

# A Fluid Cosmos

## Cosmologies of Creative Flow in Early China

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### Flow: Watery Actions and Modes of Being

By the fourth century BCE, some groups of early Chinese thinkers propounded an expansive cosmological vision that differed significantly from visions passed down from the early Zhou period. Instead of a world in which the dominant deities were animated spirits (whether gods such as Shangdi 上帝 or the spirits of human ancestors, animals, or other creatures), this cosmology presented a more unified, monistic image of a divine cosmos—rooted ultimately in Heaven (Tian 天) and the Way (Dao 道) of Heaven—from which humans derive and of which they are a part. Humans and all creatures, according to this religious view, are but creative manifestations of the intrinsic force and power latent in the heavenly cosmos.

In this chapter, I will build on Sarah Allan's in-depth work on the role of water in early Chinese mythology and thought. Allan's work examines the many rich representations and meanings of water, which was linked in some traditions to the early cosmos.<sup>1</sup> Rather than analyze the concrete image of water itself as a metaphor, I discuss watery actions and modes of being—movements and activities associated with the Dao of the cosmos, such as creativity, spontaneity, and flow. In the end, my analysis aligns with

Allan's goal of showing how the natural and human orders were supposed to merge in a single continuum.

When Allan links water to associated root metaphors in early Chinese philosophy, she considers the views they stem from to be starkly secular, separate from any religious, spiritual order. She states that the early Chinese found root metaphors "in the natural world rather than religious mythology."<sup>2</sup> The conceptual split between nature and religion, however, is very much a Euro-American conceit, grounded in the ways in which these traditions define religion and pit it against the workings of the natural world. At the same time that I agree with Allan that the study of ancient China compels us to step outside of our conceptual world, I also think we need to do so by stepping away from Euro-American tendencies to strip "nature" of any religious heritage or meaning. We might begin by pointing out what some of our thinkers seem to take as self-evident: that nature and the natural order are fundamentally spiritual and nonsecular, and that the divine inheres in the natural.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is precisely by analyzing root metaphors in Chinese philosophy that we begin to consider different ways of ordering and arranging the world around us, helping us redefine what we mean by "religion" and "nature" as well.

In early China, some cultures were grounded in a belief that the natural cosmos was tantamount to the Way of the cosmos, an idealized or utopic vision of "the Natural." Ultimate good could be acquired, it was thought, via a reconciliation of the human world with this natural Way. A central question in this type of belief system, then, was how humans were supposed to reconcile themselves with the Way. Intriguingly, the answer to this question among a variety of thinkers who idealized the Natural Way (hereafter "Dao") was very similar: it was a matter of returning to, recovering, or embracing the constant agency of the Dao in one's life and person. In other words, one must essentially embody and become a true and unique manifestation of the Dao in this world.

In analyzing a few early Chinese creation stories and cosmologies, I will underscore the largely convergent ways in which thinkers who ascribed to this type of "Dao-embodiment" approach tried to characterize the natural simplicity and efficiency of the Dao itself, showing how their characterizations were intended to be guidelines for human behavior. The fact that so many different authors ascribed to this view of the cosmic-human relationship suggests a shared spiritual or religious outlook that stressed the unmediated spiritual embodiment of the Divine rather than obedience to Heaven's divine preferences or desires, and laws—all of which are mediated through society in some fashion.

Warring States texts reveal a plethora of religious views concerning Heaven (Tian) and its interactions with humans and creatures on Earth (Di 地). The textual tradition is so diverse that it is often difficult to ascertain whether there were dominant ways of conceiving of the cosmos, and if so, what those dominant ways were. And, of course, we must always ask, “Dominant for whom, during what period, and for how long?” While I think it fair to say that there was a dominant religion of the elites rooted in the power of Heaven and Shangdi during the early Zhou period, authors during the later Zhou presented very different interpretations concerning how Heaven acted in the world and how humans were supposed to interact with Heaven and the spiritual world. Many scholars studying the fifth century BCE and later have fallen back on the ancient Chinese categorization of texts and thinkers into “schools of thought,” such as Confucian, Daoist, Mohist, Sophistic, Agriculturalist, among others. This approach has been thoroughly problematized in recent years, especially with the introduction of newly excavated manuscripts that do not fit neatly into such categories and suggest a much more complicated picture. Nonetheless, as I will argue here, there are merits to some basic distinctions among these alleged groups, as long as we understand them to be our own hermeneutical categories and do not take them as necessarily emic groupings or institutional affiliations that corresponded to shared sociopolitical realities at the time.

The bulk of my analysis is organized around the concept of creativity, a category under which I group many linked actions or activities, including spontaneity, self-generation or self-arising, and flow (English terms that can be used to translate concepts like *wuwei* 無為, *ziran* 自然, *zizuo* 自作, *shun/tong* 順/通).<sup>4</sup> This set of English terms helps translate ancient Chinese descriptions of idealized human actions or interactions with things in the world. Taken together, they serve as an interpretive cluster characteristic of a religious orientation that began to enter into Chinese mainstream philosophy around the fourth century BCE, becoming quite visible with the onset of more systematic cosmological thinking at the time. Since our early authors never just restricted themselves to one term or way of describing idealized action in accordance with the Dao, it is advisable that we examine as many related ideas as possible. Intriguingly, the way water moves and interacts with objects is a superior metaphor that links these actions together and may be the best way to describe what is salient and important about the ideal of Dao-embodiment.

Scholarship abounds on how some early authors, such as those of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Laozi* 老子, *Huainanzi* 淮南子, and so forth, argue for an idealized congruence between human and cosmos, or the idealized

natural world around us.<sup>5</sup> One thing that is readily apparent in many Dao-embodiment accounts, however, is not that idealized modes of action in the human realm are linked to the Dao of the spiritual cosmos but that the primary agency of the individual is identical to the functionality of the Dao. I therefore begin with a basic provocation that refines the notion of human-cosmic congruence, arguing instead for identification. In other words, humans must not be congruent with the cosmos; they must tap into it and its very functionality. Since the idealized cosmic Dao functions according to a certain mode, humans should also function according to that very same mode. Indeed, the more appropriate way to conceptualize this approach is not that we mimic cosmic behavior and act similarly to it, but that our behavior is cosmic behavior.

Michael Puett has written extensively on the early Chinese notion of a human becoming a god or divinity. He discusses such a notion primarily in terms of discrete ideologies of what he dubs “self-divinization,” which began in the fourth century BCE but flourished especially during the imperial period. Explaining the growth of such ideologies as intentional, oppositional claims made to redirect power away from major courts and their practices of sacrifice and divination, Puett positions self-divinization movements as alternative, theoretical stances advocated by a few intellectuals, as opposed to large-scale religious practices stemming from alternative religious cultures such as “shamanism.”<sup>6</sup> While I agree with Puett that one should not draw a genetic link between so-called “correlative cosmology” and “shamanism,” I picture a rather different image of the intellectual and religious movements of the period. Mine is not one in which a few elite men are engaged in self-conscious debate with each other to found new movements at court, but one in which the viewpoints presented in these texts, which we can presume elite men wrote and presented to some extent in various early Chinese courts, were not the sole possession of these men and their fellow intellectuals. Rather, many of these elites were representing and drawing upon larger and rather extensive religious and cultural practices, either imported or more local to a particular region. And such practices implicated people from all walks of life, not just the educated or literate elite. So, whereas Puett speaks of a few main actors who created agendas, rebelling against contemporary norms and innovating at the top of society, I would like to propose that these few main actors were acting within a larger sphere of embedded religious practices and a more general religious orientation. My conclusions in this chapter—concerning the continuities and similarities among Dao-embodiment outlooks and ways of expressing idealized human action—support this view.

My discussion of concepts such as creativity, spontaneity, and flow thus reveals a diverse yet largely convergent way that many authors characterized the natural simplicity and efficiency of the idealized cosmos. I show how this convergent approach, which I argue corresponds approximately to typical uses of the category “Daoist,” differs from others in the Central States sphere in its view of the human potential to embody the divine cosmos. And to make sure that this approach to Dao-embodiment is not confused and conflated with another type of cosmology that was gaining traction around the same time in early China—Five Phases correlative cosmology—I further outline fundamental differences between the two. I thereby draw a distinction between Dao-embodiment “cosmologies of flow” and Five Phases “cosmologies of resonance.” By identifying the category of “Daoist” as a noteworthy spiritual orientation on embodied (cosmic) creativity in society, I also show how the concept of “Daoism” might be fruitfully used to underscore cosmologies of flow in ancient China.

### Creativity as the Functionality of the Cosmos

In the middle part of the twentieth century, Joseph Needham spoke of the Chinese predilection for self-generated creation rather than creator gods and myths.<sup>7</sup> In subsequent decades, Western scholars such as Frederick Mote, Derk Bodde, and Chang Kwang-chih, for example, picked up on Needham’s insight to discuss the so-called lack of a “creation myth” in early Chinese culture, basing their claims on arguments about the “inner necessity” or “spontaneously self-generating” nature of the cosmos. These claims by twentieth-century scholars have since been convincingly refuted by Paul Goldin in his article “The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth.”<sup>8</sup> Most contemporary China scholars would have a hard time not agreeing with Goldin’s arguments. There are creator gods—and many of them—in early Chinese traditions. We see this in the pantheon of gods associated with the ancient state of Chu, as well as in the *Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水 (Taiyi Gives Birth to Water) excavated manuscript, among other sources.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, there is indeed a way in which Mote, Bodde, and others were right: certain cosmological outlooks in early China do not describe creation in terms of anthropomorphic acts of will, intent, and active fashioning.<sup>10</sup> Rather, creation is sometimes described in terms of organic, biological metaphors of self-generation, coupling, and spontaneous emergence or arising. Bodde describes this process in the following terms: “[The Chinese] cosmic pattern is self-contained and self-operating. It unfolds

itself because of its own inner necessity and not because it is ordained by any external volitional power. Not surprisingly, therefore, Chinese thinkers who have expressed themselves on the subject are unanimous in rejecting the possibility that the universe may have originated through any single act of conscious creation.”<sup>11</sup> In trying to encapsulate a singularly “Chinese” approach to creation, Derk Bodde most certainly oversimplified the matter. But his description of the cosmic pattern as something that unfolds is very helpful in underscoring what is important about a particular, more naturalistic or organic vision of cosmic creation.

A new bamboo-slip text called *Hengxian* 恆先 (hereafter: *The Primordial State of Constancy*) provides us with a rare opportunity to familiarize ourselves more precisely with one version of cosmic creativity and flow in the world. It is helpful to start our analysis with this text because it depicts the spiritual cosmos quite clearly as something fundamentally creative. Moreover, the natural creativity of the cosmos expresses itself in a liquid manner: every creation, indeed every living being, both comes into being and functions according to a localized, unique version of spontaneous generation. This is best described as a process of cosmic flow or unfolding.<sup>12</sup>

In *The Primordial State of Constancy*, we find one of the most complete accounts of cosmic creation in early Chinese texts. The text begins:

In the primordial state of Constancy, there is no material existence. There is simplicity, stillness, and emptiness. Simplicity is Great Simplicity; stillness is Great Stillness; emptiness is Great Emptiness.<sup>13</sup> It fulfills itself without repressing itself. [Bounded] space arises.<sup>14</sup> Once there is [bounded] space, there is *qi*; once there is *qi*, there is material existence; once there is material existence, there is a beginning; once there is a beginning, there is the passage of time.

恆先無有，樸，靜，虛。樸，大樸；靜，大靜；虛，大虛。自厭，不自忍。域作。有域，焉有氣；有氣，焉有有；有有，焉有始；有始，焉有往者。<sup>15</sup>

In this passage we see how, out of nowhere, the primordial state of Constancy—defined as Great Simplicity, Great Stillness, and Great Emptiness—encounters or experiences change. This occurs through the arising of (bounded) space (*yuzuo* 域作).<sup>16</sup>

The text goes on to show that the process of change and creation intrinsic to the cosmos is a process of the spontaneous arising (*zizuo* 自

作) or spontaneous generation/birthing (*zisheng* 自生) of *qi* 氣 and other ingredients such as space-time. Most intriguingly, the author makes sure to emphasize that such arising and generation occurs of its own accord and is not reliant on some external creator or force: “*Qi* is self-generating; Constancy categorically does not engender *qi*. *Qi* is self-generating and self-arising” (氣是自生, 恒莫生氣, 氣是自生自作).<sup>17</sup> From this passage, we can deduce that cosmic creation involves transformation of *qi*, and that this process is always ongoing, so that every entity or thing that takes shape is always changing in relationship to others at a specific place and time. This process of change within space-time is the creative fulfillment of things. Situations and objects change by arising “of themselves,” and not because they are fueled by an “inner necessity” (to use Bodde’s terms) or an internal motivator or creator; indeed, there is no absolute “internal” in a ceaselessly changing “self” or “thing.” Instead, the motivator that causes change is the intrinsic motor of the cosmos.

The paramount question that this description of the cosmos evokes, then, begins not with “what” but with “how.” The author seems interested not in answering the question “What (entity) causes things to be created and transformed?” but, rather “How are things created and transformed?” The answer, as we have seen, lies in the notion that creation is a spontaneous process of boundary-making in which all *qi* is generative and everything has the potential to change according to its proper, cosmic place in space and time. Rather than erroneously attribute the cause of such creativity to either an external creator or internal power (i.e., a power intrinsic to a thing), let us simply call it “cosmic flow.”

The second half of the text breaks from a discussion of the idealized creativity of the pre-cosmos and early cosmos to talk about the actions and thoughts of human beings. Blaming humans for the current disorder in the world, the author implies that humans should clean up the mess: “Primordially, there is good, order, and no disorder. Once there are humans, there is not-good. Disorder emerges from human beings” (先者有善, 有治無亂; 有人焉有不善, 亂出於人).<sup>18</sup> Since humans are the cause of all “not-good” (*bushan* 不善) in the world, we should clearly be the ones to fix it, but how? Thankfully, the second part of the text provides suggestions. Humans can reset their primordial relationship with the cosmos by entering into the cosmic flow. To be sure, humans must leave behind their imagined notions of permanent, fixed boundaries that define entities and things and focus instead on a more fluid understanding of creative change and nonstop boundary-making/unmaking.

But how to reengage ourselves in this Constancy? The author states: “Regarding the actions of the world: by neither avoiding nor partaking in them, they can happen of themselves” (舉天下之為也，無舍也，無與也，而能自為也).<sup>19</sup> If one takes this statement at face value, its meaning remains opaque, and it is difficult to guess at what the author means when saying “by neither avoiding nor partaking in [something]” (無舍也，無與也). Yet if one uses the metaphor of water, especially its image of flow and the dissolution of discrete boundaries, the text’s message comes into focus. Indeed, the cosmic flow will take its course if we but stop actively meddling around, avoiding things, or inserting ourselves consciously into affairs—if we stop trying to control or dam up the water. Instead, by acting like water, we allow *wei* activity (*wei* 為) to “occur of its own” (*ziwei* 自為). So, while activity of some sort does take place, it is not activity intended by us in any way. This is what spontaneity means in the context of *The Primordial State of Constancy*: it is tapping into the creative flow of the cosmos and thereby reestablishing our connection to the fundamentally creative processes of the cosmos.

Water is famous for taking the shape of whatever container or landscape it finds itself in. The following excerpt reveals the importance of context—of time and space—in shaping who we are at any particular moment and how we proceed in this process of unending change: “[As for] the arisings of the world: if they do not go against Constancy, there will be nothing that opposes its place” (天下之作也，無逆恆，無非其所).<sup>20</sup> Here, arisings that are coordinated with Constancy, presumably those that are right and do not cause disorder by breaking with the cosmic fabric, possess a proper place (*qi suo* 其所). I read “place” here in a metaphysical way, implying one’s role or position not merely in the social realm but in a hierarchy of humans, animals, and things in relationship to each other. In the context of the larger cosmogonic argument of the text, I think it appropriate to interpret “place” as the specific site in which Constancy functions, one that is connected to all other sites.

The author exhorts people to find their proper place by allowing the creative processes of the cosmos to work through them to establish proper relationships among things. This does not mean mimicking the Heavenly cosmos but embodying it as we proceed through every moment in space. With respect to water, it means leaving behind any attempt to control or direct it but, rather, to become like water instead. An arising, in any living being, is unique and uniquely connected to other arisings around it; it does not follow along just any generalized path of Constancy, as though



proceeding along the same, broad road as everything else. Rather, each arising must obtain and fulfill its particular Constancy (*qi heng* 其恆) at specific locations and moments of time (*qi suo*). Creativity and spontaneity in this context are the cosmic forces that allow each of us to bubble forth from our cosmic, divine source and stream along the grooves and landscapes in which we live.

## The Cosmos and Flow

Another recently unearthed manuscript, the *Taiyi sheng shui* (Taiyi Gives Birth to Water, hereafter *Taiyi*), provides a cosmogonic genesis account that directly involves water and its flow.<sup>21</sup> The text, like *The Primordial State of Constancy*, also enjoins followers to embrace and reconnect themselves to creative, organic processes of nature, although *Taiyi* is more obvious in articulating the cyclical aspects of these processes. The details of *Taiyi*'s cosmogony are utterly different from *The Primordial State of Constancy*, insofar as it traces everything back to a creator god, Taiyi. But the main emphasis on a natural process of creative change, along with its exhortation that humans embody such change, is similar. We might therefore include it in our group of texts that support what I have called a “Dao-embodiment” approach.

In the text, water, created initially by a creator god(dess), Taiyi, joins together with first-created cosmic entities such as Heaven and Earth to initiate the natural forces and cycles of the cosmos. Flow in this context is flow that completes a cycle and reverts back to the beginning to start again. It is a divine process initiated by Taiyi and carried out according to a cosmological logic of cyclical progression and completion. The first paragraph of the text describes this well:

Taiyi gives birth to water, which returns to assist it. In this manner it completes Heaven. Heaven returns and assists Taiyi and thereby completes Earth. Heaven and Earth then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they thereby complete the numinous and bright. The numinous and bright then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they thereby complete Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they thereby complete the Four Seasons. The Four Seasons then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they

thereby complete coldness and hotness. Coldness and hotness then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they thereby complete moisture and dryness. Moisture and dryness then mutually assist each other, and in this manner they thereby complete the year, after which [this process] comes to a halt.

大(太)一生水,水反鈎(輔)大(太)一,是以成天.天反鈎(輔)大(太)一,是以成越(地).天越(地)【復相輔】也,是以成神明.神明復相鈎(輔)也,是以成暄(陰)暄(陽).暄(陰)易(陽)復相鈎(輔)也,是以成四時.復【相】鈎(輔)也,是以成倉(滄)然(熱).倉(滄)然(熱)復相鈎(輔)也,是以成溼燥(燥).溼燥(燥)復相鈎(輔)也,成凶(歲)而續(止).<sup>22</sup>

It is worth noting here that the creation of the “myriad things”—humans, animals, and even *qi*-material force—is, surprisingly, missing.<sup>23</sup> The point of the passage is to depict cosmic acts of creation and self-fulfilling natural cycles—or cycles that automatically propel the world and its creatures forward along an appropriate path. The emphasis, as was the case in *The Primordial State of Constancy*, is not on the manifold things of the world but on the constant movement and inevitability of creative cycles in the cosmos.

In *Taiyi*, in particular, creative flow consists in actions such as proceeding (*xing* 行), cycling back (*zhou* 周), reverting back (*fan* 反), mutually assisting (*fu* 輔), and completing (*cheng* 成). These are all highly interactive and dynamic processes based on cycles of life and seasonal change. Take, for example, the following passage:

For this reason Taiyi hides in water, proceeds with the seasons, cycles back around and starts again . . . [it takes itself as] the mother of the myriad things.

是古(故)大(太)一儻(藏)於水,行於時,彌(周)而或【始,以己為】富(萬)勿(物)母.<sup>24</sup>

Implicated in this never-ending process of cyclical change is an interactive type of creativity in which leading actors mutually participate in a cosmic dance of sorts, helping each other bring natural cycles to fruition. The authors are intriguingly not concerned so much with the single-handed creation of an almighty God, although they concede that an almighty Taiyi started it all in the beginning by creating water. Instead, they seem focused

on creativity as a process of mutual aid and assistance, one of completing, reverting back, and beginning again rather than actively fashioning and destroying. Destruction, in fact, is not really part of the vocabulary of these cosmic processes. As parts of cycles that continue over and over again, things are not actively destroyed; they wither and die and new things are born as a natural outcome of the process.

At this point, we might ask how humans are supposed to act in relationship to these divine cycles and forces, and how water might fit back into the story. While the author of *Taiyi* mostly speaks of cosmic cycles, certain passages in the text support the notion that such an interest feeds directly into a primary concern for the health and well-being of society and its individuals. The text states:

Below, there is earth, and [this region] is called Earth. Above, there is *qi*, and [this region] is called Heaven. The Dao is also its familiar appellation. I beg to ask for its name. When carrying out affairs by way of the Dao, one must rely on its name. Thus, affairs of the world are completed and one's body develops.

下，土也，而胃（謂）之越（地）。上，闕（氣）也，而胃（謂）之天。道亦其矚（字）也。青（請）昏（問）其名。道從事者必瘳（託）其名，古（故）事成而身長。<sup>25</sup>

Here, the ideal agency of an individual who must carry out worldly affairs lies not in the “Dao” as a simple label or bounded appellation (*zi* 字) but, rather, in “its name (*ming* 名).”<sup>26</sup> The “name” of the Dao presumably refers to some sort of all-encompassing or infinite truth that cannot be put into language. From the context, it appears as though it refers to an ongoing process that helps bring everything in the human and natural worlds to completion, much like the creative, cosmic flow described in *The Primordial State of Constancy*. One might thus compare it to the “Constant Name” of the Dao, referred to in the *Daode jing* 道德經 (i.e., the *Laozi*).<sup>27</sup> In both the *Daode jing* and *Taiyi*, the “[Constant] Name” is the motor of the world and a font of inexhaustible creative powers that are referred to as “Constancy” (*heng* 恆) in *The Primordial State of Constancy*. And, in *Taiyi*, the very first and most basic expression of this creative power consists in the creation of water that permeates the universe and helps direct all natural cycles.

Many thinkers who ascribed to a type of Dao-embodiment approach of cosmic flow make use of similar verbs and varied metaphors for describing

the spontaneous movement that constitutes both the movement of the cosmos and idealized human behavior. In the texts examined so far, we have encountered early cosmic activities such as spontaneous arising and generation, cycling or reverting back, completing, and mutually assisting. For humans, we find discussion of “relying on its name,” “neither participating in nor avoiding,” “letting things arise of themselves,” and so on, which show that human actions need to be motivated by the same forces that motivate the cosmos. But nothing says “cosmic flow” more clearly than the language of Zhuangzi’s concept of *you* 遊, the verb he invokes to describe an aspirant’s ultimate freedom in the cosmic Dao (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊). Translated by Burton Watson as “free and easy wandering” and by A. C. Graham as “going rambling without a destination,” wandering or rambling (*you* 遊), in these contexts, is about floating around, as though on water. In fact, the word meaning “to swim” (*you* 游) is often used interchangeably with “to ramble” in texts like the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*. This can be seen in the cosmological chapters of the *Huainanzi*, as well as in hundreds of other examples, where authors refer to the ideal person as one who is “roaming in the land of the Inexhaustible” (*you yu wuqiong zhi di* 游於無窮之地).<sup>28</sup> Even the more mundane meaning of *you* 遊—as “to travel,” instead of “to ramble/wander”—imparts the dynamic change involved in this mode of acting in the world.

The usages of the two types of *you* 遊/游 in cosmic flow texts frequently follow a formula. Either they describe one’s traveling in or around a specific worldly destination, like a state or other locale, or they describe where one rambles psychologically in life, in terms of a spiritual state of mind. When rambling in the latter manner, one goes about one’s everyday business but in a cosmic dimension of space-time, with the cosmos as one’s motivation for action. The formula appears frequently: one goes “rambling in X” (遊於 X), where X stands for some kind of vast, cosmic space such as the infinite, the murky (*mingming* 冥冥),<sup>29</sup> a “no-man’s-land wilderness” (*wuren zhi ye* 無人之野), “with the Dao rambling in the state of Large Nothingness” (*yu dao you yu damo zhi guo* 與道遊於大莫之國),<sup>30</sup> “on the banks of the Murky River” (*xuanshui zhi shang* 玄水之上),<sup>31</sup> “outside the Six Convergences” (*liuhe zhiwai* 六合之外), or the likes.<sup>32</sup>

So far, I have outlined the links that authors in a few early texts made between early cosmic processes of creation and idealized human action. In each of these texts, the solution for avoiding human-made chaos and ensuring cosmic harmony is ultimately a psychophysiological one based on the proper embodiment of the Dao. While the metaphors may change,

the type of activity and its source in the Dao remains the same, and it always involves change that creates a new, localized configuration in space and time. Moreover, such an activity does not involve pursuing the desires of oneself or one's close associates; following or changing laws; setting up and abiding in a particular social, political, or ritual order; or divining and sacrificing to spirits outside the self. It involves, quite simply and, in contrast to many other types of approaches in early China, individuals altering their states of mind so that they engage the cosmic flow of the immanent Dao. From the perspective of political philosophy, this type of solution to social order is fundamentally decentralized and based in individual behaviors, not institutional structures or policies. It also presupposes a fundamentally religious belief that the cosmic flow, when properly invoked, will help bring order and other good things to the world.

### Correlative Cosmology versus Cosmologies of Flow

How do cosmologies of flow (or Dao-embodiment approaches) differ from other cosmologies that might be labeled “naturalistic” in orientation? By this, I refer to cosmological articulations that became popular in late Warring States China that depicted a cosmos that functioned according to causes that we might deem to be at once “natural,” “spiritual,” and “physical,” rather than due to the intention or will of deities, supernatural beings, or living or deceased beings and ancestors. So-called “correlative cosmologies” (or Five Phases cosmologies) are one such type of cosmology that gained renown around the same time as cosmologies of flow.<sup>33</sup> Although most scholars hold Five Phases cosmology (I will refer to them as “cosmologies of resonance” from now on) to be intrinsically linked to any early naturalistic ways of describing the cosmos, I will argue a slightly different point here. The fact that many authors in early China became interested in articulating naturalistic, largely non-animistic cosmologies during the period cannot be denied.<sup>34</sup> It is also true that such cosmologies were articulated precisely in order to explain how humans should act and interact in the world. But this does not mean that all naturalistic cosmologies are necessarily similar in kind.

It is important to distinguish cosmologies of flow from cosmologies of resonance, as they are based on a divergent way of presenting the idealized cosmic-human connection. Whereas cosmologies of flow ask that humans invoke, engage, and activate cosmic flow through their bodies

and minds, cosmologies of resonance demand that humans study all the diverse objects and creatures in the world so as to reveal intrinsic resonances among categories of objects. Humans must then behave so that the natural resonances among objects can be revealed and “sounded” in the world. In other words, a resonance worldview requires that humans concertedly and consciously recreate situations and environments such that the underlying harmonies of the cosmos can be felt and appreciated by all.

In cosmologies of resonance, the goal is to figure out which objects have an automatic, reflexive, or resonant connection with each other. This active search for correlations, along with attempts to arrange and articulate them clearly to rulers and the public, is inimical to the embodied worldview presented by thinkers who promote cosmic flow. As pointed out earlier, the chief trait of this cosmology is creative, cosmic change. In cosmologies of flow, while an individual’s embodiment of cosmic flow might actually result in a certain resonance or harmony with surrounding objects and creatures, the act of matching oneself up properly with these objects and creatures should never be taken as the primary goal. Moreover, the underlying resonances cannot be predicted beforehand, as with resonance cosmologies, since the Dao of the cosmos works creatively and spontaneously—that is, according to a process of self-generation that cannot be predicted or prescribed beforehand.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted what we might productively categorize as a shared approach or religious worldview that emerged sometime during Warring States China. Characterized by both a belief in a cosmology grounded in a naturalistic Dao and the imperative for humans to embody the cosmic flow of the Dao in their everyday lives, this orientation can be found in texts like the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Taiyi sheng shui*, *The Primordial State of Constancy*, the *Huainanzi*, parts of *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* 呂氏春秋, and more. While Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 father, Sima Tan 司馬談, is famous for having coined the label “Daoist School” to refer to a particular lineage and way of thought, scholars have recently questioned the legitimacy of thinking of Daoism as a school in early, preimperial times. I wish to present the claim: “Yes. There is something that we might fruitfully refer to as a ‘Daoist’ spiritual orientation in early China. Although it may not have been a self-conscious school of thought or organized itself in the

same ways we currently may wish to organize our source materials, this spiritual orientation seems to have had an extensive reach in the intellectual world of Warring States China.”

Building on Sarah Allan’s work on water as well as Michael Puett’s analyses of self-divinization movements, I argue that there was an overarching spiritual outlook—the Dao-embodiment approach—that viewed idealized human action in terms of cosmic flow and localized, creative, self-generating powers. Such a view might not differ that much from some formulations of “creativity” in the Western world. Cecilia A. Conrad, a spokesperson from the MacArthur Foundation, recently commented on two associated concepts that are popular in American notions of human excellence: genius and creativity. She said, “Genius is a state, but creativity is an activity: It’s stuff you’re doing.”<sup>35</sup> Although there was no concept of genius in early Daoism, there was the notion that anyone who could engage the Dao in his or her life could become a spiritual person. Hence, the Daoist sage in early Daoism is comparable to what we might call a genius. And as for creativity as an activity rather than a state of being, the author(s) of *The Primordial State of Constancy* would mostly agree, although they would probably not care to differentiate between the two. Creativity (*zizuo*, *zisheng*, *ziwei/wuwei*, *ziran*) is an activity as well as a state of being—one that is latent and waiting to be uncovered in every second that passes and every space that exists.

It is important to note, again, that cosmologies of creative flow are different from cosmologies of resonance that became quite popular during the Han period. In cosmologies of resonance, there is an intrinsic connection postulated between two disparate objects merely because of their purported cosmological affinity with each other. Cosmologies of flow associate affinities based not on resonance but on intrinsic cosmological connection. They are based in an early Chinese form of spontaneity or creativity that is powered by the cosmos itself.<sup>36</sup> Affinities among objects and creatures of the world do frequently occur, but they do so because creatures in the world are fulfilling their natural, creative potentials and operating according to fundamental cosmic harmony, not because of a predefined, cosmic correlation.

## Notes

1. Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).
2. Allan, *Way of Water*, 4.

3. See Ames's essay in this volume for a discussion of the religiosity of early beliefs. I also discuss these issues in more detail in my books *Individualism in Early China: Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010) and *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), and I provide background to the question of religion and nature on pages 1–5 of the latter book.

4. I use the English terms “creativity” and “creative,” which also happen to describe the type of “creation” that occurs in creation myths associated with these types of activities. I try to limit my use of the terms to the ways that they are defined in the early Chinese texts, although it is important to recognize that many modern connotations of creativity may not be relevant to the context at hand.

5. In previous work, I have also discussed the human-cosmos relationship in terms of an isomorphism or parallelism.

6. Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), see esp. chap. 2, 80–121.

7. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).

8. Paul R. Goldin, “The Myth That China Has No Creation Myth,” *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008): 1–22.

9. We will discuss the *Taiyi* text later. See also Constance A. Cook and John. S. Major, eds., *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), esp. 121–65. As John Major states, “Modern scholars, relying on late Warring States and Han texts, have reached a consensus that Chinese cosmogony is unique in having an inception rather than a creation. . . . But the widely held image of the Chinese universe as ‘uncreated’ is in need of revision; the gods in the Chu Silk Manuscript are depicted unambiguously as cosmic creator-ancestors.” *Defining Chu*, 129.

10. Mote claims that the “self-generating” cosmos—one with no god or creator external to itself—is distinctly “Chinese” or “northern Chinese.” See Frederick W. Mote, “The Cosmological Gulf between China and the West,” in *Transition and Permanence: Chinese History and Culture; A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Hsiao Kung-ch'üan*, ed. David C. Buxbaum and Frederick W. Mote (Hong Kong: Cathay Press, 1972), 7–9.

11. Derk Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Dorothy Borei and Charles Le Blanc (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 81. See also Derk Bodde, “Myths of Ancient China,” in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel Noah Kramer (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1961), 367–408; K. C. Chang, “Chinese Creation Myths: A Study in Method,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology* 8 (1959): 47–79.

12. This is an unprovenanced text that was purchased on the illicit antiquities market and published in the many-volume series by the Shanghai Museum. Scholars



agree that it is authentic, written in the Chu script, and likely dates to around the same time as the manuscripts unearthed at Guodian (ca. 300 BCE). All translations of this text are taken from our translation in Erica F. Brindley, Paul R. Goldin, and Esther S. Klein, “A Philosophical Translation of the *Heng Xian*,” *Dao* 12 (2013): 2: 145–51. For an analysis of this text in terms of boundary-making, change, and creativity, see Erica Brindley, “Spontaneous Arising and Creative Change in the *Hengxian*,” *Journal of Daoist Religions* 9 (2016): 1–17.

13. See the Mawangdui *Daoyuan* 道原 text, in which both the terms *jing* 靜 and *daxu* 大虛 help describe the beginnings of the cosmos; Guojia wenwuju guwenxian yanjiushi 國家文物局古文獻研究室, *Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書, vol. 1 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1980), 145–46.

14. The manuscript uses *huo* 或, which is generally taken as *yu* 域 in both the received and paleographic literature.

15. Text and translation after Brindley et al., “A Philosophical Translation,” 146–47.

16. I have written about the significance of the term *yu* in Brindley, “Spontaneous Arising.” I show how the emergence of space and time in the text is linked to boundary-making, which is tantamount to the creative change of the cosmos, or “nature.”

17. Brindley et al., “A Philosophical Translation,” 146.

18. Brindley et al., “A Philosophical Translation,” 148.

19. Brindley et al., “A Philosophical Translation,” 150 (end of slip 11).

20. Brindley et al., “A Philosophical Translation,” 150 (slip 12).

21. In contrast to *The Primordial State of Constancy*, *Taiyi* was excavated properly and not acquired on the illicit antiquities market. The translation I use is my own. I have consulted Scott Cook’s published translation and included a few of his terms or phrases. See Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation*, 2 vols. (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012).

22. Jingmen shi bowuguan 荆門市博物館, *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), 125.

23. I have written more at length about this text in Brindley, “The *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水 Cosmogony and Its Role in Early Chinese Thought,” in *Dao Companion to the Excavated Guodian Manuscripts*, ed. Shirley Chan (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 153–62.

24. Jingmen shi bowuguan, *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, 125.

25. Jingmen shi bowuguan, *Guodian Chu mu zhujian*, 126.

26. It is worth noting that the true name of the Dao mentioned here is likely equivalent to *Taiyi*, since the author links creative, cosmic change (of any sort) to both the Dao and “*Taiyi* hidden in water.” See Brindley, “*Taiyi shengshui*.”

27. The *Laozi* famously states: 道可道非常道。名可名非常名 (The Dao that can be spoken is not the Constant Dao. The name that can be named is not the Constant Name).

28. *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, comp. Liu Wendian 劉文典, punct. Feng Yi 馮逸 and Qiao Hua 喬華 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1989), 10.

29. *Wenzi shuyi* 文子疏義, ed. Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2000), 327 (“Weiming” 微明).

30. *Zhuangzi zhuzi suoyin* 莊子逐字索引, ed. D. C. Lau et al. (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2000), 20/53/25 and 20/54/3–4 (“Shanmu” 山木).

31. *Zhuangzi zhuzi suoyin*, 22/60/3 (“Zhibeiyou” 知北遊).

32. *Zhuangzi zhuzi suoyin*, 66/69/1 (“Xuwugui” 徐無鬼).

33. These developed in the fourth through third centuries BCE and took off in early imperial intellectual circles from the second century BCE through the end of the Han. See the contributions in “Reconsidering the Correlative Cosmology of Early China,” ed. Magnus Fiskejö, special issue, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000): 1–196.

34. It is best not to make a stark distinction between “naturalistic” and “animistic” cosmologies during the period, however, because it is likely that largely naturalistic cosmologies also retained belief in animistic deities who fit and were integrated into the natural picture in some way.

35. Jennifer Schuessler, “MacArthur Foundation Announces 2016 ‘Genius’ Grant Winners,” *New York Times*, September 22, 2016.

36. By this I refer to A. C. Graham’s note of caution that one need not think of such spontaneity in terms of the Western dichotomy of rational choice versus whimsical, emotional impulse: “The Taoist is somewhere where this dichotomy does not apply. He wants to remain inside nature, to behave as spontaneously as an animal . . . on the other hand, he has a contempt for emotion and subjectivity, a respect for things as they objectively are, as cool and lucid as a scientist’s.” See Angus C. Graham, “Taoist Spontaneity and the Dichotomy of ‘Is’ and ‘Ought,’” in *Experimental Essays on Chuang-Tzu*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1983), 10–11.