

## **FULL CIRCLE: WEST MEETS EAST**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the differences and relationships between Eastern and Western conceptions of Creation and Nature and how these differing worldviews helped shape the evolution of their respective philosophies and cultures. It further examines the similarities of contemporary scientific inquiries such as quantum mechanics and chaos theory to Eastern philosophy. Finally, it posits the benefits that might be derived in the future from the possible syntheses of these two world views.

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## **CÍRCULO COMPLETO: EL OCCIDENTE SE ENCUENTRA CON EL ORIENTE**

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### **Extracto**

El artículo explora las diferencias entre el Oriente y el Occidente de las relaciones entre los conceptos de la Creación y la Naturaleza y cómo estos diferentes puntos de vista del mundo ayudaron a formar la evolución de sus respectivas filosofías y culturas. Examina también la similitud de los estudios científicos contemporáneos tales como la mecánica quantum y la teoría del caos con respecto a la filosofía Oriental. Finalmente se exponen los beneficios que pudieran derivarse en el futuro de las posibles síntesis de estos dos puntos de vista del mundo.

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## **PLEIN CERCLE: L'OCCIDENT A LA RENCONTRE DE L'ORIENT**

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### **Résumé**

Cet essai explore les différences et les relations entre les conceptions orientales et occidentales de la Création et de la Nature et en quoi ces différentes approches globales ont contribué à modeler l'évolution de leurs philosophies et cultures respectives. Les similitudes des questions scientifiques contemporaines telles que la mécanique quantique et la théorie du chaos de la philosophie orientale sont également examinées. Finalement, cet essai postule sur les bénéfices qui pourraient être dérivés dans le futur de la synthèse de ces deux approches globales.

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## **OST – WEST: DER KREIS SCHLIESST SICH**

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Diese Schrift exploriert die Unterschiede und Verhältnisse zwischen der oestlichen und westlichen Auffassung von Schoepfung und Natur und wie diese unterschiedlichen Weltanschauungen zur Evolution ihrer respectiven Philosophien und Kulturen beitragen. Weiterhin untersucht sie die Parallelen zwischen modernen, wissenschaftlichen Konzepten, wie

Quantummechanik und Chaostheorie und Oestlicher Philosophie. Letztlich, postuliert sie die Vorteile einer etwaigen Synthese der beiden Weltanschauungen.

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### **CÍRCULO COMPLETO: O OESTE ENCONTRA-SE COM O LESTE**

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#### **Resumo**

Este texto explora as diferenças e relações entre as concepções da Criação e da Natureza entre o Leste o Oeste e como estas diferentes visões do mundo auxiliaram a estas diferentes visões do mundo auxiliaram a formar a evolução de suas respectivas filosofias e culturas. Adicionalmente examina as similaridades das questões científicas contemporâneas como a mecânica quântica e a teoria do caos na filosofia oriental. Finalmente destaca os benefícios que podem surgir no futuro das possíveis sínteses destas duas visões do mundo.

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### **FULL CIRCLE: WEST MEETS EAST**

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Creation myths are the first real glimpses into how humanity first viewed itself in relation to the world around it. Most of these myths tell of an anthropomorphic god, goddess, or gods and goddesses that willed the earth into existence and created the human race; some omnipotent being or beings that ruled over humanity and all of nature. However China, as Tu Wei-Ming notes of Frederick W. Mote, is unique in its lack of such a myth (Wei-Ming 1989). In Mote's words, "...they have regarded the world and man as uncreated, as constituting the central features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself." Thus, for the ancient Chinese, the natural world and humans were one and only a part of a larger, ever-flowing continuum of creation. Their supreme force was not separate and above them, as a ruling deity in heaven, but was within and without them, all encompassing and all-inclusive. It is this fundamental conception that sets the East Asian worldview apart from that of the West. It is also the reason empirical science did not develop in the East and for the differing views of the natural world and humanity's relation to it that lie between the East and the West.

#### **The Whole**

The earliest folk religions of ancient China did include deities, but these divine entities were very different from the Western conception of the same. For the ancient Greeks, Mother Earth was the primal force giving birth to deities and humans alike. She was viewed as an anthropomorphic goddess, the full-bosomed mother of all creation, and the many deities she delivered forth were also of a human likeness. These deities, in turn, ruled over the realm of humanity controlling all natural events from flood to famine. With higher powers in charge, the Western view of the world was distinctly split between the realm of the divine and the realm of humanity, which created a dualism of thought as well (Ames 1989). The deities of the ancient Chinese, in contrast, were localized earth spirits, a spirit of the spring or the grove, closely tied to the social hierarchy of family, village, and empire that later gave rise to some of the aspects of Confucianism, namely the Mandate of Heaven. However, these deities had no ultimate creator and were not permanent, universal entities, but were

transitory, their fates tied to that of the family, village, or empire that ruled over their domain. When any of these social elements changed or disappeared, their deities did as well.

Inherent, then, in this view was a firm acceptance of change. There was no ultimate Being bringing about change in the world, it was simply a given and natural condition of existence, the workings of creation. Though there may be deities or forces outside the scope of human perception, they were just as susceptible to the processes of change inherent to the world as humanity itself was. Thus, there was no clear distinction between the divine and humanity or humanity and nature. They were the inseparable parts of a whole.

The first evidence of this inseparableness comes from the Shang people who were the first to emphasize the polarity of heaven and earth (Colegrave 1979). Heaven was above and earth below, but this relationship did not constitute a hierarchical one. Rather, as Sukie Colegrave explains, the earth “was revered as a numinous power complementary to that of heaven.” The two realms of heaven and earth were not distinct and separate, but were seen as part of a larger whole, the Chaos or Great Nothingness, that was the beginning of the world and would later be known as the Dao. The philosophy of Yin and Yang grew out of this notion of polarity, and essentially out of nature itself, as it sought to explain the relationship and interactions between seeming opposites such as above and below, day and night, summer and winter, male and female. In all of these relationships one presupposes and cannot exist without the other polar opposite. It is only together that they constitute a whole entity. Also inherent in this polarity is the change it generates (Colegrave 1979). It is the continual changing of one polar opposite into the other, day into night, summer into winter, which creates and shapes the world. Change is therefore creation itself.

A complete doctrine eventually evolved that described the different natures of Yin and Yang and how they related to aspects of everyday life. It was believed that all things had their Yin and Yang natures, from the universe to the individual, and it was the changing balance and interactions between these two natures that created the world. The philosophy of Yin-Yang, then, stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things within a dynamic and progressive process of change. It does not try to pick the world apart. It tries to pull it together.

### **The Parts**

The philosophy that flowered in ancient Greece under the watchful eyes of their deities, however, did try to pick the world apart. The Greek's belief in a Supreme Being, Mother Earth, and all her multitude of deity children who controlled heaven and earth and even the lives of humans themselves, led the Greeks to ideas of controlling forces in nature and ultimately to modern science. These ideas, however, continued the dualism between the spiritual and physical realms, keeping them irreconcilably separated. In addition, although they also constituted a shift from the will of the divine to that of the natural world, these ideas were still ultimately influenced by the notion of some unseen and all-powerful force ordering the universe and the world. Unlike the dynamic process of change inherent to all things of Yin and Yang, this unseen force constituted a separate and unchanging absolute.

The thoughts of one Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, came surprisingly close to the concept of Yin and Yang (Colegrave 1979) with such statements as “God is day night, winter summer, war

peace, satiety hunger...” and “the way is straight and crooked; it is one and the same” (Owens 1959).

However, most of his contemporaries found this mode of thought too abstract to follow (Owens 1959). And what little influence Heraclitus did have on Western thought was far overshadowed by the prevailing beliefs best typified by the story of the philosopher Parmenides who was instructed by an unnamed goddess that the fundamental error of mortals is that, “They have established (the custom of) naming two forms, one of which ought not to be (mentioned): that is where they have gone astray” (Owens 1959). The goddess further explains, these two forms are “distinguished...as opposite in form” by humans (Owens 1959). This prevailing “error” of thinking clearly separates the polarities inherent in nature and allows one aspect to completely transcend and vanquish the other. For the Greeks this absolute was light over dark, mind over matter, humanity over the earth.

It was the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who firmly entrenched this dualism of mind and matter into Western thought. Aristotle, known as the father of philosophical empiricism, emphasized the study of the natural world in its individual physical components, as opposed to by metaphysical reasoning, for answers to the workings of nature. This emphasis placed humanity in the role of observer of the world around it and not necessarily as a participant of that world. In addition, Aristotle's “Chain of Being,” the categorizing and hierarchical ranking of the natural world based on each creature’s level of perfection, further separated humanity from nature, placing humans firmly above it, in a position of domination. Certainly rationalizations like these gave the ancient Greeks, and others to follow, a sense of control over the ever-changing and uncontrollable workings of nature, for this dualistic view of the world prevailed and sent Western thought down the road to the empirical study and manipulation of nature and, consequently, to modern science and the mechanistic world view.

### **A Balancing Act**

The ancient Chinese took a very different road. With the philosophy of Yin-Yang as the underlying and overall basis of Chinese thought, very different ideas about nature evolved. The characters for Yin and Yang themselves were derived from aspects of the natural world, referring to the dark and light sides of a mountainous valley (Colegrave 1979), indicative of the intimate relationship between the ancient Chinese and their environment. Chinese geomancy or Feng-shui (wind and water) is also a prime example of this intimacy. As Colegrave explains it, Feng-shui was the natural outgrowth of the conception of Yin and Yang as the primal polarities of the Dao. Feng-shui dictates that it is “the task of the human being to understand the ways of the two principles as they express themselves in creation, so that all actions can be performed in harmony with these ways...” (Colegrave 1979). The practitioners of Feng-shui, then, sought the perfect balance between Yin and Yang when determining such things as the placement of a home, grave, or the timing of a particular event, based on the doctrine of Yin-Yang (Colegrave 1979). Feng-shui, in other words, emphasizes the need for a harmony between humanity and the natural world. Colegrave notes that when Feng-shui first became known to the West in the nineteenth century it was ridiculed and, as J. Eitel wrote in 1873, seen as “...the blind gropings of the Chinese mind after a system of natural science...” Colegrave goes on to say that the “highly specialized, fragmented framework” in which the West studies nature “often misses the relation between the parts,” and that geomancy, and therefore the principles of Yin and Yang, may indeed one day prove to be “less unscientific” than it was once considered.

Although the other pillar of Chinese thought and society, Confucianism, was at such odds with the traditional Yin-Yang philosophy of ancient China, it still grew within the context of its underlying principles. Wolfgang Bauer writes of a Confucian scholar Tung Chung-shu who attempted to justify the succession of the Han dynasty by an interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* ascribed to Confucius. In this interpretation “Tung Chung-shu invented a whole system of interlocking cycles in order to explain the succession of dynasties” and these cycles, in turn, revealed larger patterns of change through time (Bauer 1976). Chung-shu's explanation of the honorable field of history was obviously guided by the principles of interconnectedness, interdependence, and change inherent to Yin-Yang. In addition, Bauer goes on to say of Chung-shu's work: “With it, he laid the foundations for all later pseudo-scientific explanations of the world, indeed for all scientific efforts of traditional China generally” (Bauer 1976). While the dualism of the West had led to the dissection of the natural world, the polarity of traditional China had led to the search for the unifying patterns that had created it.

The Daoist's philosophy was also an outgrowth of Yin and Yang, and like Feng-shui, sought a harmony with the natural world. Their beliefs centered on the achievement of a spiritual harmony with the Dao reached by way of a harmony with nature. In fact, the Daoists may be considered the first environmentalists for they preached the need for a balance between society and the natural world. Many renounced society all together and retreated as hermits into the mountains and marshes (Bauer 1976). This extreme behavior, however, was as much a reaction to Confucianism as it was an escape from the world of humanity. As Bauer writes, “The Confucians on the one side... were willing to acknowledge nature only as 'non-civilization,' (while) the (D)aoists conversely recognized civilization only as 'non-nature.’”

The Confucian ideal of a structured and ordered moral society based on a hierarchy of filial and religious piety was in direct conflict with the underlying beliefs of Yin-Yang philosophy and the Daoists, namely the acceptance of change as a natural way of life and the non-hierarchical interdependence of all things. Confucianism was essentially a very dualistic approach to society set within the very polaristic tradition of ancient China. Its foundation on the Mandate of Heaven, namely that the social order is a manifestation of the will of heaven (Bauer 1976), gave the Confucians an ultimate cause or absolute, actually splitting the social from the spiritual and causing a dualism between the world of humanity and the world of nature, much like the “Chain of Being” of Aristotle. The conflict between Confucianism and Daoism was as much a debate over humanity's relationship to and with nature as it was a debate over the means to a “perfect” society, for after all, the two are really one and the same. Perhaps this is why Confucianism eventually yielded to the prevalent ideology of Yin-Yang when it incorporated Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, becoming neo-Confucianism.

Similar in nature to this early conflict were the later debates of the neo-Confucian philosophers of the late Ming and early Ch'ing dynasties which centered on the relationship between and status of the two metaphysical concepts of li (principle), and ch'i (material force). These philosophers considered li the manifestation and regulation of the heavenly principle, an outgrowth of the Mandate of Heaven, and ch'i the basic substance of which all things are made, including the

cosmos and nature (Smith 1993). While ch'i is the force of the universe, li controls and apportions that force (Ng 1993), or as the philosopher Hui Tung explained: "Li is the pattern of how things are formed" (Ng 1993). There were many conflicting and innovative ways in which the relationship between these two concepts were approached and conceived. However, suffice it to say that, as On-cho Ng notes of Irene Bloom, all "were at one in denying the reality of li, or principle, as independent of ch'i" (Ng 1993). The two were interdependent and interconnected. It was unquestioned that li and ch'i were part of a larger whole. The only question that concerned these philosophers was the nature of the interactions between the two and how those interactions affected the world of humanity. Just as Confucianism had become infused with the principles of Yin-Yang, becoming neo-Confucianism, so too had the very core of neo-Confucian thought.

### **West Meets East**

Today the mechanistic and dualistic mind of the West seems to have become infused with Yin-Yang as well. On the other hand, perhaps it is, as Colegrave surmised, that the basic principles of Yin-Yang are being proven "less unscientific." Quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and the science of ecology are all beginning to do just that. As Peter Marshall explains, quantum mechanics, the physics that attempts to explain the behavior of atoms, molecules, and elementary particles does so "(b)y describing the fundamental particles of nature as being like waves, challenging the dominant scientific view...of the world as an arrangement of changeless and separate atoms..." (Marshall 1992). As waves these particles are not separate discrete entities, but are thoroughly interconnected, and it is the random interactions of these interconnected particles that determines the properties of the wave, not necessarily some absolute law. Chaos theory, in turn, deals with the basic premise of randomness, looking for patterns in the unpredictable. As Marshall explains, it "considers all kinds of wildness and irregularity observed in nature: the turbulence of weather,...the eddying of water in a stream,...the collisions of atoms in a gas." Chaos theory is certainly very different from, but not completely unlike, the interlocking cycles of Tung Chung-shu that sought to find the unifying patterns of change over time. Chaos theory, as Marshall so eloquently puts it, "has gone looking...for the whole picture. (It) is a science of process rather than stability, of becoming rather than being." One could say both of these "new" sciences are based on the fundamental principles of Yin-Yang theory.

While quantum mechanics and chaos theory bring Yin-Yang to the theoretical sciences, ecology and the ecological world view bring it to the applied sciences and the rest of Western culture. Ecology, and systems theory on which it is predicated, are both very Yin-Yang in nature. Systems theory, as Marshall explains, "looks at the world in terms of integrated wholes which cannot be reduced to their smaller parts. Rather than looking at basic building blocks, it focuses on fundamental principles of organization." The science of ecology, in turn, looks at the organization of and interactions within and between ecosystems, from the smallest of micro-environments to the concept of the whole earth as a self-regulating organism, or the Gaia hypothesis. And what ecology is discovering, and proving, is a fundamental interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. Ecology has, in essence, given empirical proof to the theory of Yin and Yang.

### **In Conclusion**

It would seem, then, that the West took the long road, strewn with the potholes of

incidentals, to the realization that everything is ultimately, and intimately, interconnected. Western empirical science has come full circle, so to speak, and has arrived where the ancient Chinese left off.

Out of the empirical proof offered by ecology a new ecological worldview is emerging in the West. In opposition to the present mechanistic worldview, it promises to work as a balance to it, the Yin to its Yang, so to speak, and guide our future relationship to and with nature. As we realize that we humans, as a part of creation, are also a prime creator of it, this emerging balance holds the promise of establishing a true and lasting harmony between the world of humanity and the world of nature: the very things that myths are made of.

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