

In the Beginning: Chinese Cosmogonic Myths and Taoist Philosophy

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Abstract. The paper aims to analyse the Chinese cosmogonic myths, cosmogony, and cosmology elaborated by the ancient Chinese philosophers, particularly the representatives of Taoism. Chinese cosmogony and cosmology are most fully represented in philosophical texts, not mythological narratives. Chinese thinkers elaborated on the complex scheme of the emergence and development of the world. The source of the world's origin is not a transcendent external force. Just the opposite, this source is immanent and is based on the principle of constant changes. Chinese philosophers understood the universe as a continuous interaction of complementary forces. The interaction of complementary forces is the path of changes, i.e., the constant creation of the world and the flow of life processes. With special attention given to the Chinese Hundun myth and chaos-hundun concept, the author analyses "Tao Te Ching", "Zhuangzi", "Huaninanzi", and "Taijitu shuo".

Keywords: Hundun; Cosmos; Wu Chi; Tai Chi; Tao; Heaven; Earth; Yin; Yang; Qi.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional Western worldview prioritises order (Cosmos) over disorder (Chaos), perceived as an abyss, gaping void, disorderly mass. According to Hesiod, Eros overcame the abyss of chaos: love created harmony. The Book of Genesis tells us how the Divine order structured and spiritualised the dark, formless emptiness and created the existing world (Gen. 1:1-31). The idea of the order of things in the Western tradition starts with the questions "What are these things?" and "What is the nature of these things?". The representatives of Western philosophy tried to explain the phenomenon of cosmic order; their explanations were based on the existence of specific general characteristics and universal principles that described this eternal order.

Classical Chinese thought followed a different path to understanding the universe. The concepts of "being" and "nonbeing" in the Chinese language are denoted by the terms "You" and "Wu". "You" means that something exists in the world and can be perceived as an actual, manifested state of the universe. "Wu" is not around, something inaccessible to be perceived – it is a potential, unmanifest state. It is about the presence and

absence of the specific things [8]. Both ontologically and axiologically, "absence" has absolute priority over "presence". "The perfect sage embodies absence – this is one of the maxims of Chinese thought" [18, p. 41]. The world arises due to the interaction of one and many, nonbeing and being, and Tao gives rise to "ten thousand things"; Tai Chi offers life to the plurality of existence [20].

Within the Chinese tradition, there is no Creator as an external force – the force that does not need anything for existence but creates a world of free will. Judeo-Christian tradition calls this force God, who established a particular order of things in the world. Unlike the proponents of the Western concept of creationism, Chinese philosophers see the Cosmos as a process of creation in situ: one thing is transformed into another. The Chinese Cosmos is a living organism integrated into a dynamic wholeness, and the main principle of the existence and development of the world is based on eternal changes [4]. The infinite, immeasurable, formless Tao generates myriads of things, processes, and phenomena that go through the entire life cycle and then return to their source to give life to the other things, processes, and phenomena [2]. These ideas were reflected in Chinese thought.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some Words on Chinese Cosmogonic Myths. Perception of the world in mythological form is inherent in human thinking. Myth, as a complex structure develops within a particular social and cultural situation, permeates all spheres of human activity. Being the initial form of the worldview, myth plays a significant role in shaping and mastering our reality. Bringing meaning and purpose to human lives, myth underlies cultural reality. Cosmogonic myths are among the most essential narratives in world mythology. Cosmogonic myths are myths about the creation of the world and the origin of the Cosmos from Chaos; they are the initial plot for most mythologies. As M. Eliade put it, "...by the fact that the world's creation precedes everything else, the cosmogony enjoys a special prestige. In fact, ...the cosmogonic myth furnishes the model for all myths of origin. The creation of animals, plants, or man presupposes the existence of a world" [5, p. 173].

For a long time, the Chinese civilisation was interpreted as non-religious and non-mythological, which had no authentic cosmogonic tradition. This perception gave rise to a unique path for China's development. Indeed, if most ancient cultures left behind fairly extensive mythological material, including cosmogonic and anthropogonic myths, the fragmentation of Chinese cosmogonic narratives served as the basis for the assertion that China had no creation myths [7]. If we talk about the creation of the world and its external Creator, who does not need anything for existence, who is eternal and perfect, then the term "creation myth" should be used with some reservations. In Chinese culture, using the terms "cosmogonic myth" or "origin myth" is more accurate. However, regardless of terminological differences, myths about the creation/origin of the world are present in Chinese culture.

The question is, "Where did everything start in the world?" "Where are we from?" "Who created the world?" has always been of primary concern for humanity, and China is no exception. Unfortunately, the lack of a large and structured set of Chinese mythological narratives does not allow the researchers to give unambiguous answers regarding Chinese cosmogony. As N. Girardot stated, "...the great difficulty in attempting to study myth in China is that it is completely decomposed, degraded, and consciously moulded to conform with the standards of classical litera-

ture and history sanctioned by the humanistically inclined tradition of Confucianism" [6, p. 295]. The ancient mythological representations of the Chinese have been preserved in laconic scattered fragments. It is tough to reconstruct the most ancient Chinese myths since the original meaning was distorted and transformed under the influence of philosophical and historical views of the different epochs. This process was facilitated by the relatively rapid transition of the Chinese civilisation from the mythopoetic interpretation of the world to the rationalistic tradition epitomised by Confucius, who rejected everything incomprehensible and mystical.

D. Bodde wrote that China had certain myths but not an advanced system of mythology, "...aside from one myth, China – perhaps alone among the major civilisations of antiquity – has no story of creation" [1, p. 81]. This myth is the myth of Pan Gu. Pan Gu is the most remarkable figure in Chinese cosmogony. Traditionally, he is depicted as a giant with small horns or bumps on his head. Pan Gu was the first living creature born and raised in a cosmic egg surrounded by chaos. Becoming taller and taller every day, Pan Gu eventually caused the egg to split open. The light, pure parts of the egg became Heaven, and the heavy, dark parts became Earth. But there was no gap between Heaven and Earth; Pan Gu pushed up Heaven and pushed down Earth, balancing these two opposite forces, Yin and Yang and establishing the universe between them. When the distance between the two opposite poles was good enough, Pan Gu got tired and fell asleep. He was so exhausted that he died. After his death, Pan Gu's body was transformed into various parts of the earthly world. His breath turned into wind and clouds, his cry – into thunder, his eyes turned into sun and moon, and his head, torso, feet and arms became mountains. His blood transformed into the rivers and his veins – into the roads. Teeth and bones were turned into precious stones and metals, and the spinal cord became a sacred jade stone. His hair became all kinds of plants. Even sweat turned into raindrops and dew [22]. Some myths say that the human race emerged from bugs on his body. However, other stories tell that Pan Gu created humans from clay [12].



Figure 1 – Pan Gu [13]

It is generally accepted that the Pan Gu narrative is relatively young. It can be traced back to the time of the Three Kingdoms or the Liang Dynasty. However, X. Wu stressed that "the Pangu myth was popular even earlier, back at least to the pre-Qin and Han Dynasties" [21, p. 365]. It is possible that this cosmogonic myth existed within the oral tradition long before its written evidence. The myth of Pan Gu demonstrates a structural similarity between the human being (microcosm) and the universe (macrocosm) that was typical for many ancient cosmogonic systems.

Despite the apparent absence of a structured cosmogonic narrative in Chinese culture, the basic mythological theme of chaos, which found its expression in the myth of Hundun, attracts particular attention. In the myths, Hundun is depicted as a weird, faceless bird-like entity representing chaos.



Figure 2 – Hundun [10]

"Zhuangzi" is one of the earliest written sources in which Hundun is mentioned. "The emperor of the South Sea was called Shu [Brief]; the emperor of the North Sea was called Hu [Sudden]; and the

emperor of the central region was called Hundun [Chaos]. From time to time, Shu and Hu came together for a meeting in the territory of Hundun, and Hundun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they could repay his kindness. "All men", they said, "have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. But Hundun alone doesn't have any. Let's try boring him some!" They bored another hole every day, and on the seventh day, Hundun died" [19, p. 146]. After Hundun's death, the universe was formed; it forever separated Hu and Shu. This way, according to the ancient Chinese, a particular order of things was established. Of course, this myth cannot be unequivocally attributed to cosmogonic myths since Hundun was not the only living creature in the world (he had his fellow rulers from across the sea). Nevertheless, this narrative reflects the primordial undifferentiated chaos and its central position – the first principle, the universal motive of the world cosmogony.

From mythology to philosophy: Taoist cosmogony and cosmology. The cosmogonic theme of primordial chaos hundun is closely linked with Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoism. Going deeper into philosophical narratives, we come closer to understanding the Chinese Cosmos that has shaped the Chinese mentality and culture. Hundun (chaos) is an amorphous, simple, and undifferentiated primordial beginning. The world we know was formed out of hundun. The next step implied the emergence of Heaven and Earth and the appearance of all kinds of things, including humans. Gradually, Chinese thought elaborated the concept of the three basic universal principles of "san-tsai": Heaven, Earth, and Human. Though J. Needham considered that Taoist thinkers avoided elaborating a cosmogony because the creative acts of Tao must be hidden, and M. Granet stated that the Chinese displayed a repulsion for all theories of creation [6], Taoist texts can shed light on the ideas of the ancient Chinese about the origin of the world. One of the problems with the precise interpretation of these texts is the preferred mode of conveying thoughts by Taoist sages: they express their ideas through parables and allegories. And ironically, "philosophy that did not allow any internal contradictions and inaccuracies were hidden within the mystical shell" [2, p. 1].

Chaos-hundun is one of the basic concepts in Taoism that significantly impacted the Taoist worldview [17]. In the Taoist tradition, chaos is a

positive, creative principle; it "contains the seeds of all things in the world" [11, p. 221].

Hundun may be seen as the starting point of cosmogenesis – the primordial beginning. It is reflected in Chapter 25 of the "Tao Te Ching":

*"There is a thing formed in chaos
Existing before Heaven and Earth.
Silent and solitary, it stands alone, unchanging.
It goes around without peril.
It may be the Mother of the world.
Not knowing its name, I can only style it Tao.
With reluctance, I would call it Great.
Great means out-going.
Out-going means far-reaching.
Far-reaching means returning..."* [9, p. 45].

Chaos is unknown, but it shapes and reshapes all things.

Hundun can be identified as "original pneuma"; sometimes, it is synonymous with Tao as the hidden fundamental principle of the universe not yet revealed in the visible world.

*"Tao begets One.
One begets Two.
Two begets Three.
Three begets all things.
All things carry the female and embrace the male.
And by breathing together, they live in harmony"* [9, p. 81].

Thus, the universe and all its manifestations represent inextricably linked organic unity that grows from the profound, mysterious Tao. We can recognise the cosmogonic nature of these "Tao Te Ching" passages.

Chinese cosmogony and cosmology are more elaborated in the "Huaninanzi":

*"When Heaven and Earth were unformed, all was ascending and flying,
diving and delving.
Thus it was called the Grand Inception.
The Grand Inception produced the Nebulous Void.
The Nebulous Void produced space-time;
Space-time produced the original qi.
A boundary [divided] the original qi.
That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven;
That which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth.
It is easy for that which is pure and subtle to converge
But it is difficult for the heavy and turbid to congeal.*

*Therefore
Heaven was completed first;
Earth was fixed afterwards.
The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced yin and yang.
The suppressive essences of yin and yang caused the four seasons.
The scattered essences of the four seasons created myriad things.
The hot qi of accumulated yang produced fire; the essence of fiery qi became the sun.
The cold qi of accumulated yin produced water; the essence of watery qi became the moon.
The overflowing qi of the sun and moon essences made the stars and planets.
To Heaven belong the sun, moon, stars, and planets;
to Earth belong waters and floods, dust and soil"* [15, p. 147].

This text reveals naturalism, holism and immanence of the world of the Chinese culture: "unified and holistic Cosmos is permeated with flows of vitality, Cosmos, all elements of which are interrelated and harmoniously united and at the same time are constantly transformed and changed in its original energetic plasticity" [18, p. 30].

Tao – the critical concept of Taoist philosophy – manifests in the relationship between Wu Chi and Yin–Yang. "The basis of all things is the Great Void, which has no phenomenal manifestations. The ancient Chinese called it Wu Chi (Infinite, Unlimited, Boundless). Heaven and Earth were not formed, the universe was in primordial Chaos (Hundun), Yin and Yang had not yet arisen, and Qi was an organic whole. Wu Chi is simple, unformed, and indivisible. It is Absence (Wu) or Absence of Absence (Wu Wu). It can be illustrated by an empty circle" [2, p. 4]. The idea of Wu Chi is expressed in the "Tao Te Ching":

*"Knowing the white and keeping the black,
One will become a model of the world.
Being a model of the world,
One will not deviate from constant virtue
And will return to the infinite"* [9, p. 51].

Sometimes, the concepts of Tao and Wu Chi are used differently. In this case, it is implied that Wu Chi transforming into Tai Chi (the Supreme Pole) manifests itself as Qi energy through the polarity of Yin and Yang, while for Lao Tzu, Tao always exists. It does not disappear in the manifestation of local forms. According to Chinese philosophical thought, Cosmos is constantly transforming:

the world looks like a puzzle of interconnected parts – things, phenomena, processes. The world arises from the interaction between unity and diversity, which explains how Wu Chi generates Tai Chi and gives life to myriads of things [20]. In Chinese philosophy, such a continuity of unity and diversity is manifested through the Oneness called Tao or Wu. As far as the Oneness cannot be defined, it is described as formlessness. For example, the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu claimed that everything was born out of formlessness, a nonbeing that evolved to become a being: *"There is life, there is death, there is a coming out, there is a going back in – yet in the coming out and going back, its form is never seen. This is called the Heavenly Gate. The Heavenly Gate is nonbeing. The ten thousand things come forth from nonbeing. Being cannot create being out of being; inevitably, it must come forth from nonbeing. Nonbeing is absolute nonbeing, and it is here that the sage hides himself"* [19, p. 367].

The Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi used Taoist metaphysics as a framework for his philosophy. In his writing "Taijitu shuo" ("Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Polarity"), he elaborated the concept that became the cornerstone of Neo-Confucianist cosmology:

"Non-polar (wuji) and yet Supreme Polarity (taiji)!"

The Supreme Polarity in activity generates yang, yet it is still at the activity limit. In stillness, it generates yin, yet it is also active at the limit of stillness. Activity and stillness alternate; each is the basis of the other. In distinguishing yin and yang, the Two Modes are thereby established.

The alternation and combination of yang and yin generate water, fire, wood, metal, and Earth. With these five [phases of] qi harmoniously arranged, the Four Seasons proceed through them.

The Five Phases are simply yin and yang; yin and yang are simply the Supreme Polarity; the Supreme Polarity is fundamentally Non-polar. [Yet] in the generation of the Five Phases, each has its nature.

The reality of the Non-polar and the essence of the Two [Modes] and Five [Phases] mysteriously combine and coalesce. 'The Way of Qian becomes the male; the Way of Kun becomes the female;' the two qi stimulate each other, transforming and generating many things. The myriad things generate and regenerate, alternating and transforming without end" [23].

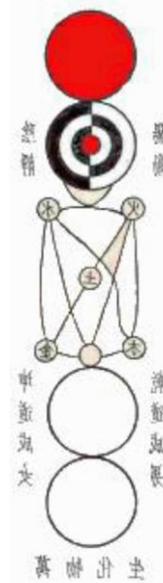


Figure 3 – The Diagram of the Supreme Polarity [16]

Thus, Wu Chi is an unlimited, non-polar state that precedes the emergence of the universe. This state is impossible to imagine; it precedes energy, matter, space, and time and expresses pure potentiality. The only characteristic of Wu Chi is variability because nothing can come from it into the spatio-temporal world without changes. The oldest of the classic Chinese texts, "I Ching," argues that changes form the universal way of existence. The transformation of nonbeing into being and being into nonbeing is a non-linear, cyclical process. There is neither "before" nor "after", neither "progress" nor "regress", but just "unfoldment" and "return". Wu Chi unfolds in Tai Chi, Tai Chi – in Bagua, Bagua – in 64 cosmic situations, and then everything returns to Wu Chi [14]. It lasts forever.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese cosmogony and cosmology are most fully represented in philosophical texts, not mythological narratives. Chinese thinkers elaborated on the complex scheme of the emergence and development of the world. The source of the world's origin is not a transcendent external force. Just the opposite, this source is immanent and is based on the principle of constant changes. Chinese philosophers understood the universe as a continuous process of interaction of complementary forces [3]. This process can be described cyclically: heyday and decline, life and death, a coming out and a going back. Everything in the world is in the process of transformation deter-

mined by its impulse [8]. The interaction of complementary forces is the path of changes, i.e., the constant creation of the world and the flow of life processes. These ideas about the universe formed philosophical and cultural maps that shaped the Chinese worldview and determined values, goals, meanings, attitudes, and preferences, ultimately influencing all spheres of life in China.

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