

Forming Spirits for the Way: The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary to the *Laozi*

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In 142 CE, Zhang Daoling 張道陵 received revelation from the god Laozi. Explaining that the world was in decay, Laozi provided Zhang Daoling with teachings that would enable practitioners to help end the decline and bring about a period of Great Peace. Thus, according to later hagiographical traditions, began the Celestial Masters movement. Under the guidance of Zhang Lu 張魯, Zhang Daoling's grandson, the Celestial Masters set up an autonomous, theocratic community in southwest China, a community that the Han emperors proved incapable of controlling. There, Zhang Daoling and his followers began their work of bringing order to the cosmos.

The Celestial Masters movement, along with the relatively contemporaneous Yellow Turban movement that emerged in the eastern region of the North China plain, are commonly referred to as the first millenarian movements in Chinese history. Indeed, they are only the most famous of several such movements that developed over the course of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220).¹

A sizable body of secondary literature has arisen around the problem of how to understand the cosmological claims that underlay these movements. Why is it that one finds during this period claims that a god has given revelation, or that a new era of peace is about to begin?

This article will be an attempt to contribute to this scholarship by looking historically at why some of these cosmological claims came to have such resonance at the time. I will focus particular attention on the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to the *Laozi*, a text that was written within this context—indeed, written in or at least appropriated by the Celestial Masters movement. To set up my argument, I will turn first to an evaluation of some of the previous attempts to analyze early Chinese millenarian cosmologies.

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¹ For an excellent summary of these movements, see Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Movements.”

Secondary Scholarship on the Emergence of Millenarian Movements in Early China

Discussions of the rise of millenarian movements in China have tended to be based on comparisons (implicit or explicit) with the rise of millenarian traditions in the Mediterranean region during the last two centuries BCE and the first two centuries CE. The authority usually invoked on the Mediterranean millenarian movements is Norman Cohn. Cohn, in his *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957, 1970), argued that medieval millenarian movements had their origin in late antiquity when Jewish groups developed a new cosmological vision to replace those that had been dominant in the region. In his follow-up (actually, his pre-quel) *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith* (1993), Cohn continued the argument by tracing back the origins of this shift to Zoroastrianism. Nonetheless, the basic framework has remained constant throughout Cohn's work.

In brief, the shift as described by Cohn runs as follows. According to Cohn, the view that had been dominant in the Near East was that the cosmos was fundamentally good and harmonious. At times, the ordered world would fall into periodic phases of chaos, but this would always be followed by a return to the harmonious order. Humans thus believed themselves to live in a cyclical, and ultimately harmonious, world. This vision of a cyclical, ordered cosmos was then, Cohn argues, overthrown by a new cosmic vision based on linear time. According to this new view, the cosmos was not fundamentally good at all. However, it would at some point be brought to an end and a new order of true peace would be created. Prior to this endpoint, a god would reveal to humans when the shift was going to occur and how humans should prepare.²

In developing this argument, Cohn was building upon a lengthy tradition in the history of religions. For example, Mircea Eliade³ had argued that a notion of a cyclical, and fundamentally good, cosmos was an assumption among all "primitive" peoples, and that Jewish notions of linear time had effected a fundamental break in human history:

History no longer appears as a cycle that repeats itself ad infinitum, as the primitive peoples represented it (creation, exhaustion, destruction, annual re-creation of the cosmos), and as it was formulated . . . in the theories of Babylonian origin (creation, destruction, creation extending over considerable periods of time: millennia, Great Years, eons). Directly ordered by the will of Yahweh, history appears as a series of theophanies, negative or positive, each of which has its intrinsic value.⁴

² Essentially the same narrative underlies several of the more recent studies of millennial movements in Western history. See, for example: Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization*; Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*.

³ Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949, 1954).

⁴ Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return*, 107.

Although, as I will discuss below, there are many problems with this type of argument, it is nonetheless important to note the tremendous influence it has had on the study of early Chinese millenarian movements. And the set of problems that emerged for the analysis of such movements from within this framework is immediately clear. If millenarian movements, according to this view, only arrived when a notion of linear time replaced the purportedly more primordial cyclical, harmonious view of the cosmos, then scholars of Chinese millenarian traditions would have to argue either that such a shift was not necessary for the emergence of millenarian traditions or that such a shift did in fact occur in early China as well. Each of these approaches is worth exploring.

Famously and influentially, Anna Seidel argued strongly for the first alternative. According to Seidel, millenarian movements are universal, and do not depend upon a specifically linear vision of time:

Since Norman Cohn's important work on medieval European messianism, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), the study of messianic movements in all cultures has become almost a fashion. It was discovered that such movements do not depend on a Jewish or Christian tradition of prophecy or on a medieval world view. During the last 100 years, politico-religious movements that can be called messianic, have appeared in Europe, in Africa, in America, in Japan, in Melanesia and Indonesia.⁵

Instead, argues Seidel, millenarian ways of thinking are simply part of a common human psychology:

The longing for paradise on earth and for the savior, the messiah, who promises to lead us to it, is one of the most elementary hopes which lie deeply hidden in man. The powerful emotional energy of these yearnings is, in a normal society, tamed and channeled by rationality and common sense. It is only in times of crisis and bewildering change, when ordinary behavior patterns are disrupted, that these yearnings can come to the surface, often with explosive force, and sweep away whole societies into irrational fantasies and inspire radical and often violent solutions to the problems at hand.⁶

Millenarian thinking, therefore, is not based upon a specific cosmology or a specific notion of time. It is rather universal, and thus can appear, given the right circumstances, in any cultural setting.

According to Seidel, then, the comparatively interesting point is to see how distinct millenarian traditions have developed in each area of the world. This is particularly important

⁵ Seidel, "Taoist Messianism," 161.

⁶ Seidel, "Taoist Messianism," 161.

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for China, because, according to Seidel, millenarian thinking is embedded in the dominant traditions of early Chinese political theory:

The roots of the specifically Chinese ideas concerning the messianic ruler lie, as is well known, in the very center of the orthodox Confucian or rather pan-Chinese tradition of political thought.⁷

Seidel then discusses various figures, from Confucius to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 and Wang Chong 王充, who, as Seidel sees it, were calling on a messianic ruler to emerge and bring Great Peace [*tai ping* 太平] to the world. According to Seidel, these ideas, like those informing the millenarian movements that were to emerge in China during the first few centuries of the common era, were based on an assumption of a cyclical, organic cosmos. Seidel sums up with the argument that,

These early formulations of the state of Great Peace differ from Western notions about the messianic age insofar as they do not imply any total break, any total discontinuity with the relative conditions of the present. The perfect state that had existed in the past was a state of cosmic harmony in which all the concentric spheres of the organic Chinese universe, nature as well as human society, were perfectly attuned and communicated in a balanced rhythm of timeliness which brings maximum fulfillment to each living being. The recreation of this state hinges on the figure of the sagely ruler . . .⁸

In other words, Seidel argues that millenarian thinking arose in China precisely through a cyclical, harmonious vision of the cosmos—precisely through, in other words, the very cosmology that Cohn saw as preventing the emergence of millenarian thinking.

Given this framework, Seidel not surprisingly reads Daoist millenarian traditions as simply a continuation of this same cosmology after the fall of the Han:

The Church of the Celestial Master understood itself as a re-creation, on a higher spiritual level, of the lost cosmic order and splendor of the Han imperium. Its rituals were directly inspired by Han court ceremonial and by the imperial worship of Heaven. It was to the Daoist masters that emperors of the various small dynasties turned for an ideological sanction of their ambition to unify all of China under their rule.⁹

According to Seidel, then, Daoist millenarian traditions were a continuation of the Han cosmic order, and this cosmic order was itself based on earlier traditions. Moreover, Daoist

⁷ Seidel, "Taoist Messianism," 162.

⁸ Seidel, "Taoist Messianism," 163–164.

⁹ Seidel, "Taoist Messianism," 173. Here and throughout, I have converted all Wade-Giles romanizations into *pinyin*.

millenarian traditions were the crucial link that maintained the ideal of imperial unity throughout Chinese history: “. . . it was the Daoist messianic dream that has kept alive, all throughout the centuries of disunion (and ever since), the nostalgia for the vanished Great Peace of the unified realm.”¹⁰ In short, the millenarian traditions of the first few centuries CE came directly out of the notions of cyclicity and an organic cosmic order embedded in Chinese culture in general.

Thus, not only did Chinese millenarian traditions not depend on the cosmology analyzed by Cohn, Seidel’s terminology implies that the Daoist tradition should be understood as a Chinese parallel to the millenarianism of the early Christian church. Both were sparked, in their respective cultural settings, by the crisis of a declining empire, and each, with its respective cosmology, responded in a comparable way and served a comparable function. Thus, for Seidel, the Daoist church served in China much the same function that the Catholic church did in Europe: each preserved, “on a higher spiritual level,” the vision of an earlier imperial unity. But each did so through very different cosmological systems—an organic and cyclic cosmology in the case of Daoism, a linear and dualistic one in the case of Christianity.

Seidel’s approach to reading early millenarian movements has been tremendously influential. Indeed, this is precisely the way the movements are now commonly portrayed in studies of comparative religion. For example, in a recent overview of millenarian traditions in Mircea Eliade’s *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Hillel Schwartz distinguishes “two constellations of millenarian thought”—“one Zoroastrian-Jewish-Greek-Christian, the other Hindu-Buddhist-Taoist-Confucian.”¹¹ The distinction between the two involves, among other things, the dualistic cosmologies and linear notions of time in the former contrasted with the monistic cosmologies and cyclical notions of time in the latter. Thus, Cohn’s reading of Western millenarian traditions is upheld, but, following Seidel, millenarian movements in China (as well as much of Asia) are read as having emerged precisely through a cyclical vision of the cosmos.

If Seidel’s approach represents one way of analyzing Chinese millenarian movements in relation to Norman Cohn’s framework, a somewhat different approach has been taken recently by Livia Kohn. In contrast to the models discussed thus far, Livia Kohn finds a shift in early China directly comparable to that analyzed by Cohn for the Eastern Mediterranean region.

In making these arguments, Livia Kohn begins by claiming that the “traditional world-view of ancient China” prior to the emergence of millenarian movements was quite comparable to that described by Cohn for the ancient Near East. Both were based on a cyclical vision of history, both assumed that the cosmos was fundamentally good, and both believed that the gods and spirits who inhabit the cosmos were simply part of the larger organic whole rather than creators of the cosmos:

The traditional world-view of ancient China until the Former Han dynasty (and thus to the very beginning of the Common Era) that paved the way for the

¹⁰ Seidel, “Taoist Messianism,” 173.

¹¹ Schwartz, “Millenarianism: An Overview,” 9:522.

millenarian visions to come was therefore cyclically oriented and basically non-millenarian. It was, in fact, highly compatible with the visions of cosmos and chaos found in other cultures of the ancient world, ranging from Egypt through Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia to India (see Cohn 1995). In these visions, the order of the cosmos is fundamentally good; it moves through regular phases of perfection and danger. The gods and spirits who inhabit it are part of the overall pattern and do not appear as creators. Time is cyclical, and although renewal is possible, the idea of a complete and radical transformation was as alien to this world as the idea of the end of time.¹²

But, unlike Seidel and her followers, Kohn argues that early Chinese millenarian movements did not develop out of such a cosmology. On the contrary, Kohn argues that, just as in the Mediterranean region, millenarian movements in early China involved a rejection of the cyclical, harmonious cosmology that dominated earlier Chinese history:

All this changed with the early Daoist movements. . . . The cyclicity of the mandate of heaven was modified to allow a linear course for history; the idea of Great Peace implied a total break with the preceding age as well as the judgment and destruction of the wicked. Furthermore, the inspiring sage became a savior, a divinely appointed agent of a personal high god. This high god was not only the highest of all but also the unique creator of the world, who nevertheless communicated directly with prophetic seers. . . . As a result, early Daoist movements are highly similar in doctrine, literary formulation, and social organization to comparable millenarian groups in the West, but also constitute a serious break with earlier Chinese doctrines and religious practices.¹³

Kohn thus finds in early China precisely the same shift from cyclicity to linearity, from a good, harmonious cosmos to one controlled by a personal savior, that Cohn found in the Near East and Mediterranean regions.

Kohn's full argument is that the resulting mixture of an earlier cyclical, harmonious cosmology with the new notions of linear time and apocalypse formed the basis of "East Asian millenarianism":

. . . the worldview of these early movements can generally be described [as] Han Chinese practices overlaid with a layer of specifically Daoist notions and millenarian expectations. The unique character of this form of East Asian millenarianism is thus found in the combination of Chinese cultural traits with the key doctrines and social structures typical of apocalyptic movements.¹⁴

¹² Kohn, "Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics," 39.

¹³ Kohn, "Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics," 39.

¹⁴ Kohn, "Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics," 45.

The argument is thus similar to Seidel's, with the crucial difference that Kohn emphasizes that Chinese (and, indeed, East Asian) millenarianism involved the addition of new elements into the earlier (and continuingly dominant) cyclical worldview.

So how does Kohn account for the addition of these new elements, and how does she account for the parallel developments she is positing for China and the Mediterranean region? Given that the shift occurred slightly earlier in the Mediterranean region than in China, Kohn postulates that the explanation may lie in a diffusion of millenarian thinking from the West:

Given this historic coincidence in timing, it is quite conceivable that merchants traveling along the silk road, which had been opened in the second century BCE, carried ideas in addition to goods into China, that people of various cultural backgrounds migrated and settled there, and that Chinese soldiers in outlying border posts came into contact with Western ideas.¹⁵

Millenarian thinking, according to this framework, arose from the West. Indeed, Kohn argues that other millenarian movements, such as so-called cargo cults in Melanesia and nineteenth-century movements in China and Japan “grew in times of cataclysmic change and typically arose after contact with Western religions had been made.”¹⁶

In contrast to Seidel, then, Kohn associates millenarian thinking with a particular cosmology based upon linear time, a creator god, and a belief in the need for a radical transformation of the world—as opposed to a belief in a fundamentally good, cyclical order. For Kohn, this is a cosmology that emerged in the Mediterranean region and was then diffused throughout the world. The distinctive millenarian traditions that emerged in each of these cultures was thus a result of the combination of this Western cosmology with the indigenous tradition in question (be that Melanesia, Japan, or Chinese late antiquity).

Reading the History of Early Chinese Religions

All of these arguments take as their baseline the narrative—found most influentially for the study of millenarian movements in the work of Norman Cohn—of a shift in Near Eastern and Mediterranean traditions from a view of the cosmos as cyclical and harmonious to one based on a linear notion of time. Seidel and her followers argue that the shift never occurred in China, and the comparative significance of Chinese millenarian traditions is thus seen as residing in the ways in which such movements arose within a vision of a cyclical cosmos. In contrast, Kohn argues that a comparable shift (although not complete) did occur in China through diffusion from the West, and she then reads the resulting millenarian movements in Chinese late antiquity as based upon a mixed cosmology—partially cyclical, partially linear. Both arguments, however, build their comparative claims upon the same paradigm.

¹⁵ Kohn, “Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics,” 47.

¹⁶ Kohn, “Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics,” 33.

In what follows, I would like to question aspects of this approach to the study of early Chinese millenarian movements. It is outside the bounds of this paper to provide a full critique of Norman Cohn's reading of Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations, but it is important to argue strongly against the Eliadean reading of "primitive" man on which Cohn's argument is implicitly based. There is no empirical evidence to support—and lots of empirical evidence to question—the view that a notion of a cyclical, harmonious cosmos is part of a common, primitive way of viewing the world.

The point was made by implication several decades ago in an influential article by Maurice Bloch.¹⁷ Bloch was attacking a famous piece by Clifford Geertz in which Geertz attempted to argue that the Balinese had a fundamentally cyclical notion of time.¹⁸ Bloch pointed out that Geertz could construct such an argument only by appealing to a limited body of ritual contexts and by ignoring all other contexts in which conceptions of time as linear were clearly predominant. Although Bloch's solution to the problem (namely, that we should posit two separate cognitive systems: one cyclical and based on rituals, the other linear and based on universal principles of lived time) is problematic, the point of Bloch's critique is nonetheless sound: any attempt to claim that a given culture (or, as with Eliade, all primordial thought) is cyclical can only be made by taking particular statements made in particular contexts and ignoring all others. As subsequent studies have shown, cultures (including those that Eliade would see as primordial) have numerous different cosmologies and conceptions of time, sometimes working together, sometimes hotly contested.¹⁹ The attempt, therefore, to read human history in terms of a universal tendency to cyclical thought overthrown in the Mediterranean region during the Roman Empire is insupportable.

But my main concern here is to take issue with how this paradigm has been applied to the study of early China. Even if the paradigm were accurate (and there is substantial evidence to suggest that it is not), is it correct to apply it to the study of early China?

The scholars analyzed thus far assume that the worldview that dominated in early China prior to the emergence of millenarian movements was one of an organic, harmonious, cyclical cosmos. The disagreement between Seidel and Kohn then comes down to whether they see that cosmology as continuing through and helping to engender millenarian movements (as Seidel argues) or as being to at least some degree replaced by a cosmology based upon linear assumptions (as Kohn argues).

I have argued, however, that a cyclical vision of the cosmos was actually *not* an accepted assumption in early China. In an earlier work, I have argued that this was a topic of repeated

¹⁷ See Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present"; reprinted in Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power*, 1–18.

¹⁸ Geertz, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali"; reprinted in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 360–411.

¹⁹ See, for example, the selection of essays in *Culture through Time: Anthropological Approaches*, edited by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney. Particularly strong is Valerio Valeri's essay, "Constitutive History: Genealogy and Narrative in the Legitimation of Hawaiian Kingship," 154–192. Note Valeri's powerful critique of Bloch (189–192).

debate; some visions of history were cyclical, but others could better be characterized as progressive, linear, or accretional.²⁰

Similarly, I have argued that a harmonious, organic, spontaneous cosmos was by no means a widely-shared assumption in early China. On the contrary, this was a minority position, advanced relatively late, and one that achieved acceptance at court only at the very end of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). Even then, however, it was hotly contested.²¹

Thus, the appearance of creator deities in the late Han millenarian movements is in itself nothing new: they had populated numerous cosmologies in the earlier period as well. Indeed, the vast majority of cosmologies advocated in early China were fully theistic: natural phenomena were regularly seen as being under the control of a large pantheon of gods and spirits who had forged the landscape and who, in some of these cosmologies, had even guided human action.²² To give one example among many, one finds the following from the *Mozi*:

[Heaven] shaped and made the sun, moon, stars, and constellations so as to illuminate and guide [the people]. It formed and made the four seasons, spring, autumn, winter, and summer, so as to weave them into order. It sent down thunder,²³ snow, frost, rain, and dew so as to make the five grains, hemp, and silk grow and prosper, and sent the people to obtain materials and²⁴ benefit from them. It arranged and made mountains, streams, gorges, and valleys, and distributed and bestowed the hundred affairs so as to oversee and supervise the goodness and badness of the people. It made kings, dukes, and lords and charged them with, first, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked, and, second, plundering the metals, wood, birds, and beasts and working the five grains, hemp, and silk so as to make the materials for people's clothing and food.²⁵

This claim, made in the fourth century BCE, is fully theistic, and indeed sees Heaven as having constructed the cosmos as well as human political and economic institutions.²⁶ And I have argued that such claims were made in opposition to those prevalent at the time—views that were equally theistic, but that saw divine powers as highly capricious and as having constructed a cosmos potentially hostile to humanity.²⁷

²⁰ Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation*.

²¹ Puett, *To Become a God*; Puett, “Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the *Huainanzi*.”

²² Puett, *To Become a God*.

²³ Reversing the order of *lei jiang* 雷降.

²⁴ Reversing the order of *de er* 得而.

²⁵ *Mozi*, “Tianzhi, zhong” 天志·中, 7.6b–7a.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of this and related passages from the *Mozi*, see Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation*, 51–56; and *idem*, *To Become a God*, 101–104.

²⁷ Puett, *To Become a God*, 31–121.

I would thus have to disagree with Kohn's claim that the appearance of creator deities is something new in Chinese history. As Kohn argues:

Thus described as a high god whose power controls the key forces and patterns of life in the universe, Laozi is not a cosmic force that moves automatically and without a personal will (like the Dao or Heaven of old) but a willful and independent deity whose power lies at the root of all and whose conscious decision gave rise to creation. In other words, in the new millenarian vision of the early Daoist movements, the world is not merely an eternally ongoing process of cyclical rhythms but is something actively designed and created by a central personal deity.²⁸

This description of Laozi in the early millenarian movements could equally describe Heaven as portrayed by the Mohists.

In thus disagreeing with Kohn's attempt to read Eastern Han millenarian movements as indicative of a shift from a spontaneous, self-generating monistic cosmology to a theistic one, I do not mean to imply that Seidel's emphasis on the continuity between the millenarian traditions and what came before is more accurate. To begin with, the continuity on this point is to be found more in the theism than in the organic cosmology that Seidel emphasizes. More importantly, however, it must be emphasized that the attempt to define an essentialized Chinese cosmology for the early period (regardless of *how* one defines it) is doomed to failure: all of these cosmological issues were topics of explicit debate. Was the cosmos spontaneously generated or consciously constructed? If the latter, are the deities in question acting on behalf of humanity or are they capricious? How should humans therefore relate to them? And, if the cosmos was spontaneously generated, then what are the proper practices for humans to follow? There was no shared consensus on the answers to any of these questions.

The point here is not to claim that, for example, millenarian movements in China never appealed to cyclical claims of history: many later movements certainly did. The point is rather that such movements should not be seen as continuing an earlier cosmological assumption of cyclical time. Thus, even for those movements that did make appeals to cyclical visions of history, we would have to account for why such appeals were made and why they were supported.²⁹

But if it is true that the distinctiveness of a millenarian cosmology in China would lie neither in its rejection of an earlier cyclical, harmonious cosmology nor in its embrace of such a cosmology, then where does its significance lie? I will argue that, in answering this question, we may need to re-think the paradigm according to which millenarian movements in early China have been studied, and we may therefore need to re-think our reading of the comparative significance of early Chinese millenarian movements. Once we discard the

²⁸ Kohn, "Beginnings and Cultural Characteristics," 40.

²⁹ For a superb analysis of millenarian movements from the fourth through seventh centuries that did make such appeals to cyclical time, see Bokenkamp, "Time After Time: Taoist Apocalyptic History and the Founding of the T'ang Dynasty."

attempt to root our analysis in an Eliadean primordium of a cyclical, harmonious cosmos that millenarian movements either did or did not reject, the emphasis will have to shift to how and why specific figures and movements appropriated earlier elements of their traditions and what cultural significance such appropriations would have had at the time.

The Community of the Celestial Masters

Allow me to begin with a brief introduction to the nature of the Celestial Masters movement.³⁰ The community that Zhang Lu set up in southwestern China (in what are now the provinces of Shanxi and Sichuan) was a hierarchical society structured around the practices and commands purportedly given by the god Laozi in 142 CE.³¹ Indeed, the hierarchy was defined by one's devotion to those practices. One would rise in rank according to the degree to which one acted in accordance with the Laozian precepts, while those who failed to so act would be called upon to confess their sins or ultimately face punishments.³²

The degree to which humans so acted in accordance with the wishes of Laozi had direct implications for the workings of the cosmos. Indeed, the fact that the cosmos was, according to the Celestial Masters, slipping toward catastrophe was a consequence of improper behavior on the part of the humans. Thus the Way, in the form of Laozi, descended to call on humans to change their behavior. A powerful statement of this can be found in the Celestial Masters text, the *Da Dao jia ling jie* 大道家令戒, translated by Stephen Bokenkamp as "Commands and Admonitions for the Families of the Great Dao." The text, which provides its own date as 255 CE, narrates a telling history of the movement up to that point. I quote from Bokenkamp's excellent translation:

Though the Han house was thus established, its last generations moved at cross-purposes to the will of the Dao. Its citizens pursued profit, and the strong fought bitterly with the weak. The Dao mourned the fate of the people, for were it once to depart, its return would be difficult. Thus did the Dao cause Heaven to bestow its pneuma, called the "newly emerged Lord Lao," to rule the people, saying, "What are demons that the people should fear them and not place faith in the Dao?" Then Lord Lao made his bestowal on Zhang Daoling, making him Celestial Master. He was most venerable and most spiritual and so was made the master of the people.³³

³⁰ On the Celestial Masters, see in particular Ōfuchi, *Shoki no dōkyō*; Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, 53–77; and Kleeman, *Great Perfection*. For a discussion of the ways in which early medieval Chinese religions have and could be discussed, see the superb analysis by Robert Campany in his "On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)."

³¹ On Laozi as a god, see Seidel, *La Divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han*; Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth*.

³² See the excellent summary in Kleeman, *Great Perfection*, 68–74.

³³ Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 170–171.

Unfortunately, since the evil ways of humanity have been too strong, there is no way to stop the coming catastrophes.

Since the evil of humanity could not be rooted out, you must first pass through war, illness, flood, drought, and even death. Your life spans have been depleted, and so it is appropriate that you must come up against these things.³⁴

However, those who follow the teachings of Laozi will live to see the formation of a new order—the era of Great Peace. Indeed, they will become “seed people” for this new era:

You will see Great Peace. You will pass through the catastrophes unscathed and become the seed people of the later age. Although there will be disasters of war, illness, and flood, you will confront them without injury.³⁵

And the era of Great Peace can only be brought about with the help of humans:

People must aid Heaven in bringing about Great Peace through their actions.³⁶

Ultimately, this proved to be a potent and, for many groups, extremely appealing movement. Indeed, the Celestial Masters were a factor in weakening the Han and became a significant force in legitimating the ensuing Wei dynasty (220–265).³⁷

But what was the cosmology of the Celestial Masters? Why have human actions brought the cosmos into danger, and why is it that proper human actions can create an era of Great Peace for the cosmos?

We do possess lengthy texts from later in the Celestial Masters movement, and much work has been done in reconstructing cosmological notions from these texts. We accordingly have a fairly good understanding of later Celestial Master cosmology concerning such notions as the Three Energies, etc. However, these texts date to the fourth and fifth centuries CE. Considering the dramatic changes that had occurred both in China in general and the Celestial Masters in particular over this period, it would be dangerous to read these later notions into the early phase of the movement.

One of the few early texts we know was either written within or at least appropriated by the Celestial Masters movement is the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi*. The commentary itself was discovered at Dunhuang (S 6825). It is unfortunately only a portion of the full text,

³⁴ Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 173.

³⁵ Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 173.

³⁶ Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 176–177.

³⁷ See Goodman, *Ts'ao P'i Transcendent*.

consisting of commentary to chapters 3 through 37. Nonetheless, it is an extremely rich document, and it is one that sheds considerable light on the cosmological claims of the time.³⁸

The *Xiang'er* commentary is consistently attributed in the received tradition to either Zhang Daoling—the figure who was purportedly granted revelation from Laozi—or his grandson Zhang Lu—the figure who subsequently founded the Celestial Masters movement. The earliest attributions credit Zhang Lu with the authorship. If true, this would make the text an invaluable source to analyze some of the cosmological claims of the early Celestial Masters movement. Unfortunately, however, certainty about the authorship is impossible.

Nonetheless, there are legitimate reasons to think that the text probably does date fairly early.³⁹ First of all, the *Laozi* text being commented upon in the *Xiang'er* appears to be linked more closely with Han manuscripts of the *Laozi* than with post-Han versions.⁴⁰ William Boltz also points out that the argument of the text fits extremely well with a date in the second century CE.⁴¹

Moreover, the *Xiang'er* appears to be referenced by other early works. As Bokenkamp points out, the *Da Dao jia ling jie* (quoted above) quotes the precepts given in the *Xiang'er* commentary, appears to allude to the *Xiang'er* commentary, and indeed appears to refer to the *Xiang'er* commentary by name.⁴² Bokenkamp concludes that “The most compelling witness to the early date of the *Xiang'er* commentary is the *Admonitions* [the *Da Dao jia ling jie*], itself written in 255.”⁴³

For these reasons, many contemporary scholars accept the attribution of the commentary to Zhang Lu as likely.⁴⁴

For the concerns of this paper, the actual author is less important than the fact that the text does seem to date to an early period—late second or early third century CE. It therefore fits perfectly into the debates during this period concerning the nature of the cosmos and types of human action deemed proper. Moreover, even though we cannot say definitely that the text was in fact written by Zhang Lu himself, the arguments that Bokenkamp has put forward renders it very likely that the text was, at the very least, appropriated by the early Celestial Masters movement.

A close reading of the text should thus provide us a significant glimpse of a cosmology from within these debates in Chinese late antiquity. And we will see that it does indeed

³⁸ For analyses of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see in particular: Rao, *Laozi xiang'er zhu jiaojian*; Ōfuchi, *Shoki no dōkyō*; Bokenkamp, “Traces of Early Celestial Master Physiological Practice in the *Xiang'er* Commentary”; Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 29–77; and Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu.”

³⁹ For very helpful summaries of the scholarship on the dating of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 58–62; and Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Movements,” 146.

⁴⁰ Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu,” 109; Ōfuchi, *Shoki no dōkyō*, 250.

⁴¹ Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu,” 109–110.

⁴² Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 59–61.

⁴³ Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 76.

⁴⁴ See Ōfuchi, *Shoki no dōkyō*, 247–252; and Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 58–59.

provide a fascinating and telling formulation of why Laozi was claimed to have descended to exhort humanity to save the cosmos.

The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary

To introduce the issues at hand, let me begin with a sentence from chapter 13 of the *Laozi*:

The reason I can suffer great calamity is that I have a body. When it reaches the point of no longer having a body, how could I suffer calamities? (*Laozi* 13)

The *Xiang'er* commentary explains:

“I” refers to the Way. Its desire is to be without a body. But it desires to nourish spirits [*yang shen* 養神]; that is all. And it desires that humans model themselves on this.⁴⁵ (*Xiang'er*, lines 154–155; Rao pp. 16–17)⁴⁶

The Way wishes not to have a body. But it also wishes to nourish spirits, and for reasons we will explore below, bodies are necessary for this activity. Thus, the Way has a body—the cosmos—in order to nourish spirits. And the Way wishes for humans to nourish spirits as well—and thus we have bodies too.

This argument that bodies exist in order to nourish spirits continues throughout the commentary:

The Way teaches humans to congeal essences and complete spirits. (*Xiang'er*, line 86; Rao, p. 12)

The terms here, essence [*jing* 精] and spirit [*shen* 神], would appear to be, as they were in earlier usages, highly refined *qi* 氣. In earlier self-cultivation literature, one’s goal was to use one’s body to circulate and cultivate that *qi* within oneself in order to generate more essence and spirits.⁴⁷ The argument here is similar, but the overall cosmology has been shifted: it is the Way itself that is teaching humans to do this, and humans should therefore do it not to gain

⁴⁵ My translations of the *Xiang'er* commentary throughout this paper has been aided greatly by the excellent translation given by Stephen Bokenkamp in his *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 78–148. I have also profited tremendously from the studies given by Rao, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian*; and Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu.”

⁴⁶ Here and throughout I will follow Bokenkamp in referencing the line number of the commentary as given in the photographic copy of the manuscript in Ōfuchi, *Tonkō dōkyō: Zurokuhen*, 421–434. This will allow the reader to easily find both the original as well as Bokenkamp’s excellent translation. Since Rao Zongyi does not reference the line numbers, I will also provide the page number where each passage appears in his *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian*.

⁴⁷ See the discussions in my *To Become a God*.

more spiritual powers for themselves but rather to nourish spirits on behalf of the Way. Indeed, the Way made a body (the cosmos) for itself in order to complete spirits, and humans have bodies in order to do the same.

The exact relationship between essence and spirits is not spelled out, but some explanation of the link can be found elsewhere in the text. In a commentary to chapter 6 of the *Laozi*, we are told that

Essence is congealed to become spirits. If you desire to command the spirits not to die, you should congeal the essences and hold fast to them. (*Xiang'er*, lines 50–51; Rao, p. 9)

Thus, if one congeals essence, it becomes spirits. To complete spirits, therefore, one must constantly use one's body to congeal essence.

Why should we want to do this? Because, it turns out, it is nothing less than a cosmic necessity. I turn to a line from chapter 10 of the *Laozi*:

If you carry and orient the *po*-soul and preserve the One, you can keep them from separating. (*Laozi* 10)

The *Xiang'er* commentary explains:

. . . The body is the vehicle of the essence. Since the essence can leave you, you should carry and orient it. When spirits are completed and the *qi* comes, they carry and orient the body. If you wish to bring this task to completion, do not depart from the One. The One is the Way. Where does it reside in a person's body? How does one hold fast to it? The One does not reside in the human body . . . It exists outside Heaven and Earth. When it enters between Heaven and Earth, it comes and goes in the human body. It moves everywhere within your skin; it does not rest in one place. The One disperses its form as *qi* and collects its form as the Taishang Laojun [i.e., Laozi], who rules Kun Lun. It is sometimes called emptiness and nothingness; it is sometimes called spontaneity; it is sometimes called the nameless; all are the same. (*Xiang'er*, lines 103–110; Rao, p. 13)

According to the *Xiang'er* commentary, the body is but a vehicle for essence, which must be congealed to complete spirits. Even Laozi is simply the congealed form of the Way; the implication is that the Way becomes incarnated as Laozi in order to admonish humans to use their bodies properly—namely, to complete spirits. In short, all forms—from the human body to the cosmos itself—were established by the Way in order to complete spirits, and the Way periodically incarnates itself as Laozi in order to urge us to continue this cosmic project.

Although the text does not spell it out, the implication of this argument would appear to be the following. The Way needs to generate spirits—highly refined *qi*. And the only way to do this is to use forms to congeal essence, which in turn becomes spirits. Thus, the Way—

reluctantly—formed a cosmos and, at a lesser level, formed human bodies. All of these forms are but vehicles for the completion of spirits.

And it would appear that this is the *only* purpose to which a body should be used. However, in order to continue to have more bodies to so complete spirits, humans must reproduce—even though this means taking essence that could be congealed into spirits and instead using it in copulation. This is an unfortunate use of essence, but a necessary one in order for more bodies to be generated. And, because humans must so reproduce themselves, they form families and thus feel the need to sacrifice to their parents after the parents die. The Way accepts all of this as necessary in order for the human species to continue. But, we are told, those with utmost power need not waste their essence in this way at all:

Now this [copulating to reproduce] produces great calamities. Why did the Way create [*zao* 造] it? The Way values ancestral sacrifices and values that the species does not end. It desires that humans join their essences and generate life; therefore [the Way] teaches it. . . . However, humans with utmost power . . . are able to not unite and produce life. From a young age they stop this [i.e., the losing of their essences through copulation] and they are able to complete good spirits earlier. These are called the essences of the Way. Thus, Heaven and Earth have no sacrifices, dragons no offspring, transcendents no wives, the Jade Maiden no husband. (*Xiang'er*, lines 57–63; Rao, p. 10)

Everything from human copulation to ancestral sacrifices is part of a lesser way of life. The Way created these because, in spite of the calamities that all of this produces, they do allow the human species to continue, and this in turn means that there is a constant source of bodies to complete spirits. But, those humans with greater power are able to produce life without losing their essence, and they can thus complete spirits all the earlier. Such figures become like Heaven and Earth, dragons, and the Jade Maiden—none of whom mate or need sacrifices.

This distinction between normal humans and those who need not copulate or sacrifice deserves further scrutiny, as this will prove to be a crucial point for our understanding of the larger claims of the text. Let us turn first to the issue of Heaven and Earth requiring no sacrifices. The following is from chapter 7 of the *Laozi*:

Heaven endures and Earth lives long; the reason that Heaven and Earth are able to endure and live long are that they do not themselves give birth. Therefore, they are able to endure and live long. (*Laozi* 7)

To which we get the following explanation from the *Xiang'er* commentary:

They are able to model themselves on the Way, and are therefore able to generate themselves and endure and live long. (*Xiang'er*, lines 65–66; Rao, p. 10)

Heaven and Earth do not require sacrifices; they model themselves on the Way, generate themselves, and thus can live long.

And humans can do the same, for their bodies are, normatively, like Heaven and Earth themselves:

The human body is imaged on Heaven and Earth. (*Xiang'er*, line 115; Rao, p. 15)

Thus, like Heaven and Earth, the body can generate itself:

The body should constantly generate itself and take calming the essences and spirits as its basis. (*Xiang'er*, line 456; Rao p. 40)

Just like Heaven and Earth, humans can generate themselves and thus live long. And the means of accomplishing this is simply to use their bodies as they should be using them—to follow the admonitions of the Way and complete spirits:

Humans should only preserve their bodies; they should not love their bodies. What does this mean? By maintaining the admonitions of the Way, we accumulate goodness and complete accomplishments; accumulate essences and complete spirits. When spirits are completed, the transcendents live long. This is why we treasure our bodies. (*Xiang'er*, lines 161–163; Rao, p. 17)

Following the admonitions of the Way and completing spirits enables one to become a “Transcendent Noble” (*Xiang'er*, line 241; Rao 23).

Precisely what this involves is explained in a gloss on a line from chapter 33 of the *Laozi*:

Dying but never perishing, this is long-life. (*Laozi* 33)⁴⁸

The *Xiang'er* explains:

When the practices of one of the Way are completed, the spirits call on him to return. He leaves the world, feigns death, and passes through the Great Yin. He is born again and does not perish. Therefore, he is long-lived. Vulgar people do not attain good merit; they die and belong to the Earth Officers. This is to perish. (*Xiang'er*, lines 515–518; Rao p. 46)

One should devote one’s life to completing spirits; if one has done so successfully, spirits then call him to the Great Yin to be reborn. Those who have not so followed the admonitions of the Way will die and then be given over to the Earth Officers.⁴⁹

A fuller explanation of the process can be found in the commentary to chapter 16:

⁴⁸ I am translating the passage according to the way the *Xiang'er* commentary is reading it. Most modern commentators would instead translate this sentence as: “If you die naturally, you are long-lived” (in other words, if one follows the teachings of the text, one will not die prematurely).

⁴⁹ See the helpful discussion of this passage by Seidel, “Post-Mortem Immortality,” 230.

If one is a king, one will be heavenly; if one is heavenly, one will be with the Way; if one is with the Way, one will be long-lived; until the end of one's days one will not meet with danger. (*Laozi* 16)

The *Xiang'er* explains the passage to us:

The Great Yin is where the Way accumulates. It is the place that refines forms. As for the worthies: if the world has no place where they can reside, they feign death and pass into the Great Yin. They return to the other side and are reborn. They end but are not destroyed. The vulgar are unable to accumulate good deeds; when they die it is a true death. They are taken away by the Earth Officers. (*Xiang'er*, lines 227–230; Rao, p. 22)

The worthy are taken to the Great Yin to have their forms refined. Unlike the bodies that the rest of us have, the worthy are granted a refined form that will live long.

The adepts, therefore, do not sacrifice, do not make offerings. They simply complete spirits and ultimately attain longevity as well:

Those who practice the Way live; those who lose the Way die. The correct method of Heaven does not reside in sacrificing, praying, and offering. The Way therefore forbade sacrifices, prayers, and offerings. (*Xiang'er*, lines 374–375; Rao, p. 34)

The overall cosmological argument would thus appear to be the following. The Way (i.e., the One) made the world of forms—including human bodies—because it needs to generate spirits. But herein lies the potential danger for the cosmos: humans, with their bodies, tend to act improperly, and instead of using their forms to generate spirits will tend instead to generate negative energy and thus bring the world to danger. In short, forms are necessary for the development of a proper order, but they are also that which can bring the cosmos to catastrophe.

And this, presumably, is why Laozi has appeared: humans are indeed failing to act properly and the cosmos is becoming dangerously unrefined. The Way has thus incarnated itself again as Laozi and provided us with these admonishments. If they are followed, humans will again start completing spirits to refine the cosmos and thereby once again bring order to the world.

Such a reading, of course, fits in well with the millenarian claims we find elsewhere in materials from the Celestial Masters: the world is in decay, and Laozi thus descends to call on humans to work to initiate the Great Peace. The way they would do so, at least according to the *Xiang'er* commentary, is to complete spirits on behalf of the cosmos.

Competing Cosmologies in the Han

So how are we to interpret all of this? Overtly, the text is building on the practices of self-cultivation that had developed in the Warring States (403–221 BCE) and early Han periods.⁵⁰ I have referred to these practices as self-divinization movements—movements aimed at transforming the adept into a spirit.⁵¹ The practices in question involved the claim that the entire cosmos had been generated by a single ancestor—the One. Those beings closer to the One—such as spirits—were composed of highly refined *qi*. As such, they were able to control those things composed of less-refined *qi*. According to such a cosmology, humans had some refined *qi*—essence and spirits—within themselves, but less than the spirits in the heavens had. The goal of adepts in the self-divinization movements, accordingly, was to cultivate the essence and spirits within themselves. As such, they would get closer to the One, increasingly become like a spirit, and increasingly gain power over the world of forms.

For example, the fourth century BCE text “Neiye” 内業 argues that, by concentrating one’s *qi* like a spirit, one is able to gain the powers of spirits:

Concentrate the *qi* as if a spirit, and the myriad things will all reside within. Can you concentrate? Can you unify? Can you not engage in crackmaking and milfoil divination and yet understand auspiciousness and inauspiciousness? Can you stop? Can you reach an end? Can you not seek from others and obtain it in yourself? Think about it, think about it, and think about it again. If you think about it but do not penetrate, the ghosts and spirits will penetrate it. This is not due to the power of the ghosts and spirits; it is due to the ultimate point of essential *qi*.⁵²

And if he can hold fast to the One, he will gain control over natural phenomena:

⁵⁰ For excellent analyses of many of the Han practices and social formations that were later to be found in Daoist movements, see Csikszentmihályi, “Han Cosmology and Mantic Practices”; and *idem*, “Traditional Taxonomies and Revealed Texts in the Han.” For a discussion of some of these self-cultivation practices themselves, see the excellent analysis by Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*, 42–183.

Historical analyses of self-cultivation techniques in the Warring States period are numerous. Several recent, excellent treatments include: Csikszentmihályi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China*; Graziani, “De la régence du monde à la souveraineté intérieure”; and Brindley, *Human Agency and the Development of Self-cultivation Ideologies in the Warring States*.

⁵¹ Puett, *To Become a God*.

⁵² Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.5a. For translations and analyses of the “Neiye,” see Roth, *Original Tao*; and Graziani, “De la régence du monde à la souveraineté intérieure.” For a fuller discussion of my arguments on the text, see *To Become a God*, 109–117.

By holding fast to the One and not losing it, he is able to rule over the myriad things. The superior man controls things [*shi wu* 使物]; he is not controlled by them. He obtains the pattern of the One.⁵³

Or, as the related “Xinshu, xia” 心術，下 puts it:

He who grasps the One and does not lose it is able to become the ruler of myriad things. He shares the same brightness of the sun and moon, and shares the same pattern as Heaven and Earth. The sage regulates things; things do not control him.⁵⁴

Thus, by cultivating the essence and spirits within his body, the adept would progressively gain the powers of spirits—powers to understand the future without resorting to the arts of divination, powers to control natural phenomena, powers to bring order to the world.

The *Xiang'er* commentary does appear to represent an attempt to appeal to these self-divinization practices of cultivating the essence and spirits. But the goal of the practices is not to gain more powers by becoming more like a spirit. On the contrary. Humans in this cosmology are little more than functionaries to help the cosmos generate more spirits; indeed, the cosmos at the macro level and the body at the micro level are simply vessels created by the Way for this purpose. It is true that those who so complete spirits will gain a refined form and long life, but they do so only by following the admonitions of the Way.

To understand why a cosmology such as this would be posited, some historical contextualization will be necessary.⁵⁵ A variant of these self-divinization movements received court sponsorship during the Qin (221–206 BCE) and early Han empires. Indeed, the sacrificial system instituted by Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE) was in part an attempt to accomplish through sacrifices what earlier figures had sought through self-cultivation: Wudi appealed to the Great One as a higher divinity than Heaven and Earth, and he devised a sacrificial system through which he would be gradually divinized and would ultimately ascend to the heavens as a transcendent.

This system remained in place for several decades. Then, in an extraordinary set of court debates at the end of the Western Han, a series of ministers were able successfully to argue against the sacrificial system instituted by Wudi. Their argument was that self-divinization movements—whether those attempted through self-cultivation or those attempted through sacrifice—were not sanctioned by the classics, and the practitioners of such arts thus claimed for themselves full autonomy from past traditions.

⁵³ *Guanzi*, “Neiye,” 16.3a.

⁵⁴ *Guanzi*, “Xinshu, xia,” 13.6b. For discussions of the “Xinshu” chapter, see Roth, “Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Taoism”; Roth, *Original Tao*, 23–30; Rickett, trans., *Guanzi*, 2:56–58, 65–70; Graziani, “De la régence du monde à la souveraineté intérieure”; Puett, *To Become a God*, 170–172.

⁵⁵ This and the following two paragraphs are a summary of chapters 6 and 8 of *To Become a God*.

By the end of the debates, self-divinization practices were fully rejected by the court, and much of the sacrificial system instituted by Wudi was dismantled. In its place were established sacrifices to Heaven and Earth at the south and north axes of the capital respectively. Through his sacrifices, the ruler would correlate himself with the cosmos and form himself into a proper descendant—a Son of Heaven. The ruler was thus defined as fully human, with no possibility of divinizing himself: Heaven and man were given defined spheres, correlated through the sacrifices, but with no possibility for the ruler to be able to ascend to Heaven directly. This conception of the ruler, and the forms of sacrifice that supported such a conception, continued to be accepted by the court for the remainder of the Han dynasty.

Precisely because of this, however, self-divinization claims came to be appropriated by numerous groups that opposed the Han court. For example, a certain Wei Si 維汜, in the first century CE, declared himself a spirit and drew several hundred disciples to himself. This was precisely the sort of claim of self-divinized autonomy that the Han court strongly opposed, and the court accordingly put Wei Si to death. His disciples, however, stated that in fact Wei Si never died but was instead transformed into a transcendent.⁵⁶

The *Xiang'er* commentary should be understood within this context. But the way the authors positioned themselves within the competing practices of the time is distinctive. Like the earlier self-divinization movements, the *Xiang'er* commentary appeals to the One as a more primordial being than Heaven and Earth. As such, the cosmology of the text was radically at odds with the one that had been adopted at the imperial court. Indeed, the *Xiang'er* commentary explicitly denies that Heaven and Earth should be objects of sacrifice at all. Sacrifices are simply part of family institutions—institutions that are necessary for humans (i.e., uncultivated humans) to generate more bodies. But these are defined as clearly lower than the proper order of refined forms: Heaven and Earth do not require sacrifices, since they can generate themselves. The ruler should thus strive not to be a Son of Heaven, feeding his ancestor and thereby becoming a proper descendant, but rather a transcendent—a figure who, like Heaven and Earth, can generate himself.

But, if the cosmology here involved a rejection of the Eastern Han imperial system of sacrifices, it was also not, as we have seen, a simple return to the earlier self-divinization movements that had been rejected by the court at the end of the Western Han. The *Xiang'er* commentary is indeed reviving precisely these practices, but in a very different form. If one of the reasons for the ritual reforms at the end of the Western Han was to reject the claims of autonomy that the self-divinization movements had spawned, then it is important to note that the authors of the *Xiang'er* commentary would have rejected such claims at least as strongly. Self-cultivation practices are advocated in the *Xiang'er* commentary only within a tightly defined, hierarchically rigid community operating under the guidelines given by the Way (incarnated as Laozi).

⁵⁶ *Hou Hanshu* 24.838. See the excellent discussions by Fang, “Huangjin qiyi xianqu yu wu ji yuanshi daojiao de guanxi”; and Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Movements,” 137.

Indeed, the *Xiang'er* in many ways involves a reversal of the cosmology of the self-divinization movements. Instead of humans attempting to appropriate the powers of spirits by undertaking, on their own initiative, a set of practices allowing themselves to get closer to the One, the *Xiang'er* commentary reverses the movement: for the *Xiang'er*, it is the One that admonishes humans to undertake these forms of self-cultivation, and the One does so because human cultivation of spirits is good for the cosmos. The practices are not ones that allow humans to divinize themselves; they are practices that allow the One to generate more spirits for the cosmos.

Indeed, the One is not posited as the ancestor that generated [*sheng* 生] the cosmos; it is rather a creator deity that (reluctantly) formed the cosmos and created [*zao* 造] human copulation and ancestral sacrifices in order to generate spirits for itself. As we have seen, the mere fact of positing a creator deity who guides human affairs is in itself nothing new: the dominant position in the Eastern Han court would equally have seen Heaven as an actively intervening agent sending admonitions to humans. But reading the One (the Way) in such a fashion certainly was a novel move. The practitioners of self-divinization had firmly posited the One as the ancestor of the cosmos—an ancestor to whom they would return. It was this creative appropriation of self-divinization cosmology and practice—along with an attendant rejection of the sacrificial practice of the Han court—that would have had cultural resonance at the time.

And the final point that would have had cultural resonance is the positing of forms (whether cosmic or bodily) as having been created reluctantly. In earlier self-cultivation practice, everything was a natural generation of the One, and the hierarchy of the cosmos was simply a question of distance from the ancestor—the farther removed something was, the lesser it was in refinement. The goal was thus to refine oneself and thereby come to exercise more potency over the world of forms. In the *Xiang'er* cosmology, however, the world of forms is clearly devalued: forms were only created because they are useful for generating spirits for the cosmos. Thus, there is no positive value to be had for gaining control over natural phenomena. While this was one of the primary goals of the self-divinization practitioners, it is not a concern at all for the *Xiang'er* commentary. For the *Xiang'er*, the concern instead is to use one's body to cultivate spirits on behalf of the cosmos.

Thus, the authors are developing a cosmology that would serve to appropriate practices (and thus appeal to practitioners of those practices) rejected by the imperial court, but they were doing so in a way that enabled them to call for a tightly knit, hierarchical social order. Although the *Xiang'er* commentary does not elaborate on the implications of this cosmology for building a social order, those implications are nonetheless clear. This cosmology would result in a hierarchy of those who were succeeding in following the admonitions of the Way and thereby completing spirits. The most powerful members of the community were those who had done this to greater degrees, and those at lower levels could progress only by following the admonitions that had come from Laozi (i.e., the incarnated Way).

In short, the cosmology offered by the *Xiang'er* involved an appropriation of the earlier self-divinization literature in a form that both undermined contemporary Han practices and defined a rigid, hierarchical community. Considering how closely this general outline matches

the way we know from other sources the Celestial Masters community functioned, it is tempting to follow the traditional attributions and see the text as having been written by Zhang Lu and as thus representing an early cosmological statement from within the Celestial Masters movement. However, even though we cannot say definitely whether or not this was written by the leader of the Celestial Masters, it is nonetheless certainly clear why, at the very least, the Celestial Masters would have adopted this text and attributed it to Zhang Lu.

Conclusion

If this analysis has validity, then it would imply that the paradigms for studying these early millenarian cosmologies may need to be re-thought. If we read a notion of a cyclical, organic, harmonious cosmology as being an assumption in early China, then we must, as discussed above, see the emerging millenarian movements of the first few centuries CE as either a continuation of this over-riding assumption or a rejection of it through an at least partial advocacy of something different. But if, as I have argued, there was no such assumption in early China, then we need to go about our analysis in a different way.

Indeed, there was a plethora of cosmologies being advocated by different groups in early China. Thus, to understand the cosmology of any one movement, we must recognize that the cosmologies being advocated at the time were claims—claims being offered in opposition to other cosmological claims. The significance that any cosmology would have had at the time can therefore only be recovered by placing it in context, seeing what cultural resonance a given claim would have had at the time. And, in sorting out these cultural resonances, the issues of cyclicity versus linearity, or a spontaneous versus a theistic cosmos—the points on which so much of the comparative analyses of these movements have rested—have not proved to be very significant. Or, rather, the points are of great significance, but not in terms of accounting for the emergence of the early millenarian movements—these had all long been topics of debate. Thus, instead of approaching this topic in terms of a narrative from cyclicity to linearity, and instead of positing a universal tendency for millenarian beliefs in times of difficulty, I have focused instead on debates within which the cosmologies posited would have had significance at the time. The crucial issues have turned out to involve topics such as the nature of the cosmos, the goals of human cultivation, and the nature of sacrifices.

But what is the implication of all this? Does such an approach entail a rejection of any attempt at comparison—the issue that in part underlay the arguments of Seidel and Kohn? My answer is no. On the contrary, I think the approach outlined here could help to open up a host of new and exciting comparative issues in the study of millenarian movements. Instead of rooting our studies of millenarian movements on the standard “cyclical” to “linear” vision of history, and instead of rooting them on a claimed universal tendency that can emerge at any time, the argument given here points toward a comparative approach focused on such things as noting how and why particular movements arose in various cultures, analyzing how and why particular cosmologies were formulated, studying how these cosmologies came to be debated and contested, and tracing the historical consequences of the ways in which such

debates and contestations played out. In other words, instead of building the comparative models on the content of the cosmologies in question (cyclical or linear, etc.), and instead of appealing to a general psychological model of crisis, the focus should be on first locating similar tensions and concerns in particular cultures and then tracing the varying responses to those tensions and concerns.

I do think this would be a helpful approach to comparing the emergence of millenarian movements at either extreme of the Eurasian continent during the Roman and Han empires. The approach advocated here would focus not on the paradigm discussed earlier but would instead build the comparative model by studying how and why comparable types of tensions arose in these two empires, how and why various millenarian movements emerged, how and why certain of these groups succeeded in gaining significant followers, and how this played out historically. In short, what I am advocating would point toward an historical approach to comparison, as opposed to the implicitly Eliadean framework that has thus far guided many of the analyses of early millenarian movements in Eurasia.

And, once we have discarded the Eliadean framework behind these arguments, the attempt to develop a narrative of the rise of millenarian movements in China through comparisons with specific Western movements that have made the shift from cyclicity to linearity ceases to be helpful. As we have seen, both Kohn and Seidel, working from the same general framework of Norman Cohn, develop their arguments through one-to-one comparisons with single movements in western Eurasia. For Seidel, the comparison is with the rise of the Catholic Church; Daoism thus becomes the Church that arises in a monistic worldview, just as Christianity is the Church that arose in a dualistic one. And for Kohn, the comparison is with Jewish apocalyptic movements of the last two centuries BCE; Daoist millenarian movements are thus the consequence of Jewish apocalyptic notions affecting (through diffusion) the Chinese worldview.

Instead of building such one-to-one comparisons out of an Eliadean narrative, I would argue that we should instead be comparing the fields of debates for each of the cultures in question: what were the issues under debate, what were the ranges of solutions articulated, and what were the historical implications of the positions taken. In short, we should be comparing the debates themselves and ways these debates worked out over the course of the first few centuries CE.

At least for the late antiquity of China, I have suggested that one of the distinctive things that the *Xiang'er* commentary points toward is an attempt to build a hierarchical community of adepts whose self-cultivation techniques are deemed necessary to bring order to the cosmos. And this was done through the audacious act of re-reading Laozi as the One who formed the cosmos reluctantly in order to generate spirits. The resulting cosmology thus appealed to those self-divinization techniques that had been rejected at court—while also rejecting the claims to autonomy that those movements had spawned. Whether this was written within the Celestial Masters movements or later appropriated by it, it is clear why such an argument would have appealed to the theocratic community of the Celestial Masters, and why such an argument would have had such resonance at the time.

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