all Christian flavor of savior, permanent eschatological redemption, or transcendental immortality. But from a broader and more anthropological perspective, it is to say that religion as a cultural system of symbols is concerned with a means of transforming, temporally or permanently, some "significant ill" that is seen to be part of the cosmological or existential order of human life (Burke 1979, 17-18). Death is not always the most important of these "ills" and, more significantly and primitively, death may be interpreted as only one phase of the total process of human life in time (Needham 1974, 77-84). The interpretation of human existence constitutes the "meaning context" for the particular idea of "salvation" since for many traditions, and China and the early Daoist tradition provide an exemplary case, existence, the organic round of life and death, is understood as a "rite of passage" that constantly involves moments of growth and regression, security and danger.

The salvational problem of life interpreted as a process of interrelated positive and negative changes is one that is focused on the relational ambiguities of knowledge, suffering, and justice in the affairs of men and women in culture (Geertz 1965, 209-12). Religion exists as a kind of sum of all other cultural systems to say that these ambiguities, the felt chaos of life, has meaning because it is interpretable. It is part of a larger fictional story "the myth" or the permanent cosmological structures of reality. That the mythic story and "formulations of a general order of

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<sup>4</sup> Presupposed here is Clifford Geertz's understanding of "religion as a cultural system" (1965, 204-15). See also Burke 1979, 17. On "salvation" as a comparative category, see Oxtoby 1973.

existence" feel real, or are *made* real, is by virtue of the cultural fact that the ideal fiction of myth becomes an existential fact in the ritual embodiment of the story, structure, and meaning of life (Geertz 1965, 212-14). Ritual "salvation" in this sense is never final or finished. It always involves to some degree, either narratively or structurally, the dramatized repetition or retelling of the ultimate stories of why things are the way they are. Salvation is cosmologically grounded and infinitely repeatable. "Myths," as Victor Turner says, "treat of origins but derive from transitions" (1968, 10:526).

Salvation refers to "deliverance possessing cosmic implications," and religion, as "behavior focused on salvation," is concerned with healing human life in relation to the culturally perceived meaning and structure of the world (Burke 1979, 17-18). Putting aside the issue of specific forms of religious expression within a civilizational context, religion "generically, culturally, and primitively" is a system of symbols that tells a story (through myths and rituals, cosmological classification and thought, sacred biographies, exemplary histories, theological and ethical doctrines, the theory and form of meditation and mysticism. etc.) of the "fall" (or multiple "falls" and anxieties) of ordinary human existence and, at the same time, provides a means of periodically recovering in this lifetime a condition of original wholeness, health, or holiness" terms that are all etymologically related to the primitive meaning of the word "salvation."

In consideration of the role of myth, and its cultural permutations, as the foundational symbolic form or "ideal structure" for expressing a religious interpretation of human life, it behooves me to clarify my working definition of myth as a specific kind of linguistic communication. Torn between claims of romantic spookiness and rationalist nonreferential banality, the modern scholarly discussion of the meaning and nature of myth has itself taken on mythic proportions and, for that reason, I would like to proceed as straightforwardly and heuristically as possible.

Perhaps the easiest route to follow is to say in agreement with the classicist Walter Burkert that myth most generally "within the class of traditional tales, is nonfactual story telling" (1980, 3; also Alderink 1980).<sup>5</sup> To fill out the terse accuracy of this definition, it can also be said that, whether as oral or written stories within early cultures, myths are ordinarily held to be religiously significant, traditional tales because they must be constantly repeated, retold, and reactivated in the course of human life." The world of repetition affirmed by myth is "*le monde de la création continuée*" (Gusdorf 1953, 28; also Barbour 1974, 19-28). Myths in this sense are distinguished from other kinds of traditional stories because they define and validate the existing cultural tradition. Myths, says Burkert, are "serious" traditional tales that are applied "to something of collective importance" (1980, 23).

It is necessary to remember myths in different ways because they account for a culture's most fundamental "formulations of a general order of existence" by relating present life to some ideal past (i.e., the characters are somehow suprahuman and the setting is some beginning period before the time of ordinary human existence). Mythic tales always tell of some kind of "once upon a time" origin that is an explanation for the problematic of human existence and functions

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<sup>5</sup> While Mircea Eliade's methodology is less explicit than Burkert's, I think that it can be said that because of their non-Lévi-Straussian concern for the universal form and historical/ thematic context of myth. Eliade and Burkert are finally complementary. See Girardot 1982; Cain 1980.



as a model for current life (Eliade 1963, 21-38; Barbour 1974, 20-21; also Bolle 1968, 17-21). Mythic tales in either nonliterate cultures or in archaic civilizations tell those cultures' most basic stories of the religious meaning or storied nature of tradition.

In this way myth is an ideal and nonfactual story form in that it does not directly refer to reality but gives tense and narrative meaning to the temporal flux of experienced reality. While natural forms of life may involve a narrative element as perceived by cultures, the "form of the tale is not produced by reality" but by language or the symbolic capacity of men (Burkert 1980, 3). A tale's character of linearity is, then, a result of the linguistic narrativity of human discourse. There is "no isomorphism between reality and tale" but it may be said that it is in the nature of language and symbol to interpret reality as if there were analogies between natural and cultural life (1980, 3).

Reality does not "automatically yield a tale" since language always represents a "selection, condensation, structuralization" of perceived reality (Burkert 1980, 3). Myth says that the world is *like* a story. But the human use of language does automatically tend toward a tale-ordering of reality: and because of the historical focus of cultural interests, certain natural objects might be said to be especially tale-responsive. Myth is the traditional storied use of language for purposes of finding and making sense of the world. Narratively analogical and interpretive, myth in the history of culture represents the first use of a comparative method for understanding the meaning of human experience.

The meaning of a myth, its "structure of sense," depends on the Proppian formalities of its narrative "functions" but is also affected by its particular, historically and culturally bound, analogical symbolic content" (Burkert 1980, 5-18). Contrary to the Lévi-Straussian position, it is necessary to take into account the specific kinds of symbols, and thematically related sets of symbols, within the context of cultural history in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation. To do otherwise is to seek only abstract decipherment and not understanding (Burkert 1980, 13).

By their nature as a "primitive" form of interpretation, myths are subject to endless linguistic transformations in cultural history. It may be said, however, that myths do not die. They go underground and resurface as "mythic themes" in nonmythological literary forms (Eliade 1963, 162-93). "Mythic themes" in this sense represent interpretive literary abstractions of traditional mythological tales. Avoiding any Jungian meta-psychological implications, mythic themes are "archetypal" or "paradigmatic" when they are found to be a "recognizable unit of recurrence whose variation and transformation may provide an aid in the interpretation of the specific works of a given tradition" (Plaks 1976, 4).<sup>6</sup>

For purposes of this study, therefore, a mythic theme will be taken to mean the detectable presence in written texts of recurrent symbolic images, or particular paradigmatic clusters of related images, that both summarize a central mythological idea and condense in an ideal-typical way the basic structure or logic of a set of myths, not all of which necessarily have the same historical or cultural background. Thematic exegesis will consequently pay attention to both the structural character of themes (the sequence and relation of images) and the particular symbolic content of an image or thematic ensemble of images (that, for example, the text employs an image of, say, a

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<sup>6</sup> On the meaning of "paradigm" see also Barbour 1974, 8-11, 119-46; Frye 1966, 87-89.

“gourd” rather than something else). The salient point here is that a theme qualifies as a “mythic theme” when both its symbolic content and its structural logic can comparatively be shown to refer back to identifiable mythological prototypes.

Besides the definitional issues of religion, myth, and mythic theme, there is also the problem of the seemingly illusory existence of a Daoist “tradition” in Chinese history. From the standpoint of Chinese social history, early Daoism (*daojia* 道家) appears to be only a bibliographical category for a set of miscellaneous and anonymous textual compilations (see Sivin 1978; Strickmann 1979). The texts in question include especially the Eastern Zhou/Pre-Han (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C.) works *Laozi* 老子 or *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Dao and Its Virtue) and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang) along with, to some degree, the Han period (2<sup>nd</sup> c. B.C. to 2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D.) syncretistic works known as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Book of the Prince of Huainan) and *Liezi* 列子 (Book of Master Lie). These materials clearly do not constitute a wholly self-conscious school of thought or an organized social movement; but I would maintain in concert with several other scholars that the texts, however unconsciously or “structurally” at times, do display a generally consistent inner logic, a “central idea,” or a mythically grounded pattern of religious convictions and procedures (see Wright 1969; Izutsu 1967, 2:1-27). Based on my analysis of these texts, I feel that it is possible to trace out a thematic trajectory of salvational intent that can be taken as the basis for meaningfully referring to a Daoist “tradition” that embraces the early texts and certain aspects of the later, socially identifiable movements of *daojiao* 道教.<sup>7</sup>

I use the term *trajectory* since the religious vision I will set out is never static or final and has undergone phases of reinterpretation. What I am suggesting is that despite important differences relevant to varying historical and sociological situations, there is finally a transformable, yet coherent, structure that informs the religious meaning to be found in all of the early texts. In a quite altered yet related way, this same underlying thematic structure may also be found behind much of the esoteric theory and practice of organized Daoism emerging out of the post-Han Way of the Celestial Master (Zhang Daoling 張道陵). The early Daoists’ unqualified solicitude for chaos will, however, be reinterpreted somewhat schizophrenically in relation to a popular and private understanding of the Daoist religion.

It is possible to be more precise as to the nature and shape of the thematic structure I am referring to and to suggest why it is foundational for the religious intentionality of the early Daoist texts. I will show that the early texts all manifest a set of multivalent symbolic images that is rooted in a particular mythological narration of the beginning (*arché*—creation of the world, man, and culture), middle-reversal-fall (*peripeteia*— the “dis-ease” of civilizational existence), and end (*lýsis*—an end that is a return to the beginning). Burkert notes that this classic tripartite definition of narrative *mythos* “comes remarkably close” to Vladimir Propp’s fixed sequence of motifemes (Burkert 1980, 6), and, I would add, to Van Gennep’s structure for initiatory “rites of passage” (1960; see Turner 1968, 526-28; Girardot 1977). This mythic structure provides an understanding of the early Daoist interpretation of the “significant ill” of ordinary human life and its soteriological solution. In this exemplary and thematic sense, which is found throughout the

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<sup>7</sup> On “trajectories” and “tradition,” see Koester and Robinson 1971, 13-15; also Smith 1978, x-xi; Slater 1978, 28-63.

various texts and different historical periods, the mythic model or structure can be called “paradigmatic” or “archetypal” for the theory and practice of early Daoist mysticism.

The structure that I will demonstrate as the paradigmatic basis for the unity of early Daoist mysticism can be given a name. Thus, the texts can be shown to harbor the presence of a certain ideal-typology of cosmogonic myth. I emphasize a typologically thematic rather than the actual narrative presence of myth, since the structure in question is clearly an abstract literary and philosophical ensemble of individual mythic images and themes coming from the debris of different oral/folk mythological traditions. The best name or label for this typology, indeed the Chinese and Daoist name found over and over again in the ancient sources, is *hundun* 混沌 (along with its phonetic variants). This term is ordinarily translated as “chaos” and derives from ancient cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths involving the primary symbolic images of a cosmic egg-gourd (as well as the interrelated images of an ancestral animal deity, culture hero, cosmic giant, primordial couple, mass of flesh, etc.) as the original chaos condition/figure of the creation or flood time. That this is the best, or most mythologically and thematically proper, label for the inner structure and logic of the early Daoist religious vision is indicated by the fact that a Hundun myth of primordial chaos was certainly present in China by the time of the Eastern Zhou and is a key technical term in all of the early texts.

The word *hundun* in its Daoist use is, above all, an excellent example of what Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty called a “portmanteau,” a word “packed” with several meanings (Carroll 1960, 270-72). Unpacking these meanings and reconstructing the thematic order of their relationship can, therefore, tell something of the story and intent of the wayfarer. Indeed, the specific conceptual content of *hundun* as a word is not so important as the fact that it serves as a symbol for an underlying mythological form, theme, system, structure, pattern, or shape in the texts. In this way it is helpful to remember that Humpty Dumpty also affirmed that his reduplicated name, like Hundun, means nothing but the “shape I am” (Carroll 1960, 263). Being shaped like a large egg, both Humpty Dumpty and *hundun* (especially Emperor Hundun in the *Zhuangzi*) refer primarily to the mythic theme of the creation, tottering, and eventual fall of the cosmic egg. The same is true for James Joyce’s Tim Finnegan, the Irish hod carrier, whose drunken fall echoes the cosmic egg theme of Humpty Dumpty and suggests the “fall of Lucifer and the fall of man” (Carroll 1960, 276n10). Curiously, the fall in *Finnegan’s Wake* is symbolized by Joyce’s ten hundred-letter thunderclaps that phonetically and thematically “pack up” both Humpty Dumpty and Hundun: “bothallchoractorschumminaroundsansumminarumdrums trumtrumina humpatadumpwautopoofoolooderamaunstrunup” (Carroll 1960, 271n7; also Joyce 1976, 3).

## “PHANTOMIC PHASES”: THE QUESTION OF CHINESE MYTH

I have stressed that this study is primarily directed toward an unveiling of the latent mythic structure of Daoist thought and practice and that this structure, this hidden order, is the basis for speaking of the religious meaning or soteriological intent of the early texts. My concern for the mythological context of early Chinese tradition is admittedly fraught with problems. The role of myth in early Chinese literature, for example, is somewhat like the “curious incident of the dog in the night-time” from the *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*:

“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention” [asked the Inspector].

“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.” “The dog did nothing in the night-time.”

"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes. (Smith 1978, 300)

The point here is that in comparison with other ancient civilizational traditions, early China seems to be singularly lacking in any complete or coherent mythological narratives, especially creation myths. Myth curiously seems *to do nothing* in early Chinese tradition. This all-too-common observation has led some scholars to claim that it is particularly the absence of cosmogonic myth that gives rise to the "cosmological gulf" between Chinese and Western traditions (Mote 1972, 3-21). In nineteenth-century scholarship the apparent unconcern for cosmogonic thought and mythological expression even seemed to make ancient China a welcome anomaly in the history of world civilizations since there was never any superstitious "deification of sensuality" (e.g., in *China Review* 4 [1875]). In sympathy with the Confucian humanistic admonition to keep the spirits at a distance, the absence of myth seemed to insure that ancient China was "singularly pure" when contrasted with all other archaic civilizations caught up in the superstitious throes of religion and myth.

There is no doubt that there are significant differences in the ancient Chinese worldview in comparison with other traditions, but the notion that the cosmological gulf consists in the non-existence of myth, creation myth, or mythological thought is an issue that deserves to be put to rest with all possible dispatch. It is not the absence of creation mythology that accounts for the cosmological differences but the manner and nature of the Chinese interpretation of traditional mythological creation tales. The real "gulf" has to do with how different early civilizations fathomed the mythological gap of chaos (see Girardot 1976).<sup>8</sup>

The work of Chang Kwang-chih and others shows that during the Eastern Zhou period there was a rich traditional mythological lore that affected all levels of early Chinese civilization (1959b; also Allan 1981). There is also sufficient evidence to argue for the presence of mythological systems of "cosmogonic formations and construction" that influenced all the major ancient text traditions or "schools." Moreover amid the congeries of mythology reconstructed by Chang, there is finally the central cosmogonic theme that in the beginning the "cosmos was . . . a chaos [*hundun*], which was dark and without bounds and structure" (Chang 1976, 157-58).

Chang goes further to classify the ancient creation themes into the functional categories of either the "separation" or the "transformation" of the original *Hundun* condition or thing (1976, 158-59). The separation thesis follows the principle of multiplication ("the Chaos was One, which was divided into two elements") such as in chapter 42 of the *Daode jing* and as is "unquestionably implied in the *Zhuangzi* and the "Tianwen" chapter of the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of the South) (Chang 1976, 159). While this theme is already philosophized in most of the texts, there are clear traces of its connection with the widespread cosmic egg-gourd and primordial couple myths. The other transformation theme states that "certain natural elements were transformed out of the bodily parts of mythical creatures" and is seen in texts like the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas) that speak of such creation deities as Zhulong 燭龍, Nüwa 女媧, and Zhuyin 燭陰. Zhuyin, for example, is the snakelike deity of Zhong Mountain who does not "drink, eat, or breathe" (Chang 1976, 158).

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<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on a spontaneous creation out of a chaos-nothingness is also honored in the *via negativa* tradition in the West. See Neville 1980.

Chang notes that the transformation theme typologically prefigures the later, more elaborate cosmic giant mythology of Pangu 盤古 (as well as the animal ancestor and “mass of flesh” themes); and, I would add that the description of the chaos monster Zhuyin is also analogous to the condition of the *Zhuangzi*’s Emperor Hundun who is bored with seven openings in order to “see, hear, eat, and breathe” or the *Shanhai jing*’s description of Hundun as a mythic creature who is without face and eyes.

Chang’s cosmogonic categories of “separation” and “transformation” originally represented different independent mythological traditions, but in the texts of the Zhou and Han they were creatively rearticulated into a common mythological pattern of meaning. This kind of interpretive coalescence of originally different mythic themes will be especially important in coming to grips with the mythological background for the coherent structure of cosmogonic intentionality found in the early Daoist texts. As Chang says, it is necessary to examine the dynamics of the functional interaction of the various independent mythic units since there are always sociological and ideological “reasons” allowing for their coalescence (1976, 155-73).

These last comments call for some clarification since, despite the deductive and reconstructed presence of originally coherent myths and the necessary assumption of an unrecorded oral tradition of living mythological fabulation in the ancient period, it still must be admitted that the earliest written sources, including the Daoist materials, do not preserve integral mythological tales. Ancient Chinese literature is basically nonnarrative in any overt sense and is not informed by mythic themes in the dramatic and epic way of other ancient literatures (Plaks 1976, 3-26).

While the *Zhuangzi*’s parabolic style demonstrates the early literary use of mythologically based story fragments, the *Daode jing* is totally devoid of any narrative element or even of any proper names. There is some vague, improvable possibility that it may have been a kind of “prompt book” for a more narrative oral tradition of mystical teachings and techniques, but the demonstrable fact is that the text as it stands is only an unusually terse collection of semi-poetic epigrams. It is simply the case that the earliest Daoist texts do not record or tell coherent myths or even follow an overall narrative form. Granting these realities, it can nevertheless be said that early Daoist thought and expression is “mythic” in its meaning because of its paradigmatic use of mythic themes. The “structure of sense” in the Daoist texts is based on a creative literary and religious reinterpretation of mythological images and themes. It is in this way that Daoist metaphysics might be thought of as a kind of nonnarrative “mythologic second” (Gusdorf 1953, 244).

If actual mythological tales in nonliterate cultures may be thought of as a first or “primitive” use of a comparative method for interpreting the world, then early Chinese written literature of all ideological persuasions might similarly be said to represent the first wholly “structural” reinterpretation of traditional oral and folkloric mythological stories. Traditional narrative myths have been reduced in Chinese literature to an inner “logical” code of binary classification and the resolution of a centering synthesis. It is this inner thematic code that makes early Chinese literature, whether the Classics or the Daoist texts, structurally mythic if not mythological in terms of overt characters or narrative form.

In an insightful analysis Andrew Plaks has essentially argued for this kind of structural understanding of the role of myth in Chinese literature. For Plaks, Chinese literature is not built on mythological or narrative forms but on the more formal, immediately structural, cosmological-classificatory implications of an archetypal, ritual-like “logic.” Because it is ritualistically arche-

typal. Chinese literature neglects the usual Western literary interest in the dramatic mythological detail of narrative form and action (1976, 11-26).

It should already be obvious that I generally agree with Plaks' interpretation, but at the same time I think that Plaks makes too much of a polar distinction between ritual/spatial formality (a nonnarrative "structural" logic) and mythological or temporal narrativity. More accurately it may be said that the inner logical form and outer thematic content, like space and time, come together in an ideal "narrative" structure that embraces both myth and ritual. In its most basic sense this is the *mythos* structure of *arché*, *peripéteia*, and *lýsis* or beginning, middle, and end. Interpreted religiously, it is creation, fall, and return. Interpreted ritually, it is the initiatory pattern of withdrawal, transition, and reincorporation. Interpreted cosmologically, it is the numerical code of "one, two, and three." And interpreted mystically and alchemically, it is the internalized pattern of *solve et coagula* that collapses all distinctions of space and time, ritual and myth, body and spirit, microcosm and macrocosm, end and beginning.

The Chinese twist that is given to this archetypal plot is that creation, as well as cosmological and soteriological meaning, do not ordinarily involve the epic idea of a final and permanent conquest of some existential chaotic foe. Above all, in Daoist literature where there is less attention to civilizational knights and gentlemen, the quest for a meaningfully authentic life in the mystical sense is not a hero's prize. A Daoist does not conquer life to win salvation but *yields* to the eternal return of things. As the idea of creation is not a once-and-for-all heroic act of a Creator outside of time and space, so also is the soteriological meaning of early Daoism directly related to the eternity of spontaneous self-creation and return. Lacking the narrative sweep and epic pathos of other ancient religious literatures, the early Daoist texts more modestly claim that the "salvation" of man and society is a matter of the resynchronization of human periodicity with the cycles of cosmic time. This has a very "primitive" ring to it.

## COMPARATIVE ORDER: "A QUEER ENTERPRISE"

As an interpretation of the Daoist second-order interpretation of original mythological interpretations, my method is fated to be a queerly proleptical enterprise. Comparative analysis, however, does not mean that a Frazerian, Tylorian, Jungian, or Hentzian mania for ethnographic "scrap-collecting" need be the ruling principle" (Lévi-Strauss 1963a, 246). In place of stalking the elusive archetypes of the collective unconscious or ranging hither and yon in varicolored gardens of symbol, the conviction basic to the method employed here is that meaningful comparison can never disregard the ecological, cultural, and historical contexts of the texts, symbols, themes, and myths it is investigating.

With this in mind my procedure will involve a "controlled comparison" of themes and myths at three interrelated levels (see Eggan 1954; Hammel 1980). First and most crucial is the comparative determination of thematic constellations of homologous images that are internal to the texts in question. This is complemented by a second stage of exegesis in which the thematic assemblage is compared typologically with actual mythological and folkloric materials coming from *closely related* historical, cultural, and linguistic units. While particular images and themes may be related only in the creative imagination of the author or authors, the second phase of typological analysis does have some reference to possible historical and cultural origins, albeit rarely conclusively. Finally, I will allow myself the wary and speculative indulgence of some cross-

cultural comparison of the various images, themes, and myths in the interest of suggesting some of the general significance of the Daoist vision in relation to the history of world religions. While the third strictly speculative step has a legitimate role to play in understanding the overall “structure of sense” perceived in the documents, the testing of the hypothesis” its falsification, revision, or verification” rests entirely on the critical accuracy and cogency of the first two culturally and historically delimited steps.

Fundamental to my approach is that the interpretation of ancient texts is best accomplished by a comparative method that starts with a descriptive juxtaposition of concrete images and themes and only secondarily works outward to a more abstract analytical edifice. The ordering of these steps is not always or necessarily sequential and perhaps the best image for this type of comparison is one of an ever widening and overlapping spiral that starts with, remains linked to, and constantly circles around the original textual deposit of particular images and themes. This is a method that partakes of the storied redundancy of myth. In history, cultures, and texts, images give rise to other images, themes to other themes, myths to other myths. Meaning, therefore, is contextually determined in relation to the different interconnected systems of multiple symbols, themes, and myths. Interpretations give rise to other interpretations. “Everything in human representations, or at least everything that is essential,” says Georges Dumézil, is “system” (in Dudley 1977, 154; also Rudhart 1972).

As a final and related methodological point, I want to emphasize that this study will only indirectly be concerned with specialized sinological problems of philology and history, although I will try to draw out such issues where they are relevant. As a historian of religions, I have assumed the liberty of keeping the hermeneutical issue paramount; consequently, I am concerned with a more synthetic and interpretive perspective appropriate to the religious intentionality of the early Daoist texts. There is no doubt that there is a certain risk in such an approach, a risk that calls for a final assessment and critical evaluation in terms of the more minute philological and historical issues. On the other hand, interpretive integrations of previously isolated facts also reflect back on, and can help to refine, those same philological and historical problems.

The risks involved in my hermeneutical invasion of sinological territory might be said to be justified by the need to reinstate the legitimacy of the methodological spirit, if not always the specific results, of the great French tradition of Marcel Granet and Henri Maspero who, while working with immense technical expertise and the best available scholarly resources, sought to draw out a comparative sociological context of meaning from their Chinese sources that went beyond the narrow boundaries of philological exegesis.<sup>9</sup> Respect must always be paid to the ultimate authority of the text and one must take into account the best philological and historical determinations of that text; but at the same time, the ancient traditional documents of China can also be shown to speak a symbolic language more broadly communicative and universally meaningful than indicated by the specialized issues of philology and history (Granet 1959, intr.). The task of interpretation should be to evaluate the evidence in that double sense of critically adhering to the cultural, philological, and historical integrity of the documents while being sensitive to wider comparative possibilities of synthetic understanding. This obviously calls for a certain amount of reasoned, or even imaginative, speculation: but if there has been a conscientious at-

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<sup>9</sup> On the lives and works of these scholars, see Demiéville 1947; Freedman 1975; Wright 1960; as well as both Twitchett's and Barrett's introductions in Maspero 1981.

tempt to ground the supposition in the concrete content of the sources, then there is no need to fear that the results must necessarily dwell within the realm of numinous humbug.

The irony of the relative neglect of a structural methodology among sinologists is that through Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss directly, and through Mircea Eliade more indirectly, Granet's method and work can be said to have influenced three of the most important subspecies of structural comparison in contemporary scholarship (see preface to Granet 1980; Lévi-Strauss 1969, 311-404). After a long hiatus it has been the contemporary rediscovery of structuralism through the mediation of Granet and other early twentieth-century figures that has advanced the theoretical sophistication and cultural understanding of many disciplines. This is especially true in relation to the cultural history of Indo-European traditions (Dumézil), the general history of world religions (Eliade), and social anthropology (Lévi-Strauss). Regardless of the adequacy of each of these different forms of structural comparison, it is a revealing comment on the methodological poverty of sinology that Granet's work and interpretive agenda is still largely spurned in the area of Chinese studies (Wright 1960, 232-55).<sup>10</sup>

But the proof of any methodology is to be found only in the textual and cultural pudding under examination. In view of the focus of this study, it is perhaps more appropriate to say that the significance of the *hundun* theme in Chinese and Daoist tradition may be comparatively found floating in a bowl of wonton soup! What I mean by this suitably enigmatic remark will become evident in the following pages and it is best that I conclude these introductory comments by taking to heart what Edmund Leach once said in a rare moment of methodological humility. Thus, all that either of us has attempted to do in our quite different studies is "to show that the component elements" in some very familiar materials "are, in fact, ordered in a pattern of which many have not been previously aware" (Leach 1965, 581).

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<sup>10</sup> Though not influenced by Granet, the fruitfulness of a comparative/structuralist/interpretive approach for Chinese studies is brilliantly illustrated by the work, among others, of Chang Kwang-chih, Wolfgang Bauer, and Paul Wheatley.



