

THE *TANG-KI* AS COSMIC ACTOR

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Taoist worship is a religious practice that has no liturgical canon, but instead emphasis is placed upon the performances of rituals. *Tang-ki* ceremonies are ‘magical’ in that it is believed that the performance of ritual-theatre can move heaven and earth, bestowing peace and wellbeing upon man. *Tang-ki* performance employs a sacred choreography that recreates the magic of legendary Chinese emperor Yu the Great.

Gods Teach, Man Saves:

The performance of sacred theatre is central to the practice of Religious Taoism which is an action-based worship pivoted about human agency. According to Taoist cosmology, man stands between heaven and earth. Gods and immortals teach worthy men the secret magic of the universe, but it is not the knowledge of the gods, but man putting the knowledge into action, that effects salvation. The secrets of the universe are often imparted by the gods through esoteric maps that are found in the natural universe, for example on the shell of a tortoise, or in the pattern of star constellations. These formulae are always action plans that must be performed in bodily movement which constitute ritual-theatre.

The magic of the movement of a *tang-ki*'s body in space:

The main feature of a *tang-ki* performance is a dance in which body movements are orientated with respect to the five directions, while adhering to the principles of *yin* and *yang*. This choreography, as in the case of the dance of the worshipper described above, is prescribed through the spatial placement of altars and god images. A plan of a typical *tang-ki* ritual stage is given in fig. 1.

In Singapore, the ritual stage of the *tang-ki* is often a rectangular area covered by tent erected upon an open space such as a field or a carpark. Under the tent, altars would be set up; each on several tiers covered over with red (the colour of blood) or yellow (the imperial colour) cloth. The three altars at north would be demarcated, each from the other by canvas curtains. The altar to the Heavenly Emperor is placed south and rises in several tiers as befitting the deity's exalted position as divine ruler. The altar to the Heavenly Emperor is never directly set upon the ground.

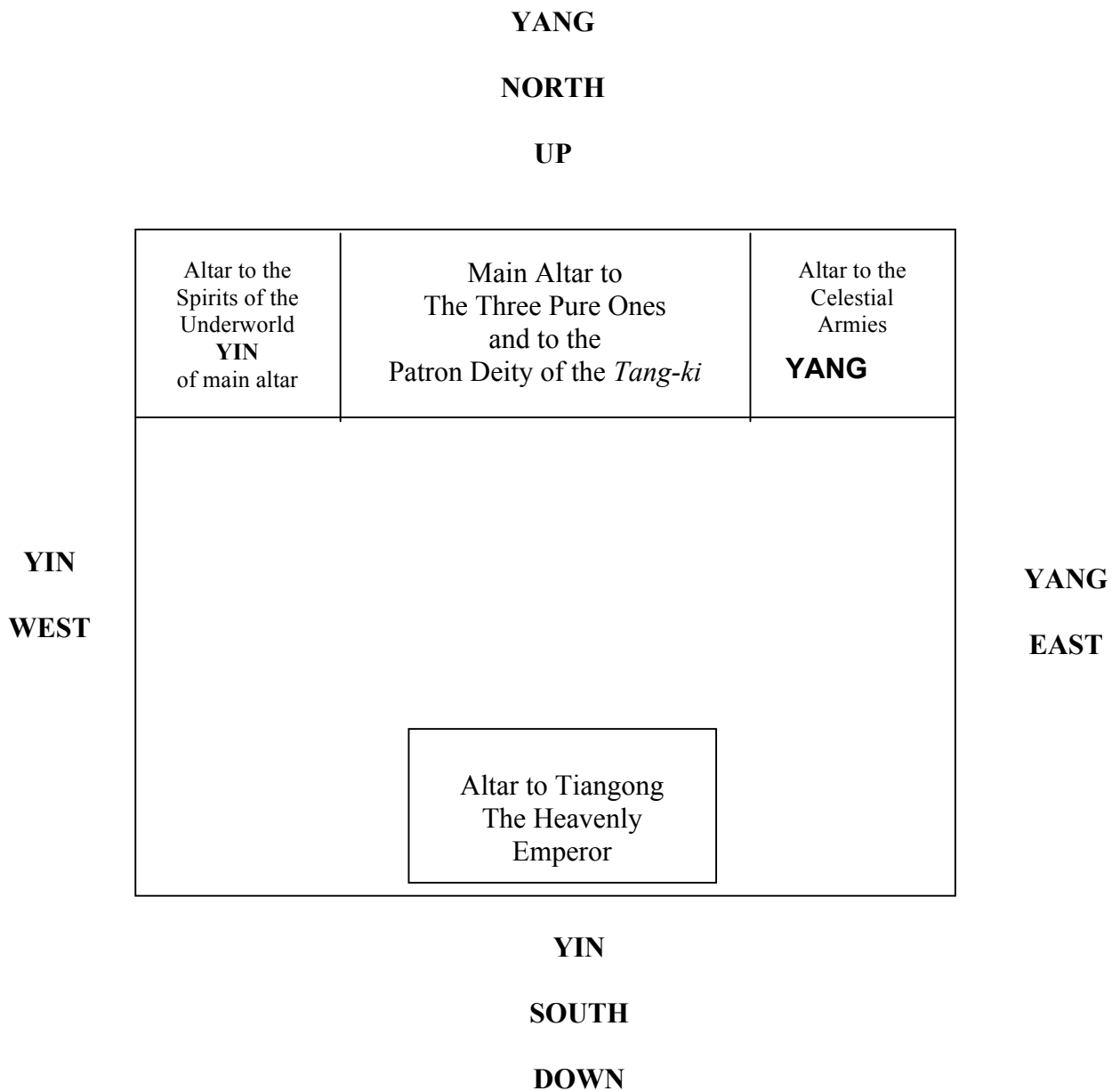
Ritual performed to *yin-yang* configuration:

Worshippers are always placed in the *yin* position, which is facing north, to the altars of the main divinities, the Celestial Armies and even the Spirits of the Underworld. When they pray to the Heavenly Emperor, the worshippers face south towards the sun of his Heaven, which is the direction they would have taken when praying to the Heavenly Emperor in front of a temple. Thus by means of the spatial arrangements of altar and god images, worshippers are directed to ‘dance’ their prayers following prescribed *yin* and

yang orientations, and in doing so they perform rituals which send out cosmic-ordering vibrations.

Fig. 1

A FLOOR PLAN OF A ‘TYPICAL’ *TANG-KI* RITUAL STAGE



What then of the *tang-ki*? Would he be in the place of the ordinary worshipper, after all he dances on the very floor that his followers walk upon? The answer is a resolute ‘no’ since the *tang-ki* is the incarnation of the patron deity whose spirit is imbued

in his images which occupy the place of honour at the central altar. While as god image the spirit of the *tang-ki* sits upon the main altar, the god is also present simultaneously in the incarnation of *tang-ki*, who as a god in flesh, dances in the midst of his people. This performance is usually held roughly in the centre of the ritual space, which is considered the most powerful co-ordinate of the five directions.

The magical Dances of the Yu:

There are two magical Dances of Yu. One dance was said to follow the *Lo Shu*, a magic square. The second dance is said to constitute the ‘pacing’ of the zig-zag map of the Seven Stars Constellation.

In both manifestations, the rituals are efficacious because they comprise sacred dances following patterns set out in cosmological maps handed down to man by the gods and immortals. We turn first to the *Lo Shu*.

The Dance of the *Lo Shu*:

The gods gave Yu the Great a magic map so that he could perform a ritual dance to save the country from flood. This map was the *Lo Shu*, a 3x3 magic square that was set out in the natural cracks on the shell of a turtle that Yu the Great saw emerging from the Lo River.

The *Lo Shu* sets out the Eight Trigrams about a central number, and all numbers connect in a pattern of zig-zag lines (figs. 2.1 and 2.2). The map of the Eight Trigrams that Yu the Great received was that of the Posterior Heavens.

Fig. 2.1 **EIGHT TRIGRAM *LO SHU* DISCOVERED BY YU THE GREAT ON THE BACK OF A TURTLE**

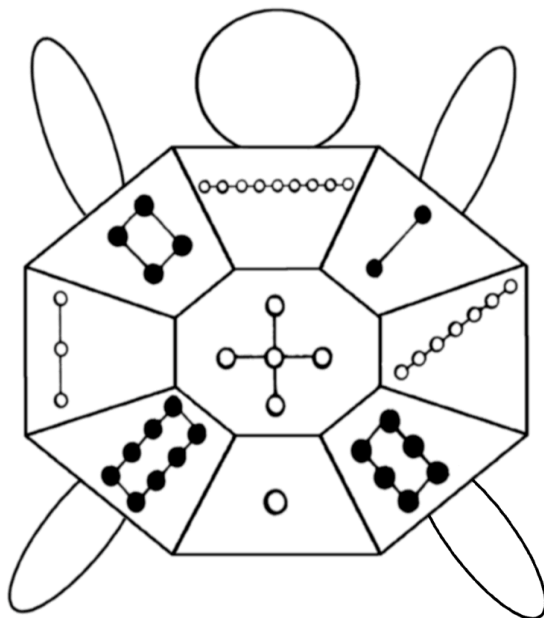
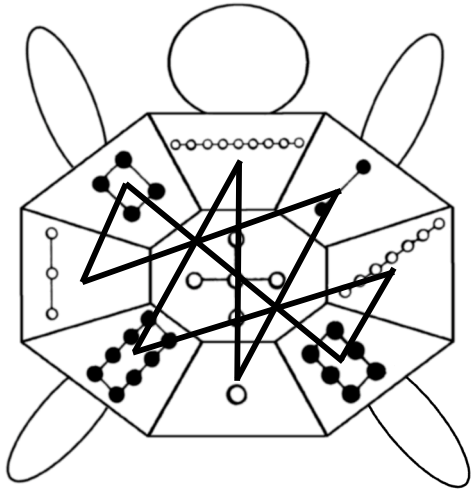


Fig. 2.2 **EIGHT TRIGRAM *LO SHU* WITH ZIG-ZAG GLYPH**



The map of the Eight Trigrams of the Posterior Heavens is an esoteric code that arranges the five elements of metal, wood, fire, water and earth, in a destructive order. Thus the metal axe cuts down the tree, fire causes metal to bend and melt in the foundry, water puts out fire, earth built into a dam contains water, and wood triumphs over earth from which it emerges as a tree.

There is also the map of the Eight Trigrams of Anterior Heavens. This secret map was discovered by the mythical emperor of the East, Fuxi (伏羲 twenty-ninth century BC), imprinted on the back of a dragon-like horse that rose out of the Meng River. The map of the Eight Trigrams of the Anterior Heavens is a symmetrical arrangement, where opposite trigrams have their *yin* and *yang* lines interchanged. In the eight trigrams of Fuxi, the five elements are joined in blissful marriage of pairs that bring about life; thus wood gives birth to fire, fire makes ash which is the earth. Earth gives birth to metal as ore, and metal brings forth water (or so it seemed to the ancients who observed condensation upon metal mirrors). Finally water causes the trees to grow.

Thus the eight trigrams of Fuxi represent the constancy of an eternal cycle of life; it is not a map of change. The map of the Eight Trigrams of the Anterior Heavens is a symbol of the perfect state of order in the universe and as such, this symbol is often featured on talismans. The map of the Eight Trigrams of the Anterior Heavens is the emblem on the *tang-ki*'s black flag. A favourite charm to be hung over a door is a 'demon-reflecting' mirror set into a wooden frame carved with the motif of the Eight Trigrams of the Anterior Heavens.

While the Eight Trigrams of the Anterior Heavens represents constancy, the Eight Trigrams of the Posterior Heavens is an action plan. This map sets out the circuit of destruction, and knowing this secret, Yu the Great caused creation to arise out of destruction with his dance of hops. Yu the Great's performance was an act of exorcism that drove away the flood demons so that the waters receded and the world was saved.



Plate 1: An altar incorporating several symbols. The notion of the eight trigrams is linked to the zig-zag emblem of star worship. Rice represents the *Way of the Five Bushels of Rice* teachings there are the other symbolic props of an abacus, a pair of scissors, a ruler and a lamp. Photo: Author

The Pacing of the Seven Stars Constellation:

Star worship had always featured in the animistic lore of the tribal people. In Han times the idea of zig-zag choreography of the *Lo Shu* was incorporated into a dance called the *Pacing of the Seven Stars Constellation* (*qi xing gang bu* 七星罡步) or the *Pacing of the Big Dipper* (*bu gang ta dou* 步罡踏斗). It was held that a line drawn connecting the Seven Stars of the Big Dipper also set out a sacred zig-zag pattern, this was an esoteric code that would unlock thunder magic (*lei bu* 雷部) (plate 1).

The Seven Stars (七 星) Constellation:

The Big Dipper, (the tail of the Great Bear or Ursa Major) is referred to in Religious Taoism as the Seven Stars or the Bushel constellation. The cluster of stars commands a pre-eminent place in Taoist ritual symbology because it is believed to be the locus of *yin* and *yang* forces and therefore the controller of all order in the universe. A dipperful is a measure for dry grain, hence the alternate name for the cluster of seven stars as the Bushel Constellation (Northern Dipper *beidou* 北斗). The Bushel Constellation (also the Big Dipper and Seven Stars Constellation) is also linked through this name to the doctrines of the *Way of the Five Bushels of Rice* teachings of the Celestial Master.

The Seven Stars constellation occupies a volume of space containing the sun, although the sun is not a member of the group. It moves around the pole star which is thus regarded by the Chinese as the pivot of the sky around which all heavenly bodies revolve. The pole star is the home of Doumu, the Bushel Mother.

In fact the Bushel Constellation according to Chinese lore has a northern and southern correspondence. These are arguably the Big Dipper in Ursa Major, and the Little Dipper in Ursa Minor, but a metaphysical explanation is put forward; that the Northern Bushel (*Beidou* 北斗) is the material substance of the spiritual essence of the Southern Bushel (*Nandou* 南斗). The Big Dipper is as such the gate to the heavens through which dead souls must pass to be reborn as bright spirits.

The Seven Stars Constellation is also said to be the chariot of the Heavenly Emperor. The constellation has also been poetically named the Revolving Pearls of Heaven and the Balance of Jasper. The latter sense of a balance, as a measuring instrument, perhaps refers to the belief that a person's life span is set between the Southern Bushel star, as ruler of birth, and the Northern Bushel star as ruler of death. This notion of life being measured out also accounts for the term 'bushel' in the name of the constellation. The bushel is the Chinese measure of rice, and since rice is the staff of life, the bushel is the measure of life. For this reason, offerings to the Seven Stars are always found on the *tang-ki's* altar. This takes the form of a wooden pail of rice (five bushels) in which symbolic items including; an abacus, a pair of scissors, a ruler and a lamp are placed. The lamp represents *yang* light, the abacus and ruler measures the length of life that is cut by the scissors (plate 1).

Although a line connecting the seven stars draws an image of a dipper, in Taoist iconography, the constellation is often represented by a zig-zag pattern. Doumu is the patron spirit of the powerful Taoist Five Thunder Method of Magic, so that it is believed that dancing following the zig-zag pattern of the Bushel stars creates powerful magic, which opens the Gate of Life and effects cures. *Tang-kis* thus dance the Seven Stars choreography in initiation ceremonies and self-mortification rituals (see chapters five and six). The *tang-ki* ritual sword has a double-edged blade engraved with the zig-zag pattern of the constellation and is believed to be imbued with the very spirit of the star group, so that the sword is worshipped as a deity in its own right. The zig-zag star motif is one of the twelve imperial insignias and can be seen printed on all sorts of talismans.

Esoteric element of the *tang-ki* performance:

The *tang-ki's* stagger and hop:

The Singaporean *tang-ki* employs the magical Yu Step (*Yubu* 禹步) to perform his dance of worship. The Yu Step of the *tang-ki* comprises a side-to-side stagger and a hopping on one leg.

The staggered walk takes the *tang-ki* forward while moving side to side in a zig-zag choreography. The *tang-ki* steps out with one foot (say the right foot) and then moves

his left foot forward touching the toes of this foot against the heel of the right without any transfer of weight. The left foot then steps out, when the right foot is brought forward up to it. The choreography of the staggered Yu Step was formalised as early as the fourth-century in the *Baopuzi* (抱朴子), a document on Taoist magic.

The stagger has been said to follow the zig-zag dance of Yu the Great choreographed following the criss-crossing lines on the *Lo Shu*. Another explanation for the stagger is that it is done in imitation of the limp of Yu the Great. It is said that Yu the Great danced the *Lo Shu* for thirteen years, by which time he was left with a permanent limp. The link of the stagger and the self-sacrificing emperor *wang* (王) is clear in the ancient ideograph for *wang* (尪), cripples who performed barefoot with bare backs exposed to the sun in rain-making rituals. The *tang-ki*'s stagger recalls the limp of his divine ancestor Yu the Great.

There are three propositions to account for the hop. 1) It is said to imitate the gait of the injured Yu the Great. 2) The hopping step was performed by Yu the Great who imitated birds in his dance on the *Lo Shu*. 3) The hop has been argued as representing the leap of a snake as it strikes. The snake is the totem animal of the ancient Yao and Yu the Great married a Yao woman. Yu's name incorporates the radical for snake. The snake suggestion also takes in the stagger as following the slithering of a snake.

Thus the *tang-ki*'s staggering-hopping dance recreates the magic of Yu the Great.