

Water, Earth and Fire – the Symbols of the Han Dynasty

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Between the inception of the Ch'in^[1] empire in 221 B.C. and the restoration of the Han dynasty in A.D. 25, the concept of imperial sovereignty underwent considerable change; religious issues had entered into questions that had hitherto been largely subject to material considerations; and claims to rule with legitimacy had become dependent on establishing links with spiritual powers. In the initial stages, the right to govern a Chinese empire was claimed by virtue of practical success, which had been witnessed in the elimination of rivals and the establishment of an authority that was acknowledged throughout the land. By the time of Wang Mang^[2] and the emperors of Eastern Han, the claim to exercise legitimate rule had been linked directly with the superhuman power of Heaven and the bestowal of its order or mandate; the theory that was to be invoked throughout China's imperial history had become accepted as orthodox.¹

This change of attitude was fully consistent with other religious and intellectual developments that affected policies of state and decisions of imperial governments. Simultaneously, philosophers and statesmen were paying considerable attention to the all important question of the choice of symbol, or cosmic element, with which the dynasty's future was linked and to which it looked for protection.² Different elements were adopted by successive governments in Ch'in and Han times; and as some confusion is evident in the minds of early Chinese writers, it is desirable to establish the sequence of symbols that were actually chosen. From the evidence which is summarized below, it appears that the symbol of Water was adopted by Ch'in and Western Han, until its replacement by Earth in 104 B.C.; that Wang Mang re-adopted Earth; and that the change to Fire took place after the accession of Kuang Wu ti^[5], first of the Eastern Han emperors. This change had already been suggested by some of the leading thinkers of the last decades of Western Han. At the same time a new principle had been recognized whereby the succession from one element to the next was governed.

One of the earliest statements which links these symbols with a particular ruler or dispensation is seen in the *Lüshih ch'un-ch'iu*^[6].³ The passage assigns the protective powers of Earth, Wood, Metal and Fire to the Yellow Emperor, the Hsiap] dynasty of Yu^[8], the Shang^[9] dynasty of T'ang^[10] and the Chou^[11] dynasty of Wen wang^[12] respectively. The text observes that Water will be the apportioned lot of the successor to Chou. It may be noted that the order in which the elements figure here is the one whereby each one overcomes or conquers its predecessor (*hsiang sheng*)^[13].⁴ This order remained unquestioned in dynastic practice until the end of the Western Han dynasty.

No less than four separate passages of the *Shi-chi*^[14] refer to the deliberate adoption of the element Water, shortly after the establishment of the Ch'in empire.⁵ Although some doubts have been cast on the authenticity of the account, the occurrence of four references, without inconsistency, argues against a theory that the incident was interpolated after the completion of the *Shih-chi*. The principal passage explains the choice of Water as following Chou's protection by Fire, and Chou's replacement by Ch'in.

There is no direct statement in the histories to the effect that the Han dynasty deliberately adopted Water, but there are several reasons why this may be inferred. In 205 B.C., before his establishment as emperor, the king of Han ordered the inauguration of worship to a fifth power, that of black, to supplement the devotions that were already being paid to the other powers of Yellow, Green, White and Red. The action may be taken as tantamount to the recognition of the Power of Water, although it is not stated that this was given preferential treatment over the other four elements,⁶ either at this juncture or after the king of Han had accepted the title of emperor in 202 B.C. However, it is clear that Water had been adopted by the Han court, early in the dynasty, from the account of two suggestions that it should be replaced by Earth. One of these originated from Chia I^[21], shortly after the accession of Wen ti^[22] in 180 B.C.;⁷ he is said to have rested his case on the plea that over twenty years had elapsed since the foundation of the dynasty, whose state of harmony warranted a change of protocol. Presumably he felt that sufficient time had passed to show that the dynastic change was permanent, and that it would be right to show a symbolical recognition of that happy state of affairs.

An identical suggestion which was made in 166 B.C. came from Kung-sun Ch'en^[23], a man of Lu^[24] who is not known to have held any office. Like the suggestion of Chia I it was rejected, but the appearance of Golden Dragons in the following year lent some support to Kung-sun Ch'en's proposal. For, gold or yellow is the colour of Earth, and the emperor relented to the point of ordering a set of new regulations for protocol. In recognition of his services Kung-sun Ch'en was appointed to be an Academician (*po-shih*)^[25], but his opponents succeeded in preventing any change of patron element from taking place.⁸ It was not until 40 years later, in 104 B.C., that the change was actually brought about, probably with the support of Ssu-ma Ch'ien^[26].⁹ At this time the strength of the Han empire had reached its highest point, before the decline in Han arms and the need for retrenchment had become apparent. The change of element, to Earth, was one of several measures which were designed to match material achievement with symbolical recognition of cosmic blessings. Han had conquered its enemies, who included not only its predecessors, Ch'in, but also those along its borders; so too must the dynasty recognize that Earth had conquered Water, the element of Ch'in.

Almost a century elapsed before the question of the appropriate dynastic element next arose. In the meantime a change had overcome the predominant attitude towards the universe, man and the state. This change is sometimes described as the victory of Confucianism, and derived partly from the philosophy of Tung

Chung-shu^[27] (c. 179 to c. 104). The practical or realistic view of the state and its purposes that had been modelled on the Ch'in empire had given place to a respect and longing for a state that was based on the ethical ideals and the less harsh dispensation that was ascribed to the kings of Chou; and in religious matters, the worship of the Five Powers (*Ti*)^[28] and other deities was giving place to that of T'ien^[29] or Heaven. Quite consistently the attitude towards the Five Elements, or Phases, also changed. A new view of the principle whereby the Five succeeded one another was witnessed in the opinions of philosophers, and put to practical effect in the hands of politicians. The change affected the choice of element by Wang Mang^[2], Kung-sun Shu^[30] and Kuang Wu ti^[5]; and it engendered the retrospective view that the appropriate element for Western Han had been neither Water nor Earth, as had been maintained, but Fire.

Hitherto it had been held that the elements succeeded one another by virtue of conquest. It was now put about, on the basis of earlier thinking, that an element rose to a position of dominance by natural growth from its predecessor (*hsiang sheng*)^[31]. The protagonists of the new opinion included formative personalities such as Liu Hsiang^[32] (79–8 B.C.) and Liu Hsin^[33] (c. 46 B.C. – A.D. 23), who observed that the true sequence should proceed from Wood to Fire, without any interloper.¹⁰ They also cited an anecdote that concerned Liu Pang^[34], before the establishment of the Han dynasty. According to the full account of this story,¹¹ Liu Pang once put a large serpent to death; at the time it was said that the serpent was the incarnation of the power of White, and that it was as an incarnation of the power of Red that Liu Pang had succeeded in killing it; and it is further related that when, some time after the incident, Liu Pang had risen to be king of Han, he made the point of according precedence to Red among the colours.

This association of Liu Pang and the protection of Red, the colour of Fire, is related in identical terms in the *Shih-chi* and the *Han-shu*. The sole corroborative statement to suggest that Western Han paid any special attention to Red is seen, rather curiously, in the record of Kung-sun Ch'en's^[23] proposal of 166 B.C.¹² Following the rejection of his proposal, the emperor made a progress to pay his respects to the Five Powers (*Ti*) at Yung^[35], and the colour Red was given precedence in the robes of the officiants at the ceremony. The absence of further corroboration has led some scholars to the conclusion that the story of Liu Pang's slaughter of the serpent was an invention of the first century B.C.¹³

In a somewhat strange incident of 5 B.C. the view was seriously put forward that the Han dynasty had reached the end of its allotted span and that its authority required renewal. The idea had indeed been propounded during the previous reign, of Ch'eng ti^[37] (33–7 B.C.), when the lack of an imperial heir had given rise to dynastic problems, political intrigues and religious controversy. The opinion which was voiced in 5 B.C. won acceptance to the point of persuading the emperor and his government of the need to effect certain changes, as a symbolical means of seeking a renewal of authority. A new regnal title was adopted, together with a new title with which the emperor was styled; and a formal change was made in the divisions of the day, for purposes of calculating time. It is evident

that those who believed that they were witnessing the end of a dynastic cycle saw that cycle in cosmic terms, and it is perhaps surprising that no direct suggestion was made for adopting a new element as patron of the dynasty. There was, however, one allusion to the growing power of Fire; the revelation that the end of the cycle was approaching was ascribed to Ch'ih ching tzu^[38], who is described as a mystic of a very advanced degree¹⁴; the term Ch'ih ching tzu may be rendered as 'The essential spirit of Red'.

The documents and procedures that attended the accession of Wang Mang^[2] as emperor of the Hsin dynasty apparently assume that the elements succeed each other naturally rather than by conquest; and they accept that Han had existed under the patronage of Fire, which was due for displacement by Earth. One of Wang Mang's own statements (6 January A.D. 9) refers specifically to the incident of 5 B.C. and its prophecy of the need for dynastic renewal.¹⁵ There is also a definite statement in the proclamation that was circulated throughout the empire in the autumn of A.D. 9¹⁶, seeking to prove how Earth had already taken the place of Fire, and how the mandate of the Han dynasty had thereby become exhausted.¹⁷ Wang Mang's choice of Earth as his patron is specified in the proclamation issued immediately after his accession, on 10 January A.D. 9.¹⁸

The duty of adopting a patron element next fell on those who sought to found imperial regimes after Wang Mang's death, i. e. Kung-sun Shu^[30] and Liu Hsiu^[40], the future Kuang Wu ti^[5]. In both cases the theory of the natural succession of the elements was accepted without demur. Kung-sun Shu declared himself emperor on the strength of the possession of territories in west China, in A.D. 25; as he regarded himself as the natural successor to Wang Mang and his element Earth, he gave out that his dynasty would thrive under Metal, the element of the west.¹⁹ Liu Hsiu, however, who chose his element in the year after his accession (i. e., in A.D. 26) based his decision on a somewhat different set of assumptions. By choosing Metal, Kung-sun Shu had accorded Wang Mang a rightful place in the sequence of dynastic authorities. When Liu Hsiu chose Fire,²⁰ he was resuming what he believed to be the appropriate element for the Han dynasty. In doing so he not only sought to unite his regime, in cosmic terms, with that of Western Han; he was also branding Wang Mang as an usurper who had never possessed a legitimate right to rule.

In two key passages of the *Han-shu* it is asserted that Han, i. e. Western Han, had served the tutelary element of Fire. One features in the historian's appreciation of Kao ti^[41]; here the statement is linked with the legitimate succession of Han from Yao^[42], who had also been blessed by Fire, and with the omen of Liu Pang's success, as seen in the story of his encounter with the serpent.²¹ The second passage occurs in Pan Piao's^[43] all important essay on the nature of kingship,²² where the same points are made. Han is also assigned to the protection of Fire in another chapter of the *Han-shu*, which is based on the writings of Liu Hsin. This is the treatise on measurements and astro-calendrical science; in accordance with the order of the natural succession of the elements, Fire is denoted as the element of Yen ti^[44] and of Yao, before the cycle had brought it round to Han.²³

An interesting statement is recorded for about A.D. 76 from Chia K'uei^[45], who was a descendant of Chia I^[21] and an enthusiastic exponent of the *Tso chuan*^[46]. He pointed out that the Liu family's claim to be descended from Yao, and the Han dynasty's consequent devotion to Red, depended solely on passages in the *Tso chuan*, there being no support for such claims from the Five Scriptures.²⁴ In a somewhat exceptional passage of the *Han-shu*, where the elements are arrayed in the order of conquest, the text is simply re-iterating the view set out in the *Lü shih ch'un-ch'iu*, according to which Fire had been the tutelary element of Chou.²⁵ A belief that Fire had been the element for Western Han was accepted by the commentator Tsan^[47], who is probably to be identified as Hsüeh Tsan^[48] (c. 350–90).²⁶

The evidence which is cited above indicates that it was a matter of no small importance to the emperors, philosophers and statesmen of Eastern Han to demonstrate that the element of Fire, thought to have watched over the fortunes of Liu Pang and his dynasty, was likewise the element to which they themselves should look for protection; and it was equally important to establish a link with the blessed Yao. These questions are of some concern to the history of state cults and religions of China, to which Professor Eichhorn has made valuable contributions. I am grateful for the opportunity to include a small note in a volume which will permanently record the debt which friends and students owe to their colleague.

The following abbreviations are used in these notes:

- HFHD H. H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, volumes 1–3, Baltimore and London, 1938–55.
- HHS *Hou-Han-shu* and *Hsü-Han-shu*^[51]; references are to Wang Hsien-ch'ien^[52], *Hou-Han-shu chi-chien*^[53], Ch'ang-sha, 1915.
- HS *Han-shu*; references are to Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Han-shu pu-chu*^[54], Ch'ang-sha, 1900.
- MH E. Chavannes, *Les mémoires historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*, Paris 1895–1905 (reprinted 1967).
- SC *Shih-chi*^[14]; references are to *Shiki kaichû kôshô*^[55]; edited by Takigawa Kametarô^[56], Tôkyô, 1932–34.
- SPPY *Ssu pu pei-yao*^[57].

- 1 For the stages whereby these changes came about, see Loewe, 'The authority of the emperors of Ch'in and Han', in the Festschrift published in honour of Professor Bünger, *Staat und Recht in Ostasien*.
- 2 I.e. one of the Five Elements, *Wu hsing*, more correctly translated as Five Phases (see John S. Major *A note on the translation of two technical terms in Chinese science: wu-hsing*^[5] and *hsiu*^[4], in *Early China*, 2 Fall 1976, pp. 1–3).
- 3 SPPY edition 13.4a.
- 4 I.e. Wood, Metal, Fire, Water, Earth. For the various orders in which the elements were arranged, see Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, Cambridge, 1956, pp. 253f.

- 5 SC 6, 23; 15, 122, 26, 9 and 26, 19; MH vol.II p.128, and vol.III pp.328 and 330. The incident is dated either in 221 or 220 B.C. For doubts regarding the authenticity of the incident, see Kurihara Tomonobu^[15], *Shin Kan shi no kenkyū*^[16] (Tōkyō, 1960) pp.45–91, and Kamada Shigeo^[17], *Shin Kan seiji seido no kenkyū*^[18] (Tōkyō, 1962) pp.42f.
- 6 SC 28, 36 (MH vol.III p.449), HS 25 A. 17a. Fujikawa Masakazu^[19], *Kan dai ni okeru reigaku no kenkyū*^[20] (Tōkyō, 1968), p.56 expresses the view that in the prevailing pre-occupation with settling the empire, the Han government was ready to accept existing protocol and practice.
- 7 SC 84, 21; HS 48.1b.
- 8 SC 10, 32 (MH vol.II, p.479); HS 25A. 19a.
- 9 SC 12, 48–9 (MH vol.III, p.515); HS 25B. 23b. For the accompanying changes, see HS 6.31a, b (HFHD vol.II, p.99), and Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London, 1974) p.31.
- 10 See Pan Ku's^[58] appreciation, HS 25B. 23b. The order of the elements by natural growth is Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water.
- 11 SC 8, 12 (MH vol.II p.331); SC 26, 35 (MH vol.III, p.448); and HS 25A. 17a.
- 12 SC 10, 33 (MH vol.II, p.480) and HS 25A. 17b.
- 13 See HFHD vol.III, p.453, note 24.1, citing Ku Chieh-kang^[36].
- 14 HS 75.31b, and Loewe, *op.cit.*, pp.278f. The term *chen jen*^[39] is sometimes rendered 'perfected adept'.
- 15 See Wang Mang's memorial to the empress dowager, of 6 January A.D. 9 (HS 99 A. 34b; HFHD vol.III p.251)
- 16 HS 99B. 9a *et seq.*, HFHD vol.III pp.288f.
- 17 HS 99B. 9b, 10b, HFHD vol.III, pp.290, 293.
- 18 HS 99A. 36a, b, HFHD vol.III pp.258–9.
- 19 HHS 13 (biog. 3) 16b.
- 20 HHS 1A. 18b.
- 21 HS IB. 36a, HFHD vol.I p.150.
- 22 HS 100A. 8a, 10b.
- 23 HS 21B. 46a, 47a, b and 72b.
- 24 HHS 36 (biog. 26). 14b, 15a.
- 25 HS 25A. 9a; for the passage from the *Lu shih ch'un-ch'iu*^[6], see note 3 above.
- 26 See note to HS IB. 26a, and Loewe, 'The orders of aristocratic rank of Han China' (*T'oung Pao* 1960 vol.XLVIII, 1–3) p.134 note 2, which cites the view of Hu Shih^[49]. For the views of an earlier commentator (Ying Shao^[50] c. 140–206), see the note to SC 8, 12–13 (MH vol.II, p.331).

- [1] 秦 [2] 王莽 [3] 五行 [4] 宿 [5] 光武帝 [6] 呂氏春秋
 [7] 夏 [8] 禹 [9] 商 [10] 湯 [11] 周 [12] 文王 [13] 相勝
 [14] 史記 [15] 栗原朋信 [16] 秦漢史の研究 [17] 鎌田重雄
 [18] 秦漢政治制度の研究 [19] 藤川正數 [20] 漢代の礼學の研究
 [21] 賈誼 [22] 文帝 [23] 公孫臣 [24] 魯 [25] 博士 [26] 司馬遷
 [27] 董仲舒 [28] 帝 [29] 天 [30] 公孫述 [31] 相生 [32] 劉向
 [33] 劉歆 [34] 劉邦 [35] [36] 顧頡剛 [37] 成帝
 [38] 赤精子 [39] 真人 [40] 劉秀 [41] 高帝 [42] 堯 [43] 班彪
 [44] 炎帝 [45] 賈逵 [46] 左傳 [47] 瓚 [48] 薛瓚 [49] 胡適
 [50] 應劭 [51] 續漢書 [52] 王先謙 [53] 後漢書集解 [54] 漢書補注
 [55] 史記會注考證 [56] 瀧川龜太郎 [57] 四部備要 [58] 班固