THE *HU* VESSEL: ENCAPSULATING LIFE AND COSMOS

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Of all Chinese vessel types, none has had a longer history of use than the *hu*. Given its assumed ritual importance, the tripod cauldron known as the *ding* has received more attention than the *hu*. True, as a *bronze* vessel, the *hu* was a latecomer compared to *jue* or *jia* vessels, but considering that its prototypes in pottery go back much earlier, it clearly deserves closer scrutiny. The fascinating question is: why did it endure for so long?

The *hu* typically has a slender 'neck', a bulbous 'body', and a pair of handles or vertical lugs on the sides. It can be round/oval or square/oblong in section. This largely consistent shape composes the ontology of a *hu* vessel. But while the shape is relatively stable, the decorative pattern adorning its body varies dramatically over time as amply illustrated in the Shen Zhai Collection (see cat. nos. 15, 16, 59–64, 67, 71–73). Early *hu* vessels covered with writhing dragons stand in sharp contrast to later examples covered with scenes of human activity—mulberry-gathering, archery, and battles, for instance. Such mutations register the shifting tastes and changing needs of different times. Yet, despite these surface variations, we remain confident that the *hu* is still a *hu*. The shape and vessel type retain the essential *hu* ontology.

What makes a bronze vessel an art form stems in part from the dynamics of constancy and change, the relatively stable shape and the changing surface decoration. Embellished whether with paired dragons or battle scenes, it is subordinate to some central idea of what a *hu* vessel is about. If we accept this premise, we must wonder what dragons, mulberry-picking, and battle scenes have in common. Nothing, we might say, if taken at face value. But if we probe deeper into what a *hu* is all about, we will be surprised to discover that the intertwining dragons and the battle scenes are in fact about the same thing. It is this *thing* that is the essence of the *hu*.

The object is an enigma. There is a saying: 'what drug are you trying to sell inside that *hulu* (bottle gourd)?' The saying expresses perplexity about the message bottled up inside its container. The liquid inside—liquor or water—could be contained in other vessel types. So the 'inside story' does not divulge much. It is the medium—the container—that is the true message. And the message resides in its formal design.

Recently there has been considerable discussion on the concept of 'artificial life'. The very idea that life can be imagined outside of the body unsettles our habitual way of thinking. It opens up horizons of post-biological or extra-bodily life. Yet this notion would not have seemed so strange in ancient China, for the early Chinese idea of life is anything but body-centric. For the ancient Chinese, the essence of life, far from being confined to the body, resided in the breath or *qi*, vital energy that permeates both the cosmos and the human body. Concentration of *qi* creates life; its dissipation spells death. So in the early Chinese context, the line between 'artificial' and 'natural' was elusive. This view of life and the cosmos, as we shall see, informs the fundamental nature of the *hu*.

Methodology

How do we figure out the essential signification of the *hu*? Simply lining up *hu* vessels would not suffice. We would end up with a bland descriptive account of how *hu* decorations change over time, and not be in the position to go beyond this observational report. Textual accounts had become available during the last few centuries before the Common Era. They tend to be artefacts in their own right, presenting confounding scenarios, which themselves stand in need of explanation. In addition, there is, among historically minded modern sceptics, always the nagging suspicion that the application of later texts to early artefacts runs the risk of misleading.

Fig. 1 ***Fanghu*** (one of a pair)
Late Western Zhou dynasty (877–771 BC)
Bronze; height 60.5 cm
Shen Zhai Collection, cat. no. 62

A methodological readjustment is needed. One viable tactic is to take advantage of the rich resources that have grown exponentially since the fourth century BC. They present new avenues into the workings of the *hu* vessel, increasing the chance that we may have extrapolated a deeper impulse fuelling and sustaining the *hu* vessel culture over centuries. With that acquired prism, we can gain insights into the decorative patterns on earlier *hu* vessels. It may well turn out that the paired dragons and the battleground scenes in fact have a lot more in common than we are prepared to accept at the outset.

Dragons in Shang and Western Zhou Dynasty *Hu* Vessels

Let us start with dragons. It is commonly accepted that, while the *hu* bronze vessel type first appeared during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BC; cat. no. 15), it really became a fully developed distinct subgenre of bronze vessels during the Western Zhou (1046–771 BC). The prototypes developed in the Western Zhou in turn inspired new designs in the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC). As the Bronze Age subsequently came to an end, *hu* vessels found renewed energy in other media, such as lacquer and pottery. Shang bronzes do not provide a good starting point—not that they are inferior in quality—simply because we do not have enough information about them. With the Western Zhou bronzes, we have more to lean on.

Consider the pair of *hu* vessels (figs. 1 and 2, cat. no. 62) with coiling dragons from the Shen Zhai Collection. The date of these can be established in relation to the well-known Pi *hu* 昕壺 (fig. 3), excavated in 1992 from the tomb no. 8 of Marquis of Jin, Quwo county, Shanxi province, dating from the late Western Zhou, ca. 800 BC. The coiling-dragon *hu* has all the basic attributes that herald the design features of some of the most celebrated *hu* vessels of subsequent periods. The most notable feature of the decoration is the swirl of conjoining dragons whose bodies interweave into overlapping patterns. The decoration in fact marks a revolution in design. A hierarchical symmetry is the prevalent principle behind the decorative patterns adorning bronze vessels prior to the ninth century BC. The wave patterns on the ninth century BC Da Ke *ding* 大克鼎 (fig. 4) signal a new trend. The early Chinese bronze vessel is cast out of piece moulds. The casting method means that it is easier to fit design into the piece mould. However, the Da Ke *ding* designer disregards this rule. He lets the undulating and interwoven form of the dragons overrun the surface as if the mould division does not exist. The continuous wave pattern disregards the symmetrical design that had been the prevalent decorative order on bronze vessels. In fact, the old regimen is still preserved on the upper register of the Da Ke *ding*, contrasting with the undulating wave pattern in the lower band that breaks that symmetry.

It is apparent that the coiling-dragon *hu* vessels (figs. 1 and 2, cat. no. 62; fig. 3) reflect the same aesthetic spirit as the Da Ke *ding*. Both make a point of disregarding the mould divisions. Both feature dragons—the Da Ke *ding* on the handles—and both let the serpentine wave patterns run free. The new design opened a floodgate. The wave pattern would become a prevalent design for bronze vessels in the subsequent centuries. If we compare the coiling-dragon *hu* of late ninth century BC (figs. 1 and 2, cat. no. 62) with the eighth-century BC *hu* featuring continuous bands of undulating ribbons (fig. 5, cat. no. 63),[1] we see a distinct trend, as the more literal rendition of the dragons in the former becomes more abstract on the latter.

Fig. 2 ***Fanghu*** (one of a pair)
Late Western Zhou dynasty (877–771 BC)
Bronze; height 60.5 cm
Shen Zhai Collection, cat. no. 62

Fig. 3 Pi *hu* (one of a pair)
Late Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 800 BC)
Bronze; height 68.8 cm
Unearthed in 1992 from tomb no. 8 of Marquis Jin cemetery, Quwo county, Shanxi province.
Shanxi Provincial Musuem

Fig. 3a Detail of the Pi *hu* lid design.

The prominence of the interwoven dragons on the coiling-dragon *hu* is notable. Not only do they overrun the surface of the vessel belly, in the case of Pi *hu*, but they also swirl on the lid, four of them (fig. 3a) forming a continuous wave pattern, literally 'making waves'. Why do dragons gain such prominence on Western Zhou vessels? No Western sources explicate the matter. But a pre-second-century BC Chinese source sheds some light. The account is worth quoting in full:

> In the past, when the Xiahou Clan was in decline, two divine dragons appeared at the court of the Emperor of Xia and said: 'We are the two lords of Bao.' The Emperor of Xia divined through scapulimancy on whether to kill them, to expel them, or to keep them. None [of the results] were auspicious. Only when he divined requesting to store the dragons' saliva was it auspicious. Thereupon, he laid out silk for sacrifice and wrote out a bamboo tablet as a prayer to them. The dragons thus disappeared, leaving their saliva, which he put aside in a casket. When Xia perished, this casket was handed down to Yin; and when Yin perished, it was again handed down to Zhou. For three dynasties consecutively none had ventured to open it until near the end of King Li's era when he opened it to look at it. The saliva overflowed in the court and could not be cleaned up. King Li made women strip naked and yell at it. The saliva changed into a black reptile, and as such entered the innermost quarters of the king's palace. A girl in the innermost quarters, whose adult teeth had just come in, encountered it and became pregnant when her hair was first pinned up. As she had no husband, yet gave birth to a baby, she was frightened and abandoned it. During the time of King Xuan, a children's song among girls went: 'The bow of wild-mulberry and the quiver of *qi* wood will destroy the Zhou.' When King Xuan heard of it, he sent someone to arrest and kill a couple who sold these items. As they were escaping, the couple found the baby who had been abandoned on the road by the girl from the innermost quarters of the palace. They heard it cry during the night and, out of pity, they adopted it. The couple thus ran away and fled to Bao. When Bao offended [the king], they asked to be allowed to offer the daughter who had been abandoned by the girl to the king to atone for their offense. [Since] the abandoned daughter was from Bao, she was called Lady Si of Bao.[2]

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Several things are notable about this passage. To begin with, the appearance of the two 'divine dragons'—a more apt translation would be 'spirit dragons'—is considered 'auspicious'. Then, the fact that the dragons appear as a pair already hints at the reproductive nature—a hint confirmed in the subsequent scenes: it is the dragons' spittle that gets the young palace woman pregnant. More relevant to our purpose is the role of the repository. The dragons' saliva is preserved in a container known as a *du* 匵 that can be passed down through generations. It is remarkable that, despite the centuries-long duration, the dragons' saliva remains a potent potion capable of inseminating a young woman and making her pregnant. That this occurs in the context of a royal palace suggests the high status accorded to the *du* repository that preserves life.

Fig. 4 Da Ke *ding*
Middle Western Zhou dynasty, King Xiao (r. ca. 891–886 BC)
Unearthed in 1980 from Fufeng county, Shaanxi province.
Bronze; height 93.1 cm
Shanghai Museum

The role of the *du* container makes us wonder about its corresponding artefact. A later glossing of the character '*du*' points to the well-appointed carriages from the palace, and so it comes as no surprise that there is a Western Zhou bronze model carriage (fig. 6) from noble tombs at Ju county, Shandong, on the east coast of China. The cabin is carried by six nude figures. Atop appears a kneeling nude couple—a male and a female—about to engage in copulation. Most likely, the couple represents reproduction, and the sculptural scene is meant to manifest what the box is about. It is a container of life-conferring forces. The cues reside in the visual elements of the couple, the nakedness, and the container. All of these elements appear in the dragon story cited above. What this vessel illustrates is the potency of vessels that can preserve life.

Keeping in mind both the life-giving agency of the vessel and the dragon saliva, we are in the position to better understand the import of the coiling-dragon *hu* vessels (figs. 1 and 2, cat. no. 62). The pairing of the dragons makes perfect sense. Their intertwining performs a scenario enacted explicitly on the Ju county bronze carriage.

The *Hu* as Enabler: A Garment-Shaped Banner from Tomb No. 3 at Mawangdui

The coiling-dragon *hu* sets in motion a long tradition of intertwining dragons in subsequent times. It calls our attention to the synergy between the intertwining dragons and the *hu* vessel. This long tradition culminates in a second-century BC instance: the bottom section of the garment-shaped banner from tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui, dated ca. 168 BC (fig. 7), expresses a similar play of ideas. Like the *hu*, it involves a pair of conjoining dragons, demonstrating the enabling role of the *hu* vessel. While the interlacing dragons appear on the surface of the *hu* vessel, the Mawangdui painting shows the dragons on a cosmic scale, with a *hu* vessel as the starting point.

From the bottom to the top, the banner maps out the successive stages of a seasonal cycle of the renewal of life. In other words, life is pictured as a natural process that unfolds both outside and inside the body, as a cosmic and somatic event. To that extent, the seasonal scenes are not really about seasons per se, but rather the cycle of natural life with its ebbs and flows.

The Mawangdui Banner: The Winter Scene

Winter is aptly the beginning phase. It marks the nadir of the life cycle, hence the bottom position. To the extent that the garment-shaped banner is a part of the funerary ritual paraphernalia, it amounts to a tacit acknowledgement of the actual situation of the newly dead. The death scene operates by way of a set of correspondences and cognate concepts: winter, darkness, cold, dampness, water, abyss; the list goes on. In the early Chinese way of thinking, however, nothing is locked into stasis. Even death is not an unchanging state. It breeds life. The correlative cosmology provides a good cue. Death is certainly associated with winter, but we must consider the full chain of associations. Winter is associated with the north and water, but, while the long nights and darkness of winter might be distressing and associated with lack of life, *water* is not. Teeming with fish, it is the domain where life is bred. This is where life begins.

Fig. 5 *Hu* (one of a pair)
Late Western Zhou dynasty (877–771 BC)
Bronze; height 39 cm
Shen Zhai Collection, cat. no. 63

This is what the bottom section of the garment-shaped painting depicts. The scene features a pair of intertwining fish in blissful copulation. Four sets of related images, all in proximity and interaction with the copulating pair of fish, endow this scene with suggestive overtones. These include: (1) a *hu* vessel beneath the interlacing fish; (2) a pair of turtles flanking the intertwining fish; (3) a squatting potbellied anthropomorphic deity astride the copulating fish; and, last but not least, (4) a pair of dragons, one red and one pale blue.

The Mawangdui Banner: Turtles, Fish, Dragons

Leaving aside the *hu* vessel to the last, let us focus on the three sets of creatures first. Animals in early Chinese art mostly visualisations of states and conditions. Since reality is understood as in flux, animals become markers of different changing states. In light of this, we can take the turtles, the fish, and the dragons as consecutive states of an evolving life force. The turtles—conventionally denoting deep water, winter, the north, and cold—mark the lowest and most inactive state. As conditions improve, the evolving life force enters its next stage. Things get animated, as seen in the intertwining and copulating fish. Life is being conceived. To the extent that life is conceived as concentration of breath or *qi* energy, what happens next is the growth and soaring of energy. This is where the dragons come in.

Fig. 6 Bronze casket (*du*) with nude figures
Western Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC)
From Ju county, Shandong province.
Bronze; height 7.5 cm
Shandong Provincial Museum

The Chinese dragon is different from the fire-breathing, ferocious, evil creature of Western imagination. The Chinese dragon is a creature invented to fill a gap in the early Chinese correlative cosmology. The way this cosmology works involves matching and aggregating sets of concepts and domains. Most fundamentally, it correlates spatial entities to seasonal phases. Turtles align winter, abyss, and water into one associative chain; birds relate summer to summit and heat (fire). How to denote spring—the intermediate state that bridges the deep abysmal water and empyrean high—becomes

a challenge. There is no such creature in nature that fit the bill. But the missing link is necessary, and the correlative cosmology has to be perfected. For that purpose, the dragon is posited to serve as that missing link. It is the only creature—though an imagined one—that can both reside in water and soar into the sky. It is not meant to provide spectacle. Rather, it is created as a cognitive marker to embody spring, that state in which life goes from the wintry-watery low to the summery-fiery high, from the realm of fish to that of the birds. This is what the banner depicts. Having gone through the states of deep slumber or inaction (turtle) and life-breeding in water (fish), the growing life force now gathers enough energy to soar. And soar it does, from the depths of the water into the midair.

The Mawangdui Banner: The Hu

Two agencies aid this process. There is, first of all, that *hu* vessel underneath the intertwining fish. Its appearance in the scheme might seem strange. How does the *hu* vessel, a manmade artefact, fit into the 'natural' scheme of things populated by lively creatures? The vessel is not about the materiality of the container itself, but what is contained within it—the ethereal entity, or the bottled-up breath inside.

A few points about this vessel are notable. Its appearance at the nadir of the composition suggests the death condition, a state of scattered breath. Rejuvenation, if it can be engineered at all, starts with the reversal of this condition. If scattered breath spells death, concentration of *qi* energy leads to life. This is what the *hu* vessel does: it bottles up the energy needed to breed life. It does not play by the clock of natural process. What it can do—or least what the human imagination hopes it can do—is to condense the long duration of successive stages of life cycles into one pregnant moment, in other words, speed up the process. The vessel is a pressure cooker, an energy condenser. It turns life around quickly.

The mute object cannot speak for itself. It has to be spoken for. Hence the need for the turnaround process, a fiction in a guise of a 'natural' scheme, to be figured and pictured. The banner deftly plays out this vessel-enabled scenario in the most dramatic way. Starting with the bottom *hu* vessel beneath the fish, as the eye view moves up, a succession of *hu* shapes appear. The intertwining dragons, as they soar into the midair, form two *hu* shapes: one placed upside down, the other with a flaring mouth atop the vessel (fig. 7). As we shall see, the upside-down *hu* shape expresses the winter-to-spring transition; and the *hu*-shaped geometry above signals the autumn-to-winter phase.

The Mawangdui Banner: The Potbellied Figure and the 'Mourning' Scene

This brings us to the second enabling agent, the potbellied figure astride the intertwining fish (fig. 8). The potbelly is not depicted for comic effect (though it does strike one as rather amusing). Instead, it is designed to resonate visually with the sequence of *hu* shapes. The identity of the figure has long been in dispute, but it is pointless to pin it down to a particular mythological figure named in early texts. Rather, we need to ascertain what the figure is *doing* there—what his agential role is in this scheme of things, this process of mutation. Judging from the figure's central position in the evolving process from the state of fish to that of bird, his role could be to represent either the life-enabling force that brings the yin and yang energies together, or the *result* of the intertwining fish, the human life born of the yin-yang copulation. He might also denote the state of the 'naked creature' in the fivefold scheme of nature comprising the feathered, the naked, the scaly, the hairy, and the armoured.[3] The 'naked' category occupies the phase between the scaly and the feathery. In any case, the potbellied figure is either the enabler—an anthropomorphised deity—or the result of the life-making process.

We are not done yet with the *hu* in this sequence of *hu*-centric events on the pictorial banner. A platform—which amounts to a section view of ground zero of the earth—

Fig. 7 Garment-shaped silk painting
Early Western Han dynasty (ca. 168 BC)
Excavated in 1973 from tomb no. 3, Mawangdui site,
Changsha city, Hunan province.
Silk; height 233 cm, width 141 cm
Hunan Provincial Museum

Fig. 8 Bottom section. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

intervenes between the watery underworld below and the human world above. This picture (fig. 9) has commonly been identified as a mourning scene. There is a problem with that characterisation. The garment painting from tomb no. 3, whose occupant is Marquis Dai's son, features eight women in the 'funerary' scene while the corresponding scene on the pictorial banner from tomb no. 1, occupied by Marquise or Lady Dai, presents eight men. The gender distinction is notable. No existing source indicates that a man's funeral is exclusively a women-only event, nor a woman's funeral a men-only affair. The scenes on both banners, therefore, cannot be a depiction of a funerary event. Rather, they picture the changing *states* corresponding to the conjoining of yin and yang breaths in the underworld.

Here the set of four *hu* vessels is the focal point. Inside is presumably the deceased's breath. Two files of women flanking the vessels are most likely his imaginary female consorts, who also perform the double duty of registering and externalising the changing states of the yin breath in relation to the yang force associated with the deceased male tomb occupant. The row of women in uniform white robes suggests the total dominance of yin energy, which means dead winter and the nadir of breath. Once we get to the left side, there is a marked improvement. The array of women to the left likewise registers the state of the *qi* energy, though its disposition has now changed. The alternating red (yang) and white (yin) robes worn by the women vividly conveys growing yang (red) energy. The congregation scene therefore shows a transition from a dead-winter state (death) to spring-to-summer (life) state. It externalises what is inside the four *hu* vessels. The correspondence between the three sets of four—two sets of four figures flanking the four *hu* vessels—makes manifest the transformative process enclosed in the vessels. There is also a subtle indication of the elapsed time. The four figures on the left of the vessel scene are smaller and shorter. In contrast, their counterparts on the right are larger and taller. Significantly, each of them wears a hairpin. Women would start to wear hairpins when they reached age fifteen, an expression of coming of age. We have therefore a clear indication that the seemingly stately and static scene here actually reveals the passage of time. During this time, the scattered breath of the dead acquires a new life. The *hu* vessels, an energy source, enables the process of revival.

The conjugation of the yin and yang energies, as suggested by the red-and-white colour alternation seen on the robes of the left-side women, is echoed in a significant detail above. Looming large is a jade disc into which the white and red dragons are interwoven. The yin and yang breaths reach the climax of their conjugation, a state correlated to the summer. What follows is the fruit-bearing autumn phase. The image of the deceased son of Marquis Dai appears here (fig. 10). The timing of his appearance is deliberate and calculated, and it makes perfect sense. Up to this point, the condition of the deceased is in the scattered state of *unformed* breath. So unformed that the spirit of the deceased has not taken shape. So the best way of locating and showing its whereabouts is to present it as an ethereal mass of breath contained in *hu* vessels.

As the enabling vessels succeed in concentrating the breaths and causing the yin and yang energies to 'mate', the productive process yields a good result. What was previously a mass of scattered breath is now condensed and compacted enough to form the shape and frame of a human being, though it is an avatar of sorts, mirroring the visage of the deceased son of Marquis Dai (fig. 10).

Fig. 9 Vessel scene. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

Other figures attend to the avatar of the deceased, notably the two sets of four figures at the either far side of the scene. Apparently the script involving the sets of four continues to play out here, but the narrative has reached a new stage. To the far right stands a group of four women. Compared with their counterparts in the vessel scene, they have apparently grown taller. The colour scheme of their robes, which is considerably darker in tone, is largely blue and black, with limited highlights of red on the collars and the edges of their sleeves. If we view these as a figural rendition of the abstract state of breath or life energies, things fall into place. The protagonist's breath has entered the state in which the yin force—as indicated by the sombre colour of the robe and the increased height of the four women—begin to prevail. If we follow the right-to-left sequential order, it should come as no surprise that the four figures on the left appear older.

The Mawangdui Banner: The Colour Scheme As Expression of Yin and Yang Energies

What do we make of the central figure—the postmortem avatar of the tomb occupant—in relation to the four-figure sets? Who are the two figures immediately following the central figure, one of whom shelters him under an umbrella? This element apparently relates to the yin and yang balance: the son's spirit embodies the yang, while the female figures signal its yin counterpart. It should be noted, however, that gender identity does not equate an absolute state of either yin or yang; rather, the *life* of any individual being is subject to the changing cycle of varying yin and yang compositions. Accordingly, the women here display the changing yin and yang *ratio* by their coloured robes. Throughout the pictorial sequence, the robes change from the overwhelming yin scheme to a yin and yang balance, and then revert to the dominant yin scheme. In that process, they mature and age. As they accompany the male protagonist, together they grow old. In other words, the changing condition of the four women registers that of the man. Here, the marquis' son wears a brown gown with highlights of red at the collar and sleeve edges. It spells golden autumn. The painter imbues him with predominantly yang tones, while relegating the role of the intimation of imminent winter—hinting again at death—to his female attendants. But the overall message is loud and clear: life is heading into the dark winter (fig. 11).

Fig. 10 Image of the tomb occupant. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

The colour scheme of the soaring dragons intimates the same thing (fig. 11). The bottom section posits yin and yang as two equal forces (fig. 8). Initially weak, they slither into full-fledged bodies, weaving their way into the jade disc, a summit point of conjugation (fig. 7). Things start to dim afterwards. The previously consistently red dragon now starts to lose its florid hue, its head turning a pale white. The overwhelming yang is morphing into predominately yin. Life is turning into death (fig. 11).

The painting tries to inject an upbeat note to death. The realm of death is treated as a celestial spectacle (fig. 11). In view of the seasonal cycle, it is yet again a wintry phase improbably suggested by a pair of fish. The fish-in-the-sky scenario takes us by surprise, but it is not without rhyme or reason. The underlying logic is built on the winter/water equation. The equation in turn also extends to the winter/darkness/ death correlation. To be sure, the paired fish (fig. 12) echo their counterpart at the bottom of the painting. However, unlike their counterpart at the bottom, which shows the coupling of the distinctly red and white fish, here they are both in sombre, dark tones, though the fish to the right retains a ring of red—a vestige of yang energy—on its head. The message is clear. Here is the wintry and dark domain, in other words, the realm of death.

The Mawangdui Banner: The Climactic Celestial Moment

The top section of the banner shows the climax or the grand finale of a narrative thrust that extends visually all the way up from the bottom. The capping finale dramatises the return to the origin of the cosmos and of life, of going back in time to the very beginning when both were created.

The Chinese creation myth starts with a state of *hundun* 混沌 , nondifferentiation or chaos. Some early sources visualise this state as a sack. In a fable by Zhuangzi, the sacklike *hundun* was examined and people tried to poke a hole in it, but to no avail. *Hundun* is pure and simple, a thing without holes. Indeed, we are presented here with a sack (fig. 12). Early texts speak of the *hundun*, the initial state of the universe, of splitting into yin and yang energies, which crystallise into the primordial figures of Fuxi and Nüwa. Together they created mankind. Here they are shown as half-human and half-serpent figures, an attribute of the first people, as portrayed in early Chinese sources.[4]

This is how the early Chinese visualisation of death plays with time and space. To return to the origin of life means to join the distant procreators of mankind. Together, the newly dead and the distant forebears inhabit the same space. Since they belong to different time frames, distant and recent times, the fact that they inhabit the same space means time difference is erased. No longer does the distinction between distant past and recent past obtain. Here is a timeless space. This is not a condition that creative imagination would be content with. For the painter to put the best face on death, there is naturally the urge to make it look better, to enliven this otherwise deadly state of affairs.

One solution is to frame the afterlife scenario as a *lived* eternity. The way to convey the idea of eternity is to incorporate the sun and the moon, since they are presumed to be eternal. Early Chinese longing for longevity and eternity is typically expressed as 'being at one with the sun and moon' or to keep company with them.[5] There is more: once the sun and moon are integrated, they bring life, as they are the ultimate generators and sources of yang (sun) and yin (moon) energies.

The painting deals with what may seem an oxymoron: how can one acknowledge death and affirm life at the same time? This is challenging considering that early Chinese imagination defines death as scattered breath, which means that one loses one's bodily autonomy. Consequently, in the successive stages of the deceased's breath, his image only appears in the fruitful autumn phase. Before that point, his post-mortem breath had yet to achieve human form; after that point, heading into another wintry phase (death), he again loses human shape and resumes the unformed breath state. The painting honestly acknowledges this state of affairs. Nowhere in the celestial scene is the humanoid form of the deceased son of the marquis ever found.

The top scene is emphatically accompanied by celestial music, evoked by eight capped cranes (fig. 13). Celestial music in the Western Han parlance is often framed as an orchestrated harmony of 'Eight Winds'. Moreover, the central government of the Western Han gave considerable attention to music, to the extent that a music department or office was set up to regulate and promote courtly music as part of ritual and ceremony. The capped cranes recall the capped officers, signalling the presence of music reverberating across the vast celestial space.

Fig. 11 Final wintry phase or heaven. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

Fig. 12 Sack with a pair of fish. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

The banner thus depicts a whole cycle of life-to-death transition (fig. 7). The process is presented in positive terms. The newly dead condition is likened to a deep-sea domain or a moment in the dead of winter (fig. 8). Through yin and yang energies, life is reconceived. It goes through the seasonal cycle, leading to another dark, wintry phase (fig. 11). But this phase is spatialised and visualised as a fantastic celestial spectacle with intoning music. A series of vessels powers this entire process, which starts with a *hu* vessel in the water (fig. 8), and ends with a sack in the sky (fig. 12), to the tune of eight cranes signalling celestial music (fig. 13). Throughout, the paired dragons—the bearers of breath—guide the process along.

The Life-Death Cycle: The Xinzheng *Hu*

The second-century BC painting must be a culmination of a long tradition. How far back does this script go? We might be surprised. The script is intimated on the crane-crowned *hu* from Xinzheng, Henan, which is by all standards a magnificent artwork (fig. 14). It is a supreme example of enlivening an inanimate artefact. To make the still object move seems to be the artistic intent. Modern observers, among them Jenny F. So, have taken note: 'the vessel appears disturbingly alive: the creatures at the bottom seem ready to walk away with the burden, and even the surface decoration contributes to the general feeling of bustle.'[6] Not only is the surface overrun with crawling serpentine forms and dragons, the otherwise motionless vessel is poised to move as the two scuttling felines at the foot strongly suggest. The visual drama culminates with the crane atop the petal-rimmed crown, poised to take flight.[7]

There is a method to this commotion. The mere fact of stringing a sequence of events with a pair of soaring dragons and a crane atop suggests a structural similarity to the Mawangdui tomb no. 3 garment-shaped painting. Taken by itself, there is no way of knowing what the paired dragons and the crane on the *hu* are all about. The methodical mapping of the cycle of life-to-death transformation on the Mawangdui banner provides us with a master script. The banner is a full-fledged version; the Xinzheng *hu* decoration is an abbreviated iteration.

A Progenitor: The Pi *Hu* from the Tomb of Marquis Xian of Jin

The Xinzheng *hu* is an intermediate between earlier precedents and the second-century BC culmination of a time-honoured tradition. The earliest known precedent of this pedigree is the aforementioned Pi *hu* (fig. 3) from the tomb of Marquis Xian of Jin (r. 822–812 BC). The petalled crown on the Pi *hu* clearly anticipates the Xinzheng *hu*. If anything, it is the interlacing dragons on the *hu* vessel that appear to be a fixed feature of the evolving *hu* decoration. The Pi *hu* makes an emphatic point of this. On its lid, eight dragons form an interlacing volute. If we read the story of Lady Si of Bao and the paired dragons in early sources in tandem with the Mawangdui banner, we start to grasp the import. It is not that the paired dragons *symbolise* royal power—that would await later mutations of the use of dragon images—rather, they embody the yin and yang breaths and enact the water-to-heaven transformation in a way no living creatures are capable of in the phenomenal world. The inscription on the Pi *hu* says as much: 'On this auspicious *Geng Wu* day, Marquis Pi of Jin has made this precious *hu* to give offering to the august ancestor Wenzu. May it be honoured and used for a trillion years' 唯九月初吉庚午，晉侯昕作壺尊壺，用享於文祖皇考，萬億永寶用 .

Fig. 13 Eight cranes. Detail of garment-shaped silk painting.

On the face of it, the vessel is dedicated to the ancestor. But in fact it is not so much retrospective as forward-looking. The wish that it be used in perpetuity is the real point of the vessel. One of the key messages of the Lady Si of Bao story is that a vessel can preserve dragon saliva, which can impregnate a palace woman and make her pregnant. It is a striking coincidence—or maybe not that much of a coincidence—that the main events of the dragon story are set in the ninth century BC, roughly contemporaneous with the Pi *hu* vessel.[8]

Water-to-Sky and Winter-to-Summer Transitions, Expressing a Cosmos in Flux

Much can be gained by aligning this body of materials—the Pi *hu*, the Xinzheng *hu*, the dragon story, and the Mawangdui painting. The alignment reveals not just a simplicity-to-complicity story; it highlights some prominent design features crucial to the ontology of the *hu* vessel, such as the ascension of paired dragons. The blueprint underlying such ascension is the transformative process spanning different domains. These domains can be expressed spatially either as water-to-sky or winter-to-summer. The elaboration over time of the prototype follows a cogent logic, with new additions conforming to the script. Birds join the ranks of dragons not just for dramatic effect. They are there to provide the affirmative note of the celestial realm.

It is rewarding nevertheless to track the evolution of a prototype into a full-blown form. To begin with, the continuity of motifs spanning centuries is striking. Consider the crane atop the petalled crown on the Xinzheng *hu* (fig. 14) and the array of eight cranes on the Mawangdui painting (fig. 13). Is it a coincidence that the number of petals on the crown

Fig. 14 *Fanghu* with lotus and crane.
Middle Spring and Autumn period (late 7th–6th century BC)
Unearthed in 1923 from Xinzheng city, Henan province.
Bronze; height: 118 cm
The Palace Museum, Beijing

happens to be eight? If the eight cranes on the Mawangdui painting signal the Eight Winds, is it possible that the eight petals here in relation to the crane carry a similar significance? Though we can never be certain, the narrative script underlying the Mawangdui banner gives us a better grasp of the elements in play.

There is the persistent presence of dragons and serpentine forms. The more realistic rendition of the serpentine protrusion on the Pi *hu* (fig. 3) into more stylised patterns on the Xinzheng *hu* (fig. 14) is suggestive. The decorative scheme of the Xinzheng *hu* makes a striking distinction between the full-bodied fauna (felines, horned dragons, and poised crane) and the flattened pattern of stylised geometry of interlacing coiling serpentine motifs. Such a dramatic contrast seems to visualise some time-honoured underlying premises. The full-bodied animals—the bottom felines, in-between dragons, and summit crane—mark distinct domains spanning the underworld all the way to the firmament. Meanwhile, they are by no means entities locked into static states. The breath permeating the universe is the essence enlivening all creatures. The flat pattern visualises that breath. The key point is that the cosmos is in constant flux and mutation. Different stages of the dragons' horns, below and above, register a process of growth and maturation.

A Chengdu *Hu*

Are we choosing facts and details selectively to fit our scheme? Thinking along these lines, what could we make of the paired animals beneath the low-slung midsection of the Xinzheng *hu* vessel (fig. 14)? They turn up in places where one least expects them. They appear at the foot ring of a *hu* vessel with inlaid designs, dating from ca. 500 BC, excavated in 1965 in Chengdu city, Sichuan province (fig. 15). At the outset, there appears no reason for them to be there, in a largely human-themed decorative scheme. The *hu* is covered with figural scenes, mulberry-picking, archery, music play, and battle scenes. Animal scenes appear only on the lid and at the foot ring. (Cat. no. 73, a *hu* in the Shen Zhai collection has similar decoration arranged into a fish-shaped vessel.)

The dominantly figural programme on the Chengdu *hu* has largely been taken at face value. The mulberry scene is commonly taken as evidence of sericulture, the bell-and-chime scene as a visual documentation of the courtly ritual, and, of course, the battle scene as a visual record of military campaigning. In light of this, this group of *hu* appears to be an outlier, apart from the iconographic tradition we have identified—one that starts with the coiling-dragon *hu* and ends with the Mawangdui banner. But we will see that in fact the design on the *hu* with battle scenes is every bit a part of the same *hu* decorative tradition.

The Chengdu Hu: *The Spring Scene*

The decorative scheme shows a seasonal cycle. If we start from the mouth of the vessel (discounting the lid for now), the first register features a mulberry grove scene, denoting springtime activities. An archery scene reinforces this impression. What makes the archery scene on this register distinct is that the action is framed in an architectural setting. This lends a courtly character to the activity. Underneath, an array of five figures appears in uniform steps, all facing the mulberry scene, either with outstretched arms or carrying bows. Beneath these five figures appears a tripod cauldron, or *ding* vessel. How do all these add up—mulberry, archery, and the cauldron? A passage describing the spring activity from the *Annals of Lü Buwei* may provide a clue:

> In this month [the second month of spring], the swallows return. On the day they arrive the Great Penned-Animal Sacrifice is offered to the High Matchmaker. The Son of Heaven goes in person. The queen and royal ladies lead the nine royal concubines. There those with whom the Son of Heaven had congress are treated with great courtesy, with bow cases being placed about their waists, and bows and arrows conferred on them before the altar to the High Matchmaker.[9]

Fig. 15 Drawing of decoration of the Chengdu *hu*
Early Warring States period (5th century BC)
Excavated in 1965 from Chengdu city, Sichuan province.
Bronze; height 39.9 cm
Sichuan Provincial Museum

This explains the first register. To begin with, it accounts for the presence of the *ding* vessel, which is used to contain the meat of sacrificial animals (oxen, sheep, or pigs), known as the 'Great-Penned-Animal Sacrifice' (*tailao* 太牢), for ritual offering. The 'High Matchmaker', to whom the offering is made, is the fertility-conferring deity residing in natural environs. The springtime ritual of praying to the High Matchmaker therefore takes place in the suburbs. The location also makes the ritual known as a suburban offering. The mulberry scene is commonly the prototypical setting for this suburban ritual because of its strong association with fertility.

Similar decoration is found on another *hu*, in the Shanghai Museum (fig. 16), where the bow-toting figure is made an integral part of the mulberry scene. The passage also calls our attention to the conferral of 'bows and arrows' to palace ladies. For a

Fig. 16 Drawing of decoration of the Shanghai *hu*
Early Warring States period (5th century BC)
Bronze; height 34.2 cm
Shanghai Museum

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nobleman to practise archery or perform archery ritual connoted insemination—'shooting the essence' (sperm). That the ritual instruction makes the royal ladies the recipients of bows and arrows drives the point home. The mulberry and archery ritual combine to establish the first register as a springtime scene.

The Chengdu Hu*: The Summer Scene*

Moving up, we see the lid overrun with animal images. There is a pattern. The animals come either in pairs, judging from their equal sizes, or in a parent-cub relationship. In other words, they are either mating or nurturing. The animal scene on the Shanghai *hu* contains some suggestive details. Human figures with swords interweave among the animals (fig. 15). The *Annals of Lü Buwei* contains the following instruction with regard to prescribed summertime activities for government agencies: 'Pregnant mares should be separated out into their own herd, and fiery stallions should be tied up, and the regulations concerning horses should be published.'[10] The sword-bearing human figures on the Shanghai *hu* lid are thus government officers performing their summer duties, sorting out the pregnant mares—shown here with a flower pod to suggest pregnancy. They also wrestle with the 'fiery stallions'. So the lid scene pertains to summer.

The Chengdu Hu*: The Winter Scene*

A pattern emerges. The first register establishes a spring scene; and the lid, summer. Accordingly we should expect autumn and winter scenes. Following the vertical symmetry (animals appear both at the top and the bottom), let us turn to the bottom scene. Keeping in mind the abyss/winter association, we should expect the allocation of a winter scene to the bottom ring, occupied by a set of paired animals in heart-shaped enclosures (fig. 15). Since the monthly ordinance in the *Annals of Lü Buwei* has informed the spring and summer scenes on the *hu* vessel, we can presume that the monthly ordinance amounts to a master script the designer draws on. In winter, we read from the *Annals*, 'nothing that has been buried or stored should be uncovered ... all is kept properly sealed' to prevent 'the ethers of the Earth' from leaking out. Moreover, it is the time when 'tigers begin to pair'.[11] This accounts for the paired animals bottled up at the bottom. The monthly ordinance further stipulates the preparation of the sacrificial animals in anticipation of 'the offerings made to Venerated Heaven and the Supreme Sovereign, and those made at the altars of soil and grain'.[12] This explains the ring of bustling activities above the bottled-up paired tigers (fig. 15).

The Chengdu Hu*: The Autumn Scene*

The spring, summer, and winter scenes are accounted for; what about the autumn scene? At the outset, the military campaign (fig. 15) above the winter scene seems incongruous in the scheme thus far consistently governed by the theme of seasonal cycle. In fact, it falls in line just as snugly. Again, the monthly ordinance provides us with the officially sanctified autumn activity:

> The Son of Heaven then mandates that his generals and commanders should select men and sharpen weapons, choose and drill those of distinction and merit, and give their entire trust only to men of achievement, thereby correcting every immorality. He orders the interrogation and punishment of the oppressive and insolent, thereby making it plainly evident who should be cherished and who despised, and rendering obedient those in distant quarters.[13]

The Chengdu Hu*: The Middle Register*

So we have covered the entire seasonal cycle. The first register and the lid spell spring and summer; the third register and the bottom ring signify autumn and winter. The only register on the *hu* left unaccounted for is the middle register. Closer inspection reveals that the scenes on the register are symmetrically divided into spring *and* autumn scenes. The open-air archery scene pertains to spring. The courtly music scene of beating chime-stones and bells is a standard autumn scene (fig. 15). Thus the entire decorative scheme can be plotted out top-down as the following:

summer (top)–spring–spring/autumn–autumn–winter (bottom)

What is striking about this scheme is that it does not follow the natural seasonal cycle. Instead, it is presented as bipolar scheme: the spring-to-summer sequence goes up, and the autumn-to-winter transition goes down. How do we account for this oddity? The scheme actually makes perfect sense in view of the dynamic early Chinese cosmological model. The model sets up its perimeters as heaven above and earth below. But the heavenly and earthly domains are not conceived as set spatial entities. Rather the cosmos is animated by the constant movement of heavenly and earthly breaths or *qi* energies. How can the decorative design present two different cosmic tendencies? One involves the two breaths going separate ways; the other has them converge. One pertains to winter, the other to spring. In the tenth month of the lunar calendar, or early winter, the heavenly and earthly breaths part ways: 'The cosmic ethers of Heaven have ascended on high, while those of earth have descended here below. Communication between Heaven and Earth has ceased, and everything is closed. Winter has matured.'[14] The springtime picture is the opposite. It is the moment when the heavenly and earthly breaths meet.[15] These diametrically opposed pictures cannot be on the same page. That is the challenge for the *hu* decoration designer, and the design accomplishes the seemingly impossible.

The solution is to arrange the seasonal cycle as one in which the heavenly and earthly breaths part ways. That would suggest early winter. Meanwhile, it creates a register in which the heavenly and earthly breaths—the ascending spring and descending autumn energies—converge on the same register or occupy the same wavelength. In other words, the vessel simultaneously holds two competing natural courses. One is the separation of heavenly and earthly breaths, and the other is their union. One is associated with early winter and the other early spring. One pertains to the process of dying, the other the process of coming alive. Apparently favouring life, the design presents the first sequence in order to show that the second sequence can undo the first.

There is another way of describing this complex process. It is actually misleading to characterise the two energies respectively as 'heavenly' and 'earthly'. Doing so risks locking them into distinct and unchanging identities. A better way of describing the early Chinese cosmological model is to see the 'heavenly' and 'earthly' breaths as capable of switching identities. The ascending breath starts off as the 'earthly' breath following the deadly winter. But as it ascends it gathers heavenly attributes. Once it reaches the summit and has nowhere else to go except down, it turns into the 'heavenly' breath going down. So a more apt way of describing this process of change is to speak of the two energies respectively as 'growing yang' and 'growing yin'. The growing yang breath starts off in spring as an energy embedded in a largely yin force. As it ascends, the yang portion grows until it hits the summit.

Fig. 17 ***Hu***
Early Warring States period (5th century BC)
Bronze; height 36.5 cm
Shen Zhai Collection, cat. no. 71

The Shen Zhai Collection *Hu*, Cat. No. 71

The same logic underscores the *hu* in the Shen Zhai Collection (fig. 17, cat. no. 71). Its figural scenes are arrayed in five registers, three above and two below, with a band of abstract patterns intervening in the middle. The bottom register features cranes stomping on snakes, evoking a watery domain conceptually related to winter. Above the water-cum-winter scene is a spring scene, signalled by archery and the dancing Goumang (a bird-headed humanoid figure). Thus the two lower registers suggest the earthly energy ascending, after having hit rock bottom. The top register presents the summer phase marked by the total triumph of the yang-birds devouring and trampling on the snakes. The third register, a graphic scene of hunting beasts and slaughtering oxen for sacrificial purposes, points to late autumn, when such activities are sanctioned in accordance with the monthly ordinance: 'In this month [the third month of autumn], during the hunt the Son of Heaven teaches the use of the five weapons ... proceeds with the hunt. He orders the host for the sacrifices to sacrifice animals to the four quarters.'[16] The second register, between the summer register above and the autumn scene below, most likely suggests a late summer state marked by the prominent humanoid figure with horns, feathers, and avian features, a 'naked' state associated with the season.

The overall design telegraphs the meeting of two energy forces. The top three registers, in a summer-to-autumn sequence, shows the descending heavenly ether, having reached the summit; the bottom two registers, in a winter-to-spring order, present the earthly energy going up. The two energies meet in the middle. Despite the growing yang and growing yin energies moving apart, the centre expresses their union. That union creates life, counteracting the natural cycle otherwise irrevocably bound for wintry death.

The decorative scheme on the *hu* vessel thereby puts on full display its intended symbolic function. The vessel is a cosmic model with its heavenly top and earthly bottom. The model is, however, a dynamic one, with the heavenly and earthly breaths constantly ascending and descending. The central process that the artifice enables is the meeting of the heavenly and earthly breaths, or, the growing yin and growing yang breaths.

The *Hu* Vessel and the Life-Affirming Union of Yin and Yang Energies

This union of growing yin and growing yang energies is a master process underlying the design of numerous Chinese artefacts. By Han times, this scenario is typically presented as the meeting of the White Tiger (west; autumn; growing yin energy) with the Green Dragon (east; spring; growing yang energy). In the Mawangdui garment-shaped painting, the growing yin and growing yang breaths are represented by the two dragons soaring from the bottom watery/wintry domain into the high (fig. 7). The painting enjoys the freedom of imaginary space allowed for by this medium. Yet *hu* vessels, depicted on the painting, fuel the transformative process. The cosmic transition from death to life to afterlife unfolds in a *hu* vessel, which is a cosmos unto itself.

This cosmic transformation, brought about by the synergy of the two cosmic breaths (growing yin and growing yang) in the form of two dragons, is the key event the *hu* vessel enables. Everything falls into place if we recall the story of the two dragons in the Zhou court and the appearance of the two dragons on the Pi *hu* vessel. Even though the Warring States period *hu* with battle scenes presents an altogether different iconographic scheme, we should not be deceived by the surface figural variation. In spite of their iconographic variations, underneath they all present the same master scenario—the urge to yoke together the growing yin and growing yang breaths to create life. To the extent that the *hu* vessel encapsulates and simulates the cosmos, it is a microcosmic laboratory that brings together life-affirming energies.

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1 The *hu* in the Shen Zhai Collection (fig. 5, cat. no. 63) is comparable to the Zeng Zhong You Fu *hu* 曾仲斿父壺 in design. See Fong Wen 1980, pp. 237, 248, cat. no. 62.

2 Nienhauser 1994, pp. 73–4.

3 *Zhouli*, pp. 481–2.

4 *Liezi*, p. 62.

5 Ma Jixing 1992, p. 972.

6 So 1980a, p. 257.

7 Ibid, pp. 256--7.

8 *Guoyu*, p. 576.

9 Knoblock and Riegel 2000, p. 78.

10 Ibid, p. 135.

11 Ibid, pp. 241–2.

12 Ibid, p. 260.

13 Ibid, p. 173.

14 Ibid, p. 225.

15 'Why must the wedding take place in the spring? Spring is the time when heaven and earth communicate, all beings start to be born, and the yin and yang copulate' *Baihutong*, cited in Ouyang Xun, comp. *Yiwen leiju* , p. 41.

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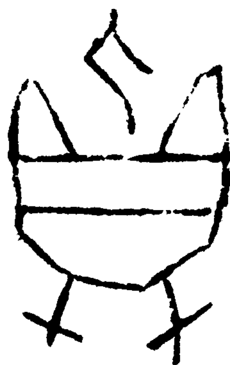
DIALOGUE with THE ANCIENTS

100 Bronzes of the Shang, Zhou, and Han Dynasties

The Shen Zhai Collection



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