

4.6 YIN-YANG FIVE-FORCES THEORY DURING THE HAN

During the early Han, the conception of the universe as governed by yin and yang and the five forces became characteristic of almost every school of thought. We will find it a pervasive undercurrent in the Huang-Lao texts that appear in a later reading, and it is also probably the greatest influence in the reformulation of Confucianism undertaken by Dong Zhong-shu, also discussed in further readings. These theories were a part of Warring States naturalism (as discussed in the earlier reading on that subject), and are often traced to the philosopher Zou Yan. However, it was during the Han that they came to have their greatest influence.

An idea of the plastic nature of these concepts can be conveyed by illustrating how they were applied to a very broad range of phenomena. For example, the five forces were each assigned to a direction and a season (with the sixth month, midsummer, being considered a separate season). This seasonal concept allowed the forces to be correlated with phases of the yin-yang cycle of polar influence as follows:

WOOD	East	Spring	Rising Yang
FIRE	South	Summer	Greater Yang
EARTH	Center	Midsummer	Balanced Yin and Yang
METAL	West	Autumn	Rising Yin
WATER	North	Winter	Greater Yin

With these as starting points, the system that emerged became a grand correlative scheme:

<i>Category</i>	WOOD	FIRE	EARTH	METAL	WATER
numbers	8	7	5	9	6
colors	green	red	yellow	white	black
astral bodies	stars	sun	earth	constellations	moon
planets	Jupiter	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
weather	wind	heat	thunder	cold	rain
sense organs	eye	tongue	mouth	nose	ear
emotions	anger	joy	desire	sorrow	fear
organs	spleen	lungs	heart	kidney	liver
tissue	muscles	blood	flesh	skin & hair	bones
tastes	sour	bitter	sweet	acid	salty
smells	goat-like	burning	fragrant	rank	rotting
animals	sheep	fowl	oxen	dogs	pigs
sage rulers	Emperor Yu	King Wen	Yellow Emp.	Tang	First Emperor
tools	compass	measures	plumb lines	T-square	balance

The list could be extended indefinitely. Musical notes, constellations, government ministries, geographical regions of China, sacrifice locations – all were incorporated into this system.

While theories concerning yin and yang and the five forces dominated the Han view of the world, the intellectual excitement of these theories seems somewhat elusive now. There are

cases where Han writers attempt to fashion a grand system by showing how the two powers of yin and yang and the five forces fit together well with cosmic systems that correlate them with the ten heavenly stems, and twelve earthly branches, and the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yi jing* (we also see the twelve-year cycle of Jupiter and the twenty-eight lunar-lodge constellations figure in such designs). It is hard not to hold one's breath while reading through some of these numerical acrobatics, but there is a certain undeniable level of tedium. The impulse to control the cosmos through dense classification and mechanistic dynamics that these theories express contrasts rather unfavorably with the earlier interest in the protean concept of *qi*, which underlies many of these later theories, and which was absorbed into their frameworks.

However, five forces theory held a very important place in politics for a time. One of the aspects of the theory concerned the succession of dynasties, a matter into which Zou Yan had inquired early on. It was believed that each dynasty was governed by one of the five forces, and that the governing force was meant to determine many of the ritual features of the government, such as the color of the imperial robes and insignia, the geographical location of its sacrifices, and so forth. It was believed, for example, that the Yellow Emperor had ruled through the force of earth, the Zhou through the force of fire, and so forth.

The First Emperor, in his devotion to all forms of superstition, was very concerned to adjust his governance to the force according to which his dynasty was believed to rule. His court scholars reasoned that since he had conquered the Zhou, a dynasty of fire, the Qin must be a dynasty of water, because water conquers fire. Accordingly, the Qin rulers worshipped the Yellow River, wore black robes, and so forth.

When Liu Bang succeeded to the throne, he paid no attention to these issues. Just as he retained the forms of Qin administration and law, he also continued to wear black robes, sacrifice black oxen to Heaven, and generally continue the rituals of the Qin. His failure to attend to issues of such importance seemed a clear reflection of his limited education. After his death, this became a matter of concern to the erudites at court.

By the reign on Wen-di, the need to fix an appropriate system for the Han had become a major concern. The problem was that there was complete disagreement concerning what the "force" of the Han was. Some argued that since the Han had defeated the Qin (water), the force of the Han was earth (earth "conquers" water). Others, however, said that conquest was not the manner in which the forces succeeded one another. As with the seasonal arrangement, so dynastic forces "gave birth" to one another. Water gives birth to wood, so that was the Han force. Still others argued that the Qin had never actually received the Mandate, and hence had not been a real dynasty. Therefore the Han sign should be earth, which fire gives birth to. And others yet agreed about the Qin not being a legitimate dynasty, but, holding to the "conquest" order of the forces, designated the Han sign as water. Such was the vigor of the Han metaphysical imagination!

It was not until 104 B.C. when, in the course of a massive calendrical reform that fit emperor Wu-di's reign into immense cycles stretching back to the beginnings of time, the Han finally settled on earth as its force and changed its ritual appurtenances accordingly.

The ideas of yin and yang and of the five forces exerted their greatest influence during the Han, but they persisted as key concepts in Chinese cosmology throughout the traditional period. Even today, Chinese culture continues to exhibit strong interest in these concepts, which play major roles in some forms of the martial arts, in the much used art of geomancy (recently becoming popular in the U.S.), and in various types of popular religion and religious Daoism.

While the twin powers of yin and yang, taken in isolation, may have enhanced the creativity of some aspects of Chinese thinking by their broad and flexible natures, the five forces and the dense gridwork that those concepts generated seem stifling by comparison. The mechanistic nature of the five force “organic” cosmos led to the creation of a wealth of true pseudo-sciences, most of which emerged from *fangshi* cults. These appear to have strongly inhibited the development of true science in China (though there were surely more powerful social factors bearing on this issue). The five force models were systematic enough to support elaborate explanatory and predictive uses, and also complex and incoherent enough to provide secondary explanations and margins of error that could be used to mask the true nature of frequent failures.

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The role of yin-yang and five force theory in the life of imperial China was probably felt most intensely at the center, in the life of the emperor and his ritual attendants. This was particularly true after 135, when Dong Zhongshu’s adaptation of these theories to Confucianism became the foundation of an emperor-centered ideology. However, even before that time, a detailed manual for the administration of a state according to these concepts had been elaborated as a set of twelve dispersed chapters in the late Warring States text, *The Almanac of Lord Lü*. These chapters, corresponding to the months of the year, portrayed the progression of annual cycles through the five force fields and some of the host of correlated phenomena listed in the tables above.

The chapters, known as the “Monthly Ordinances,” were collected together during the Han and included as a long section of the Confucian classic, *Records of Ritual*. The description of the first month in that compendium is translated below. Accounts of the remaining months conform to the basic structure set forth in this chapter.

The First Month of Spring

Nature's seasonal signs

In the first month of spring, the sun is in the constellation Yingshi, and the constellation Shen reaches the zenith at dusk while the constellation Wei is at the zenith at dawn.

The anchor point for the text's ritual cosmology is the astronomically determined calendar. The constellation Yingshi includes stars in the Greek constellation Pegasus; Shen includes stars Orion; Wei corresponds closely to Scorpio.

Its cyclical signs are *jia* and *yi*, its divine ruler is Tai Hao, its attendant spirit, Gou Mang. Its creatures are scaly, its musical note *jue*, its pitch-pipe *taizu*, its number 8. Its taste is sour, its smell goatish; its sacrifice is at the inner door for which the spleen of the victim is essential.

These various categories are determined by correspondence with the force of Wood (some are listed on the chart on page 1). Each of these items belongs to a set of five (e.g., cyclical sign pairs, members of the "five high deities," basic animal types, pitches, etc.) that were assigned to the Five Forces.

The east wind releases what is ice-bound; the hibernating insects and reptiles first stir; the fish rise up from beneath the ice; the otter sacrifices its fish; the wild geese return.

These natural phenomena seem drawn from a type of "farmer's almanac" inventory, and became emblematic of the season in popular culture and literature. The otter's "sacrifice" was a fanciful construction of the actual phenomenon of otters collecting captured fish on river banks.

The Emperor's Person

The Son of Heaven shall dwell in the left-hand apartments of the Green Hall of Yang. He shall ride in a great belled chariot drawn by "azure dragon" horses and decked with green pennants. He shall wear green robes with pendants of azure jade. His meals shall be wheat and mutton, his vessels coarse and cut with holes.

Ideally, the cosmology that underlay Han Confucianism tightly constrained the actions of the ruler. As the cosmic center, his every act had to harmonize with and drive the proper motion of the cosmos. The holes in vessels here seem to reflect the dynamic of *qi* flowing freely as the frozen winter thaws.

Rituals of the Calendar

This month is the calendrical initiation of spring. Three days prior to the date set for spring, the Grand Scribe shall report to the Son of Heaven, saying: "On such and such a day spring will begin. The prevailing force will lie with Wood."

“Grand Scribe” is a literal translation; during later eras the post would be as well described as “Grand Historian” (this is the office held by Sima Qian). However, the same officer was in charge of calendrical calculations based on the heavenly bodies, and also the prediction and interpretation of portents, such as eclipses, planetary conjunctions, comets, and so forth. The title is thus sometimes rendered as “Grand Astrologer,” and, as this text makes clear, could also be understood as “Grand Astronomer.”

The Son of Heaven shall thereupon fast and purify himself. On the first day of spring he shall personally lead the three chief ministers, nine bureau chiefs, the lords of domains, and the court grandees to the eastern suburbs to greet the spring. On his return he shall hold court and bestow rewards upon the ministers, bureau chiefs, and grandees. He shall order the chief ministers to bestow his grace and proclaim his orders, to present awards and distribute alms to all down to the masses of common people. Once these are distributed, none will lack his just deserts.

The actions of the ruler are beneficent in spring, paralleling the actions of nature.

He shall order the Grand Scribe to preserve the records and receive care of the regularities, observing the sun and moon, stars and constellations so that there will be no error in the calculations of their fixed locations and relative positions and no deviation in the calculation of their courses, based on their past constant motions.

Rituals of the Season

In this month, on the first occurrence of the eighth cyclical Heavenly stem day, the Son of Heaven shall pray to the Lord on High for abundant harvests. Then, selecting the auspicious Earthly branch day, he shall personally bear a ploughshare and handle in his carriage, standing flanked by the charioteer and the man-at-arms and, leading the three chief ministers, nine bureau chiefs, the lords of domains, and the court grandees, shall personally plow the Field of the Lord. The Son of Heaven shall plough three furrows, the three chief ministers five, the bureau chiefs and lords of domains nine. On their return, they shall assemble in the Grand Chamber where the emperor shall take a chalice and toast all of them. This is called “the toast of wine in recompense for labors.”

Timely Governance

In this month the *qi* of Heaven descends, the *qi* of earth rises upwards; Heaven and earth are in synchronous harmony and the grass and trees burgeon forth.

The king shall order the work of fields to begin. He shall order the inspectors of the fields to reside in the eastern suburbs outside the town walls, to repair the boundary markers of the fields, to inspect the pathways and irrigation ditches, to examine well the rises and hills, the slopes and heights and lowlands to determine the appropriate crops for each. They

shall themselves go in person to guide the people where the five grains should be sown. Once the work of the fields has been laid out and prescribed with field lines aligned for fair distribution, farming can proceed without confusion.

In this month, the Director of Music shall be ordered to open the schools to train the students in dancing.

Timely and Untimely Acts

Now the schedule for sacrifices will be determined. Orders will be given for offerings to the spirits of the mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes. No female creature may be offered in these. It shall be forbidden to cut down trees, to overturn nests, to kill young animals; neither those still in the womb nor the newborn shall be killed, nor fledgling birds of flight, neither animals babes in the den nor eggs in the nest.

The multitudes of people shall not be gathered for state service, nor shall work be done on inner or outer walls. The bones and corpses of those who have died in the open shall be buried.

In this month it is forbidden to mobilize troops. He who mobilizes troops will surely be met with destruction from Heaven. This prohibition on taking up arms means that one may not initiate war.

These prohibitions are reminiscent of the “Chu Silk Manuscript,” the recovered hemerological text from the southern warring state of Chu examined in reading 2.11. It too specifies which months are appropriate and inappropriate for warfare, wall building, and similar activities. The final sentence here appears to be an early gloss that has entered the text, licensing defensive warfare.

In all things one must not deviate from the *dao* of Heaven, nor destroy the principles of earth, nor bring confusion to the great guidelines of man.

If in the first month of spring the ruler follows the ordinances proper instead to summer, then the rains will not come in season, the grass and trees will wither early, and indeed the country will be plunged in fear. If the ruler follows the ordinances proper instead to autumn, then the people will be afflicted by great pestilence, violent winds and torrential rains will arrive in tandem, and brambles, darnel, tumbleweed and artemisia will all infect the fields. If the ruler follows the ordinances proper instead to winter, the rivers will flood over crumbling banks, frost and snow will grip the land, and from the first seeds sown none will sprout.