

Myth and Meaning in the "Tao Te Ching": Chapters 25 and 42

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N. J. Girardot

MYTH AND
MEANING IN THE
TAO TE CHING:
CHAPTERS 25
AND 42

It is a queer enterprise—this attempt to determine the nature of something consisting of phantomic phases. [V. NABOKOV, *Ada*]

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

In the past ten years there has been something of a revival of serious scholarly interest in the Taoist tradition. There have been two international conferences on Taoist studies as well as indications that we are finally starting to learn something about the long neglected liturgical and esoteric dimensions of the tradition.¹ Moreover, recently there has been the discovery of the so-called Han dynasty “silk manuscripts” (*pai-shu*) which include such valuable documents as the oldest extant version of the *Tao Te Ching* (*Lao Tzu*), one of the earliest illustrations of breath control and physical exercise (*tao-yin-t’u*), and four lost texts of the Yellow Emperor tradition of Taoism (the “Huang-Lao” tradition).²

¹ Concerning the first international Taoist conference held in 1968 at Bellagio, Italy, see the “Symposium on Taoism,” *History of Religions*, vol. 9 (November 1969–February 1970). The second conference was held in Japan, and the proceedings will be published in a volume forthcoming from Yale University Press. Following the early work of H. Maspero and more recently that of Max Kaltenmark, the liturgical and esoteric dimension of Taoism has been brilliantly studied by such scholars as K. Schipper, A. Seidel, M. Saso, M. Strickmann, N. Sivin, and J. Needham.

² This important discovery was made by Chinese archaeologists in 1973 during the excavation of a Han dynasty tomb at Ma-wang-tui, Chang-sha, in Hunan

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This is not the place, however, to rehearse these developments, and it is still necessary to be reminded of Max Kaltenmark's admonition that, despite the advances in the sinological appreciation of the Taoist tradition, "Taoist studies in Western languages are still in their infancy."³ Thus, my particular concern in this essay is only to show, via the specific test case of the *Tao Te Ching*, that methodological considerations must go hand in hand with the increase in historical and philological information.

To propose yet another look at the *Tao Te Ching* may seem superfluous since this book of only 5,000-odd characters is the most translated of all Oriental works and has been subjected to innumerable interpretations from the various standpoints of Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarship. For example, Fung Yu-lan has recently put forth a new Marxist interpretation of the work, and Chang Chung-yuan has suggested that Lao Tzu seems to be most fully understood within a Heideggerian framework.⁴ Chang, with some temerity, even felt it possible to claim that "Heidegger is the only Western philosopher who not only intellectually understands Tao, but has intuitively experienced the essence of it as well."⁵ Chang, like Fung, does provide us with a very sensitive and interesting interpretive translation of the text, but it seems at least partially presumptuous to assert that the philosophical conundrums of Heidegger or the materialistic determinism

province. The dating of the tomb is 168 B.C. or, in traditional terms, the twelfth year of the Ch'ien-yüan age during the reign of Emperor Wen-ti of the Former Han dynasty. Transcriptions of these important documents are now published in *Wen-wu* [Cultural relics] (Peking) 10 (1974): 30-42; 11 (1974): 8-20; and 4 (1975): 14-26, and the *Po-shu Lao Tzu* (Taipei: Ho Lo T'u, 1975). For a partial bibliography of published material on these finds plus various Chinese critical studies, see the list compiled by Jan Yün-hua in the *Newsletter of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions* (February 1976), pp. 4-7. Professor Jan will have a preliminary discussion of "The Silk Manuscripts on Taoism" in English in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.

³ Max Kaltenmark, *Lao Tzu and Taoism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. vi.

⁴ On Fung's more recent discussions of Taoism, see his *Chung-kuo che-hsüeh-shih hsün-pien* [New history of Chinese philosophy] (Peking, 1964); *Chung-kuo che-hsüeh-shih lun-wen chi* [Essays on the history of Chinese philosophy], 1st ser. (Shanghai, 1958), 2d ser. (Macao, 1962 [?]); and his essay "Hsien-ch'in tao-chia che-hsüeh chung-yao ming-tz'u t'ung-shih" [General explanations of important philosophical terms in the Taoism of the pre-Ch'in period], in *Lao-tzu che-hsüeh t'ao-lun-chi* [A symposium on the philosophy of Lao Tzu] (Peking, 1959), pp. 83 ff. For an interesting discussion of Fung's recent views, see Jan Yun-hua, "Problems of Tao and Tao Te Ching," *Numen* 22 (1975): 208-34. Chang Chung-yuan's views are found in his *Tao: A New Way of Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, Colophon Books, 1975), pp. vii-xxviii.

⁵ Chang, p. ix. For additional and very interesting comments from a Heideggerian perspective, see Charles Wei-hsun Fu, "Creative Hermeneutics: Taoist Metaphysics and Heidegger," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 3 (1976): 115-43.

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of Marx fully clarify the textual obscurities of the *Tao Te Ching*.⁶

The issue of possible approaches to such a magnificently recalcitrant and enigmatic text as the *Tao Te Ching* is precisely the problem I will be addressing in this paper. One way of stating this problem is that while the *Tao Te Ching* might be said to be philosophical in nature, or at least to employ some philosophical language, the text is more accurately described as nonconceptual and nonpropositional since symbolic (figurative or metaphorical) language predominates.⁷ The question necessarily becomes how one can “reduce” the ambiguity of symbolic discourse to conceptual expressions. There has been no lack of attempts to do this, Chang Chung-yuan and Charles Wei-hsun Fu’s work being two notable recent examples; but at the same time the outcome of these efforts, while helpful and insightful, is often less than fully satisfying.

Another, and I think a more ultimately fruitful approach would be one that makes use of a philosophical-analytical mode of interpretation, but also displays an appreciation for the mythological and religious context of meaning that seems so frequently to lie behind the particular articulation of images and themes found in the *Tao Te Ching*.⁸ There is certainly a hermeneutical advantage and necessity in seeking a philosophical articulation of figurative language; but there is also the need to take symbolic language at

⁶ Even the Chinese Marxists were rather critical of Fung’s attempts to find “dialectical materialism” in early Taoism (see Jan’s discussion of Fung’s critics in his “Problems of Tao and Tao Te Ching,” pp. 225–29).

⁷ See Charles Wei-hsun Fu’s discussion, “Lao-Tzu’s Conception of Tao,” *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 367–71; and Nai-tung Ting, “Laotzu: Semanticist and Poet,” *Literature: East and West* 14 (1970): 212–44.

⁸ This mode of interpretation is at least sporadically exemplified by the work of Ellen Marie Chen. See, for example, her articles: “Nothingness and the Mother Principle in Early Chinese Taoism,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1969): 391–405; “The Meaning of *te* in the *Tao Te Ching*: An Examination of the Concept of Nature in Chinese Taoism,” *Philosophy: East and West* 23 (1973): 457–70; “The Origin and Development of Being (*yu*) from Non-Being (*wu*) in *The Tao Te Ching*,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1973): 403–17; and “Is There a Doctrine of Physical Immortality in the *Tao Te Ching*?” *History of Religions* 12 (1973): 231–39. I should mention, however, that Chen’s articles are sometimes marred by a rather uncritical espousal of questionable, or at least controversial, theories (such as her references to an ancient Chinese matriarchical tradition and her penchant for Jungian speculations). But these are only minor cavils. More important are her substantial analytical discussions of early Taoist thought and especially the overall tone of her work which, in many respects constitutes an updating of some earlier unpopular, and unfortunately neglected, sinologists such as Karl Hentze, Edward Erkes, and Tu Erh-wei. Somewhat like Marcel Granet and Henri Maspero, these scholars are frequently prone to rather flamboyant speculation and methodological eccentricity; but it is certainly unfortunate that their works have been so completely spurned. Used cautiously, they constitute a valuable corpus of insightful analysis and suggestion. Along these lines, it is refreshing to see that Joseph Needham has been particularly open to a serious consideration of these scholars’ works.

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face value and consider the cultural and religious background involved in the use of certain images and themes. Despite the dangers of Paul Ricoeur's "hermeneutical circle," it must be recognized that symbol qua symbol initially gives rise to more symbols or thematic articulations of symbols—especially as a symbolic theme may point to an archaic context of story or myth.⁹ Therefore, in addition to allowing for an interpretation that can never be completely reduced or "raised to" a conceptual level, knowing some of the possible stories that lie behind the use of particular symbols helps to understand the philosophical implications of the text.

With respect to the *Tao Te Ching*, the importance of this observation is that it potentially allows for a "religious" as well as a philosophical meaning.¹⁰ Furthermore, a consideration of a possible mythological context of meaning need not be antithetical to the text's philosophical and ideological implications since it can be shown that mythological thought is not necessarily any less logical or "meaningful" than philosophy.¹¹ Indeed, mythology,

⁹ Paul Ricoeur's comments on what he refers to as the "circle" of hermeneutics are found in his book, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 347–57. For Ricoeur as a philosopher what is important is that the "symbol gives rise to thought" in the process of interpretation and the "understanding of symbols in symbols" eludes the "question of truth which only an additional philosophical analysis can provide." But as Ricoeur's own work on the symbolism and mythology of evil demonstrates, it is still necessary to approach symbol and myth as *initially* "giving rise" to more symbolism. This kind of analysis is represented by Mircea Eliade, the historian of religions whose works are a good example of a mode of understanding that "tends to place the symbols in a whole which is homogeneous with the symbols, but vaster, and which forms a system on the place of the symbols themselves." While coming at this issue from a different methodological perspective, I am reminded of Lévi-Strauss's observation that, like symbol, "myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at 'taking off' from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling" (*Structural Anthropology* [New York: Basic Books, 1963], p. 210). An illustration of my point from even another point of view has been made by the archaeologist, A. Marshak, who shows that Paleolithic markings are clearly symbolic in nature and also seem to demonstrate that a coherent theme, story, or myth is inherent in the symbols (see his *The Roots of Civilization: The Beginnings of Man's First Art, Symbol, and Notation* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972], pp. 169–340).

¹⁰ My use of the term "religious" is only meant to suggest the possible presence of a soteriological intentionality in the early Taoist texts. This does not necessarily imply the ideas of transcendence, immortality, or supernaturalism, since the "salvation" implied may be, in a sense, a medicinal, healing, or naturalistic (yet supranormal) transformation of the profane condition of man.

¹¹ This point has been made at least from the time of German Romanticism in the eighteenth century (see, for example, Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, comps., *The Rise of Modern Mythology* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972]; and Mircea Eliade's review article, "Myth in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973], 3:307–18). See also the work of M. Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, Torchbooks, 1968); and Victor Turner, "Myth and Symbol," in *International Encyclopedia of Social*

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especially creation mythology, is frequently the basis for the cosmological “first principles” of both Eastern and Western traditional philosophical systems.¹² J. Shih, for example, has stated that

as Plato and Aristotle opposed *theo-logos* to the mythical recitals of Homer and Hesiod, so Lao Tze and Chuang Chou substituted Taoism for a mythical tradition in ancient China. This means that Taoism is a philosophical reiteration of a religious tradition. Therefore, though it makes no explicit mention of revelation and faith one may still talk about its view on the relation between God and man. The question is only how to talk about it meaningfully. My supposition is that one cannot talk about it meaningfully without taking into account the mythical tradition for which it is a substitution.¹³

Shih, as a Jesuit priest writing in a document put out by the Roman Catholic *secretariatus pro non christianis*, is primarily concerned with showing the “fitness” of Taoism “as a vehicle of Christian revelation”;¹⁴ but this bias does not invalidate his initial supposition concerning the importance of myth for an understanding of Taoism. It may even be possible to go further and say that it is not so much a matter of a simple “substitution” of philosophy for myth but a disguised transformation that essentially preserves a mythological intentionality.¹⁵

To provide some focus on the aptness of this perspective I would like to take up the issue of the meaning of Tao as portrayed in two chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*. My reason for doing this is prompted by E. M. Chen’s observation that a basic failure on the part of many scholars is their assumption that “Taoism, like Confucianism, expounds a man-centered or ruler-centered (since the ruler is the model of his people, he is man par excellence) universe.” Chen continues, “but the *Tao Te Ching* does not expound a man-centered universe, it teaches naturalism (chap. 25).”¹⁶

This is simply to say that at the heart of the *Tao Te Ching* is an ontology rooted in a specific cosmological vision. Thus, Tao as the

Sciences, ed. David L. Sills (New York: Free Press, 1968), 10:576 ff. From a “structuralist” perspective, see C. Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology*, and R. Kirk, *Myth, Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

¹² For a discussion of this, see N. J. Girardot, “The Problem of Creation Mythology in the Study of Chinese Religion,” *History of Religions* 15 (1976): 310–15.

¹³ J. Shih, “God and Man in Early Taoism,” in *Religions, Fundamental Themes for a Dialogistic Understanding* (Rome: Editrice Ancora, 1970), pp. 261–62; see also his “The Ancient Chinese Cosmogony,” *Studia missionaria* 18 (1969): 111–30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264. While it would seem questionable to speak so assuredly of “God,” from a less Christian and a more neutral perspective it is surely possible to speak of “gods,” “revelation,” and “faith” in ancient China.

¹⁵ See Girardot, pp. 289–94, 310–15.

¹⁶ Chen, “The Meaning of *te* in *The Tao Te Ching*,” p. 463.

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cardinal principle of Taoist thought is primarily presented as a cosmological first principle, origin, or primordial ground and source of being; and, as noted by Chen and others, one of the clearest depictions of this particular cosmological context of meaning is found in chapters 25 and 42.¹⁷ Other important chapters such as 1, 4, and 52 (and many additional passages throughout the text and other Taoist works) also emphasize this same cosmological framework and will be brought into the discussion; but I want to make it clear that, while my focus is primarily on the possible cosmogonic underpinning of the Taoist ontology of Tao, the mythological imagery can also be shown to be thematically supportive of the overall individual, social, and ethical issues found in the text.

Rather than taking these cosmological speculations as only *sub specie aeternitatis*, I would like to show that it is revealing to see them rooted in a mythological creation theme—in particular, the story (or stories) of a cosmogonic chaos or what in Chinese is called *hun-tun*.¹⁸ Accordingly, it is not really so much an issue of two separate and antagonistic “hermeneutic versions of Lao Tzu’s cosmological thinking”: “*sub specie temporis* (in the literal sense),” where “Tao as Origin is taken to mean the real natural cause of the existence of all things (in the time process),” versus *sub specie aeternitatis*, where “no actual process of natural causation or evolution” is involved.¹⁹

First of all, a cosmological and/or cosmogonic understanding of Tao—*sub specie temporis*—need not be taken “in the literal sense” and certainly does not exclude a more universal ontological meaning. Another consideration is that this view betrays a rather narrow appreciation of the nature of creation myth since cosmogony need not necessarily imply a “creator” and may be essentially linked to the idea of cyclic or embryological growth.²⁰ Indeed, the creation theme suggested by the *Tao Te Ching* seems best clarified under the general typology of a chaos or world-egg myth wherein creation

¹⁷ See, for example, Fu, “Lao Tzu’s Conception of Tao,” pp. 372–79.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the *hun-tun* myth, see Chang Kwang-chih, “Chung-kuo ch’uang shih shen-hua chih fen-hsi yü ku shih yen-chiu” [Chinese creation myths: a study in method], *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, no. 8 (1959), pp. 55, 59, 61 ff.; and Lo Meng-Ts’e, “Shuo hun-tun yü chu-tzu ching-ch’uan chih yen ta-hsiang” [The primeval state and ideas of creation in early Chinese philosophy and classics], *Journal of Oriental Studies* (Hong Kong) 9 (January 1971–July 1971): 15–57, 230–305; see also Girardot, pp. 298–304.

¹⁹ Fu, “Lao Tzu’s Conception of Tao,” p. 377; see also Gellert Beky’s discussion in his *Die Welt des Tao* (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 1972), p. 133.

²⁰ See K. Bolle’s discussion of some of these points in his *The Freedom of Man in Myth* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), pp. 1–20; and Eliade, *Myth and Reality*.

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is self-contained and self-generated—the “idea of an organic process or a birth.”²¹

In the following analysis my procedure will be to show, first, that there is a specific cosmological scenario concerning the Tao exemplified most fully in chapters 25 and 42; and second, that this story of Tao as a creative principle is linked primarily to the theme of a cosmogonic chaos and reveals a code of language and syntax most closely associated with the “cardinal technical term” of *hun-tun*.²² I must emphasize that by so doing I am in most cases *not* dealing with pure myths, complete mythic units, or even with a single cosmogonic narrative; for it is apparent that the early Taoist texts drew upon a rather large and diverse body of archaic mythological traditions. Thus, there are a number of cosmogonic themes which give evidence of originating from different ancient local cultures; but, as the anthropologist Chang Kwang-chih has suggested, there is finally only a limited array of mythological “basic units” referred to in early Chinese literature, and these units in Taoist tradition seem to be manipulated and transformed in relation to an overall pattern that is most accurately described as the cosmogonic theme of chaos or *hun-tun*.²³

SYMBOL AND MYTH IN CHAPTERS 25 AND 42

A. CHAPTER 25

The first passage that must be examined critically for clues of an archaic creation mythology and the theme of chaos is found in chapter 25. The relevant section of this chapter is the following:

There was something chaotic yet complete [*yu wu hun ch'eng*],
Which existed before the creation [*sheng*] of heaven and earth.
Without sound and formless [*chi hsi liao hsi*],
It stands alone [*tu*] and does not change.
It pervades all [*t'ung hsing*] and is free from danger [or, “does not
tire,” *pu tai*];
It can be regarded then as the Mother of the world [*t'ien-hsia mu*].
I do not know its proper name [*ming*] but will call [*tzu*] it Tao.
If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great [*ta*].

²¹ Quoting Bolle, p. 20; see also Nai-tung Ting's discussion of “organic” imagery in the *Tao Te Ching* and, of course, J. Needham's discussion of the “organismic” nature of Taoist thought in his *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), vol. 2.

²² Needham, 2:107. He is especially concerned with the use of *hun-tun* as a technical sociological term for the Taoist idea of the Golden Age. This is certainly a factor; but, as I will be suggesting, it also seems to be supportive of the individual mystic ideal of an initiatory “return to the beginning” (*fu ch'i ch'u*) (see my “Returning to the Beginning” and the Arts of Mr. Hun-Tun in the *Chuang Tzu*,” forthcoming in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*).

²³ Chang Kwang-chih, pp. 51 ff.

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Great means “moving away” [*shih*].
“Moving away” means “far away” [*yüan*],
And “far away” means [ultimately] to return [*fan*].²⁴

The passage quoted presents us with a description of the Tao as a cosmic first principle, a description that is significantly put forth within a cosmogonic framework. In fact, it would seem that the first two verses of this chapter specifically indicate a creation mythology concerning the separation of the dual cosmological units of heaven and earth from a primordial chaos. There is, for example, an echo of this mythological scenario found in chapter 6 of the *Chuang Tzu* where it is said that “Before there was a heaven and Earth, it [*Tao*] unquestionably existed. It ‘gave spirit and life’ [*shen*] to all the spirits and gods [*kuei shen ti*] and gave birth to heaven and earth. It existed before the Supreme Ultimate [*t’ai-chi*], and yet you cannot call it lofty.”²⁵

The focus of concern in both the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* is basically with what precedes the creation of duality in the world. Most important is the technical equation of Tao with *hun*^a, or the mysterious condition of the Tao as the primordial source, principle, or “thing [*wu*” responsible for, and controlling, the bio-cosmic “birth” or “creation” of the ordinary phenomenal world.²⁶ We have, then, a description of a precosmic stage in the

²⁴ The text I am using (along with collected commentaries) is Chiang Hsi-ch’ang’s *Lao Tzu chiao-ku* [Lao Tzu collated and explained] (Taipei: Ming Lun, 1970); hereafter cited as *LTCK*. For translations I have relied primarily on Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963). See Chan also for the various textual and dating problems associated with the *Tao Te Ching* (pp. 35–93). The passage is found in *LTCK*, pp. 166–70. For the last three verses of this passage I am following Chen’s translation as found in her “Origin and Development of Being from Non-Being,” pp. 404–5.

²⁵ For the *Chuang Tzu* I am using the critical text found in the *Chuang Tzu yin-te* [Concordance to the Chuang Tzu], Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, suppl. 20 (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956); hereafter cited as *CCT*. For my translations, I have followed Burton Watson’s excellent renderings except where it has been necessary to alter them in line with my own interpretations (see *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1968]). For this passage see *CCT* 12/16/29–30 and Watson, p. 81. *T’ai-chi* is the great “ridge-pole” or cosmic axis between the two things of heaven and earth. There are numerous mythological implications here, and for its later philosophical elaboration see Siu-chi Huang, “The Concept of T’ai-chi (Supreme Ultimate) in Sung Neo-Confucian Philosophy,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1 (1974): 275–94. It should also be noted that the first part of the passage states that the Tao, like the chaotic, shapeless *hun-tun* of the *Chuang Tzu* chap. 7, is *wu wei wu hsing*, “actionless and without shape.”

²⁶ Munro (*Concept of Man in Early China* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967], p. 120) feels that in the *Tao Te Ching* the cosmogonic idea of the Tao as a “mother” or “ancestor” who gives “birth” (*sheng*) to the world is replaced in the *Chuang Tzu* with the more philosophical idea of the Tao acting as the principle behind the endless changing of things. As Munro says, “in the *Chuang Tzu* ‘transformation’ (*hua*) replaces ‘production’ (*sheng*).” While this may be said to be a generally accurate observation with regard to the technical use of the terms

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overall creative life process of the universe, a stage where there was as of yet no separate existence of the phenomenal world. It was a stage that was a perfect, total, or complete (*ch'eng*) fusion of all things. It was the stage or condition of cosmic totality referred to here as that which is *hun ch'eng*; and I should point out that this reference may betray a textual corruption or interpolation for the term *hun-tun*—"des Chaos Urheberin" as Erkes puts it.²⁷ In any case, Chiang Hsi-ch'ang points out that Tao is specifically linked to the term *hun*^a (and by implication, *hun-tun*) in the *Tao Te Ching*.²⁸

There is additional internal evidence in this chapter as well as corroborating testimony from other texts that indicate the mythological context of the passage. Thus in this chapter and in several other chapters (see chaps. 1, 52, 20, and 59) the Tao is called the "mother [*mu*]" of the world,²⁹ which is reflective of numerous

hua and *sheng* in the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*, the theory of the Tao as pure change or transformation still seems to be essentially founded upon the mythological idea of the Tao's creative power for "giving certain ideological differences in terms of emphasis and attitude in the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* (for a discussion of some of these differences, see pp. 118–21).

²⁷ E. Erkes, "Spuren einer kosmogonischen Mythe bei Lao-tse," *Artibus Asiae* 8 (1940): 16–35; and Needham, 2: 78. Most significantly, Erkes attempts to show a connection with a cosmic egg cosmogony—"... die Vorstellung vom 'Chaos' hun-tun . . . mit der vom Weltei identifiziert" (p. 30). Erkes also makes the point that in chap. 25 of the *Tao Te Ching* the expression *hun-ch'eng* is most likely corrupt since "the compound *hun-ch'eng* permits but still another construction, namely with the genitive particle [*hun chih ch'eng*=*hun-tun chih ch'eng tsao che*] 'des Chaos Urheberin.' Therefore, the original sense of the verse was: 'There was a Thing that laid the Cosmic Egg and that preceded the birth of Heaven and Earth'" (p. 35).

²⁸ Chiang Hsi-ch'ang, *LTCK*, p. 166. In his commentary on chap. 20 where the Taoist sage is described as having the "mind of an idiot [*yü*]" and the condition of "chaos and dullness [*tun tun . . . hun hun*]," Chiang quotes Ssu-ma Kuang (*Tao Te Ching Shu-Yao*) as saying this refers specifically to the condition of the mythological Hun-tun as seen in the *Chuang Tzu* (*LTCK*, p. 133). Chiang also notes that the reference to the sage ruler having his mind "chaotically unified [*hun ch'i hsin*]" found in chap. 49 can be connected thematically to the *tun-tun hun-hun* passage of chap. 20 (*LTCK*, pp. 306–8). I should also mention that the homophonic identification of *hun*^b found in chap. 20 with *hun*^a is also supported by semantic analogies. Thus, *hun*^b is related to *hun*^c and suggests the idea of "stupidity, confused, or dull." Many of these terms related to the idea of *hun-tun* seem to suggest the important theme of the *wu-chih* (see *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 3), condition of the Taoist (see *LTCK*, p. 133).

²⁹ See, for example, Chen, "Nothingness and the Mother Principle," pp. 391–405. Chap. 52 is significant in that it explicitly refers to the idea of the Mother in a cosmogonic context and then goes on to apply this understanding to the methods of returning to the Tao used by the individual Taoist. That is, the Taoist "blocks the passages and shuts the doors" and reduplicates the cosmic processes established at the beginning. Man is instructed to "return and hold to the Mother," which is a way of "returning to the light." This is called *hsi ch'ang*. It is significant that *hsi*^a may also be read as *hsi*^b. Chap. 27 uses the technical expression of *hsi-ming*, "following" or "unifying" the light (see *LTCK*, p. 184). These terms are connected with the idea of primordial unity or the condition of *hun-tun*. For example, the

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mythologies where creation involves a cosmic ancestral giant, animal, or Great Mother that spawns a male and female offspring who in turn incestuously engender the human world.³⁰ Another frequent mythological form of this same idea of the Tao's motherhood, and one that appears close to the intention of the Taoist texts, is the idea of a primal ancestral bird, snake, or fish that lays a cosmic egg which subsequently splits open, giving rise to the dual principles of the cosmos.³¹

Many of these considerations are reiterated in chapter 1 which, along with chapters 25 and 42, is one of the most important presentations of the Tao in a cosmological framework. It is said there that

The tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao [*ch'ang tao*].
The name that can be named [*ming*] is not the eternal name.
The nameless [*wu ming*] is the origin of heaven and earth.
The named [*yu ming*] is the mother of the Ten Thousand Things [the phenomenal world].³²

Here there is a technical use of the expressions of *wu ming* and *yu ming* (or *wu^b* and *yu*) which, as seen especially in the commentary of Wang Pi, refer, respectively, to the philosophical notions of

Huai Nan Tzu says *t'ien ti chih hsi ching wei yin yang* (the unification of the essence of Heaven and Earth gave rise to *yin* and *yang*) which specifically links the idea of *hsi* to a cosmogonic context of meaning (see *LTCK*, p. 325). Chap. 59 also relates the idea of the Mother to specific techniques of returning to the Tao. Chan is wary of ascribing any particular mystical significance to these terms; but it would seem that from the overall context of interpretation such a meaning is possible and even probable (for his views, see *Chan*, pp. 205–6).

³⁰ See, for example, Charles Long's discussion of some of these mythologies in his *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1963), pp. 37 ff.

³¹ Erkes on rather meager speculative grounds was the first to suggest these parallels (see Erkes, pp. 16–35). I should note that in the *Shan Hai Ching hun-tun* is specifically identified as a mythological "Divine Bird [*shen niao*]" whose body is like a yellow sack, red as a burning fire, who has six legs and four wings. It is Hun-Tun, having no face, no eyes [*wu mien mu*] but it is very good at singing and dancing. In reality, this Bird is no other than the god Chiang" (quoting from T. Izutsu, *Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism* [Tokyo: Keio Institute, 1967], 2:18–19). The *Tz'u Hai*, quoting the *Shen I Ching*, says that *hun-tun* was an animal that lived on the K'un-lun mountains. Erkes feels that Ti Chiang is related to Ti Hung, and it is therefore significant that the *Tso Chuan* (sec. 6) reports that Huang Ti was the son of the legendary Ti Hung (see Erkes, p. 30; B. Karlgren, "Legends and Cults in Ancient China," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* [Stockholm], no. 18 [1946], p. 253). The *Tso Chuan* also says in sec. 18 that "the emperor Ti Hung shih had an untalented son . . . the people of all the worlds called him Hun Tun" (Karlgren, p. 247).

³² *LTCK*, pp. 2–3. On some of the problems concerning the punctuation and translation of these lines, see J. J. L. Duyvendak, *Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way and Its Virtue* (London: John Murray, 1954), p. 21. They could also be read as "non-being is named the origin of heaven and earth. Being is named the mother of the Ten Thousand Things."

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“non-being” and “being.”³³ But regardless of the philosophical specificity of these terms, it would seem that there is still a strong attachment to a mythological theme concerning the primordality of the Tao as the origin of heaven and earth and the source of the phenomenal world. What is confusing in the isolation of this chapter is that the period before the creation of the profane cosmos (the “Ten Thousand Things”) includes a number of creative stages—stages or phases that are still generally a part of that which in chapter 25 is whole or “chaotically complete.” Therefore, that which is the primordial Tao is both nameless and formless, yet can be named with a series of mythologically significant terms like “mother,” “chaos,” and other more abstract metaphysical terminology like “nothingness” (*wu*^b), “great” (*ta*), “empty” (*hsü*), and “one” (*i*).

The “named” as mother of the Ten Thousand Things and the “nameless” as the origin of the duality of Heaven and Earth are still to be considered as part of the original “chaotic” process of creation at the beginning. Heaven and Earth have been given a preliminary cosmological shape or form, but there is still a perfect harmonious connection or fusion between the two. They are that “one thing” of chaotic wholeness before the creation of the world. This is indicated by what follows in the remaining verses:

These [*wu*^b and *yu*] proceed from the same source [*t’ung*^a], yet
have different names.
Both together [*t’ung*^a, the unity of *wu*^b and *yu*] are called the
dark [*hsüan*].
Dark and even darker,
It is the gate of all hidden-wonders [*miao*].³⁴

The original condition of the “dark [*hsüan*]” which is the source of both *wu*^b and *yu* is something that is already alive and displays

³³ See Chan’s discussion of this in his *Way of Lao Tzu* (pp. 97–98) and, especially, Chen’s comments, in “Origin and Development of Being from Non-Being” (p. 411) (see also A. Link, “Taoist Antecedents of Tao-an’s Prajna Ontology,” *History of Religions* 9 [November 1969–February 1970]: 181–215). Link says that the “cosmological significance of *yu* and *wu*^b is of primary importance: *Wu* was frequently used in Taoist texts to designate that primal undifferentiated state which preceded the later state of manifested things (*yu*), or else it referred to the perpetual alternation of the absence of something (*wu*^b) as contrasted to the presence of something (*yu*)” (p. 187). Therefore, the idea of *hun-tun* seems to be related to the idea of *wu*^b since “it signified a primal unity in which, as it were, both existence and non-existence lay fused and undifferentiated. This unitive state was not, however, a mere ‘nothing’ for it contained all future possibilities for world manifestation” (p. 188). For an overall discussion of *yu* and *wu*^b, see A. C. Graham, “Being in Western Philosophy Composed with *Shih/fei* and *Yu/wu* in Chinese Philosophy,” *Asia Major* 7 (1959): 79–112.

³⁴ *LTCK*, p. 10.

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an internal self-generated life of creative movement.³⁵ The true mystery of this primordial life is exactly its clouded fusion, totality, or fluid unity of all separate things—the condition that is here referred to as *t'ung*^a.

It is interesting that this important term of *t'ung*^a, which in later Chinese tradition is the basis for the Chinese idea of the paradise time (*ta-t'ung*),³⁶ is related in the *Chuang Tzu* (chap. 12) to the Taoist's goal of identifying himself with the condition of the creation time: "Being identical [*t'ung*^a], you will be empty [*hsü*]; being empty, you will be great [*ta*]. You may join [*ho*] in the cheeping and chirping and, when you have joined in the cheeping and chirping, you may join with Heaven and Earth."³⁷ The terminology of *t'ung*^a, *hsü*, *ho*, and *ta* is frequently related to a cosmogonic context of meaning in the *Chuang Tzu*, but even more significant is the fact that this passage opens with an explicit reference to the creation time similar to those seen in chapters 1, 25, and 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*: "In the Great Beginning [*t'ai-ch'u*], there was nothing [*wu*^b]. There was no being [*yu*] and no names. Out of it arose one. It was one, but it had no form [*wei hsing*]."³⁸ This passage characteristically concludes with a description of the unique condition of reunification (*ho* or *t'ung*^a) with the Tao in terms that are parallel to the reference in the *Tao Te Ching* to the condition of *hsüan-t'ung*. Indeed, in the final verses of this passage from chapter 12 of the *Chuang Tzu* the emphatic and reduplicated use of the terminology evokes the sound and mystery of the *hun-tun* condition. It reads: "Your reunification, how chaotic [*ho hun hun*]! Like you were stupid [*yü*]! Like you were chaotically demented [*hun*^b]! This is called the Dark Virtue

³⁵ For the range of meanings associated with *hsüan*, see Peter A. Boodberg, "Philological Notes on Chapter One of the Lao Tzu," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20 (1957): 600–601 (see also Chen's discussion in "Origins and Development of Being from Non-Being," pp. 407–8).

³⁶ For a general discussion of the idea of paradise, see Wolfgang Bauer, *China und die Hoffnung auf Glück* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1971), and for the specific relation of the "paradise lost" theme to the term *hun-tun*, see Needham, 2:107–20 (Needham translates *hun-tun* as "social homogeneity").

³⁷ *CCT* 30/12/39–40, and Watson, p. 132. The verse ("cheeping and chirping"), which is suggestive of the sounds of a hatching egg, is reminiscent of Ho-shang kung's commentary on chap. 1 of the Tao: The "eternal name" of the Tao is "like a chicken that has not yet broken through [the eggshell]" (see E. Erkes, *Ho-Shang-Kung's Commentary on the Lao-tse* [Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1958], p. 13). As I will suggest throughout this article, the allusions to egg symbolism and various embryological motifs seem significant in relation to the theme of *hun-tun* as linked to a cosmic egg mythology.

³⁸ *CCT* 30/12/37–38, and Watson, p. 131.

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[*hsüan-te*] whereby you are reunified with the Great Unity [*ta-shun*].”³⁹

In reference to the above mentioned term, *hsüan-t'ung*, and its relation to the creation theme of chaos, it is necessary to examine chapters 15 and 56 of the *Tao Te Ching*. Thus, chapter 15 opens with a description of the paradise time when men were in perfect harmony with the Tao: “In ancient times those who were masters of the Tao were mysteriously and darkly complete [*wei miao hsüan-t'ung*]. [They] are too profound to be understood [today].”⁴⁰ It is important to note that the men of Tao who lived in the paradise time are said to possess the preternatural attributes of *wei miao* (which can be related to the cosmogonic descriptions of the primordial Tao throughout the *Tao Te Ching*) and also of *hsüan-t'ung*^a which would seem to refer to the unique experience of being one with the Tao. That this interpretation is not unwarranted is indicated by a corresponding reference in chapter 56 where it is stated that to know the Tao one must

Close the mouth,
Shut the doors,
Blunt the sharpness;
Untie the tangles,
Blend [*ho*] the light,
and unify [*t'ung*^a] with the dusty world.
This is called *hsüan-t'ung*^b.⁴¹

This motif of “closing and shutting” the sense organs in order to return to an identification with the Tao is especially reminiscent of the famous *hun-tun* passage in chapter 7 of the *Chuang Tzu*, where it is suggested that the primordial condition of perfect unity was lost when Emperor Hun-Tun was bored with the holes of face.⁴² The implication there, as well as in this passage from the

³⁹ CCT 30/12/40–41, and Watson, p. 132. Reading *hun^c-hun^c* for *ming-ming*. The technical expression of *ta-shun* has already been noted in the *Tao Te Ching* (chap. 65). *Shun*^a is related to the sound series that includes a number of terms related to the theme of *hun-tun*: *shun*^b meaning “pure, simple, great, in harmony” (also pronounced as *ch'un*), *shun*^c or *ch'un* meaning “pure, genuine, honest, rich, fertile.”

⁴⁰ LTCK, pp. 85–87. The last part of chap. 15 is also significant in that it continues by describing the *hsüan-t'ung* condition of the Taoist as being “chaotic [*hun*^a], like turbid waters [*chuo*].”

⁴¹ LTCK, pp. 345–46.

⁴² CCT 21/7/33–35, and Watson, p. 97. See also CCT 26–27/11/28–44 and 27–28/11/44–57 (Watson, pp. 118–22) where the “perfect tao” is described as “chaotic and silent [*hun hun mei mei*]”—“when the eye does not see, the ear does not hear, and the mind does not know, then your spirit will protect the body, and the body will enjoy long life.” Even more interesting is the passage from the following story (CCT 27–28/11/44–57) of Hung Meng who was “hopping around like a sparrow”: “You have only to rest in inaction and things will transform themselves. Smash your form and body, spit out hearing and eyesight, forget you are a thing among other things, and you may join in great unity with the deep and boundless. Undo the mind, slough off spirit, be blank and soulless, and the ten thousand

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Tao Te Ching, is that the Taoist seeks to reverse that original event and re-attain the paradise condition of *hun-tun*, *hun-ch'eng*, or *hsüan-t'ung*.

In fact, Ch'en Ming-chia feels that the use of the term *hsüan* is related to the pronunciation and use of *hun* and that the technical expression of *hsüan-tung*^b for the mystic experience of identification with the Tao is primarily suggestive of the mythological theme of *hun-tun*.⁴³ Moreover, it would seem that the *hsüan-t'ung*^a of chapter 15 is to be equated with the *hsüan-t'ung*^b of chapter 56 and that both may be considered as variants of the theme of *hun-tun*.

The semantic and phonetic identification of *t'ung*^a with *t'ung*^b and consequently with the cosmogonic theme of *hun-tun* is further demonstrated by other passages in the *Chuang Tzu* (chap. 10) where *t'ung*^a is used in the sense of the paradise time of cosmic harmony.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, the *Huai Nan Tzu* makes use of these same identifications so that in chapter 10 the paradise time before the creation of the profane world is referred to as either *tung-t'ung* or *hsüan-t'ung*^b,⁴⁵ and in chapter 14 it is said that "The mysterious unity [*tung-t'ung*] of heaven and earth chaotically [*hun-tun*] constitutes [the condition] of the uncarved block [*p'u*]. It has not created, yet is complete with things. It is called the primal one [*t'ai-i*]." ⁴⁶

An additional perspective on this chapter is also provided by the recently discovered "silk manuscript" text known as the *Tao Yüan*. This is a very short text (464 characters) apparently of the Former Han dynasty Huang-Lao tradition of Taoism. Its importance is that it stresses the cosmogonic significance of the Tao as the "origin [*yüan*]" of the world and, in this sense, reads almost like a direct commentary on chapter 25 (and 42), although the *hun-tun*

things one by one will return to the root—return to the root and not know why. Dark and undifferentiated chaos [*hun hun tun tun*—to the end of life none will depart from it. But if you try to know it, you have already departed from it. Do not ask what its name is, do not try to observe its form. Things will live naturally and of themselves [*tsu sheng*]." I should recall that the mythologically relevant section from the *Shan Hai Ching* describes Hun-tun as a faceless bird-monster who dances and sings (see n. 31 above).

⁴³ Ch'en Meng-chia, *Lao Tzu fen-shih* [Lao Tzu explained analytically] (Chung-king: n.p., 1945), p. 6 (see also *LTCK*, p. 346).

⁴⁴ *CCT* 29/10/27 and Watson, pp. 111–12.

⁴⁵ See *Huai Nan Tzu chu shih* [Commentary and explanation of the *Huai Nan Tzu*] annotated by Kao Yu (ca. 168–212) (Taipei: Hua Tien Publishing Co., 1968), p. 153; hereafter cited as *HNTCS*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 235. In chap. 6 of the *Huai Nan Tzu* there is a similar passage that reads "*t'ien hsia hun erk wei i*"; and Kao Yu comments that the "One" is to be identified with *hun-t'ung*. Chap. 6 concludes with a characteristic golden age passage that is called the time of *ta-t'ung hun-ming* (see *HNTCS*, pp. 97–98).

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terminology is not used. Thus in almost a paraphrase of chapter 25, this text opens with lines which expand on the chaos condition of the primordial Tao and emphasize the theme of primal unity (*t'ung*^a):

At the beginning of eternal past,
All things penetrated and were identical
with great vacuity [*t'ung t'ung ta hsü*].
Vacuous, same and became one,
Resting at the one eternally.
Moist and chaotic [*shih shih meng meng*],
There is no distinction of dark and light. . . .
From the ancient times it [*Tao*] had no form;
It penetrated greatly but was nameless [*ta t'ung wei ming*].⁴⁷

To return now to the examination of chapter 25, I only want to remark on a few other significant descriptive factors found in this chapter and repeated in a technical sense throughout other passages. Thus, there are a number of terms used in an exclamatory manner suggestive of some of the particular attributes of the Tao as that which is *hun ch'eng*. It is declared to be, and many of these are linked with the chaos themes, "without sound and form [*chi . . . liao . . .*]"; it "pervades all [*t'ung hsing*] and is free from danger [*pu tai*]," "stands alone [*tu*]"—expressions repeatedly used to refer to the unique condition of the Tao during the creation time, its "darkness" and "hiddenness" (*hsüan* and *miao*).

Furthermore, here and also in chapter 1 there is reference to the fact that the Tao is a living thing—it moves, changes, pervades, gives birth, yet paradoxically remains whole by constantly regenerating itself without alteration, without consumption or exhaustion. That is why it is called the "constant" or "eternal" Tao, the *ch'ang tao*. There is an internal temporal process that is a manifestation of a cyclic pattern of creative activity or life-giving force. The Tao in its primordial condition of chaotic fusion "goes out" (*shih* or *ch'u* in chap. 2) giving birth to all phenomenal things, finally reaching an apogee of movement (*yüan* or *chiao* in chap. 1) at which point it reverses itself and "returns" (*fan*) to the condition that was present at the beginning (the condition of *hun-ch'eng*, *hsüan-t'ung*, or *hun-tun*).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The Chinese text is found in *Wen-wu* 10 (1974): 42; and the *Po-shu Lao-Tzu*, p. 235. For a translation and discussion of this text, see Jan Yün-hua, "The Silk Manuscripts on Taoism," forthcoming in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. With some emendation, I have followed Jan's translation.

⁴⁸ See especially Chen's discussion of the four stages of the Tao's going out and return in "Origin and Development of Being from Non-Being" (pp. 404–16). The "Huan Tao" (the round Tao) chapter of the *Lü-shih ch'un ch'iu* is pertinent to this discussion (see Jan, "Problems of Tao," p. 221).

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This law of cyclic return is that which is ultimately characteristic of the Tao's creative activity and enduring presence in the world. It is the mode of creative function established by the harmonious interaction of duality during the period of the *hun-tun* time (as will be seen in the discussion of chap. 42). As chapter 40 says

Returning[*fan*] is the movement of the Tao.

.....
The Ten Thousand Things of the world are born from that which
has being [*yu*].

That which has being is born from that which is non-being [*wu*].⁴⁹

To summarize some of what can be ascertained from this important chapter, I should recall first of all that the Tao is expressly described within a cosmogonic context of meaning which is associated with a number of analogous, and mythologically suggestive, themes. The primary descriptive reference for the Tao in this cosmogonic sense is the term *hun*^a (*hun ch'eng* or *hun-tun*) which is a primordial condition of cosmic totality or unity (*t'ung*^a). It can also be called the mother (*mu*), the great (*ta*), the dark (*hsüan*), or the eternal (*ch'ang*), since it operates spontaneously (*tzu-jan*) and continuously to give birth and life to all things.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *LTCK*, p. 265. See also chap. 16 for the idea of "return." In chap. 16 the term *fu-kuei* is used. Chap. 28 uses the expression *fu kuei yü p'u*. In the *Chuang Tzu* a constant refrain is *fu ch'i ch'u* or "return to the beginning."

⁵⁰ The last four verses on chap. 25 state that "man patterns himself on earth, / Earth patterns itself on heaven, / Heaven patterns itself on Tao; / And Tao is spontaneously patterned of itself [*tao chih tzu-jan*]" (*LTCK*, p. 173). One of the most characteristic descriptions of the "life" of the Tao is that it is completely self-generated and returning in on itself, going out and coming back in a completely spontaneous and creative way. Its basic rule and pattern of life is its utter self-contained freedom of movement, its *tzu-jan*, which constitutes in Taoism one of the most important technical terms of the perfect freedom of pure spontaneity and naturalness attained through an identification with the Tao. To be *tzu-jan* is to have the wholeness and freedom that was present at the beginning, to be completely "self-so" in that all actions and thoughts are generated internally and spontaneously in harmony with the organic law of cosmic life itself. It seems probable that the important idea of *wu-wei* represents the individual Taoist's identification with, and emulation of, the cosmic life and spontaneity and naturalness (*tzu-jan*) of the Tao. Thus, the return to the condition of *hun-tun* implies a certain kind of conduct that emulates the unique life order and freedom of the primordial Tao—its *tzu-jan*. Generally, *wu-wei* may be interpreted in the sense of a "purposeless" or "disinterested" mode of action in distinction to the "willful" action (*wei*) emphasized within Confucian tradition (see Munro [n. 26 above], pp. 142, 144). But this kind of simple contrast would seem to be reflective of deeper mythological and religious issues. Schipper, for example, has noted that, inasmuch as *wu-wei* must be seen as a mode of conduct modeled on a strict conformity with the cosmogonic order of *tzu-jan*, the "alternatives between the Confucian ideology and the Taoist attitude could just as well turn out to be the difference between two different cosmologies," (quoting from "Rapporteur's Notes of the Bellagio Conference," Xerox [American Council of Learned Societies, Committee on the Study of Chinese Civilization, 1968], pp. 21–22). In other words, the difference may proceed from the differing conceptions of the ultimate meaning of life and order seen in Taoism and Confucianism. For a discussion of some of the problems associated with the important

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B. CHAPTER 42

An important consideration in the analysis of chapter 42 is that the explicit use of the precise terminology of *hun-tun* is not crucial,⁵¹ since in the *Tao Te Ching* and the other early Taoist texts there seems to be a rather elaborate code of variant symbolism (frequently related to semantic, syntactic, or homophonic analogies) evincing a consistent story of the Tao as that mythological chaos condition, time, or thing before the creation of the profane cosmos.⁵² Therefore, while chapter 42 does not make use of the term *hun-tun* or its close variants it does present us with the clearest account of a cosmology evocative of an archaic mythological creation story. In fact, Needham, Erkes, Kaltenmark, and others have pointed this out and have suggested that this chapter is basically a philosophical embodiment, or transformation, of a “cosmogonic myth.”⁵³ Thus, it is important to consider the cosmological scenario depicted here in relation to those chapters specifically referring to the theme of the primordial *hun-tun* condition. The passage in question is as follows:

The Tao gave birth to the one [*tao sheng i*].
The one gave birth to the two.
The two gave birth to the three,
And the three gave birth to the Ten Thousand Things.
The Ten Thousand Things carry *yin*,
And embrace *yang*;
And achieve harmony by the mixing of *ch'i* [*ch'ung ch'i i wei ho*].⁵⁴

An initial problem in dealing with this passage is that there appear to be several corruptions and possible anachronisms. It seems, for example, that the terms *yin* and *yang* did not come into

technical term of *tzu-jan*, see *ibid.*, pp. 27 ff. Also see Link, pp. 196–97, 215. There may also be a connection here with the philosophical idea of the “Self-sufficient (*ta-ch'üan*)” (see Lo Meng-t'se [n. 18 above], pp. 50 ff.).

⁵¹ In the *Tao Te Ching* the specific terms *hun*^a and *tun* are used six times (see chaps. 14, 15, 20, 25, and 49). This term or its more usual compound form of *hun-tun* (and its close variants) are even more quantitatively significant in texts like the *Chuang Tzu* and *Huai Nan Tzu*.

⁵² Some of these I have already noted (such as *t'ung*^a and *hun*^b). There are many other close phonetic variants of the double phoneme *hun-tun* (and these are terms also analogous in terms of mythological significance) i.e., *k'un-lun* (*Chuang Tzu*), *hun-lun* (*Lieh Tzu*), *k'ung-t'ung* (*Chuang Tzu*), *hung-tung*, (*Huai Nan Tzu*), *hsüan t'ung*, (*Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*, *Huai Nan Tzu*), and *tung-t'ung* (*Huai Nan Tzu*). For a discussion of the semantic and linguistic significance of such terms in relation to B. Karlgren's idea of Chinese “word families,” see R. Stein, “Jardins en miniature d'extrême-orient,” *Bulletin de l'école française d'Extrême-Orient* 42 (1942): 53–54.

⁵³ See, for example, Needham (n. 21 above), 2:78.

⁵⁴ *LTCK*, pp. 278–80 (including relevant Chinese commentaries).

technical use until a somewhat later period.⁵⁵ Moreover, the first verse is possibly garbled because of the reference to the “Tao giving birth to the one,” since throughout the rest of the *Tao Te Ching* the Tao is ordinarily identified with the one (see chaps. 10, 14, 22, 39).⁵⁶ Indeed, concerning this last point, the *Huai Nan Tzu* quotes this passage and the opening verse is omitted.⁵⁷

Despite these considerations, it is important to recognize that there is a long Chinese tradition of commentary concerning this passage and that it is often seen to be the very crux of early Taoist ideology and cosmology.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the cosmological theory found in this chapter is “common to nearly all Chinese philosophical schools,”⁵⁹ including the early cosmological speculations of the *I Ching* down to Chu Hsi and the formulations of Neo-Confucianism. What is more important here, however, is not that this theory, which is already abstract and philosophical in nature, forms a backdrop for nearly all of early Chinese cosmological thought, but that it is used by the Taoists in a specific context of interpretation and application. As Erkes notes, it is especially in the Taoist tradition that the archaic mythological and religiously relevant character of this passage is preserved and emphasized.⁶⁰

By way of a preliminary analysis, the puzzling issue of the meaning of the “one, two, and three” must be addressed. This is more difficult than it might seem, for superficially traditional commentarial opinion holds that the “one” refers to the Tao or the *T'ai-shih* (the “Great Beginning”), the “two” to the heaven and earth (or *yin* and *yang*, *wu* and *yu*), and the “three” to the basic triad of Heaven, Earth, and man.⁶¹ It must be said, however, that

⁵⁵ Ordinarily, the use of the terms *yin* and *yang* in a technical sense is attributed to Tsou Yen (fourth century B.C.); but as John Major notes: “the genius of Tsou Yen and his school down to and including the academy of Liu An, Prince of Huainan, must be seen *not* as the creation of the cosmological doctrine of Warring States Early Han China, but rather their organization into a clear, coherent, and comprehensive philosophy . . .” (see his “Topography and Cosmology in Early Han Thought: Chapter Four of the *Huai-nan-tzu*” [Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1973], chap. 3, pp. 33–34).

⁵⁶ For an interesting discussion of Tao in relation to the idea of “one,” see Chen, “Origin and Development of Being from Non-Being,” pp. 409–10. See also *LTCK*, p. 252, where Chiang Hsi-ch'ang specifically identifies the one of chap. 39 with the cosmogonic idea of the Tao and one found in chap. 42 (see also the Ta-yüeh chapter of the *Lü shih ch'un-ch'iu*, discussed in Jan, “Problems of Tao,” pp. 221–22).

⁵⁷ *HNTCS*, p. 99, line 13b.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Erkes's list of relevant commentary (“Spuren einer kosmogonischen Mythe,” pp. 16–28).

⁵⁹ Chan, p. 176.

⁶⁰ Erkes, “Spuren einer kosmogonischen Mythe,” p. 28.

⁶¹ *LTCK*, p. 279 (see also Fu's discussion, “Lao Tzu's Conception of Tao,” pp. 376–79).

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with such an interpretation we are dealing primarily with Confucian (and Neo-Taoist) inspired speculation.

An approach more in harmony with the “naturalism” of the *Tao Te Ching* suggests the strong possibility that the numerical symbolism of one, two, and three is rooted in associations more archaic and mythological in nature. Thus, based on the cosmological context found throughout the *Tao Te Ching*, the idea of the one would seem to be basically analogous to that primordial chaotic condition at the beginning which is variously called *hun ch'eng*, *ch'ang Tao*, mother, or what the *Chuang Tzu* refers to as the “great unity” (*ta-t'ung*)—that which gives birth to the separate dual principles classically called either heaven and earth or *yin* and *yang*.⁶² In fact, the theme of one is specifically linked to the term *hun*^a in chapter 14 of the *Tao Te Ching* where it is said that the “three things” of the mysterious Tao (its “dimness [*i*],” “soundless [*hsi*],” and “formless [*wei*]” qualities) are “chaotically fused into the one [*hun erh wei i*].”⁶³ Chiang Hsi-ch'ang comments on this passage to the effect that the reference to the chaotic “oneness” of the Tao goes back to the cosmogonic theme whereby at the time of the great beginning (the *t'ai-ch'u*), before heaven and earth were separated, there was only that primordial condition of wholeness (*t'ung*^a) without any particular sound, form, or substance. This is what throughout the *Tao Te Ching* is known as the *Ch'ang Tao* which is without any name (*wu-ming*) or shape (*wu-hsing*)⁶⁴—the amorphous, faceless condition of the mythological Emperor Hun-tun in chapter 7 of the *Chuang Tzu*.

⁶² Kaltenmark in his “La Naissance du monde en Chine,” *La Naissance du monde* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959), p. 464, says that “We have there [i.e., chap. 42] a conception of origins still very close to mythology: Heaven and Earth are conceived as the Father and Mother of creatures.—The One is clearly a more abstract designation for chaos which is itself generally described as being an undifferentiated state, the One of the primordial Breath. ‘One’ means also ‘total’: it was a time when there was nothing other than chaotic Unity.”

⁶³ *LTCK*, pp. 76–78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78. It is worth noting that another technical use of the idea of “one” is found in the expression *pao-i*—“embracing the one” or to return to an identity with the Tao as the source of life. Thus, the term *pao-i* is found in chap. 10 where it has the initiatory connotation of returning to the condition of the child. In chap. 19 there is found the similar term of *pao-p'u* and in chap. 39 the term *te-i*. Another related term would be *shou-chung* found in chap. 5. In chap. 22 it is said that the “sage embraces the one” (*pao-i*), and in this case it specifically indicates the condition of being identified with the Tao. For a discussion of the mythic and religious significance of some of these terms, see M. Kaltenmark, “Ling-Pao: Note sur un terme du taoïsme religieux,” *Mélanges publiés par l'institute des hautes études chinoises* (Paris: University of France, 1960), 2:581–82, 585–86. As a further demonstration of the linkage of these terms it is worth noting the commentary of Sung Ch'ang-hsing on chap. 10 of the *Tao Te Ching*: “This chapter of the classic says in the first sentence ‘to embrace the one [*pao-i*].’ This is the tao of

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This interpretation is in keeping with the traditional understanding as, for example, put forth by Fung Yu-lan;⁶⁵ but the real problem is to decide the nature of the three or the “third term” which is said to give rise to the phenomenal universe of the Ten Thousand Things. In distinction to the Confucian-inspired interpretation of this as “man” (man-king-emperor being the mediating factor between the hierarchical structure of the universe constituted by Heaven and Earth or the dual principles of *yin* and *yang*),⁶⁶ the Taoists maintained a less humanistically inclined and more ultimately cosmocentric interpretation. Consequently, it would seem that it is wrong to attribute any particularly human characteristics to the idea of the three.⁶⁷

Granting that in the sequence of creation presented here it is not until after the creation of the three that there is the final creation of the phenomenal world, it would seem legitimate to consider the state of the three as a phase of creation still in some manner partaking of the original condition of primordial unity represented by the one. The implication is that throughout the cosmogonic process of movement from one to two to three there is a paradise condition that duplicates the harmony of absolute unity. In a mythological sense the one, two, and three are all part of an inter-

embracing the origin and holding to unity [*pao yüan shou i*]. If one is able to embrace the origin and hold to unity, then one's spirit will be natural, will be carried along and will not be separated. If it is carried along and is not separated, then one's true breath will necessarily concentrate in the one. And if it concentrates in the one, his breath will certainly become soft and compliant. He can therefore be compared to an infant. And if he can be compared to an infant then the virtue of his inner-nature will be complete and undifferentiated [*hun ch'üan*]. He will be the simplest and ablest: free of both desires and purposefulness. Then he will be at one with the Tao” (trans. Edward Shaughnessy) (see Sung Ch'ang-hsing, *Tao Te Ching Chiang I* [Talks on the meaning of the Tao Te Ching] [Taipei: San Min, 1970], pp. 15–16).

⁶⁵ Fung originally identified the one with the *Chuang Tzu's ta-t'ung*, the two with heaven and earth, and the three with *yin* and *yang* and their harmonious interaction (see his *History of Chinese Philosophy* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952], 1:178–79—originally written in the 1930s); but more recently he has put forth a more Marxian “dialectical” interpretation (see his *Chung-kuo che-hsüeh shih hsin-pien*, p. 261, and Fu's discussion, “Lao Tzu's Conception of Tao,” p. 376).

⁶⁶ Within the context of imperial ideology Tung Chung-shu writes in his *Ch'un-ch'iu fan-lu* (sec. 43) that “Those who in ancient times invented writing drew three lines and connected them through the middle, calling the character ‘king’ [*wang*]. The three lines are Heaven, Earth, and man, and that which passes through the middle joins the principles of all three. Occupying the center of Heaven Earth, and man, passing through and joining all three—if he is not a king, who can do this?” (quoted from W. T. de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1960], 1:163; see also H. Wilhelm, “Das Zusammenwirken von Himmel, Erde, und Mensch,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* [1962], pp. 317–50).

⁶⁷ See, for example, Munro (n. 26 above), pp. 121 ff. By the time of the *Huai Nan Tzu*, however, the Confucian inspired idea of “man” for “three” is a factor in the Taoist interpretation (see below).

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nal, or precosmological, period of development best designated by the idea of *hun ch'eng* or *hun-tun*; and the passage from three to the Ten Thousand Things might be said to represent that moment of creative rupture with, or fall from, the creation time. With the transition from the condition of three the paradise condition of unity is ended and the purely human world is created.⁶⁸

With the condition of the three there is still the chaos time of *hun-tun*, a period that has its own internal principles of organization, change, order, and life. The three is the tripartite "paradise form" of cosmological unity that possesses the principles of duality in harmonious union and communication.⁶⁹ There are two things present, but the embryonic world is in a paradise condition since these two are mysteriously balanced by a third term that unites them perfectly. This condition of the three can probably best be associated with the overall condition of wholeness at the beginning, the time of *hun-ch'eng*, since in chapter 25 *hun*^a is related to the time before the birth of heaven and earth and in chapter 14 it is the union of the three. Here it is necessary to speak of the paradoxical idea of an "ordered chaos" since the idea of *hun*^a (*hun-ch'eng* or *hun-tun*) is not presented as an absolute chaos, disorder, or confusion. Rather, as seems to be implied in these passages, there is a mysterious real or sacred "order" of life and time inherent in the Taoist idea of the chaos period of creation.⁷⁰

Aside from the general associations with the theme of the chaos time of the primordial Tao, the idea of the three or the third term

⁶⁸ On the idea of a "fall" or "paradise lost" motif in China, see D. Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. S. N. Kramer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 389-94.

⁶⁹ On the idea of the tripartite nature of "paradise forms" in Chinese tradition, see Stein, pp. 42 ff.

⁷⁰ This problem is entirely analogous, and in fact related, to the difficulties of dealing with the idea of the Tao in relation to the concept of *wu*^b or "nothingness." The problems that arise concerning the paradoxical use of such terms as *hun* (or *hun-tun*) for an "ordered chaos" ("for the Chinese the terms which designate Chaos do not imply the idea of disorder, but that of a uniform confusion" [Kaltenmark, "La Naissance du monde," p. 464]), *wu*^b for a "creative nothingness," or *hsü* and *k'ung* for a condition of "fertile emptiness" (which are associated with the nature of the ultimate principle of Tao) can only be hinted at here. It is my contention that these terms only receive a complete matrix of understanding when seen in relation to the theme of chaos. Lo Meng-ts'ue's study (n. 18 above, pp. 20 ff.) is especially valuable in this respect inasmuch as he related the *hun-tun* theme to the important Chinese philosophical concept of *ta-hsiang wu hsing*. T. Izutsu has also suggested as much (n. 31 above, 2:115-35, 128-30). At a more general level, see the study by Chen, "Nothingness and the Mother Principle," pp. 391-405, which treats of the Tao's emptiness and nothingness in terms of the mythological notion of "the Mother" (see also Link [n. 33 above], pp. 186-88). In a comparative sense, but with close bearing on the symbolic significance of *hun-tun*, see C. Ouweland, *Namazu-e and Their Themes* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), pp. 122-23, where he discusses the religious meaning of *utsuho* (Chinese = *k'ung*) or "emptiness" in Japanese tradition.

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can also be specifically related to the idea of *ch'i*—the mysterious life breath, ether mist, fluidlike vapor, matter energy, life force, etc.—that is said to pervade all things and constitute the connective matrix of microcosmic-macrocosmic solidarity.⁷¹ This, in fact, is suggested by the rest of the passage, which says that the working of the phenomenal universe is a cyclic interaction of the dual principles of *yin* and *yang* and that their harmonious interaction is achieved through a return to the mediation (blending, mixing—*ch'ung*) of the *ch'i*. Moreover, it should be noted that the term *ch'ung* is especially evocative of the *hun-tun* idea of a chaotic void or “emptiness” (see chaps. 3, 4, 5) at the beginning of time.⁷²

In a comparative context there is a suggestion here that corresponds to some of the early Greek cosmogonies whereby the original seed, egg, or substance of creation experiences an internal pre-cosmic process of organization and change—especially the motif of “swelling” to a point where its center is “hollow” or “empty” but still infused with the invisible breath (*pneuma*) that is the source and basis of all life.⁷³ Then comes the moment in the

⁷¹ Fung Yu-lan's latest views tend to support this identification (see Jan Yün-hua's discussion in his “Problems of Tao,” pp. 213–16). On the general concept of *ch'i*, see Mitikuni Yosida, “The Chinese Concept of Nature,” in *Chinese Science*, ed. by Shigeru Nakayama and Nathan Sivin (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1973), pp. 71–89.

⁷² *Ch'ung* also connotes the idea of a “watery, bubbling” condition, “to clash or dash against,” an “empty void” (such as the compound *ch'ung-hsü*), or “blended and complaisant” (i.e., the compound *ch'ung-ning* meaning “melted and congealed, blended together”). Thus, the terms *ch'ung*, *hsü*, and *ning* are all suggestive of the *hun-tun* theme in the early Taoist texts. Chap. 7 of the *Chuang Tzu* refers to the *t'ai-ch'ung* which is said to be a particular stage of the process of returning to an identification with the Tao. In chap. 4 of the *Tao Te Ching*, *ch'ung* is used in relation to the terms *yüan* (“bottomless pool”) and *chan* (“deep” or “clear as water”) and suggests an allusion to the watery, chaotic condition of the promordial Tao or the “ancestor [origin]” of the Ten Thousand Things. In this way, it may be that we come closer to an understanding of *ch'ung* than its usual translation of “void,” “emptiness,” or “mixed” since this character also conveys the idea of “bubbling” or “overflowing water.” There seems to be a whole series of associations suggesting the creation time of the watery chaos or abyss. The “emptiness” of the Tao, then, is really to be imagined as that cosmogonic matrix of water and air pregnant with all life forms. Terms like *hun-yüan*, *hun-lun*, and *hun-hun* suggest the revolving motion of flowing water (especially in the sense of a whirlpool) or the turning of a wheel (cf. *yun*) (see the *Tz'u Hai* on these terms). The *Meng Tzu*, for example, says: “There is a spring of water; how it gushes out [*hun hun*]” (see J. Legge, *The Chinese Classics* [reprint ed., Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960], 2:324). For some symbolic motifs concerning a cosmogonic watery chaos from a comparative perspective, see Otto Kaiser, *Die mythische Bedeutung des Meeres in Ägypten, Ugarit, und Israel* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1962).

⁷³ The etymology of the Greek term for “chaos” would seem to be related to the idea of a “yawning gulf or gap,” a “hollow” or “space.” On this see Chambers, “Chaos in Paradise Lost,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1965): 56 ff. (see also Anna-Britta Hellbom, “The Creation Egg,” *Ethnos* [Stockholm] 28 [1963]: 65–73; Long, [n. 30 above], pp. 109 ff.; and W. Staudacher, *Die Trennung von Himmel und Erde, ein vorgriechischen Schöpfungsmythus bei Hesiod und den Orphikern* [Tübingen: Karl Bölyle, 1942]). In commenting on the cosmic foundation

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process when the cosmic embryo, sack, seed, or egg splits into the two constituent dual principles of the world, and a perfect cosmos is formed. For the *Tao Te Ching* it would appear that this perfect cosmos is the paradise condition of the three that still reflects the condition at the absolute beginning of creation. The two are separated by a chaotic void or hollow emptiness, but this void is alive with the embryonic life force of the *ch'i*. This is a paradise condition of total harmony cyclically ordering the interaction and synthesis of the dual principles through a continual process of going out (expansion, swelling, rising) and returning (contraction, coagulation, lowering) mediated by the “emptiness” of the center,

of the *plemochoe* or sky and earth vessels that were a part of the Eleusianian rites in ancient Greece, E. L. Ochsenschlager states that the cosmogonic conception would seem to be an image of “the origin of the universe in the bisection or separation of a world egg or globe, or in the hollowing out, through fermentation, of the world substance into twin hemispherical or conical world mountains, one growing downward, the other upward.” He also presents a discussion of the Hesiodic cosmogony that is quite similar to the Taoist concept (particularly the role of Eros as the “third term” of union between sky and earth): “The initial act is a separation of sky from earth. . . . In Hesiod, however, the separation is twice repeated. First we are told that the gap (Chaos) came into being between matter of indeterminate composition fused together . . . and later the concept is anthropomorphized with the emasculation and violent separation of Uranus and Gaia. . . . One thing particularly noticeable in the Orphic and Hesiodic cosmologies . . . is the immediate appearance of Eros after the initial separation. In the Orphic cosmology he appears from the egg of which the upper part from heaven and the lower part earth. In the Hesiodic version, he comes into being right after the gap is created. . . . Guthrie has suggested that Eros is the mediating power between heaven and earth ‘easily rationalized as the rain which falls from heaven and fertilizes the earth or the more general “moist element” in which philosophers saw the origin of life.’” Moreover, in relation to the symbolic associations for *hun-tun* in China it is curious that there are such close parallels to terms linked to the Indo-European root *k'va*. Ochsenschlager remarks that “the Iranians conceived world development from the hollowing out of yeast dough (*KYS*) containing the dynamic forces of moisture and heat in fermentation, and he (L. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968], pp. 109–10) indicates that the word *KYS* comes from an Indo-European root *k'va* in which the *k* was originally accompanied by either an aspirate or sibilant. He lists a number of words related to this process of creation derived from *k'va* variously extended. Among these, the idea of inflation and swelling is represented by Greek *kuma*, swelling wave, *kuros*, mighty one, *kfeneos*, empty, *koilos*, hollow sky, related to *poilos-pilos*, sky cap, Latin *cavus*, hollow, *caelum*, sky; and the idea of bubbling, boiling, sucking dry, or crusting over appears in the Greek *aphros*, foam, related to the Avestan *kafa*, foam, slime; in the Greek *skutos*, related to the Latin *cutis*, skin, *scutum*, leather shield; and the Greek *skyphos*, *kypellonkype*, hollow vessel, related to the English *cup*, *skiff*, *skull*, *scalp* and the like” (see E. L. Ochsenschlager, “Cosmic Significance of the Plemochoe,” *History of Religions* 9 [May 1970]: 332–35). Campbell (p. 110) also notes that “*kōf* (= *kavafa*, *kaōfa*), the word for a vast mountain or cave, comes from *k'va-va-*, an extension of the root that emphasizes the activity and force involved and should be connected with sanscrit *kup*, bubble up, *kupa*, spring, cave, *cvabhra*, cave, and perhaps also with the Syro-Anatolian Huvava, Humbaba, Kubaba, which was formerly a monster of the mountains. This monster would represent the unformed and chaotic world mass which must be subdued by the hero-creator of order. To the same root one may connect the English words heap and heave. Heaven is the *sky* (cf. *ksv-*, *skv-*) that has been heaved upward like a great mountain top or cave roof.”

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that third term or primordial principle (frequently called the *yüan-ch'i* or *hun-yüan* in later Taoist texts) which constantly connects all phenomenal forms, images, things with the Mother.⁷⁴

As a further demonstration of the mythological underpinning of this passage and its particular technical association with the cosmogonic theme of *hun-tun*, I would like to look briefly at chapter 7 of the *Huai Nan Tzu* which offers an explicit reworking of the creation sequence of one, two, and three.⁷⁵ Thus, this chapter is really the earliest Chinese commentary on the creation paradigm presented by chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*, and it is significant that it opens with the following cosmogonic refrain: "In the primeval period, before the time of Heaven and Earth, there was neither shape nor form [*wu hsing*]." These introductory verses are then followed with a characteristically reduplicated terminology referring to the idea of the *hun ch'eng* or *hun-tun* condition of primordial unity before the appearance of the two—"yao yao ming ming . . . mang wen mo min," which would seem to be terms generally suggestive of the darkness, obscurity, and formlessness of this stage of the creation process.

That these terms may be identified with the theme of *hun-tun* is directly asserted by the next verse where this stage (or mythological god) of the creation time is called "*hung-meng hung-tung*." Aside from the possible homophonic identification of *hung-tung*

⁷⁴ On the Taoist idea of the "original" or primordial *ch'i*—the *yüan ch'i*—see H. Maspero, "Les Procédés de 'nourrir de principe vital' dans la religion taoïste ancienne," *Journal Asiatique* 228 (1937): 206 ff. The *Tz'u Hai* records a text where the *hun-yüan* was said to be the origin of the *yüan-ch'i*. Maspero (pp. 206 ff.) states that in later Taoism "this interior breath, personal to each man, is the Original Breath [*yüan-ch'i*]. In man this Original Breath corresponds to the primordial breathes which before the creation formed the Heaven and Earth" (pp. 206–7). In Taoist alchemy there are the terms *hun-ch'i*, *hun-yüan*, and *tao hun yüan* (see T. L. Davis and Chao Yun-Ts'ung, "Chang Po-tuan of T'ien-T'ai, His Wu Chen P'ien, Essay on the Understanding of the Truth," *American Academy of Arts and Sciences [Proceedings]* 70 [1935–36]: 99).

⁷⁵ *HNTCS*, pp. 99–100. While the *Huai Nan Tzu* might be said to be the earliest explicit commentary, attention should be drawn to chap. 2 of the *Chuang Tzu* (CCT 5/2/53–55, and Watson, p. 43) where there is a cryptic allusion to chap. 42 of the *Tao Te Ching* which seems to condemn any sort of cosmological theory of origins. Chuang Tzu characteristically uses strong language, but it is exactly the use of language (or the *talking about* creation theories) rather than cosmogony that is being condemned. Thus, these lines are expressive primarily of the extreme repugnance Chuang Tzu has for contrived "disputations [*pien*]." My point is not that the Taoists proclaimed a certain cosmogony as a debating point or, for that matter, asserted any particular mythology. There is no real living mythology as in a primitive culture, but there would seem to be a vision or story of life grounded in ancient mythological images underlying their ideology. The *Tao Te Ching* more consciously links this vision to its cosmological foundations whereas in the first seven chapters of the *Chuang Tzu* it is taken for granted or, more accurately, there is a refusal to talk about what can only be experienced—"better to let things be!"

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with *hun-tun*, the use of the term *hung-meng* is also mythologically significant since it would seem to refer to a mythological figure or primordial deity that was identified with the mythic figure of Hun-tun.⁷⁶ The *Chuang Tzu*, for example, has a passage that expressly connects Hung-meng with the theme of *hun-tun*.⁷⁷ More important, however, is that all of these analogous terms for “chaos” are rooted in a congruent cosmogonic narrative related to the numerological sequence found in the *Tao Te Ching*.

A rather enigmatic verse follows the above lines saying that “no one knows its opening(s) [or gates]” (cf. *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 25), which might be taken as a mythic allusion to the primordial condition resembling a closed egglike unity internally harboring all of the fertile stirrings and sounds of creation.⁷⁸ This passage continues by saying that “two spirits [*erh shen*]” were now born,⁷⁹ but that these “two” are still “one” by virtue of the fact that they are “born chaotically blended [*hun sheng*].”⁸⁰ There is now a center present that orders the two back into a condition that is equivalent with the one and gives a preliminary organization to the heaven and earth. In other words, the condition of three spoken of in the *Tao Te Ching* has been established as the paradise condition of the harmonious unity of the one and the two.

There is evidently some repetitious garbling in the next few verses, but generally the meaning seems clear. Thus, the passage goes on to say that the two spirits that were previously a chaotic oneness now “separated and became *yin* and *yang* [*pieh wei yin yang*].” These two opposite principles (the “hard and the soft”) through their alternate separation and fusion then produced the Ten Thousand Things of the phenomenal world. As in chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*, the condition of the three is necessary in order to give birth to the phenomenal world. This world was still a part

⁷⁶ In this reference (*hung-meng hung-tung*) the emphasis is upon the characteristic reduplication of sounds found in the theme of *hun-tun*. That is, all of the terms may be taken as symbolically equivalent and as referring to a single cosmogonic idea. Mythologically, Hung-meng is related to Ti Hung (or Ti Chiang) who was said to be the father of Hun-tun (see the *Tso Chuan* in Legge, 5:279–83). The term *hung* means “cinnabar” (the metallurgical theme is frequently a factor with all of these terms), “flood waters,” or, as in the compound *tung-hung*, suggests the idea of “communication” (see Couvreur, *Dictionnaire classique* (reprint ed., Taipei: Kuangchi Press, 1966), p. 537).

⁷⁷ See n. 42 above.

⁷⁸ It is perhaps not unwarranted to suggest also a parallel here to the *Shan Hai Ching*’s faceless *hun-tun*, the *Chuang Tzu*’s Emperor Hun-tun of the center who was without the openings that would make him profanely human, and the *Tao Te Ching*’s refrain of “shut the gates . . .” (see chap. 52).

⁷⁹ As Kaltenmark suggests, this may be a reference to a cosmogony involving a primordial couple (see “Naissance du monde,” p. 466).

⁸⁰ See *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 14 (see above).

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of the paradise time, since everything in it naturally reflected the oneness of the two things harmoniously working together through the dialectical mediation of the *ch'i* (through the agency of its visible manifestations of breath and semen).

The microcosm and macrocosm of reality were one solidarity, and man's body reflects the sacred order of the universe: "the head is round, the shape of heaven, and the feet are square, the shape of earth." Man is linked with the source of life at the beginning of time since "heaven is his father and earth is his mother." His life is the creative product of the hierogamous synthesis of these two things, and human nature basically reflects the threeness of the creation time since there must always be a blending of the two to maintain the fullness of life.⁸¹ Paraphrasing chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*, this passage continues by saying that as the "two spirits" were originally blended and harmonized during the chaos time, so also do "the Ten Thousand Things bear *yin* and embrace *yang*. And the mixing [*ch'ung*] of the *ch'i* causes harmonious unity [*ho*]."

Life itself is the harmonious operation and comingling of the dualities through the circulation of the third term of *ch'i*. This is the ruling principle (*kang* and *chi*) of the Tao (cf. *Tao Te Ching*, chap. 14) that binds the sage to the sacred time of the beginning. The Tao is that which "dwells" always in the order of *hun-tun*, that realm of "empty nothingness" at the center of all things (*hsü wu ch'i tao chih so chü yeh*).⁸² The Tao, then, is the root of life, the original seed or egg of all creation, and all creative processes are a replication of the cosmogony. Embryological development inside the womb is but a miniature recreation of the world following the rule of ontology recapitulating phylogeny. This is indicated by the fact that after invoking the *Tao Te Ching's* creation paradigm of one, two, three, the *Huai Nan Tzu* goes on to discuss the "ten stages" of embryological development leading to birth, stating that in the seventh month the fetus is complete and whole (*ch'i yüeh erh ch'eng*).

For the *Huai Nan Tzu* the art of the Tao is specifically related to the art of nourishing or prolonging life (*ch'ang sheng*),⁸³ which

⁸¹ It is at this point in the cosmogonic narrative that "man" can be equated with the idea of the "three."

⁸² The text now invokes the passage of one, two, and three from the *Tao Te Ching*.

⁸³ On the significance of "life preservation" or "self-preservation [*wei-wo*]" in Taoism, see Yu Ying-shih, "Life and Immortality in Han China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25 (1964-65): 80-122; and Jan Yün-hua, "Problems of Tao," pp. 211 ff. (concerning Fung Yu-lan's recent views). This theme is ordinarily linked to the school of Yang Chu and is, therefore, not necessarily Taoist in origin.

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seems symbolically to imply a reversal of the ordinary life current back to the original germ plasm of life, a *regressus ad uterum* which is a recapitulation of the cosmogony. Once the return to the absolute beginnings is accomplished, the Taoist can again symbolically experience the development of the one to the two to the three, or reach, in a sense, that seventh stage of fetal perfection where all is internally “complete” (*ch’eng*, or more accurately, *hun-ch’eng*).⁸⁴ This symbolism would also seem to have a bearing on the root meaning of other important Taoist expressions such as *pao-i* (“to embrace the one”), since the etymological associations for the term *pao* are closely related to the idea of an infolding, motherly embrace, or a womblike enclosure.⁸⁵ And I might also add that the importance of these embryologically oriented images seems to be an additional argument for seeing the basic mythological typology of the *hun-tun* theme as that of the “cosmic egg” variety.⁸⁶

To conclude my discussion of chapter 42 it can be said that the creation scenario might not be as corrupt as Duyvendak would have it, since the cosmological phases of Tao, one, two, and three seem to proceed from a mythological creation story.⁸⁷ Thus, even though the *Huai Nan Tzu* leaves out the verse “the Tao gives birth to the one,” it had already established with abundant mythological imagery that there was a preexistent stage of chaos before the initial order of one appeared.⁸⁸ The Tao as that absolute mystery of the beginning, the “hidden Tao without name” (see chap. 41) or the great “ancestor” (see chap. 4), initiates the ordering process of creation. There is an internal development, imagined as a kind of germination process, producing a new state or level of organization which seems to be depicted as a swelling or hollowing out of the original prime matter. This is the stage of

⁸⁴ On the possible significance of “seven” in relation to the cosmogonic paradigm of *hun-tun*, see my “Arts of Mr. Hun Tun in the Chuang Tzu.”

⁸⁵ See n. 64 above.

⁸⁶ Indeed, Erkes with more imaginative speculation than reasoned analysis would interpret chap. 42 of the *Tao Te Ching* as saying: “The Primal female laid the Cosmic Egg which split into Heaven and Earth. Heaven and Earth together gave birth to man, and through the combined efforts of the San-ts’ai [Heaven, Earth, and Man] all things were formed” (see his “Spuren einer kosmogonischen Mythe,” p. 35).

⁸⁷ Duyvendak (n. 32 above), p. 99, feels that the text is obviously corrupt, but Erkes’s mythologically oriented discussion would suggest otherwise.

⁸⁸ I, therefore, agree with Chen’s observation that “‘one’ is born of Tao (chap. 42). Since Tao is a female principle, i.e., it is nothingness or zero, the ‘one’ it produces must be understood as the extremely small born of the nothingness of the mother. Thus, the ‘one’ cannot be capitalized. As the origin and seed of all things, ‘one’ still pertains to the dark, it is not yet born, thus it is even weaker than the infant” (see “Origin and Development of Being from Non-Being,” p. 409, n. 12).

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the one which may be named more readily since there is now some organized dark form, some vague shape, present.

Mythologically speaking, it would seem that this stage (and also the overall sequence of Tao to three) can be named as *hun-ch'eng* or *hun-tun* since *hun-tun* is often imagined symbolically as a hollow sack, calabash gourd, bellows, drum, cocoon, or egg.⁸⁹ That is, *hun-tun* is a mythological creature or symbol of the paradisiacal creation time (the time of one, two, three before the creation of the profane human world) because it is chaotically whole and identified with the Tao as the primordial source and ground of all life. At the same time, however, it also displays an organic "order" or organization which is manifested by the magic power of its "emptiness."⁹⁰

CONCLUSION

Despite some of my allusions to possible mythological symbolism, it is obvious that I have been dealing primarily at a rather abstract level of analysis; and it will be necessary to try to flush out the cosmogonic "theory" presented in the *Tao Te Ching* with more of what may be directly related to ancient Chinese mythology and symbolism. That task, however, is more than I can accomplish here, since to do so properly would require a close scrutiny of all of the other Taoist texts as well as drawing upon elaborate comparative materials. Let me only say that even a preliminary analysis such as presented here suggests strongly that in early Taoism there is a rather elaborate pattern of symbolism constantly evoking the cosmogonic "idea" of the Tao as that primordial chaos condition or time (*hun-tun*) before the establishment of the profane, civilized, or human cosmos of the Confucian culture heroes.

Erkes, supported by the corroborating work of Eberhard, Chang Kwang-chih, and Kaltenmark,⁹¹ is probably generally correct when he suggests that the overall theme of *hun-tun* is related most directly to a cosmic egg type of mythology—that "one" thing of the creation time which contained within itself the

⁸⁹ See the following: M. Granet, *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne* (Paris: University of France, 1959), pp. 537–48 (sack, drum, owl, and bellows symbolism associated with *hun-tun*); Stein (n. 56 above), pp. 42–80 (calabash gourd); W. Eberhard, *Local Cultures of South and East China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), pp. 438–46 (egg, sack, thunder); and Lo Meng-ts'e (n. 18 above), pp. 287 ff. (gourd and cocoon). Lo Meng-ts'e tries to show (p. 289) how the gourd and cocoon shapes may be related to the development of the traditional *t'ai-chi* symbol (made of a circle enclosing two crescent forms symbolizing the *yin* and the *yang*).

⁹⁰ See, for example, Izutsu (n. 31 above), 2:128 ff., and Ouwehand (n. 71 above), pp. 122 ff.

⁹¹ See especially Eberhard, pp. 438 ff.

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perfect germlike totality of the phenomenal world. But the simple recognition of *hun-tun* as being related to a cosmic egg typology is not really so helpful since the category of "Creation Egg" mythology can be broken down into at least four different subunits as to general content and intentionality.⁹² A further complication is that the creation theme as found in the early Taoist texts also involves the use of fragmented cosmogonic themes and local legends concerning such broad categories as heaven and earth separation myths, cosmic giant myths (i.e., similar to the later P'an-ku myth), and primordial couple myths (i.e., Chung-li, and Fu Hsi and Nu Kua).

One way to view this problem is to see that generally the theme of *hun-tun* in the early Taoist texts seems to represent a synthetic reworking of a number of different cosmogonic fragments into a common ideological structure. Thus, primordial couple myths or cosmic giant myths need not necessarily be linked with cosmic egg creation myths and, in fact, may be originally associated with different cultural situations and convey different religious ideas about the nature of creation and reality.⁹³ But for early Taoism, at least, these different mythic units all seem to be interpreted as being functionally equivalent and expressive of a single ontology.

⁹² See Hellbom, pp. 64–65. She distinguishes four categories: (1) "Cosmic Egg or World Egg" myths proper which describe the creation of the universe. (2) "Man or Mankind Egg" myths which depict the birth of mankind or the first human ancestor out of an egg. (3) "God or Hero Egg" myths wherein prominent tribal deities, fabulous animals, or culture heroes are born from an egg. (4) "Magic Egg" stories in which marvellous and/or demonic things come from an egg or egg shaped vessel such as a sack, vase, gourd, seed, drum, bell, cauldron, cocoon, stone, etc. The complicating factor is that in the Taoist use of the *hun-tun* theme all four of these categories are represented, sometimes simultaneously. An example of this would be the P'an-ku mythology where the First Ancestor is born from the World Egg of *hun-tun* and is subsequently both the creator of the cosmos and mankind. For Taoism it seems clear that the various types of egg myths are functionally interrelated and are ultimately linked to the primary category of the cosmogonic myth of the Cosmic or World Egg. As Eberhard says: "The concept that single persons or groups of people may be born out of an egg or an egg-like lump of flesh seems to be connected with the myths in which the whole world is born from an egg or a lump of flesh" (p. 438).

⁹³ Long (n. 30 above), pp. 109 ff. He states that "in the cosmic-egg symbolism the beginning of things is spoken of as a totality which includes the opposite modes of sexuality in relation. This is a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a form of symbolism which is different from that of the Primordial World Parents. Sexuality is not represented here by World Parents but by the precise creative power of each sex, who, though related, are capable of independence and separate determination. In other words, the actual *power of creativity* is already present in the beginning. . . . In the cosmic egg the concrete forms of the two sexual principles are united. This unity is a symbol of perfection. Again we must emphasize that this unity is not the same as the unity of the primordial World Parents; rather it is the unity of sexuality which has expressed its potentiality and power as separate from the other sexual principle" (pp. 116–17). On the problem of the functional interrelationship among cosmic egg, cosmic giant, and primordial couple myths see also H. Baumann, *Das Doppelte Geschlecht* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1955).

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As Eberhard suggests, it is especially the motif of an incestuous marriage (*hieros gamos*) between the primordial couple (or their offspring) that may afford the “connecting link” with the strict world egg and cosmic giant mythologies.⁹⁴

The intentionality behind most cosmic egg symbolism is the vision of reality and life in terms of the mystery of “coincidentia oppositorum” whereby the beginning and end of all things is a perfect embryonic equilibrium of dualities. As in the *hun-tun* theme in Taoism, the cosmic egg symbolism in general displays a world view where a “cosmological dualism comes to the fore. The myths of this type posit the dualism, but they show at the same time the necessary relation between the two active principles.”⁹⁵ In the most general sense, then, it may be that the significance of the *hun-tun* theme is in reference to the basic embryological analogy concerning the mysterious nature of a seed or egg—that which possesses an internal life force or order completely prefiguring the finished form. The final outcome seems to be that while the *hun-tun* theme includes echoes of diverse mythologies there is always the preservation of a common cosmogonic idea concerning the ultimate nature of Tao as the first principle of creation; that is, the emphasis is always on the macrocosmic and microcosmic cyclic return to a condition of undifferentiated totality exemplified most fully by the symbolism of the cosmic egg.

Therefore, the chaos theme of *hun-tun* in its primary allusion to

⁹⁴ Eberhard, p. 438.

⁹⁵ Long, p. 121. He points out that “in the myths of the cosmic egg the essential complementary relationship of the sexual modes of being is emphasized” (p. 119). He also remarks that according to “Baumann’s interpretation, the cosmic-egg symbolism, insofar as it includes bisexuality, represents the attempt to come to terms with the religious meaning of the powerful antithetical symbols of sexuality. In the egg symbolism the union of the sexual principles in twins as in a bisexual deity is an attempt to overcome the dualism involved in the revelation of the sacred in one or the other sexes. This is not the old primordial union of earth mother and sky father. In this symbolism the emphasis is on the passive togetherness of the sexes. Though the myths always state that the World Parents have offspring, the full meaning of sexuality as unique and separable principles is not emphasized” (p. 115). In the *Tao Te Ching* there would seem to be an emphasis given to the maternal quality or primordial femaleness of the Tao (see Chen, “Nothingness and the Mother Principle”). More correctly, however, it appears that the Taoist ideas of *hun-tun* as a primordial egglike substrate and source of all life goes deeper than a mother-earth type of symbolism. Rather, the emphasis conveyed by the use of the *hun-tun* theme seems to concern an idea of an absolute wholeness or primordality that necessarily includes both male and female dimensions. In a way that would seem to be related to the Taoist use of the cosmic egg idea, Eliade remarks that “‘femininity’ does not seem to have been thought of as a primordial mode of being. ‘Femininity,’ like ‘masculinity’ also, is already a particular mode of being, and, for mythical thinking, this particular mode is necessarily preceded by a whole mode of being. . . . One might call this primordial state a neuter and creative wholeness” (see his *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* [New York: Harper & Row, Torchbook, 1967], p. 178).

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the mythology of the cosmic egg might be said to set a basic pattern of intentionality and constitute an underlying frame upon which other mythic typologies are added. In theory, the emphasis always tends to stress a complementary dualism or an equilibrium of opposites as the basic mode of creation and life, both cosmic and human. The periodic reappropriation of a primordial wholeness, the mysterious union (*t'ung*⁹⁶) of the two things, the return (*fan*, *fu-kuei*) to the *hun-tun* condition, is the constant (*ch'ang*) way of the Tao and man and can be symbolized by a homologous series of mythic themes: the cosmological and embryological perfection of the world egg, the hermaphroditic totality of the cosmic giant who is born from the world egg, or the incestuous sexual union of a primordial couple. Man and the human world of Ten Thousand Things is an articulation of the two, but there is a “fall” or loss of equilibrium (*ta-luan*) which demands a periodic initiatory re-enactment of the cosmogonic process,⁹⁶ a reversal of the outward movement of the Tao into manifest duality and a return to that original paradise condition when the two found harmony in the central realm of the Emperor Hun-tun.⁹⁷

For early Taoism it is the “theory” or “mythic idea” that seems to be creatively remembered, preserved and retold—the way a myth (or myths) evaluates, affirms, and narratively structures the perception of reality. In this way, the theme of *hun-tun* associated with the idea of the Tao retains a certain mythic and exemplary power for expressing, more intuitively and symbolically than a strictly abstract philosophical principle, what is felt to be the true nature of being, the fullness of life, the really real. Therefore, it would appear that with regard to the *hun-tun* theme in Taoism the overall structure of the cosmogonic ontology is preserved in a more or less philosophical way but continues to function mythically in that it serves as the basis for a kind of story, theory, or method for what it means to follow the Tao.

⁹⁶ It seems clear that in the *Chuang Tzu* a conscious technical distinction is made between the cosmogonic time or paradise world of *hun-tun* and the “Great Disorder [*ta-luan*]” of the profane world brought about by the machinations of the culture heroes Yao, Shun, and Yü (see *Chuang Tzu*, chaps. 10, 11, 23). There is a political implication here as to the true meaning of “order” (*ch'ih/chih*) and a possible connection with the theme of the “legendary rebels” (Hun-Tun is one of these) found in the Confucian texts (see Needham [n. 21 above], 2:115–20, and my forthcoming article, “Chaotic ‘Order’ [*hun-tun*] and Benevolent ‘Disorder’ [*luan*] in the *Chuang Tzu*”).

⁹⁷ Another important consideration is the relation of the Taoist symbolism of *hun-tun* with archaic rituals of cosmic renewal (such as times of seasonal and temporal renewal important in an agricultural setting) and initiation. This is a hopelessly complicated topic, but for some possible parallels concerning a “re-constructed” archaic Chinese tradition, see Granet, 2:537–48.

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In the *Tao Te Ching* and the other early Taoist texts there seems finally to be a shared conviction in a specific mythologically grounded theme of creation which shapes the Taoist understanding of reality and the method of returning to a healing identification with the ultimate source of true life, the Tao. In short, it would seem that the symbolic application of the *hun-tun* cosmogony gives form to the overall soteriological mode of being a Taoist and ultimately forms the basis for the Taoist's own understanding and interpretation of that unique experience of knowing and living the Tao—being a “spirit man,” “true man,” or “perfect man.” To paraphrase chapter 21 of the *Tao Te Ching*, it is “by this” foundation in an archaic creation mythology that the truth of the Tao is revealed. The Taoist “knows the ways of things at the beginning.”⁹⁸

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⁹⁸ *LTCK*, p. 149.

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GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

chan 湛

ch'ang sheng 長生

ch'ang tao 常道

ch'eng 成

chi 紀

chi hsi liao hsi 寂兮寥兮

ch'i yüeh erh ch'eng 七月而成

ch'ih/chih 治

(ti) chiang (帝) 江

chiao 徽

ch'u 出

chuo 濁

ch'ung ch'i i wei ho 沖氣以為和

ch'ung-hsü 沖虛

ch'ung-ning 沖凝

erh shen 二神

fan 反

fu ch'i ch'u 復其初

fu kuei 復歸

fu kuei yü p'u 復歸於樸

ho 合

ho hun hun 合昏昏

hsi^a 習

hsi^b 襲

hsi^c 希

hsi ch'ang 習常

hsi ming 襲明

hsü 虛

hsü wu che tao chih so chü veh 虛無者道之所居也

hsüan 玄

hsüan-t'ung^a 玄通

hsüan-t'ung^b 玄同

hua 化

hun^a 混 (渾)

hun^b 昏 (昏)

hun^c 惛 (潛)

hun ch'i 混氣

hun chih ch'eng=hun-tun 混之成=混沌
chih ch'eng tsao che 之成造者

hun ch'uan 渾全

hun erh wei i 混而為一

hun hun^a 昏昏

hun hun^b 渾渾

hun hun mei mei 昏昏默默

hun hun tun tun 渾渾沌沌

hun-lun 渾淪

hun sheng 混生

hun-tun 混沌, 渾沌, 混敦

hun t'ung 混同

hun yüan 渾元

hung 瀕

hung meng 鴻蒙

hung tung 鴻洞

i 夷

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kang 綱

kuei shen ti 鬼神帝

k'un-lun 崑崙

k'ung 空

k'ung-t'ung 崕峒

mang wen mo min 芒艾漠閔

miao 妙

ming 名

ming ming 緜緜

mu 母

ning 凝

pao-i 抱一

pao p'u 抱樸

pao y'uan shou i 抱元守一

pen-wu 本無

pien 辯

pieh wei yin yang 別為陰陽

p'u 樸

pu-tai 不殆

shen 神

shen niao 神鳥

sheng 生

shih 逝

shih shih meng meng 濕濕夢夢

shou-chung 守中

shun^a 順

shun^b 純

shun^c (ch'un) 淳 = 瀋

ta-ch'uan 大全

ta-hsiang wu hsing 大象無形

ta-luan 大亂

ta shun 大順

ta-t'ung 大同

ta-t'ung hun-ming 大通混冥

ta t'ung wu ming 大通無名

t'ai chi 太極

t'ai ch'u 泰初

t'ai i 太一

tao fa tzu-jan 道法自然

tao sheng i 道生一

te i 得一

ti hung 帝鴻

t'ien hsia hun erh wei i 天下混而為一

t'ien hsia mu 天下母

t'ien ti chih hsi ching wei yin yang 天地

tu 獨 之襲精為陰陽

tun tun 沌沌

t'ung^a 同

t'ung^b 通

t'ung hsing 同行

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tung-hung 洞洪
tung-t'ung 洞同
t'ung (tung) t'ung ta hsü 洞同大虛
tzu 字
tzu-jan 自然
tzu sheng 自生
wei 微
wei hsing 未形
wei miao hsüan-t'ung 微妙玄通
wu^a 物
wu^b 無
wu chih 無知
wu mien mu 無面目
wu (ming) 無(名)
wu wei 無為
wu wei wu hsing 無為無形
yang 陽
yao yao ming min 窈窈冥冥
yin 陰
yu (ming) 有(名)
yu wu hun ch'eng 有物混成
yu 愚
yuan^a 遠
yuan ch'i 元氣
yun 運
wang 王