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Thinking through Comparisons

Edited by

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Humans and Gods: The Theme of Self-Divinization in Early China and Early Greece

MICHAEL PUETT

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses what practicing the theoretical life means:

Such a life would be superior to the human level. For someone will live it not insofar as he is a human being, but insofar as he has some divine element in him. . . . Hence if understanding is something divine in comparison with a human being, so also will the life that expresses understanding be divine in comparison with human life. We ought not follow the proverb-writers, and “think human, since you are human.”¹

A philosopher is one who has risen above the human and become, at least in part, divine. This claim came out of traditions of self-divinization beginning at least a full century earlier, and, as is clear by the polemic at the end of Aristotle’s statement, was made in opposition to numerous other views at the time concerning the nature of divinities and humans and the proper demarcation that should exist between the two. Beginning roughly in the fourth century B.C.E., a similar debate concerning the potential of humans to achieve divine powers developed in China as well. In this chapter, I discuss the emergence of these self-divinization movements from a historical and comparative perspective: why did such notions arise in these two cultures and how should a comparative study account for them?

My reason for discussing the theme of self-divinization is that it will help us to think through some of the ways in which these two cultures can be conceptualized from a comparative perspective. In particular, it should raise questions about previous attempts to analyze Greece

and China through a model that emphasizes the contrastive cosmologies of the two cultures. I argue that the material at hand should force us to rethink such a framework.

A full comparative study of this topic, however, lies well beyond the bounds of this chapter. A proper treatment would involve not only analyses of several texts, but also a reconstruction of much of the religious background in both cultures against which such claims were being made.² For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, I mention only a few specific examples—sufficient to make my argument, but not detailed enough to lose my readers. For Greece I focus in particular on Empedocles, and for China I discuss the rise of self-cultivation literature during the Warring States period. I begin, however, with a brief discussion of some of the secondary literature on cosmology in Greece and China.

Secondary Scholarship on Comparative Cosmology

One of the commonly made contrasts between Greece and China concerns the purported differences in the respective cosmologies of the two cultures. In contrast to the so-called tragic cosmology of the Greeks, wherein an inherently agonistic relationship was seen to exist between humans and gods, scholars often emphasize the degree to which early Chinese cosmology emphasized continuity between the human and divine realms. As Fredrick Mote has famously argued: "The genuine Chinese cosmology is that of organismic process, meaning that all the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process."³ If such a cosmology was indeed an assumption in early China, or, as Mote calls it, an accepted "worldview,"⁴ then it would follow that both humans and spirits would be conceptualized as part of a larger monistic system. As Mote has further argued: "This is an essentially naturalistic conception, in that it describes 'spirit' as having the same qualities and as being subject to the same processes as all other aspects of nature."⁵ In contrast to the West, in other words, humans and gods were seen as inherently linked.

K. C. Chang has expanded on these ideas, arguing that this difference in the cosmologies of the West and China derives from a different orientation toward shamanism:

Men and gods, animate and inanimate things, the living and dead members of the clans—all of these beings existed in the ancient Chinese world

within the same universe, but that universe was layered and subdivided. The most important divisions were the Heaven and the Earth, and the ancient Chinese could be seen as particularly preoccupied with the Heaven and Earth intercommunication. The shamans—religious personnel equipped with the power to fly across the different layers of the universe with the help of the animals and a whole range of rituals and paraphernalia—were chiefly responsible for the Heaven-Earth communication.⁶

Under such an interpretation, shamans are seen as intermediaries who maintain a proper link between the human and divine realms, and in China, Chang argues, shamans occupied positions of great importance.⁷

For Chang, the contrast between China and the West occurred because the Near East had what Chang calls a “breakout” from this earlier, shamanistic past, whereas China (along with Mesoamerican civilizations) maintained its shamanistic culture.⁸ Thus, the West developed, among other things, “a cosmology that emphasized the separate existence of gods. . . ,”⁹ whereas Chinese culture was built on an assumption of an “interlinked world continuum.”¹⁰

According to these interpretations by Mote and Chang, China and Greece (indeed as well as the whole West) are distinguished by having radically different cosmologies—the latter being defined in terms of a disjunction between man and god, and the latter assuming an inherent correlation and linkage. As I argue later, some of the material concerning the theme of self-divinization might force us to rethink such a framework.

I first turn to a brief discussion of Empedocles, a figure whose writings initially might appear to confirm the arguments of Mote and Chang. As someone who explicitly opposes a tragic cosmology, Empedocles might at first seem best interpreted as an exception that proves the rule. But I argue that, when placed in a historical and comparative perspective, other interpretations may emerge.

Humans and Gods in Early Greece

The following quote is from Empedocles on the golden age of man: “They did not have Ares as god or Kydoimos, nor king Zeus nor Kronos nor Poseidon but queen Kypris. Her they propitiated with holy images and painted animal figures, with perfumes of subtle fragrance and offerings of distilled myrrh and sweet-smelling frankincense, and pouring on the earth libations of golden honey. Their altar was not drenched by the slaughter of bulls, but this was the greatest defilement among men—to

bereave of life and eat noble limbs."¹¹ Empedocles is explicitly attacking the religious practices of his day, practices that are based on sacrificial offerings to a pantheon of anthropomorphic deities. Prior to this world, Empedocles argues, was a period ruled over by Kypris, or Love.

Such an opposition to the sacrificial practice, indeed, is a recurring theme in Empedocles: "Will you not cease from the din of slaughter? Do you not see that you are devouring one another because of your careless way of thinking?"¹² Why Empedocles would attribute sacrifice to a "careless way of thinking" is a topic to which I return. Here, it is important first to delineate why precisely an opposition to the world of anthropomorphic deities and to sacrificial practice is so important to Empedocles.

As is well known, the importance of maintaining a strict separation between humans and gods is a recurrent theme in early Greek writings, as is the injunction to avoid the hubris of trying to get too close to divinity.¹³ The theme also plays an important role in the Hesiodic cosmology and view of sacrifice that Empedocles wishes to criticize, so a brief discussion of what Empedocles is reacting against may be worthwhile.

In the *Theogony*, Hesiod explicated sacrificial practice through the well-known narrative of the transgressions of Prometheus. According to Hesiod, Prometheus killed an ox and split it into two portions. The first portion consisted of the animal's meat, which the Titan wrapped in the stomach of the ox to make it look unappetizing, whereas the second portion consisted of the bones, which were hidden in the fat. Prometheus allowed Zeus to pick the portion he wanted, hoping to trick the god into choosing the worse of the two.¹⁴ The original offering of bones was thus a trick by the Titan. As a punishment for this ruse, Zeus prevented man from having fire with which to cook. Prometheus then stole fire and gave it to man, an act that again incurred the wrath of Zeus¹⁵ and prompted him to send down woman.¹⁶ This theft of fire, insofar as it gave humanity the ability to cook, thus won him autonomy from the gods, but at the cost of a tragic separation from divinity.

Sacrifice, under such a narrative, recapitulates the crime of Prometheus, serving both as a repetition of the ruse against the gods and as a reminder of the degree to which humanity is still submitted to them: whereas the gods, not dependent on meat, can be satisfied with bones, man, who must eat to survive, has to take the edible portion—knowing that the satisfaction of his hunger is only temporary. The division of the offerings in the sacrifice thus reveals, under Hesiod's reading, the separation of man and divinity, a separation resulting from the fact that man can only gain his autonomy from the gods by transgressing their power

and thereby resigning himself to an ultimately doomed life of labor and hardship. The sacrifice is thus an offering to the gods, but one that underscores, rather than alleviates, the radical disparity between humanity and divinity.

In direct contrast to such a tragic cosmology, in which humans and gods are posed as radically separate, Empedocles proposes a naturalistic system in which the two are presented as inherently linked. To begin with, Empedocles redefines the deities as themselves the roots underlying all that exists: "Hear first the four roots of all things: bright Zeus and life-bringing Hera and Aidoneus and Nestis, whose tears are the source of mortal streams."¹⁷ The gods, in such a formulation, are not anthropomorphic deities separate from the world yet in direct control over it; on the contrary, they are the elemental bases of the world. Empedocles elsewhere defines these roots as fire, water, earth, and air,¹⁸ and argues that they pervade everything: "All these are equal and of like age, but each has a different prerogative, and its particular character, and they prevail in turn as the time comes round. . . . These are the only real things, but as they run through each other they become different objects at different times, yet they are throughout forever the same."¹⁹

Indeed, Empedocles defines the cosmic process itself in terms of the interaction of these roots: "Under strife they have different forms and are all separate, but they come together in love and are desired by one another. From them comes all that was and is and will be hereafter—trees have sprung from them, and men and women, and animals and birds and water-nourished fish, and long-lived gods too, highest in honor. For these are the only real things, and as they run through each other they assume different shapes, for the mixing interchanges them."²⁰ In such a cosmology, everything—from gods to humans to objects—is composed of the same roots. Not only are humans and gods not separated, they are in fact inherently connected. Indeed, differentiated things exist at all only because of the strife that breaks the proper harmony of love.

Hence Empedocles's contempt for sacrifice: sacrifice incorrectly assumes a division between animals, humans, and gods—wherein animals are sacrificed by humans for the sake of the gods—when in fact all three of these are linked. In contrast to a theistic understanding of the universe, Empedocles calls for a "divine understanding": "Happy the man who has gained the wealth of divine understanding, wretched he who cherishes an unenlightened opinion about the gods."²¹

And here we arrive at the crucial points. Having used a set of statements concerning the nature of all that exists to deny the Hesiodic claim

concerning the relationships between humans and gods, Empedocles here makes an argument about the potential of thought, or divine understanding. A hint of what Empedocles means by this is found in another set of fragments: "For he is not equipped with a human head on a body, [two branches do not spring from his back,] he has no feet, no swift knees, no shaggy genitals, but he is mind alone, holy and inexpressible, darting through the whole cosmos with swift thoughts."²² Such a description of mind alone is quite close in language to another fragment that describes the sphere of Love: "There the swift limbs of the sun are not distinguished. . . . In this way it is held fast in the close covering of harmony, a rounded sphere, rejoicing in encircling stillness."²³ And another that appears to describe either Love itself or the state achieved by a wise man: "For two branches do not spring from his back, he has no feet, no swift knees, no organs of reproduction, but he is equal to himself in every direction, without any beginning or end, a rounded sphere, rejoicing in encircling stillness."²⁴

The implication of these fragments appears to be as follows: Love is the perfect state of harmony of the four roots, and thought itself is the perfect harmony of the roots as well. Divinity, therefore, is located in harmony itself, not in anthropomorphic deities. Accordingly, divinity is fully achievable by humans through understanding, which is itself the divine harmony of Love.

These ideas are expanded in Empedocles's discussion of daimons. As he argues in the *Katharmoi*, a *daimon* is one in whom the four roots are properly combined, and one, therefore, ". . . to whom life long-lasting is apportioned."²⁵ But, through error, the daimons, like everything else, fall into strife: ". . . he wanders from the blessed ones for three times countless years, being born throughout the time as all kinds of mortal forms, exchanging one hard way of life for another. For the force of fire pursues him into sea, and sea spits him out onto earth's surface, earth casts him into the rays of blazing sun, and sun into the eddies of air; one takes him from another, and all abhor him."²⁶ Empedocles has discovered himself to be one such fallen *daimon*: "I too am now one of these, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, having put my trust in raving strife."²⁷ For this reason, he is now a mortal man, just as before he has been various other mortal creatures: "For before now I have been at some time boy and girl, bush, bird, and a mute fish in the sea."²⁸ Empedocles himself, then, is striving to reach the divine understanding of the *daimon*, just as all humans should do.

Humans, therefore, are simply a transitory form; but the thought of humans can be divine. And this understanding grants the practitioner the ability to control the strife of the roots: "You will learn remedies for ills and help against old age, since for you alone shall I accomplish all these things. You will check the force of tireless winds, which sweep over land and destroy fields with their blasts; and again, if you wish, you will restore compensating breezes. After black rain you will bring dry weather in season for men, and too after summer dryness you will bring tree-nourishing showers (which live in air), and you will lead from Hades the life-force of a dead man."²⁹

Overall, then, in direct opposition to the claims of a separation between humans and gods, Empedocles has proposed a cosmology in which a basic substrate unites all things. Moreover, he has defined thought as divine, and as thus possessing potential control over natural processes themselves. As such, he has denied the theistic conceptions on which the religious activities of his day were based. For Empedocles, sacrifice is wrong because it involves a destruction of what is inherently linked and is unnecessary anyway because humans, properly cultivated, can attain powers over natural phenomena on their own.

Empedocles was thus calling for a rejection of the religious practices of the day and was putting in their place a new regimen in which followers would no longer supplicate to divinities but would rather, ultimately, become divine. Such a regimen, in short, was being proposed in full opposition to the polis culture of the day.

These attempts to propose methods of self-divinization in opposition to the polis culture became increasingly important over the course of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. Plato, for one, appropriated and reworked such ideas in his formulation of the academy, an institution in which disciples would be trained in a rigorous process of self-cultivation. As he argues in the *Timaeus*, explicitly appealing to a vocabulary of the *daimon*: "As concerning the most sovereign form of soul in us we must conceive that heaven has given it to each man as a guiding *daimon*—that part which we say dwells in the summit of our body and lifts us from earth toward our celestial affinity, like a plant whose roots are not in earth, but in the heavens."³⁰ Plato's ultimate call, of course, was for those who thus undergo such self-cultivation to lead the state.³¹

It is beyond the bounds of this chapter to trace the ways that such ideas were reformulated by, among others, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists. Suffice it to say here that these claims of self-divinization became a crucial

aspect of early Greek philosophy, which in part explains the uneasy relation that philosophers had with the polis culture of their day. Although I have only been able to sketch it briefly in this chapter, the issues I have been discussing became part of a significant debate that stretched over the next several centuries of Greek history.

Self-Divinization in Early China

In turning to the material from China, one might at first think that we would be confronted with a culture that witnessed no comparable debate concerning gods and humans. If the views Mote and Chang quoted earlier were accurate, then one would hardly expect a debate about the relationship between humans and spirits to emerge in early China. On the contrary, one would expect that spirits, like humans, would be conceptualized as part of a larger monistic system. In other words, the type of cosmological system that Empedocles was presenting in opposition to the dominant views of the time in early Greece would be, if Mote and Chang are right, a starting assumption in early China.

Indeed, one could even go further and argue that some of what we have just seen in Empedocles might seem to support K.C. Chang's views concerning shamanism. As is well known, one of the enduring debates in the study of Empedocles concerns the origin of his ideas. Most intriguing from the point of view of Chang's thesis is E. R. Dodds's famous argument that Empedocles was influenced by shamanistic currents from Central Asia.³² If this were true, it would imply that a link might indeed exist between monistic notions of the cosmos and shamanism, and it would mean that monism only came into Greece at the point when shamanism entered through diffusion: If Chinese civilization, due to its maintenance of a shamanistic substratum, possessed a monistic cosmology as an assumption, Greece developed such an idea only when it became influenced from outside by shamanism.

I should admit here that Dodds's thesis concerning a shamanistic influence on Empedocles does not persuade me. No evidence of such a contact exists, nor does any evidence that ideas such as those found in Empedocles existed among the Scythians at all.³³ More important, I would argue that Empedocles was developing cosmological theories for specific historical reasons, and herein lies their importance. Before discussing this point further, however, let us return to the issue of cosmology in China.

In what follows, I question a framework that attempts to contrast Greece and China according to their opposed cosmologies. More explicitly, I argue in this section that notions of monism were not assumptions at all in early China, but were rather, as in Greece, consciously formulated ideas designed to critique a set of very different beliefs and practices dominant at the time. The fact that such cosmological notions later (during the Eastern Han) became dominant at the imperial court should not mislead us into thinking them to have been common assumptions in the preimperial periods. Instead, these cosmological notions grew out of a debate quite comparable to that which developed in early Greece. This is not to say, of course, that the positions that were taken within the two cultures were identical, nor is it to say that the course of the debates was similar. My argument is rather that the debates are comparable in terms of the motivating concerns and tensions. The interesting issue from a comparative perspective then lies in discovering how and why the debates worked out historically in the two cultures.

To lay the groundwork for this argument, let me begin by sketching some of the religious and political contexts against which cosmological theories developed in early China. The first point to emphasize is the degree to which, just as in early Greece, a highly theistic vision of the world was pervasive in elite religious activities. Although Mote admits that "It is true that in the vulgarized versions of this rather philosophical conception [of naturalism], spirits sometimes began to resemble 'gods.'"³⁴ I will argue that such notions were not vulgarizations of a more pervasive naturalistic orientation at all. On the contrary, theism was fully dominant from at least the time of the late Shang, and it continued well into the early Han. For example, Emperor Wen (180–157 B.C.E.) of the Han, after noting the growing prosperity of the empire, is quoted as stating: "With my lack of virtue, how could I take credit for this? It is a gift of the god (*di*) and all the spirits (*shen*)."³⁵ He thereupon increased the sacrifices to the spirits.³⁶ Such statements are telling of early Han political rhetoric: the way one would claim to be a humble ruler was by giving credit for one's successes to the gods and spirits and by proclaiming one's indebtedness to them through such things as copious sacrifices, ritual obeisance, and so forth.

Crucial to this cosmology was the notion that natural phenomena were seen as being governed by distinct, active deities. To give one example among many, I will refer here to the "Ji fa" chapter of the *Liji*: "The mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills that can send out clouds, make wind and rain, and cause to appear strange phenomena are called

spirits (*shen*). He who possesses all under heaven sacrifices to the hundred spirits.”³⁷ Natural phenomena, the text is claiming, are under the direct control of particular spirits, to whom continual sacrifices must therefore be given.

And because natural phenomena were directly controlled by spirits—and potentially capricious spirits at that—a great deal of religious activity during the Warring States and early Han periods accordingly concerned attempts to chart out which spirits controlled which domain of power, to understand the intentions of such spirits through divination, to mollify them with sacrifices, and, when they inhabit a person, to exorcise them and drive them back to their proper domain.

It is in this context, for example, that we should understand claims such as those found in the *Zuozhuan* that one of the civilizing acts of Yu consisted of casting cauldrons with images of the spirits,³⁸ an act that allowed the people to “know the spirits. . . .”³⁹

Similarly, the “Wuzang shanjing” section of the *Shanhaijing* consists of an exhaustive description of, among other things, the various spirits of each mountain and the particular powers that they possess. A typical passage reads: “As for the appearance of their [i.e., these mountains’] spirits, they all have a human body and sheep horns. In sacrifices to them, use one sheep and, for grain offerings, use millet. These are the spirits. When they appear, the wind and rainwater make destruction.”⁴⁰ These particular spirits, then, have a tendency to cause destructive wind and rain, but the text explains the forms of sacrifices that can be given to keep them from doing so.

Considering the dominance of such notions, that a motif commonly found in early writings concerns the proper relations that ritual specialists should maintain with the spirits is not surprising. A clear example of this can be found in the “Chu yu, xia” chapter of the *Guoyu*. The passage provides a critique of its own age by looking back to an earlier period when ritual specialists behaved properly:

In antiquity, the people and the spirits did not mix. Those among the people whose essence was bright and never divided, and who were able to be proper, reverential, correct, and rectified, their wisdom was capable of comparing the propriety of what was above and what was below; their sagacity was able to glorify what was distant and display what was bright; their clear-sightedness was able to glorify and illuminate it; their keen hearing was able to listen and discern it. As such, the illuminated spirits descended to them. As regards males, they were called *xi* (male ritual specialists); as regards women, they were called *wu* (female ritual

specialists). They were employed in order to regulate the placement, positions, precedence, and ranks of the spirits, and to prepare the sacrificial victims, vessels, and seasonal garments. . . . The people and spirits had different tasks. These were respected and not transgressed. Thus, the spirits sent them good harvests, and the people used the produce to sacrifice. Disasters did not come.⁴¹

The ritual specialists were rectified, and spirits and humans were thus kept to their proper tasks: the spirits granted strong harvests, and the humans in return used the produce to sacrifice to the spirits. The argument of the text is that, if ritual specialists properly maintain their appropriate tasks, then the worlds of humans and spirits will be correctly demarcated and no disasters will occur.

I quote this passage in particular because it is one that has often been cited in discussions of shamanism in China.⁴² But I would follow David Keightley in arguing that the passage in fact has little to do with shamanism.⁴³ Indeed, far from referring to a mixing of humans and spirits, the text is explicitly oriented toward defining humans and spirits as, normatively, separate. Like Pindar, this is a text arguing against any attempt to weaken the boundary between humans and spirits.

All of these various movements and texts that I have sketched thus far are fully committed to a theistic vision. They are not “vulgarizations” of the accepted cosmology of the time. On the contrary, I argue that it is precisely against such common theistic beliefs and practices that the sorts of cosmological theories Mote discussed were developed. In the pages that follow, I trace a series of attempts to promulgate a monistic cosmology in early China in which humans and spirits were defined as being of the same substance and in which practices such as divination and sacrifice were critiqued. I argue that the rising emphasis on notions of *qi*, on claims that the universe consists of spontaneous processes, and on practices of self-cultivation occurred in part out of attempts by specific figures to bypass and replace the ritual specialists employed in the courts of the day. Such figures were attempting to claim that they alone possessed the methods and techniques that would allow for a proper means of guiding human action. Although the specifics of the claims thus made differed from that in early Greece, I demonstrate that the general attempt to use cosmological claims and self-divinization arguments to critique the practices and authorities of the time is indeed quite comparable.

A clear example of such an attempt can be seen in the “*Neiye*,” chapter 49 of the *Guanzi*.⁴⁴ The chapter builds its argument around three

interrelated terms: *qi*, essence (*jing*), and spirit (*shen*). *Qi*, which I here leave untranslated, is the energy and substance of all things. In its most refined form, *qi* becomes essence (*jing*): "Essence is the essence of *qi*."⁴⁵ Spirit (*shen*) is then defined as a refined *qi* as well: spirit, as we shall see, becomes another name in this text for essential *qi*.

The text opens up with one of its more provocative renderings of this argument: "As for the essence (*jing*) of all things, it is this that is life. Below it generates the five grains; above it becomes the arrayed stars. Floating between Heaven and Earth, we call it ghosts and spirits; stored within one's chest, we call it a sage."⁴⁶ Essence is the force of life, generating both the growth processes on earth and the stars in the heavens. What we call spirits is in fact the essence floating between Heaven and Earth, and what we call a sage is simply he who has such essence within. Human sages, in other words, contain within themselves the same substance found in spirits. >

The text then details precisely how a human can become a sage. The goal is to cultivate oneself such that one will draw more essence into one's heart. One must remain still and correct:

Heaven values correctness; earth values levelness; man values calmness and stillness. Spring, autumn, winter, and summer are the seasons of Heaven. Mountains, hills, streams, and valleys are the branches of the earth. Happiness, anger, taking, and giving are the schemes of man. For this reason, the sage alters with the seasons but is not transformed, follows things but is not changed, and is capable of being correct and still. As such, he is capable of being settled. If he has a settled heart within, ears and eyes that are distinct of hearing and sight, and four limbs that are durable and strong, then he can be the resting place of the essence.⁴⁷

If one can remain correct and still, and not be transformed by such things as the changes of Heavenly seasons, the shifts in the earthly landscape, and the schemes of other humans, then one can have a settled heart and ultimately become a resting place for essence.

At times, the text explicitly refers to this essence as spirit:

There is a spirit that of itself resides within the body, at times leaving, at times entering. No one is able to contemplate it. If you lose it, there will be disorder; if you obtain it there will be order. Carefully clean its resting place, and the essence will of its own enter. Refine your thoughts and contemplate it; make tranquil your memories and bring it to order. Be reverent, generous, dignified, and respectful, and the essence will come and settle. Obtain it and do not dispense with it. Your ears and eyes will never go astray, and your heart will have no other designs.⁴⁸

Each person, therefore, has a spirit (i.e., refined *qi*) within his own body. The goal of self-cultivation is then to keep this spirit within oneself.

The consequence of such cultivation is that one will become a sage, and thus be able to avoid disasters and harm:

When the essence exists, it gives life of itself. On the outside, all will be settled and flourishing. Internally, one can store it so that it acts as the source of a fountain. How vast! When harmonious and tranquil, it acts as the depths of the *qi*. If the depths do not dry up, the nine apertures will thereupon penetrate. They are thereby able to exhaust Heaven and Earth and cover the four seas. If within one has no delusions, then outside there will be no disasters. If the heart is complete within, the form will be complete on the outside. One will not encounter Heavenly disasters nor meet with the injuries of others. This person we call the sage.⁴⁹

Indeed, the text argues, self-cultivation allows the sage to gain the powers of the spirits and to do so without resorting to the arts of the religious specialists of the day:

When awareness of *qi* is obtained, all under Heaven will submit; when the awareness of the mind is stabilized, all under Heaven will listen. Concentrate the *qi* as if a spirit, and the myriad things will all reside within. Can you concentrate? Can you unify? Can you not engage in crackmaking and milfoil divination and yet understand auspiciousness and inauspiciousness? Can you stop? Can you reach an end? Can you not seek from others and obtain it in yourself? Think about it, think about it, and think about it again. If you think about it but do not penetrate, the ghosts and spirits will penetrate it. This is not due to the power of the ghosts and spirits; it is due to the ultimate point of essential *qi*.⁵⁰

The argument here rests on the claim that the universe is composed of *qi* and that change is a product of the alterations and transformations of this *qi*. *Shen*, the most highly refined form of *qi*, is able to understand the proper movements of the universe, and because humans have this within themselves as well, they ultimately can attain such an understanding on their own. The claim, in other words, is that substances exist within oneself that, properly cultivated, can gain one the powers of a spirit. Thus, self-cultivation allows one to understand auspiciousness and inauspiciousness without resorting to the arts of divination (scapulimancy and milfoil divination). And such an understanding is attained not because the ghosts and spirits have given one information or because self-cultivation allows one to ascertain the intentions of particular spirits, but rather because one has attained sufficient refinement on one's own to understand the workings of the universe.

In contextualizing the "Neiye," A. C. Graham correctly compares the text with the *Guoyu* passage quoted earlier.⁵¹ Graham, who accepts a shamanistic reading of the *Guoyu* passage, states the following in reference to the "Neiye": "The shamanic origin of the exercise is plain. The point of it however is not to become a medium for the gods or for deceased ancestors. This is a programme for self-perfection, as usual addressed primarily to the rulers."⁵²

I mentioned that I would question this shamanistic reading of the *Guoyu* passage. Such a questioning, however, only renders the issue at hand all the more intriguing. As I argued, the point of the *Guoyu* passage was not to discuss the shamanistic linking of man and spirit but rather to emphasize the importance of maintaining a distinction between the two: properly trained ritual specialists, the text argued, would keep the worlds of man and spirit separate, and such a separation was presented as necessary for an orderly world to exist. The "Neiye" chapter, in direct contrast to this, is claiming precisely that humans and spirits potentially possess the same essential *qi* and that humans can thus through cultivation achieve the powers of spirits. If the point of the *Guoyu* passage was to maintain proper ritual separation between humans and spirits, the point of the "Neiye" is to deny the distinction. And if the *Guoyu* passage was claiming that disasters can be avoided only through such a separation, the "Neiye" is claiming that disasters can be avoided precisely by the sage who crosses such boundaries.

These claims, that sagehood is obtainable on one's own and that sagehood grants one an intuitive understanding of the universe comparable to what spirits themselves possess, were to become increasingly common in the latter part of the Warring States and early Han periods. For example, the "Xin shu, xia," chapter 37 of the *Guanzi*, is modeled directly on the "Neiye."⁵³ The text defines spirit as that which is so refined as to be immeasurable by ordinary human experience, and yet which understands everything: "As for the spirit, no one knows its ultimate point. It brilliantly knows all under Heaven and penetrates the four ultimate points."⁵⁴ The text then quotes from the "Neiye" passage (discussed earlier) concerning divination. Intriguingly, however, the text leaves out the passage that one should try to concentrate "like a spirit" (*ru shen*): "Can you concentrate? Can you unify? Can you not engage in crackmaking or milfoil divination and yet understand auspiciousness and inauspiciousness? Can you stop? Can you reach an end? Can you not ask others and obtain it in yourself? Therefore it is said: 'If you think about it and think about it but do not obtain it, the ghosts and spirits will teach

it. This is not due to the power of ghosts and spirits; it is due to the ultimate point of the essential *qi*.”⁵⁵

The passage concludes by defining the sage in precisely the same terms used to describe the spirit: “He brilliantly knows all under Heaven and penetrates the four ultimate points.”⁵⁶ The claims are essentially those of the “*Neiye*,” but the authors here are taking the additional step of implying that one can in fact become a spirit.

Another chapter of the *Guanzi*, the “*Xin shu, shang*,” makes the point explicit. The text at one point makes a claim clearly reminiscent of the “*Neiye*”: “If one empties one’s desires, the spirit will enter and dwell. If in clearing one does not cleanse fully, the spirit will leave.”⁵⁷ It then provides a commentary to this statement:

That which regulates man is essence. If you discard desires, then you will be all-embracing. If you are all-embracing, then you will be still. If you are still, you will be of essence. If you are of essence, you will establish yourself alone. If you are alone, you will be illuminated. If you are illuminated, you will be a spirit. The spirit is the most valued. Thus, if a hallway is not opened and cleared, then a valued person would not reside in it. Therefore it is said: “If you do not cleanse, the spirit will not remain.”⁵⁸

Utilizing the same cosmology and same terminology as the “*Neiye*,” the authors of the “*Xin shu, shang*” make the full claim that humans can in fact become spirits.

Like Empedocles, then, the authors of these texts present a cosmological model that redefines both humanity and spirits such that humans can obtain divine powers. By thus claiming to possess a series of techniques that would allow the practitioner to obtain the powers of spirits without resorting to the arts of divination patronized at the courts, the authors are making an argument for their own authority: instead of trying to divine the intentions of the spirits and to control them through sacrifices, the authors of the texts are claiming the ability of the practitioner to divinize himself.

Over the course of the Western Han, various figures appropriated and radically reworked these ideas. By the Eastern Han, cosmological ideas of monism (now separated from any emphasis on self-divinization) ultimately came to dominance at the court. For my purposes herein, tracing precisely how and why such a shift occurred is not necessary.⁵⁹ What I wish to emphasize here is the degree to which these ideas were initially promulgated by figures outside of the major courts, attempting to replace the ritual specialists by denying the theistic underpinnings of

their practices. Far from being an assumption emerging from a shamanistic substratum, monistic cosmology in China—just as in Greece—was a rhetoric of critique.

Comparative Considerations

We have sketched the emergence in both early Greece and China of claims of self-divinization. In both cultures, these claims emerged within religious and political contexts dominated by theistic beliefs and practices. And, I have argued, one of the main reasons that the emphasis on a monistic cosmology came to prominence was precisely that it was seen as an effective response to such beliefs and practices. Naturalistic cosmology, far from being an assumption of the times, was rather, initially, a form of critique, based in an attempt to bypass the dominant modes of orientation toward the world of spirits. The advocates of these practices began articulating new definitions of the nature of spirits, the nature of humanity, and the relation between the two. More precisely, these articulations involved attempts to reduce the distinction between humans and spirits and to argue that through proper practices one can attain divine powers.

In other words, in China just as in Greece, monism was a later development, and in both cultures monistic cosmologies were formulated in opposition to the dominant practices supported by the states. The attempt to contrast these two cultures in terms of the claim that one assumed a tragic disjunction between humans and gods that the other, due to its shamanistic substratum, never possessed, is unconvincing. Such a contrast requires taking particular texts out of context and reading them as assumptions of an entire culture. I have suggested instead that some of the texts often pointed to in such contrastive frameworks were written within debates that were in fact quite similar in Greece and China. Certainly the “*Neiye*” offers a cosmology completely different than, say, the *Theogony*, but it is much less different than what one finds in Empedocles. And both Empedocles and the “*Neiye*,” I have argued, involved attempts to formulate a cosmological model with self-divinization claims to question the modes of authority dominant at the time.

Of course, significant differences in the monistic cosmologies came to be proposed in these two cultures. Just in terms of the examples discussed in this chapter, Empedocles was dealing with numerous ideas—such as reincarnation—not to be found in the early Chinese material.

But the more significant difference lies rather in the social claims of the figures in question. In the case of Empedocles, the emphasis of self-divinization was part of an attempt to form an alternate way of life and ultimately an alternate community. Although I have not, for lack of room, discussed the later history of such self-divinization claims in early Greece, suffice it to say that such appeals tended to be made by those groups with oppositional relationships to the polis. In early China, such appeals were also made by figures who opposed the political and religious structures of the time, but they were rarely used for claims to build alternate communities; on the contrary, many such appeals were made in the form of advice to kings—calling on rulers to follow their practices and advice as opposed to those of the divinatory and sacrificial specialists dominant at court. Indeed, not until the Eastern Han were such self-divinization practices (in very different form) appropriated and used by religious Daoist communities to formulate the basis of an alternate political order. Although I will not pursue it here, the interesting comparison to be made concerns the very different ways that such claims were debated, the different groups that made appeals to self-divinization practices, and the historical consequences of the ways in which such debates played out.

The comparative approach that I advocate, therefore, is one in which the analyst attempts first to locate similar tensions and concerns in the cultures in question and then to trace the varying responses to those tensions and concerns. Such an approach has two advantages. First, it allows for an avoidance of the tendency in comparative frameworks to deny the individual and to deny differences that exist within cultures. If the focus is on discovering common tensions, rather than contrasting different assumptions, then once one has isolated the political and cultural tensions at hand, studying the ways in which particular individuals in particular contexts tried to deal with the perceived problems is possible. The comparison then involves the study of attempts by individuals in other cultures to confront similar political and cultural concerns. Second, by making explicit the tensions with which figures were grappling, analyzing particular statements as reflective of an attempt at solving a given problem, and not as necessarily indicative of assumptions of the larger culture as a whole, becomes possible. It thereby helps the analyst to avoid the tendency, for example, to read a given statement concerning the correlation of humans and spirits made in a single text as necessarily reflective of the beliefs of the time.

In this chapter, I have suggested that at least one of the ideas that is often pointed to in comparative studies—the contrast between the

“tragic” cosmology of early Greece and the “continuous” cosmology of early China—is based on specific claims that were made within larger political and cultural conflicts. Instead of focusing on a claimed difference between tragic versus continuous cosmologies in Greece and China respectively, the approach I advocate here is a contextual and historical one: to read the varying cosmological statements as claims being made in particular contexts and to ask why such claims were being made and who such claims were being made against. Many of the interesting comparative issues then lie in discovering the ways that these conflicts and debates unfolded historically. Although space here permits me only to sketch these histories, I hope this chapter gives a glimpse of the sort of approach I advocate.

Notes

1. X.7, 1177b26–34. Trans. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, in *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), pp. 441–42.

2. These issues are discussed in detail in my book *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

3. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), p. 15.

4. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p. 23.

5. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p. 17.

6. Chang Kwang-chih, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 4th ed. (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 415.

7. The argument is developed in full in Chang’s *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

8. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, p. 421.

9. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, p. 421.

10. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, p. 418.

11. Diels fragment 128. Trans. M. R. Wright, *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1981), #118, p. 282.

12. Fragment 136. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #122, p. 285.

13. See for example Pindar, *Isthmians* 5, vol. 11–16.

14. *Theogony*, 539–57.

15. 558–70.

16. 571–616. The woman is identified in the *Works and Days* as Pandora (81).

17. Fragment 6. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #7, p. 164.

18. Fragment 17. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #8, p. 166.
19. Fragment 17. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #8, p. 167.
20. Fragment 21. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #14, p. 177.
21. Fragment 132. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #95, p. 252.
22. Fragment 133. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #97, p. 253.
23. Fragment 27. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #21, p. 187.
24. Fragments 29–28. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #22, p. 188.
25. Fragment 115. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #107, p. 270.
26. Fragment 115. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #107, p. 270.
27. Fragment 115. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #107, p. 270.
28. Fragment 117. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #108, p. 275.
29. Fragment 111. Trans. Wright, *Empedocles*, #101, p. 261.
30. *Timaeus* 90a. Trans. Francis Cornford in his *Plato's Timaeus* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 114.
31. The argument is laid out most clearly in the *Republic*.
32. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956). For a recent defense of Dodds's position, see Peter Kingsley, "Greeks, Shamans, and Magi," *Studia Iranica* 23 (1994): 187–97.
33. For a strong critique of Dodds's position, see Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 34–53. See also Ioan Culianu, *Psychonadia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).
34. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p. 17.
35. Shiji, "Fengshan shu," Zhonghua shuju edition, 28.1381.
36. Shiji, "Fengshan shu," 28.1381.
37. Liji zhengyi, "Ji fa," Sibu beiyao edition, 46.3a. Hereafter cited as SBBY.
38. Chunqiu Zuozhaun zhengyi, Xuan, 3, SBBY, 21.8b–9a.
39. Chunqiu Zuozhaun zhengyi, Xuan, 3, 21.9a.
40. Shanhaijing jianshu, "Dongshan jing," SBBY, 4.7b.
41. Guoyu, "Chu yu, xia," SBBY, 18.1a–2a.
42. Chang refers to this as "the most important textual reference to shamanism in ancient China. . . ." See his *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, p. 45.
43. David Keightley, "Shamanism, Death, and the Ancestors: Religious Mediation in Neolithic and Shang China (ca. 5000–1000 B.C.)," *Asiatische Studien* 52 (1998): 821–24. Keightley's article as a whole contains a lengthy critique of the shamanism hypothesis for Neolithic and Bronze Age China. The particular *Guoyu* passage in question here is discussed in detail in Keightley's unpublished "Shamanism in *Guoyu*? A Tale of the *xi* and *wu*" (Regional Seminar, Center for Chinese Studies, Berkeley, Calif., 1989).
44. For excellent discussions of the "Neiye," see Harold Roth, "Psychology and Self-Cultivation in Early Taoistic Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51 (1991): 611–20, and A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Debate in Ancient China* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), pp.

100–105. Also extremely helpful is Qiu Xigui, “Jixia Daojia jingshen shuo de yanjiu,” in Chen Guying, ed., *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 2 (1992): 167–92.

45. Guanzi, “Neiye,” SBBY, 16.2b.

46. Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.1a.

47. Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.2b.

48. Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.3a–3b.

49. Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.4a.

50. Guanzi, “Neiye,” 16.4b–5a.

51. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, pp. 100–101.

52. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 104.

53. For an excellent discussion of the relation between the “Neiye” and the “Xin shu, xia,” see Harold Roth, “Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Taoism,” *Early China* 19 (1994): 1–46. See also W. Allyn Rickett, trans., *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, vol. 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 56–58, 65–70.

54. Guanzi, “Xin shu, xia,” 13.5b–6a.

55. Guanzi, “Xin shu, xia,” 13.6a–6b.

56. Guanzi, “Xin shu, xia,” 13.7b.

57. Guanzi, “Xin shu, shang,” 13.1b.

58. Guanzi, “Xin shu, shang,” 13.3a–3b.

59. I provide the full history of this process in my forthcoming *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*.