



Image & Script
from *Yin and Yang*

By *Frank Fiedeler*

THE SHIFT OF FOCUS FROM THE IMMEDIACY of appearance to an abstract objectivity in the historical development of thought, and respectively from the images of the heavens to the world of human beings outlined above, is immediately reflected in the development of the medium through which our knowledge of Chinese antiquity has primarily come down to us, namely the Chinese written language; for in China, writing did not originate as a means of recording human discourse for other humans, but rather for communication between the deities or ancestral spirits of heaven and the humans on the earth, i.e., as a mediation between heaven and earth.

This is to say, that the act of writing itself was thought of as a direct expression of the enduring cosmic act of creation, by which the pattern of

Translated by
Gabriel Weiss

heaven was cast down into the regulations of earth. Cangjie, the mythical founder of the art of writing, was therefore represented as having two pairs of eyes, one above and one below, so that he could see the heaven and the earth simultaneously. The tracks of birds (which signify the messengers of heaven) on the ground are said to have inspired him to devise writing. And moreover it is reported that with the invention of writing, the demons began to weep in the night, for “the script which decodes the world, the fruit of the union between heaven and earth, above and below, heralded the power of human beings over them.”

The associative joining of heaven and earth was, however, not only the principle of the creation of writing, which indeed, in the course of the first two to three centuries of the Zhou Dynasty led to the developed form of a

regular written language, but moreover to the production of symbols in general. It was the principle of a mythical way of thinking, that primarily represented mythos in the synesthetic medium of ritual. The rituals originated out of the ecstatic techniques of the shamanic priests, through which they entered into intuitive contact with the celestial powers. One such ecstatic technique was obviously the legendary Dance of Yu. Hence, in their later codified forms, the rituals possessed the structure of a symbolic imitation of celestial phenomena in order to immediately correspond to the mandate of heaven.

How one must conceive of the origin of writing in the context of early ritual has been convincingly reconstructed by Leon Vandermeersch on the grounds of investigation of the archaic forms of relevant Chinese characters. Thus the character *yue* 𠄎 (in its archaic form) that introduces a written quote, signifies the image of a "script tray" that is a

flat vessel filled with a layer of sand in which the inscribed tablet of wood or bamboo would be placed, as it is practiced with incense sticks in Chinese temples today. On these tablets was written the message or the question to the heavens that the ritual was intended to express. The character for 'scribe' (shi 史) originally represented a hand which holds aloft a script holder fastened to a stick, in order to offer the message contained within it to the heavens. The scribe ritually answers the gesture with which, in the reverse direction, the heaven itself lets its 'signs' (wen 文) or 'images' (xiang 象) 'hang down', as it is referred to in the old texts.

The messages on the tablets were graphic magic formulae, which "proceeding from the development of writing, may not yet be regarded as talismans, that is as compositions of layered or juxtaposed graphic forms without any of the pronouncability of characters which could be spoken aloud". They were magical