Part II

Conceptions of divinity
This chapter aims to articulate some salient characteristics of religious belief in Chinese thought, with particular focus on its indigenous philosophical traditions, Confucianism and Daoism. The historical period covered here spans roughly from the Shang dynasty (17th–11th centuries BCE) to the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). There is substantial archaeological evidence from around the late Neolithic (pre-2000 BCE) and the Shang, allowing scholars to envisage plausible pictures of life, society, and religion at that time. At the other end, while the continuing evolution of religion in China becomes exponentially more interesting and complex after the introduction of Buddhism into China at around the second century CE, the focus on the selected period is critical. First, Confucian and Daoist philosophy, among others, arose and were consolidated as separate traditions during the Han. Secondly, a more thorough awareness of developments in this period enables a more sophisticated understanding of the continuing evolution of religious beliefs and practices through time, including the reception of Buddhism by the Chinese.

Two other related considerations shape this discussion. First, relatively recently-discovered texts, including especially those from a late fourth century BCE tomb in Guodian (in present-day Hubei), were unearthed in 1993. The texts, entitled the Guodian Chu Jian, contain elements that challenge entrenched views about the clear delineation of the Confucian and Daoist traditions. This distinction by Sima Qian (145?–86 BCE) in the Historical Records (Shiji) involved the categorisation of the debates prior to this period into six ‘schools’ (jia), including Confucianism and Daoism, in the discourse available then. Some scholars who had held his classification suspect draw on the Guodian texts to suggest that ‘there was no strong tension between Confucianism and Daoism in pre–Han China’ (Defoort 2000: 3) (see also the issues of Contemporary Chinese Thought, vols. 1 & 2, 2000–2001, which are dedicated to the Guodian texts). What this means for the discussion here is that, while it maintains that certain texts and themes are distinctly Confucian, or distinctly Daoist, it will also focus on religious elements which may not belong to either tradition.

Secondly, the discussion will highlight areas in ancient Chinese religion that have recently received significant attention in the literature, those of the Shang period and earlier. A combination of reasons – newly excavated burial sites, cross-disciplinary (philological, philosophical, anthropological and archaeological) approaches, and comparative, multi-regional archaeological studies – have made a major impact on our understanding of ancient Chinese religion. Some of
its features, which predate the demarcation of Confucianism and Daoism, will influence our understanding of divinity and spirituality in the traditions.

This chapter is organised in two sections, Divination and Cosmology. The section titles are not intended as comprehensive and overarching themes but, rather, as entry points into a range of related sub-topics within each area of focus. Investigation of these focal areas will facilitate a sense of the religious landscape over time. Through the focus on divination, we will gain insights into the types of activities, as well as the thinking behind them, that sought to access the world of spirits (shen) and ancestor powers. A contrastive religious outlook to this may assume, for example, that communication with spirits is redundant since humans have, in themselves, capacities for accessing the divine. In this scenario, the spirit as middleman drops out as irrelevant, as do the divination practices that attempt to communicate with them. This competing view is also significant in certain Chinese philosophical traditions, as we will see later. Secondly, the investigation of cosmology in Chinese thought deals with the nature of religious belief and its epistemology. Belief in an integrated and comprehensive cosmological framework included belief in Heaven (tian) and its patterns, Earth (di) and its landscape, humanity, spirits, natural phenomena, the myriad things (wanwu), and the relationships between beings and across domains. The two sections, Divination and Cosmology, facilitate clarity of exposition only, and we must expect overlaps across them.

**Divination – securing the future**

The term ‘divination’ covers a broad range of practices, participants and underlying metaphysical assumptions. Across time and regions, the term may apply to: (a) prognostication by royal diviners and early kings; (b) appeasement of ancestor spirits, nature powers, and cosmic forces; (c) interpretation, by court officials, of natural and human events in order to legitimise the bureaucracy; (d) the practices of technical experts, including in the mantic arts, so that they can act as conduits for communication between the living and the dead; and (e) prognostications by ordinary people on their fate and personal well-being. An underlying theme in this section is the changing relationship between the human and the divine through time.

**Oracle bones and pyromantic practices**

Archaeological evidence from the Shang has been, and continues to be, primarily excavated from Yinxu (in a region near Anyang in Henan). The excavation finds include: royal tombs and palaces, including: shrine areas; chariot pits, sacrificial and ash pits, and house foundations; ritual, funerary and burial vessels and jade accessories; and inscribed oracle bones – bovine scapula (shou jia gu) – and turtle plastrons (gui fu jia). Oracle bones and turtle plastrons were used by the Kings and their diviners during this period, in attempts to prognosticate on a vast range of topics, including natural disasters, harvests, sickness, seasonal and climatic changes, military strategy, sorties and trips, and childbearing (Keightley 1978: 33–35).

More recent finds, beginning from around the 1930s, have contributed to scholarship in the field. For example, cross-disciplinary approaches involving palaeontology, anthropology, and textual analysis have helped correct the misconception that the earliest three dynasties had a narrowly linear succession: Xia (c. 2200–1760 BCE) – Shang – Zhou (c. 1122–221 BCE). The outdated linear model was one dominated by a focus primarily on textual study, and influenced by Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* (Eno 2009: 43; Allan 1984). Archaeological research also demonstrates variation, as well as significant patterns, in multiregional comparisons of divination practices, though these are too complex to discuss here (see, e.g., Flad 2008).

Evidence from the Shang shows that, over time, there was increasing systematisation of divination, where the level of elaboration and systematisation are correlated with the place of ritual in the maintenance of socio-political power (ibid. 19–31). During the Shang,
prognostication questions were posed as ‘charges’ (ming ài) in the act of divination. David Keightley reconstructs a divination event:

A topic was addressed to the turtle shell or bone in the form of a charge, which was frequently couched in either alternative (A or B) or in positive and negative (A or not-A) modes. Thus, an initial inquiry about millet harvest might be divided into the two contrasting charges, ‘We will receive millet harvest’ … and ‘We may not receive millet harvest’ … The charges were thus tentative predictions or statements of intent, proclaimed to the spirits for their approval or disapproval … As the charge was addressed to the shell or bone, a hot bronze poker or some other heat source was applied to a series of hollows or pits that had already been bored and chiselled into its back; the heat caused T-shaped stress cracks to form, with up to ten cracks being made in ten separate hollows for each question. Having been numbered … and examined, the cracks, and thus the charges with which they were associated, were interpreted, if possible, as lucky or unlucky to a greater or lesser degree … ‘The king, reading the cracks, said: “Auspicious. We will, in this case, receive harvest.”’


Some records of these activities present a full list of the proceedings, including the verification of the prognostication following its confirmation by future events. The texts from the period of Wu Ding’s reign (c. 1200–1181 BCE; the 21st king of Shang and the earliest in records) include both prognostication and verification, but there is no case where the king’s incorrect forecasts were explicitly noted (Keightley 1988: 372). Keightley suggests that they reveal not only the processes of divination but, as records, had a legitimising role – ‘a primitive form of legitimating historiography’ – that spoke to the ‘passive infallibility’ of the royal diviner (Keightley 1988: 373). Indeed, it seems that some of the charges were recorded in a way as if the intention was to play down the negative outcome (Keightley 1984: 15–16). In some other cases, the charges were phrased as if the diviners sought, magically, to secure the future. In these cases, only the positive charge was recorded, such as ‘this night there will be no disaster’ (Keightley 1988: 372). Keightley suggests that these single, positive, charges were no less than ‘ritual incantations with a strong magical element’ (ibid.).

**Ancestor spirits, former lords, powers and Di**

During the Shang, there was a complicated panoply of spirits and powers invoked in divination. The nature of each of the spirits and powers, and their place in the rituals in the life of the Shang royal house, are closely connected with particular initiatives of the kings and diviners, and also with the role of religion in the maintenance of the Shang State. Dong Zuobin’s classification of Shang inscriptions into five periods continues to be used in scholarship (1945: 1.2b–4b). Drawing in part from Dong’s schema, David Keightley (2004: 5–11) proposes a generally accepted classification of the Shang spirits and powers in six categories:

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<td>(1) <strong>Di</strong>, the High God</td>
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<td>(2) Nature Powers, e.g. the River Power</td>
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<td>(3) (Spirits of) Former Lords, now associated with the dynasty</td>
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In Keightley’s first column, **Di**, the nature powers, and the former lords, were associated with grander-scale events involving the country or dynasty, such as the weather and warfare. **Di** sits
at the apex of this panoply of spirits and powers, indicative of a ‘proto-bureaucratic hierarchy’ (Eno 2009: 70–77, esp. 71). The powers in the second column comprise spirit beings specific to the royal lineage. Paradoxically, while Di is in one sense the most powerful in this ordering, as it can directly influence natural phenomena, it was the pre-dynastic and dynastic ancestors, as well as ancestresses, who were invoked in relation to the king’s personal matters through divination rituals. For example, the sounds made by the cracks were interpreted as the speech of the ancestors (Keightley 2004: 7). Some inscriptions belonging to Wu Ding’s time attest to the closeness of the personal relationship between the king and his ancestors: some inscription records suggest that a pledge is offered, should the outcome be successful (ibid. 9). Such evidence of attempts to bargain with the ancestors indicate both a particular closeness with the ancestors, as well as the attempt to mitigate uncertainty (Allan 1991: 57–73). It is worth keeping in mind that these six categories are fluid and some nature powers were attributed the status of ancestors (Keightley 2004: 6–7) or animated as ‘personified spirits’ (Eno 2009: 64; 67–68).

There was meticulous attention to the detail of ritual; for example, some of the nature powers and former lords were, together with ancestors, given ancestral titles and temple names (gan) and included in a regular ritual schedule, known as the gan zhi (stem and branches) calendrical cycle (Keightley 2004: Fig 1., pp. 13–14; 16–20). In the Zhou, there were detailed prescriptions, including the types of gifts to be exchanged and the seating arrangements at funeral performances that were determined by the rank of a person’s founder-ancestor, and by the nature of their relationship (Cook 2009: 244). Kinship was emphasised through extended mourning periods and lengthy sacrifices, a particular feature of Zhou mortuary practices. Many bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou (c. 1045–771 BCE) include the formula ‘may sons of sons, grandsons of grandsons, forever treasure and use [this sacrificial vessel]’ (cited in Kern 2009: 154). This was an expression of the belief in, or wish for, eternity.

Nevertheless, in time, there was an increasing tendency to impersonalise the dead ancestors, and this is largely due to the incorporation of ritual in the bureaucratic domain (Keightley 2004: 26–30). This meant, among other things, that the ‘good order represented by the ancestors’ was more important than their individual personalities (ibid. 27). For example, a passage from the Zhou text Book of Documents (Shangshu) proclaims, ‘If you, the myriads of the people, do not attend to [my commands] … the former rulers will send down on you great punishment for your crime … Our former rulers will restrain your ancestors and fathers, (so that) your ancestors and fathers will reject you, and not save you from death … ’ (cited in Keightley 2004: 35). Here, Keightley argues, ‘the dead have virtually become coercive police officers in the service of the living king … although these dead have jural power, they have no individual personality’. Other factors contributed to the diminishing belief in and practice of ancestor worship over the Zhou, including the destruction of aristocratic lineages, the loss of traditional communities, the establishment of more sophisticated agricultural and trade networks, and the rise of political power representing non-Zhou culture (Cook 2009: 237–38). It was against this setting that Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his followers sought to preserve the rituals, practices, texts, and patterns of the past. The Confucians were known collectively as the Literati (Ru), as they argued that the restoration of Heaven’s telos (or Heaven’s ordinances) was to be achieved through the ethical and cultural achievements of humankind in cooperation with Heaven and Earth. We will return to this in a subsequent section.

Diviners and technical experts

Divination rituals were a major preoccupation of the life of the king and his court; significant resources were devoted to them, including the manufacture and use of ritual vessels, the training
required for the liturgists and engravers, as well as the animal and human sacrifices made during the events (Keightley 2004: 29–30). It has been proposed that the king-diviners were shamans—men of magic (Chen 1936; Chang 1983: 44–55). However, these claims have been heavily scrutinised in the literature for a number of reasons, including: (i) the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ are not sufficiently well-defined, and this affects the effectiveness of sociological comparisons (von Falkenhausen 1995); (ii) the shamanic model often used in analyses of early China is inappropriate as it derives from Siberian shamanism (Keightley 1998); (iii) the terms of reference—what counts as shamanic—depend to a large degree on matters of definition (Keightley 1999: 262); and (iv) the bulk of data for shamanism in early China dates from the Zhou period and superimposing this data on the late Shang is unwarranted (Boileau 2002).

In the Zhou period, technical experts (fangshi) were involved in divination and its associated activities: auguring auspicious days, exorcism, and interpretation of omens. Texts associated with these activities ‘provide concrete methods for the practical management of fate,’ including detailed instructions for rituals to ward off evil, and the appointment of mantic personnel (Raphals 2010: 127). These texts include versions of the Changes of Zhou (Zhouyi), almanacs, prognostication records, astrocalendric texts, and especially ‘daybooks’ (nishu) (Raphals, ibid.; see also the detailed discussion of daybooks, excavated in 1992 in Hubei, by Harkness 2011). Raphals suggests that there was much competition between the technical experts and the court officials associated with the Masters texts (the extant texts associated with a ‘master’ such as Xunzi and Zhuangzi), as both were vying for similar goods: ‘career choice, patronage, students, and the status of modes of knowledge’ (ibid. 124). For example Xunzi, a Confucian thinker of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), explicitly argued against superstitious beliefs and practices, describing them as a preoccupation of the simple folk:

If you pray for rain and there is rain, what of that? I say there is no special relationship— as when you do not pray for rain and there is rain. When the sun and moon are eclipsed, we attempt to save them; when Heaven sends drought, we pray for rain; and before we decide any important undertaking, we divine with bone and milfoil. We do these things not because we believe that such ceremonies will produce the results we seek, but because we want to embellish such occasions with ceremony. Thus, the gentleman considers such ceremonies as embellishments, but the Hundred Clans consider them supernatural. To consider them embellishments is fortunate; to consider them supernatural is unfortunate.

(Xunzi 17.11; trans. Knoblock 1994: 19)

In his close examination of a number of Warring States texts, Michael Puett (2002: 80–121; 145–200) contends that they collectively express disdain for the fangshi and their technical arts (wushu), some of whom had considerable power in the courts during this period. On this view, the texts propose that, by cultivating the self through proper practices, individuals could attain divine powers and therefore circumvent the need for both divination and fangshi. According to Puett, a monistic cosmology underlies these approaches to self-cultivation; these will be explored in the Cosmology section.

Disapproval of fangshi and their activities waxed and waned across periods. The Qin (221–206 BCE) emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE) and the Han emperor Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE) were enthused in their quest for immortality and sought immortals and others who could offer them elixirs (Poo 1998: 157–65). The Qin emperor called himself Huang Di (Brilliant Di) and consulted fangshi who were asked to summon spirits and had ‘theomorphic pretensions’ (Puett 2002: 238–45, at 240). While Wudi was himself keen to employ fangshi, he was wary of the
activities of the *fangshi* among the ordinary people (Lin 2009: 451–52). There is also a record of a Han emperor, Cao Cao (155–220), who consulted with *fangshi* that ‘sometimes drank urine and sometimes suspended themselves upside down’ (Book of the Later Han, ‘Biographies of Ten Princes of Guangwu’; in DeWoskin 1983: 87).

Ridicule of *fangshi* and hostility toward their activities continued in the second century ce when Buddhism entered China, as they then had to compete with both Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns (Lin 2010: 276). Then, again, across the early medieval period in China – around the period of the Six Dynasties (220–589) and after – there is evidence of increased consultation of *fangshi* by emperors and court officials. They were called upon to summon ghosts, communicate with gods, conduct exorcisms, advise on taboos, prophesy on a range of matters including military advances and court affairs, cast curses, and conduct black magic (Lin 2010). Some emperors and senior officials created positions for the *fangshi* in the bureaucracy, and others granted titles and built temples in their honour.

**Religion, ritual and politics**

Variations in the oracle bone inscriptions over time reveal that, by the time of the last two kings of the Shang, Di Yi (r. c. 1101–1076 BCE) and Di Xin (r. c. 1075–1046 BCE), divination practices had become more systematic and structured (Keightley 1999). Keightley (1988: 387) suggests that the metaphysical assumptions underlying divination practices changed in order to be more ‘serviceable politically’; the bi-polar charges of Wu Ding’s time, expressive of openness to *yin-yang* complementarity, eventually gave way to more incantatory and ritualised divination. By the time of Di Yi and Di Xin, a ‘Yijing-style’ divination (associated with the *Book of Changes*) reduced the prognosticatory elements of divination and increased human control through its greater interpretive focus (Keightley 1988: 385–88). These changes may also have been due in part to the relative popularity of turtle-shell and oracle-bone divination among other forms such as milfoil divination associated with the *Book of Changes* (Chang 1981; Eno 2009: 81–85; 89–91).

The evidence demonstrates an overall increasing bureaucratisation of religion in the consolidation of State power in the late Shang and after. Many ancient Chinese myths were employed to legitimise a particular ruler, sage king, or dynasty. Texts from the Zhou assert the divinity of its founder sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu, while Han texts gathered the founder deities of the three earliest dynasties, Xia, Shang, and Zhou, into a group known as the *Sanhuang* (three brilliances); sage kings were assembled in a group known as *Wudi* (five emperors) (Cook 2009: 239). In the *Historical Records*, some of the sage kings and dynastic founders were sired by powerful spirits, mythical creatures such as dragons, or forces of nature, and born of a human mother. This ‘magical paternity’ meant that they were of semi-divine origin (ibid. 554–55) and therefore capable of creating initiatives and institutions necessary for human civilisation.

The Confucian focus on the heightened role of the sage king to establish social order through ritual and tradition was instigated in part by the chaos of the Eastern Zhou during Confucius’ lifetime and after. Confucius appeals to the former glory of the Zhou house during the Western Zhou, as he frequently recalls the Duke of Zhou (r. c. 1043–1036 BCE; e.g. *Analects* (*Lunyu*) 7.5) and the texts of that time (e.g. the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*); *Analects* 2.15; 3.8; 17.9). There is evidence of the gravity of ritual in the Western Zhou; Martin Kern (2009: 153–54) draws on Zhou odes in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) to depict an aesthetic convergence of the visual, auditory, olfactory, and rhythmical aspects of music, dance, linguistic diction, and comportment. The rituals in ancestor worship were instrumental in sustaining the officials both at a personal level and for reasons of State. These included: (a) provision of a space for interaction between the living and the dead; (b) perpetuation of identity and purpose for the living; (c) reinforcement and
continuity of patterns of cultural practices; (d) enforcement of social hierarchy and solidarity; (e) delineation of sacred space and time; (f) expression of the promise that the past would continue into an everlasting future; and (g) establishment of the connection to other ritual, social and political activities such as the celebration of administrative appointments. Kern suggests that the formalisation of ritual was a result of the need for an imagined legitimisation of the beginnings of the dynasty, and to commemorate it so as to further legitimise its continuation (ibid. 150).

As we have suggested here, rituals had overlapping functions for court officials. To some extent, they would have practised some of these rituals in their personal domestic contexts as well, thus further blurring the distinctions between the religious practices at court and in the lives of the ordinary people (Harper 1999: 831–32). Mu-chou Poo (1998: 5) makes a more substantive claim, which is that there is no simple distinction between elite and popular religious culture and ‘it is possible to approach the beliefs of the commoners by examining the culture of the elite’. While Poo’s investigation of popular religion in China is an invaluable resource, there are questions about his work, amongst them the clarity of the distinctions he uses in categorising ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ religion (Brindley 2003; von Falkenhausen 1999). In the following section, we consider folk religious practices and their underlying beliefs.

**Divination in ordinary life**

The understanding of popular religion in ancient China has been enhanced by the discovery of texts more closely associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the ordinary people than the literature discussed so far. These include mantic texts, astro-calendrical texts, such as the *Xingde* texts from Mawangdui, as well as daybooks, and records of personal prognostication (Kalinowski 1998–99; Raphals 2010). The earliest personal prognostication records date from approximately 340 BCE (ibid. 128). These records reveal the divination attempts of the common people to portend and improve their person’s welfare. In one example, the prognostication concerns illness, including a wish that it be non life-threatening and an attempt to mitigate the severity of the illness by sacrificial offering:

> There is an illness near the abdomen with shortness of breath; may there be no calamity … He made offerings: one billy goat to the Lord of the Wild Lands, one billy goat to the Lord of the Grave … He prognosticated about it: it is auspicious. In the month *xingyi* he [Shao Tuo] will have an audience with the king.  


During the Warring States, there were different ways to prognosticate or pacify spirits, using different kinds of equipment, such as TLV mirrors (bronze mirrors with inscriptions bearing the shapes of the English letters ‘T’ ‘L’ or ‘V’), *liubo* boards (a game of chance used in divination or fortune telling), cosmic charts and divining boards (Lewis 2006a: 273–84; Loewe 1985). Numerology was also used. For example, number sequences were linked with omens in one version of the *Book of Changes*, the *Guicang Yi* text (Raphals 2010: 129–31). In the version from Fuyang, numbers were used to represent hexagram lines (ibid.). More complex number-mapping involved grouping phenomena under numeric headings, then interpreting the correspondences when mapped onto another numbered group (Lewis 2006a: 276). This included numbers within a cosmological framework, for instance, of the four quadrants (*sifang*), the five positions (four directions and the centre), eight positions (with intermediate directions), nine palaces (a grid), and twelve degrees (ibid.). The cosmological and religious implications of these numbers are discussed later.

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Poo provides extensive details of some of these practices, organised according to the agricultural cycle, the life cycle, as well as the consultation of handbooks for daily activities such as auspicious and inauspicious times for tailors to make new garments, for baths, and, especially, for travel (ibid. 123–56). During the Han period, people also focused in particular on siting: on where to build, how to position and when to move – what is now called geomancy (ibid. 143–45). The variety of divination methods was fuelled in part by belief in an extensive array of beings, some of which were expressed in Chinese myths. These beings included gods and goddesses with different capabilities, demons, strange lands and peoples, animals and hybrid creatures, flora and fauna, and aspects of the natural landscape (Lewis 2009: 575–82; Birrell 1993). A major assumption that undergirded divination practices was the belief that each person had the capacity to influence their well-being through forging a do ut des – a give-and-take – relationship directly with gods, powers and spirits (Poo 1998: 28, 61, 215).

Some of these religious practices reflected, and bred, superstition: they sought to determine auspicious times for a whole range of activities, including ‘marriage, childbirth, making clothes, building projects, travel, slaughtering farm animals, farming, and official audiences … [as well as] dreams, illness and leisure, and military activities’ (Raphals 2010: 131). There were also dark arts – curses, black magic, and seductive charms – that induced fear (Lin 2009: 447–56). However, these were only one aspect of popular religious belief. Over the Warring States period and into the Han, there were noticeable changes in how the relation between the human and the divine was conceived. One important change was the belief that, through sustained cultivation practice, individuals could develop unusual capacities in a range of spheres including in the corporeal (in physical fitness and vitality), ethical, intellectual, and extra-sensory. These beliefs were nested within a broader cosmological framework, whereby humans were able to harness the powers and energies from their environmental and cosmological contexts. In the case of kings, and sometimes their officials, effective exercise of their ethico-political capacities was necessary for the realisation of the human Way (dao), in cooperation with Heaven and Earth.

Cosmology

Both the Confucian and Daoist traditions situate their discussions of an ideal society and human flourishing within a cosmological framework that reaches beyond the human realm. The discourses in both traditions share a common vocabulary, such as Heaven, Earth, dao, qi (energies), yin-yang, and wuxing (five phases). In addition, both traditions advocate disciplined and arduous practices in order to cultivate various capacities. However, as we shall see, there are significant differences in their methods and aims of self-cultivation and these are directly related to their respective conceptions of humanity and divinity.

The idea of a context beyond one’s immediate experience was already present in the Shang. A prominent conceptual scheme of that period was the notion of the four quadrants or directions (sifang) of the world expressing a sense of place. The Shang kings were careful to attend to di-sacrifices directed at the four cardinal directions (Guo 1978–82; cited in Wang 2000: 28–34); in this case, the sifang are most appropriately understood as ‘four directions’. In geographical terms, sifang indicated areas on the periphery – of distant lands and their peoples – that were external to the life of Shang society (Wang 2000: 23–28; Allan 1991: 74–98). Sifang may also be understood as ‘four quadrants’, where it was used symbolically to place the Shang royal house in the centre of the four quadrants – at the sacred fifth point. The idea of centrality was an important one – and it grew more prominent when the Zhou overthrew the Shang. It was graphically captured by the Chinese character, ya (亞) (Allan 1991: 99). Allan suggests that the shape of the cross resembles the turtle plastron and, correspondingly, that the turtle was a model
of the Shang cosmos, ‘[with its carapace] seen as the sky and [its plastron] the earth with [its legs symbolising] four pillars in the northeast, southeast, northwest and southwest’ (ibid. 101). Allan suggests that the figure of the four quadrates and its centre, forming five parts, may have been a factor in the development of fives in Chinese numerology such as the five mountains and five ministers (Allan 1991: 101). However, as Allan’s thesis draws partly on later texts – over one and a half millennia later than the Shang – that the Shang held these myths is questionable (Lewis 2009: 548).

Another important cosmological picture significant in the Han was the nine-square grid. It had already figured in spatial terms during the Warring States period when, for example, it was proposed in the Mengzi that land should be allocated according to a nine-square well-field system, the character itself resembling a grid (井) (Mengzi 3B9). The grid also had religious and cosmological significance. First, it was the dominant understanding of the world ‘within the four seas’ during the Han, where China was said to occupy the southeast corner (Lewis 2006a: 247–60, at 252). Secondly, it was a schematic representation of the cosmos – magic squares – with systematic correspondences across a range of domains (Major 1984). Thirdly, the ritual hall during Han times, known as ming tang (the bright hall), had nine rooms, which was a replica of the structure of the cosmos. The emperor would reorganise his dwellings, garments and style of government, across the seasonal variations associated with each of the nine halls (Lewis 2006a: 260–73). It is not possible within this space to dwell further on the different cosmological pictures. Other noteworthy accounts of Chinese cosmology include Needham et al. (1959), Major (1993), Henderson (1984), and Pankenier (1998).

Ancient Chinese cosmology proposed a worldview that incorporated continuities and correspondences across the human and divine realms. All human activities were irretrievably interwoven with those of other beings, and all of these were enfolded within cosmic processes. Concomitantly, change was understood to be inevitable and imminent. The ontological commitment to a dynamic cosmological framework also served as an explanatory framework for understanding and organising life. One of the implications of the belief in a reality that was constantly in flux was that the idea of a transcendental, unchanging order, or that of an independent and enduring deity, did not figure prominently, if at all, within Confucianism and Daoism. The following section investigates the conceptual framework of change, its expression in concepts such as yin-yang and wuxing, and its manifestations across different realms.

Change and correspondences

The concept of change is captured explicitly in the character yi (易), understood in a Han period etymological text, the Shuowen jiezi, in two ways. First, the character resembles a lizard and therefore displays its ‘easy mobility and changeableness … one of the lizards, the chameleon, is the epitome of changeableness’ (Shuowen 卷十: 易部; Wilhelm 1973: 14). Secondly, the character comprises two other characters, the sun (日) and the moon (月) (Shuowen 卷十: 易部). In the Book of Songs, yin is associated with rain (Ode 35) and yang with the sun that dries the dew (Ode 174). In Ode 250, yin and yang denote the shady and sunny sides of a mountain, respectively, to capture the regular succession of shade and sunlight according to the position of the sun. In this early usage, yin and yang express the idea of alternation.

During the Han, yin-yang acquired a sense of bi-polarity, defined by their relative positions (Wilhelm 1979: 195). The Xici Zhuan, a Han dynasty commentary included in the Book of Changes, explicitly addresses yin-yang in relation to change:

In capaciousness and greatness, change corresponds to Heaven and Earth; in the way change achieves complete fulfilment, change corresponds to the four seasons; in terms
of the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, change corresponds to the sun and moon; and in the
efficacy of its ease and simplicity, change corresponds to perfect virtue.

*(Xici zhuan 1.6, translated by Lynn 1994: 56)*

While retaining its older association with the sun and the moon, the *Xici Zhuan* locates both *yin*
and *yang* in the teleological processes of the cosmic and human worlds. Elsewhere, the dualistic
schema of *yin-yang* was used to explain a range of phenomena, including seasonal change, the
human life cycle, and the rise and fall of dynasties. An extensive list of correlates of *yin* and *yang*
are provided in an early Han Daoist text, the *Mawangdui Laozi B*. *Yin* is correlated, for example,
with earth, autumn, winter, night, inaction, below, woman, younger, base, being controlled by
others, silence, and receiving. Correspondingly, *yang* is correlated with Heaven, spring, summer,
day, action, above, man, older, noble, controlling others, speech and giving (cited in Graham
1986: 27–28). *Yin* and *yang* operated in a conceptual framework that emphasised bipolarity,
harmony and interdependence; while a duality, they were never conceived of in antithetical or
antagonistic terms (Major 1993: 28).

In relation to the notion *wuxing*, its earliest references referred to the *materiality* of five basic
elements, the five materials (*wucai*) — wood, fire, earth, metal, and water (Graham 1986: 74).
The phrase was also used to refer to the attributes of these five materials: ‘the nature of water
is to soak and descend; of fire, to blaze and ascend; of wood, to be crooked and straight; of metal,
to yield and change; while the virtue of earth is seen in seed-sowing and in gathering’ (*Hong Fan*
continues, forging correspondences between these attributes of the five elements and the five
tasks (*wuji*) of humans, five divisions of time (*wuji*) and five sources of happiness (*wuji*) (ibid.
325–44). By the Han, this latter use of *wuxing* was common, referring to the distinctive qualities
of an element rather than the element itself. Its application in a range of discourses included the
legitimisation of particular styles of leadership. It is used in this way in the *Huang-Lao* text, a fusion of Daoist concepts with Legalist (*fajia*) strategies, culminating in the notion of the Yellow Emperor (Ryden 1997; Major 1993: 32–38). The
*Huang-Lao* interprets *wuji* in terms of a conquest cycle (wood — earth — water — fire — metal) to justify its argument for a Daoist style of government (Graham 1986: 81–82). In contrast,
Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–c. 104 BCE) used a generative cycle (wood — fire — earth — metal —
water) to establish a Confucian model (Wang 2000: 190–95). Interestingly, both texts used a
similar vocabulary (*dao, tian, yin-yang, wuxing*, and *qi*) in their contrastive cosmological warrants
for rulership. It is clear that, by this time, *wuxing* is most aptly captured by the translation ‘five
phases’ rather than ‘five elements’ (Graham 1986: 77).

Another significant feature of Han cosmological thinking is the postulation of systematic
correspondences across various domains, as, for instance, between astrological events and politi-
cal scenarios, and the human body. Many of these correspondences were analogical and
metaphorical, though the correspondences traversed much larger domains than analogies typically
do (Henderson 1984: 1). As we would expect, the attempts to explain a wide variety of
cosmic, historical and social correspondences often resulted in forced-fits (ibid. 9–12; 89–118).
One particular type of correspondence is resonance (*ganying*), where events in one domain are
causally connected to those in another, resonating in mutual sympathy. The spirit of *ganying*
is most palpable in acoustical and musical resonances (Henderson 1984: 22–23) although during
the Han and after, it spread to a wide range of fields, including poetry, human physiology and
health, diet, alchemy, and geomancy (ibid. 47–53).

The notion that events were causally related across different domains was reasonably wide-
spread. For example, the ‘Monthly Ordinances’ (*Yue Ling*) of the Confucian *Record of Rites*
comprises twelve sections according to the months of the year. For each of these months, the text identifies the divine ruler and spirits, animal, musical note, pitch-tube, number, taste, smell, sacrifice, and human organ. There is also detail on the appropriate hall, raiment, accessories and diet of the king, the rituals he should attend to, and prohibitions and warnings, for example, that war should not be undertaken in a certain month (Legge 1885: 92–131). There are consequences that reverberate across domains, if the correlations are ignored. For instance, the Book of Documents states that ‘If throughout the year, the month, the day, the seasonableness is interrupted, the various kinds of grain do not become matured; the operations of government are dark and unwise; heroic men are reduced to obscurity; and in the families of the people there is no repose’ (Hong Fan, translated by Legge 1865, Pt. 2: 341–42).

These beliefs had far-reaching consequences for ordinary people in their daily lives as well, manifest in their attitudes and beliefs in ganying and correspondences in a wide range of activities including food, health and geomantic practices (Sterckx 2006; Henderson 1994). In geomancy, for example, the compass incorporated ‘practically all of the systems and series the Chinese used to measure or represent elements of space, time, and cosmic change’ (Notes on ‘FIG. 8.11. Illustration of a Geomantic Compass’, Henderson 1994: 217). Yet, ‘knowledge of general geomantic rules of thumb was surprisingly widespread in late traditional Chinese society’ (ibid. 216).

Conceptually, the five phases gradually displaced the sifang model – the emperor at the centre – with one that shifts and is in flux. This had important implications for government, evidenced in the fact that the ritual cycle based on wuxing became a key feature of Han imperial rule (Loewe 1974). From a meta-ethical point of view, the commitment to a dynamic cosmological order entails the cultivation of skills in order to cope with and respond to these changes. Texts belonging to the Confucian and Daoist traditions proposed models of cooperation between Heaven, Earth and humanity, carefully carving out the domain of human action within the cosmological context. We examine each of these in the sections that follow.

Self-cultivation in Confucianism

The concept tian plays a particularly prominent role in Confucian discourse, bearing a range of meanings through time and in the hands of different Confucian thinkers. Tian played a major role in the Zhou conquest of the Shang dynasty. Many Zhou texts assert that the Shang kings lost the Mandate of Heaven (tianming); and that the early Zhou kings, Wen (r. 1099–1050 BCE), and Wu (r. 1046–1043 BCE) received the Mandate (Puett 2002: 58–63). The replacement of Di, the Shang high god, by tian was not merely terminological; for the Confucians, tian was the paradigm of order and harmony (Puett 2002: 55). There was increasing use of the phrases ‘Son of Heaven’ (tianzi) and ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (tianming), both of which were central to the political and religious legitimacy of Western Zhou rule (Kern 2009: 150). The notion of tian and its place in cosmology has also been interpreted in a number of ways. For Eno, tian undergoes an evolutionary process during the Zhou, from a ‘highly anthropomorphic religious cosmology’ to a ‘more rational philosophical view’ (Eno 1990: 4). Pankenier (1998: 170) offers a more extended account of the development of the Chinese cosmological worldview, arguing that Zhou (Confucian) ethics, grounded in the harmony of tian and humanity, was a re-statement of earlier, pre-Shang cosmology. On this view, ancestor worship during the Shang was an aberration in the development of tian as a basis for ethical life (ibid. 173–74; 176). These views of a developmental cosmological trajectory have been challenged, however, on whether it is appropriate to use in the case of ancient China a model of development that moves from more primitive to more rationalistic (Puett 2002: 61–68).
In the main Warring States Confucian texts, the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*, *tian* is connected to human ethical life, though the connections are spelt out differently in the texts. In the *Analects*, a compendium of conversations between Confucius and his interlocutors, the ordinances of *tian*, *tianming*, are held in high regard by the ‘paradigmatic’ person while the ‘small’ person simply does not grasp them (*Analects* 16.8). *Tianming* in this text is to be distinguished from *ming*, fate, which simply means one’s allocated lifespan. In normative terms, human culture derives from *tian*’s patterns (*wein*) (*Analects* 8.19), and it is the task of the sage to enact these patterns in human society (*Analects* 8.9). Here, we detect a teleological and non-dualistic conception of Confucian cosmology, whereby humans should bring to fruition the dictates of *tian*. Yet, there is no mention of *tian* as having a sentient, regulative role in human conduct (Puett 2002: 100). Nor does the text hold *tian* blameworthy for human and natural disasters, a view in a number of late Western Zhou texts, when there was unrest resulting in the fall of its capital in 771 BCE. For example, the odes in the *Book of Songs* written during this time blame ‘pitiless Heaven’ (Pines 2002: 57–61), accuse its commands of going awry, including the charge that ‘were there one who could bring peace, [tian] would overcome him’ (*Shijing* 192.4, cited in Eno 1990: 27).

The *Analects* maintains reverential distance from *tian*: Confucius does not murmur against *tian* (*Analects* 14.35). By contrast, the *Mengzi* seems to be more ambivalent about whether *tian* is always worthy of esteem (*Mengzi* 2B.13; 7B.10), at times holding *tian* responsible when things do not go right (*Mengzi* 1B.16. See the discussion in Perkins 2006: 295–306). The Mencian conception of *tian* is altogether more complex as *tian* is at the same time the source of humanity’s innate moral inclinations (*Mengzi* 2A.6; 7B.25; 7B.31). Because events under the jurisdiction of *tian* may be good or bad, Mencius places greater responsibility on people and, ultimately, on the sage for attaining social order (*Mengzi* 6A.7). He also provides a more thorough account of what is necessary for human flourishing: the four sprouts of innate moral goodness, namely, benevolence (*ren*), rightness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*), which are located in the human mind-heart, *xin* (2A.6). Endowed by *tian*, *xin* is the focal point of humanity and human flourishing. Mencius also draws on the notion of *qi* to establish the continuity between *tian*’s telos and human morality: the floodlike *qi* ‘is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between Heaven and Earth’ (Van Norden 2008: 39). While Mencius’ moral metaphysics provides a more thorough program for self-cultivation, it faces theological dilemmas. For example, he needs to account for the problem of evil in light of the moral sprouts of goodness (Perkins 2006), and for the tension in *tian*, which endows humans with the primary capacity for moral goodness and yet wreaks havoc.

The *Xunzi*’s *tian* is commonly characterised as ‘naturalistic’, to capture its ethical disengagement (Machle 1993: 14–15). This interpretation is based in particular on the discussions in the ‘Discussion on Heaven’ (*Tian Lun*) chapter, which separates the domains of *tian* and humanity: ‘Heaven has its seasons; Earth its resources; and Man his government’ (*Xunzi* 17.2; translated in Knoblock 1994: 15). Yet, we must understand that this is not a denial of engagement but rather a delineation of what may be attributed to *tian* and what is a result of human actions and decisions. In fact, Xunzi asserts the importance of engagement according to these terms: competition (*zheng*) with *tian* is to be avoided, and the ideal is a model of cooperative participation (*can*). A cosmic hierarchy is maintained with Heaven embodying its perfect *yang*, and Earth its perfect *yin*. Among the Confucian texts discussed so far, Xunzi’s *tian* is most closely aligned with the notion of a constant, divine order—which, incidentally, Xunzi does not hold to account for human and natural disasters. Hence, Edward Machle rejects the common interpretation of *Xunzi*’s *tian* as naturalistic, arguing that, for Xunzi, *tian* is both at the apex of the hierarchy, yet
contained within a mutually-defining triadic relationship (ibid. 153–54). This is a view that has no room for fangshi or divination practices. Xunzi’s program involves cultivation of the self, effected by enlightened, sagacious government that regulates human society through ritual propriety and penal law (fa), as well as the development of appropriate (moral) sentiment (qing) (Xunzi 17.4). Machle quotes a section of the Xunzi’s Yue Lun (Discussion on Music) that, he argues, best exemplifies Xunzi’s commitment to correlative cosmology:

[The spirit of the dance joins with the Way of Heaven. The drum is surely the lord of music, is it not? Hence, it resembles Heaven, while the bells resemble earth, the sounding stones resemble water, the mouth organs and lutes resemble the sun, and the scrapers resemble the myriad beings of creation. How can one understand the spirit of the dance? … when all the posturing and movements, all the steps and changes of pace, are ordered and none are lacking in the proper restraint … there is the spirit of the dance in all its manifold fullness and intensity!]

(Watson 1963: 118, cited in Machle 1993: 180)

This passage also reveals the coherence of Xunzi’s program, the realisation of the Dao of Heaven (tiandao) through human participation in a thoughtful, disciplined, and aesthetic life, resulting in the establishment of cultural institutions (wen). For Xunzi, the integration and engagement of humanity in the continuing flux of the cosmological processes is a prominent feature of Confucian religious thought.

In the Han, Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE) incorporated the vocabulary of qi and wuxing, and the pivotal role of the emperor, successfully persuading Emperor Wudi to establish Confucian orthodoxy during his reign in the late Han, by 135 BCE. On the basis of Dong’s ideas, Emperor Wu consolidated Confucian thought in the Confucian Five Classics – comprising the Book of Songs, the Book of Documents, the Record of Rites, the Book of Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan) – and established an imperial college for training in Confucian thought (De Bary 1999: 311–18). As in Xunzi’s arguments, Dong distinguished the qualities of each of the three key domains: Heaven, Earth, and humanity. Dong weaves them into a cosmology governed by yin-yang polarity that moves through the five phases:

The [qi] of Heaven and Earth join as the One, divide as Yin and Yang, halve as the Four Seasons, assume an arrangement as the Five Processes. ‘Process’ is proceeding; they proceed dissimilarly, and are therefore called the Five Processes.

(Chunqiu Fanlu 59.1, translated in Graham 1986: 90)

Dong used the graph for emperor, 王 (wang), symbolically to represent Heaven, humanity and Earth, respectively, with each of its horizontal strokes, while the vertical stroke captured the emperor’s dao – the dao of humanity – in realising the unity of the three realms (Chunqiu Fanlu 44). The king’s task is to ensure the best fit of human socio-political life to the shifting cosmological patterns of Heaven and Earth. This program gave weight to the role of the emperor but it also constrained him. Calamities, even natural ones, were attributed to him as events that seemed spontaneous but actually were not (Chunqiu Fanlu 65.1). There is an implicit assumption of causal continuities and correspondences across realms in this denial of spontaneity. In Dong’s account, there is likewise no place for divination, but rather the development of human hearing and sight in order to interact appropriately with the processes of the causative yin-yang movements (Puett 2002: 292).

This brief examination of a few representative Confucian texts up to the Han reveals a number of aspects of Confucian religious thought. It recognises the domain of what is properly
human and, therefore, gives scope for meaning in human life: the patterns and harmonies (he) in the cosmological context require a human response. Texts like the Great Learning in the Record of Rites from the Han period emphasise the ruler’s central role in facilitating the cultivation of virtue. In the finer details of the Confucian vision, human life is irreducibly moral; there are quintessentially human capacities – most prominently the mind-heart – whose function is to realise the heavenly patterns in bringing about order under Heaven (zhì tianxia). The set of Confucian virtues, including benevolence (ren), trustworthiness (xin), filial piety (xiao), as well as appropriate moral sentiments, are manifest through ritual propriety. This assists in the realisation of harmonious equilibrium in the microcosm, which emulates and resonates appropriately with those in the cosmological macrocosm; the resonances are the particular focus of another chapter in the Record of Rites, the Doctrine of the Mean. Although the task of humanity is to fulfil Heaven’s telos, there is no requirement to replicate the values or qualities of a transcendent deity, nor is there an injunction to abide by abstractly-determined fixed principles. In that regard, the Confucian texts stress the importance of listening (wen) and observing (guan) in order to attune oneself to these patterns (e.g. Analects 2.18; 17.9). The issue of patterning human behaviours continued to occupy Confucian discourse in the Neo-Confucian period, with discussions on modelling li (pattern) on tianli (Heavenly pattern). The phrase that captures a distinctive feature of Confucianism, ‘unity of Heaven and humanity’ (tian ren he yi), was coined by Zhang Zai, a Neo-Confucian thinker, to capture the inherent capacity of humans to embody the Heavenly Way (Zhang 1989: 4). The question of finding one’s place – be it in human relationships, society, or the cosmological context – is a central theme in Confucianism. In this regard, the characterisation of Confucianism as a ‘collectivist’ culture (in not a few sociological analyses) appears simplistic, as it fails to recognise the profundity of the cosmological framework in Confucian thought.

Self-cultivation in Daoism

In the opening passage of the ‘Heavenly Patterns’ chapter of the Huainanzi, the origins of life are described in cosmological terms:

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed, all was ascending and flying, diving and delving. Thus it was called the Grand Inception. The Grand Inception [dao] produced the Nebulous Void. The Nebulous Void produced space-time; space-time produced the original qi. A boundary [divided] the original qi. That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven; that which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth. …

The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced yin and yang. The supersessive essences of yin and yang caused the four seasons. The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things …

(Huainanzi 3/18/18–23; translated in Major et al. 2010: 114–15)

Key terms in this cosmogonic picture – tian, dao, yin-yang, four seasons – are from a common vocabulary shared with Confucianism. What are the distinctive features of Daoist religious
cosmology? Over the Warring States up until the Han, we may identify two main differences in the Confucian and Daoist approaches to divinity. However, these should not be taken as defining characteristics of the respective traditions. They are at best broad generalisations which are nevertheless helpful in thinking through the two approaches to cosmology and divinity. The first difference is that, in some Daoist texts — as, indeed, in the Huainanzi passage above — dao is referred to as the origin or source, and at times used co-terminously with tian as the ground of all being. In Confucian texts, references to dao typically carve out domain- or being-appropriate activities or behaviours. Therefore, they designate normative standards and are not normally construed in metaphysical terms. For example, the dao of humanity (rendao) is contrasted with, but complements, Heavenly dao (e.g. in Xunzi, Chunqiu Fanlu, Discourses of the White Tiger Hall and Lunheng). Hence, tian dao and tianli (Heavenly patterns) may overlap in meaning, or they may be used interchangeably.

In the Huainanzi passage above, the picture of origination conveys a common source, dao, which, in time and space, gives rise to yin and yang and, ultimately, the myriad things (wanwu). As in Confucian cosmology, there is a place for Heaven and Earth, a cooperative dualism that continues to manifest in the polarities of yin and yang. However, unlike in Confucianism, dao is at the origin, characterised as primal: unformed, chaotic, and nebulous. The originating patterns of tian set out at the start of this early Han text of 21 chapters, establishes the primacy of these patterns. The text, commissioned by the King of Huainan, Liu An (179–122 BCE), emphasises the alignment of the King’s rule with Heaven’s patterns. The remainder of the chapter is highly technical, requiring the king and technical experts to interpret and understand cosmological correlations (Major et al. 2010: 109–12). It also seems that the authors of other chapters of the text promoted a range of cosmological schemes, including those in which the king’s capacities were comparable to those of spirits and could control natural phenomena (Puett 2002: 259–86).

Another Daoist text, the Laozi, that would have been compiled by the third century BCE, also advocates the primary status of dao. Very much a composite text, one of its passages presents an origination story that begins with dao:

[Dao] produced the One.
The One produced the two.
The two produced the three.
And the three produced the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of [qi] they achieve harmony …

(Laozi 42; translated in Chan 1963: 176)

Various passages in this text celebrate the mysterious (xuan) nature of the primal dao (Laozi 6, 10). Certain passages advocate a return to a primal state, using the imagery of the uncarved block to capture its simplicity (pu) (Laozi 32, 62, 15, 65). This reversal (fan) involves a rejection of conventional values and pursuits (Laozi 2, 5, 12, 18–20). In spite of the text’s various references to spontaneity (ziran), Laozi 17 suggests this is only superficial. In other words, the sage’s effective leadership seems spontaneous to the people. In fact, the sage who penetrates the mystery of dao has immense power in effecting ‘great conformity’ (da shun), facilitating the return of the myriad things to dao (Laozi 65, 17).

The second major difference between the Daoist and Confucian traditions is that Confucianism celebrates the cultural institutions as the key to the realisation of social order. By contrast, Daoism views socialisation, institutionalisation, and regulation as threats: they alienate humans from their primary locus of authenticity. Therefore, Daoist self-cultivation involves the
restoration of unity with the primordial dao. There is a basic dualism between human artifices, on the one hand, and the authentic dao, on the other. In this regard, the Daoist notion of wuwei – often inadequately translated as non-action – involves both the rejection of conventional norms and watchful vigilance against them.

The Zhuangzi, a Warring States text (which also has mixed authorship especially in the last 26 of its 33 extant chapters), likewise maintains the primacy of dao in the originating cosmological processes, establishing its place prior to spirits and Di (Zhuangzi 16/6/29–36). The ultimate person (zhiren) is oblivious to the distinctions made in conventional life: anxiety, taste, beauty, and the two key Confucian virtues, benevolence and rightness (Zhuangzi 6/2/64–70). In fact, he is unaffected by what is typically considered advantageous or harmful, including natural phenomena such as blazing woodlands, the chill of frozen lakes, thunderbolts and whirlwinds, and has control over them (Zhuangzi 6/2/71–73; following Graham’s translation 2001: 58). He has also transcended the life-death distinction: ‘death and life alter nothing in himself’ (ibid.). This suggests immortality: he is not simply like a spirit, he is spirit. The genuine person (zhiren), another referent for the sage in the Zhuangzi, is ‘someone in whom neither Heaven nor man is victor over the other’ (Zhuangzi 6/16/19–20; Graham 2001: 85). The sage’s cultivation involves the fasting of the mind-heart (xinzhai), a process that denies both the fasting practices associated with divination, as well as the exercise and discipline of the mind-heart as advocated by the Confucians (Zhuangzi 9/4/24–34). For the Zhuangzi, the proper capacity for forging attunement is qi, vital energy, which enables a person to acquire the state of emptiness (xu), which is where dao accumulates (Zhuangzi 9/4/27–28).

What is ‘emptiness’? It is the liberation from being tied to things and values in the conventional world. Puett (2002: 129) acutely describes Zhuangzian liberation in light of the teleological undertow of the text: ‘the liberation that arises from no longer being dependent on things arises from accepting the order of Heaven’. The monistic cosmology requires the attuned sage to be like a vessel: the teacher whose name is ‘Huzi’ (vessel) playfully taunts a technical expert whose speciality is physiognomy (Zhuangzi 20/7/15–21/7/31). The vessel is an important metaphor as it symbolises the emptiness of the Daoist sage: only as an empty vessel, devoid of conventional values and attitudes, can a person store elements of the Heavenly dao. The teacher Huzi shows, in his face, these different elements at each of the shaman’s subsequent visits: the earthly patterns, heavenly grounds, vital energies, and the origins prior to the rise of the ancestors. The shaman flees after his last visit when he is shown the cosmological picture prior to existence. This story highlights a few elements of the Zhuangzi’s attention to the divine and helps to sum up what we have discussed so far. First, the cultivation of the self involves the eradication of one’s conventional, this-worldly learning so that a person may be properly guided by her vital energies. Secondly, what is afforded by qi is direct insight into the cosmological processes, rendering divination practices superfluous.

There are similar themes in the ‘Inward Training’ chapter of the Guanzi, a fourth-century BCE text. Although the text belongs to the Legalist tradition, the ‘Inward Training’ chapter’s presentation of extensive details about Daoist meditation techniques makes it unique in its time. The chapter shares many similar themes with the Zhuangzi, including its disdain for divination (Guanzi XI.1; trans. by Rickett 1998: 51), the centrality of alignment with the primal dao, and the cleansing of the ‘house’ in order that vital essence (jing) will arrive therein (Guanzi VII.3; Rickett 1998: 45). In the ‘Inward Training’, the vital essence is the source of all living things, even of spirits and ghosts (Rickett 1998: 29); when humans concentrate their vital energies, they will be ‘like spirits’ (mu shen) (Guanzi XI.1; translated by Rickett 1998: 50). The chapter also promotes control of pulse, breath, emotions, and diet to attain concentrated qi (Guanzi XI.2–XIV.1; translated by Rickett 1998: 51–55; see Roth 1999 for a detailed analysis of the ‘Inward Training’ chapter).
In summary, the Daoist texts we have examined demonstrate some hostility to prevailing practices, traditions, and customs. The demarcation between Confucianism and Daoism became more pronounced in the Han, as we have seen, when thinkers attempted to persuade rulers to adopt particular models for government. The establishment of Confucian orthodoxy in the Han seems to have precipitated some backlash from the Daoists. At around 3 BCE, a peasant cult associated with Daoism organised a rebellion. This cult worshipped the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wang Mu), a mythical figure worshipped by both elites and peasants (Cahill 1993: 23–24). The Queen Mother of the West represented the yin – the dark, female force – in Daoist thought. That this was recorded in the Book of Han is an indication of its severity, as peasant concerns were rarely recorded in these historiographies (ibid.: 21–23). Cahill suggests that these activities foreshadowed the Daoist peasant revolts which brought the downfall of the Han Dynasty in 220 CE (ibid.: 21). Loewe also considers the possibility that worship of the Queen Mother of the West may have developed in order to fill a gap in Dong Zhongshu’s Confucian orthodoxy: the question of what happened after death and, associated with it, the possibility of attaining immortality (Loewe 1979: 97).

In the period immediately following the Han, during the Six Dynasties, there was an ‘iconoclastic counterculture movement’ against the Confucian orthodoxy (Chan; in Chan and Lo 2010: 3). One of the key characteristics of this movement was not the rejection of Confucianism but the scrutiny of so-called ‘Confucian’ teachings in the Han. The movement involved unlocking the mystery of dao by reinterpreting the teachings of Confucius, and became known as ‘Xuanxue’. Another prominent theme during this period when Daoism flourished was the pursuit of great peace (tai ping), wherein the end of Han was interpreted as an eschatological ending. The Scripture of Great Peace (Taiping Jing), a sixth-century text, grew out of this context. The text was associated with millenarian movements that had a program for salvation, sought fairness for women, and a fairer society overall (Hendrischke 2007).

Conclusion

The ancient Chinese engaged in divination practices and sacrificial rituals to foretell the future, and to appease spirits and powers. These attempts to secure better personal outcomes for themselves and, in the case of emperors, for the State as well, reflect anxieties about change, affairs beyond human control, and the unknown. The engagement of specialists to conduct these activities suggests a level of helplessness on the part of individuals, and the awareness of human limitations, in accessing the sphere of the divine. Yet, on the other hand, belief in a comprehensive and correlative cosmological framework is enabling as all beings have their place within this framework. These metaphysical commitments, together with the belief in continual flux, make it imperative that humans have an appropriate response to the ongoing processes of the cosmos. Existing literature on the Confucian and Daoist traditions – and beyond these traditions – bears out immensely rich and subtle ethico-religious aspects of Chinese thought. In this barest sketch of the Confucian and Daoist responses to this cosmological view, we have seen the optimistic and ennobling proposals that affirm the place of humanity – indeed, of each individual – within their respective teleologies. Notwithstanding important differences, both traditions take into account not only individuals and their actions but their place and relationships within the cosmological framework. Their delineation of what is, and what is not, within the domain of the human may be seen as naturalistic, or as a move toward rationalisation. I have suggested instead that we understand Confucian and Daoist self-cultivation as attempts to empower individuals, for them to develop skills and capacities, so as to be attuned to the ‘pipes of Heaven’ (Zhuangzi 3/2/3–4).
List of dates

Table 7.2

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<tr>
<td>Shang dynasty</td>
<td>17th – 11th centuries BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhou dynasty</td>
<td>c. 1122 BCE–221 BCE</td>
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<td>Western Zhou</td>
<td>c. 1045 BCE–771 BCE</td>
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<td>Eastern Zhou</td>
<td>771 BCE–221 BCE</td>
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<td>Warring States period</td>
<td>475 BCE–221 BCE</td>
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<td>Qin dynasty</td>
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<td>Han dynasty</td>
<td>206 BCE–220 CE</td>
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<td>220–589</td>
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Glossary of Chinese terms

Table 7.3

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<td>論語</td>
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<td>安陽</td>
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<td>Baoshan slips</td>
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<td>包山楚簡</td>
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<td>benevolence</td>
<td>ren</td>
<td>仁</td>
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Hubei

Inward Training (chapter in the Guanzhi)

king

Laozi

Legalist

like spirits

listen

Literati (Confucians)

Liu An

Liubo board

Lunheng

Mandate of Heaven

Mawangdui

Mencius

Mengzi

mind-heart

Monthly Ordinances (chapter in the Record of Rites)

moon

myriad things

mysterious

observe

ordinances of Heaven

paradigmatic person

patterns

patterns

penal law

Qin dynasty

Qin Shihuang

Queen Mother of the West

Record of Rites

resonance

reversal

rightness

ritual (in Confucianism: ritual propriety)

River (power)

schools (of thought)

Scripture of Great Peace

sentiment

shaman

Shang Dynasty

Shun (Zhou sage king)

Shuowen Jiezi

Sima Qian

simplicity

Six Dynasties

small person

Son of Heaven

spirit/s

spontaneity

stem and branches (calendrical cycle)

sun
technical arts
technical experts
temple name
Three Brilliances
trustworthiness
turtle plastrons
ultimate person
unity of Heaven and humanity
vital essence
Warring States
well-field system (nine-square grid)
Wen (Zhou king)
Western Zhou
wisdom
Wu (Zhou king)
Wu Ding
wuwei
Xia Dynasty
Xici Zhuan (Section of the Book of Changes)
Xingde
Xuanxue
Xunzi (text written by Xunzi, a Confucian thinker)
yā
yang (attributes associated with masculinity)
Yao (Zhou sage king)
Yellow Emperor
yīn (attributes associated with femininity)
Yinxu
yǐn-yáng
Yu (Zhou sage king)
Zhang Zai
Zhou Dynasty
Zhuangzi (text associated with Daoist thinker Zhuangzi)