



***Cosmological Thought
in Europe & China
from Yin and Yang
(Introduction)***

By Frank Fiedeler

JOSEPH NEEDHAM, TO WHOM WE MAY BE THANKFUL for a multiple volume work on the culture of China from a scientific and historical perspective, once characterized the uniqueness of Chinese thought in the following way: *The key words in Chinese thought are system and above all pattern (and if I may whisper it for the first time, structure). Collectively the symbolic correlations or correspondences constitute parts of a single colossal pattern. Individual phenomena transpired as they did, not because of previous events or the influence of other phenomena in some specific way, but rather because they were gifted with an intrinsic character as a result of their inherent position in the constantly moving, cyclical universe and this made their behavior unavoidable.* In fact we can understand the formal structure of the history of Chinese thought as the development of a

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“colossal pattern” from symbolic correlations. The Chinese concept for this is *wen*, which means “pattern”, “design”, and “order” as well as “writing”, “text”, and, “culture” in general. Chinese thought is preeminently graphic, which is readily seen in the picturesque nature of the Chinese written language. In fact, its peculiar character can be understood with regard to the cultural and historical context of ancient times. What can be taken as the basis of this is the understanding of the cosmos as a concrete pattern of phenomena, the symbolic forms of which were developed in correspondence with a context of cultural and historical significance. Next, I will describe the nature of this cultural and historical egress in greater detail and highlight it by placing it in relation to the European history of ideas.

Appearance and Being

The world of the “constantly moving and cyclic universe” that formulated the “colossal pattern” is the well known shibboleth commonly heard in the West, “Dao” (in earlier transcriptions written as Tao). The concept is current not only within the frame of the esoteric tradition that is referred to specifically as Taoism, but also valid for the state religion of Confucianism, and even for the sinicized form of Buddhism which originally was brought over from India. Dao is the central concept of the unique Chinese way of thinking, that the Dutch sinologist De Groot once defined as “Universism” and as “the foundation of religion and ethics, state and science in China”. Therefore, the entire traditional Chinese culture is literally “Daoist”.

The word Dao basically means “the way” and signifies in the wider philosophical context the movement of the world. The

classical definition can be found in the “Great Commentary” (*Dazhuan*) of the Book of Changes and reads: “Once yin, once yang - this is referred to as the Dao”. The basic order of the way for the world is therefore characterized by two elements, that are named Yin and Yang. As universal philosophical categories or essences, these concepts arose in about the 4th century B.C.E. However, the designation of this pair of antitheses, especially in the form of the two types of oracle line in the Yijing (Book of Changes), was manifest much earlier. Their original meaning developed out of the Chinese characters: the concepts of yin and yang are both written with the radical for “hill” and have the tangible meaning of “shadow-side” and “light-side”. Correspondingly, as a result of the sun’s zenith being southward, the north face of a mountain and the south slope of a valley are yin while the south face of a mountain and