

Varieties of Yin and Yang in the Han: Implicit Mode and Substance Divisions in *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Daodejing*

Diogenes
2022, Vol. 64(1–2) 105–125
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DOI: 10.1177/0392192117742022
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



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Abstract

In the study of Chinese thought, the products of the Han dynasty have historically been identified as those most antithetical to Western rationalism. In many of these narratives, the commentarial tradition and systems of complementary yin and yang receive the most attention. The present work draws on Mawangdui texts (*Guan*, *Cheng*, and *Cixiong jie*), the writings of Dong Zhongshu, the *Huainanzi*, and ultimately *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Daodejing* to complexify this view. Within these examples one discovers divergent philosophies of opposites and yin and yang that confound the notion of a monolithic and solely holistic Han cosmology. Ultimately, this paper seeks to promote *Heshanggong's Commentary* as an exemplar of Eastern Han Daoist yin-yang theory that subdivides these two principles into mode and substance. Such an interpretive move explains the commentary's valorization of yin modes (non-action, weakness) but not yin substances (cold, corpses), and yang substances (spirit, essential qi, living beings) but not yang modes (action, aggression, violence). Furthermore, this approach unveils new insights about the relationship of the Dao and Heaven, the history of Daoism, and the varieties of correlative cosmologies in the Han.

Keywords

Daodejing, Heshanggong, Mawangdui, yin and yang, Han thought

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At first glance, the yin-yang conception at the heart of *Heshanggong's Commentary on the Daodejing* appears contradictory: it propounds the superiority of yin, grounded in *Daodejing* ideals, while simultaneously exalting yang, commonly favored during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE).¹ However, a

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concerted investigation of contemporary milieux and historical antecedents yields a different revelation. Beneath *Heshanggong's* seemingly paradoxical exterior, its integrated vision of yin-yang – and by extension the cosmos – represents a rich worldview built on sophisticated internal reasoning.

The *Heshanggong* is a product of its period. It teaches us much about Han Daoism and its particularly complex value system.² We will argue that said system implies a subdivision of yin and yang into “mode” and “substance.” Here “mode” refers to behavior and states of existence: yang modes involve movement, outward intent, intensity, visibility, rigidity, aggression, and violence; yin modes reflect stillness, inward focus, moderation, obscurity, adaptability, gentleness, and peacefulness. Substance indicates the full range of “matter” and “spirit” that comprises *Heshanggong's* world: yang is refined and united as with *qi*, spirit, and Heaven, while yin is dense and divided as with flesh, emotion, and Earth.

This cohesive and creative structure that underlies *Heshanggong's* philosophy resulted from its synthesis of antecedent yin-yang theories' divergent values and must be understood by examining a multiplicity of yin-yang and proto-yin-yang conceptions from the Han. Resultantly, we find the two major strains of Han yin-yang thought that *Heshanggong* incorporates into his system. The result is an ideal where the yin mode that encompasses the values of the *Daodejing* (emptiness, softness, weakness, obscurity) generates the yang substances prized in the Han (Heaven, spirit, and original *qi*). For clarity in comparison and contrast, Lisa Raphals' theoretical yin-yang parameters will serve as the interpretive framework for models sourced from Mawangdui texts, the work of Dong Zhongshu, the *Huainanzi*, and *Heshanggong* itself. This analysis seeks to resolve the “paradox” of *Heshanggong's* worldview, and in so doing complexify our understanding of yin and yang, Chinese holism, Han thought, and the historical continuity of Daoism.

I. Variations of yin and yang

Heshanggong uses yin and yang to construct its cosmology, but its notion of these two is a departure from the ahistorical, essentialized one promoted by many scholars of East Asian thought. That limiting conception deems the holistic binary to be eternally complementary and mutually generating, and suggests that, as a result of its absolute relativity, no single thing is identifiable as yin or yang. For example, A. C. Graham (1986: 28) contrasts the complementary nature of yin-yang with that of a conflict-minded Western perspective. Hall and Ames (1995: 158–160; 1998: 127) offer a comparable analysis of yin and yang as a “polarity” as opposed to Western “duality.” Needham (2004: 94) puts it best: “Yin and Yang ... were always seen as relational, not contradictory; complementary, not antagonistic.” These views represent the “classic” holistic yin-yang conception, though analyses of yin and yang have begun to shift toward more refined perspectives.³

Lisa Raphals offers just such insights, which can assist in explaining *Heshanggong's* departure from other schools of thought. Noting the variegated history of yin and yang, Raphals identifies oppositional “dualities” in addition to complementary “polarities” and the like. Slightly reformulating her categories produces four yin and yang types: complementary (I), oppositional (II), hierarchical (III), and cyclical (IV).⁴ Unpacking this collection unveils an array of possible yin-yang relationships.

First, the complementary (I) sort represents the “normal” yin and yang dynamic where the two sides are interdependent and relative. Next, the oppositional (II) approach involves yin and yang cosmologies that emphasize fixed essences. Yin and yang do not exchange places or roles and are not fully interdependent. This conception of pairs tends to be associated with Western Medieval scholastic correlations, matching dualities like good/evil, light/dark, male/female, and mind/body. The third, the hierarchical (III) model is by nature most revealing of a cosmology's values: whether it honors yang or valorizes yin. It may also coincide with either the oppositional

or the complementary types. For instance, in a complementary hierarchy (I & III), both sides are essential and valued, but one is bestowed more power and status, e.g., Heaven and Earth together produce all life, but the yang of Heaven remains superior. As for an oppositional hierarchy (II & III), one side is absolutely preferred while the other is absolutely rejected. Lastly, the cyclical (IV) pattern describes gradual alternation between extremes such as day and night or summer and winter. This dynamic can also accommodate hierarchy: night is inferior to day, but its role in the cycle remains vital.

In the following sections, we shall apply the rubric of these relationships to a range of contending Han-era yin-yang and proto-yin-yang models to draw out their worldviews, and to set the groundwork for the mode/substance reading of *Heshanggong*. In three Mawangdui texts, two opposite-gendered pairs appear to illustrate contradictory hierarchical values: the cow is presented as inferior to the bull (*pin-mu* 牝牡), yet the hen is understood to be superior to the cock (*ci-xiong* 雌雄). In contrast, the paradigmatic Han cosmologist Dong Zhongshu is overwhelmingly partial to yang, identifying it with goodness and the higher aspect of human nature. Chapters 1 and 7 in the *Huainanzi* celebrate the importance of stillness and softness, qualities commonly connoted by yin, but also focus on the attainment of spirit (*jingshen* 精神), which is typically linked to Heaven, a premier signifier of yang. While these two chapters do not present complete correlative systems overtly identifying qualities and entities with the labels yin and yang, they set up a functioning prototype for the double hierarchy at work in *Heshanggong*. As a descendant of the foregoing texts, the *Heshanggong* commentary threshes their respective permutations and emerges with its own, fully articulated expression of Daoist yin-yang thought: a causal relationship between yin modes (stillness, non-action, etc.) and the yang substances of spirit and virtue in the body or abundance and unity in the state.

2. *Pin-mu* 牝牡 (cow/bull) and *Ci-xiong* 雌雄 (hen/cock) in the Mawangdui texts

Edmund Ryden, in his investigation of opposites in Mawangdui's *Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經), posits that two different male and female sets – *pin-mu* 牝牡 (cow and bull) and *ci-xiong* 雌雄 (hen and cock) – cannot be reduced to the single relational paradigm with which they are identified in later yin-yang history. He instead proposes that the complementarity of the first contrasts with the antagonism of the second (Ryden, 1997: 16–39). Raphals' classification system highlights further distinctions between the two, along with their related correlates. The inversion of valuation for male-female characteristics in the *ci-xiong* duo, when framed in context with more common yin-yang hierarchies, points to contending alternate worldviews even within this single collection. Additionally, it is important to note that in spite of superficial similarities, the two gendered animal sets appear in disparate contexts. *Pin* and *mu* correlate with categories of things (e.g. Earth and Heaven) and actions (e.g. receiving and giving); *ci* and *xiong* operate independently of things, and are solely defined by behavioral modes (e.g. humility and arrogance). The categorical, value-based, and contextual differences gleaned from these early pairings help to illumine hidden divergences in the usages of yin and yang throughout the Han that inform the worldview of *Heshanggong*.

Pin and *mu* are the cosmic gendered principles in both *Guan* 觀 and *Cheng* 稱 cosmologies. In *Guan*, the pair respectively correlates with yin and yang, soft and hard, virtue and punishment, and warm and cold seasons, all of which are what Raphals might call cyclical complements (I & IV). Yin and yang, however, represent the foundational pair: “When yin and yang were not yet fixed, I had no way to bestow names. At present, they are separated in two and are divided as yin and yang” (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 62).⁵ The primacy and division of the duo

precipitate all emergence and differentiation, such as the subsequent appearance of *pin* (cow) and *mu* (bull): “When the cow and bull seek each other, there is a meeting of the hard and soft. When the hard and soft complete each other, the cow and bull attain their forms. Below [one] congregates as Earth; above [the other] congregates as Heaven” (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 62).⁶ *Pin* and *mu*, as described here, undergo a necessary process of mutual completion before taking on ensuing substances and forms that eventually manifests as Earth and Heaven. Overall, the reciprocal completion and transformation into foundational natural powers, consistent with *pin* and *mu*’s yin-yang properties, point to the primordially of complementary relationships in this worldview.

Later in the text, this complementary dynamic of yin-yang, *pin-mu*, and Earth-Heaven is applied to the true *raison d’être* of the work: rulership. Rather than let his arbitrary will prevail, the ruler is exhorted to accord with the alternations implicit in nature. “In the spring and summer employ virtue, and in the fall and winter employ punishment. Place virtue first and punishment last to nourish life” (Yates, 1997: 108; Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 62). This seasonal approach to governance brings a cyclical dimension to the text’s view of opposites (I & IV) and introduces a shade of Raphals’ hierarchy (III) as well. Within the world of this text, life (a yang substance) is presumed to be better than death, and it is best nourished in accord with spring/summer/virtue (also yang substance). Still, both life and death remain part of the natural cycle of opposites.

In *Cheng*, *pin* and *mu* similarly integrate within complementary (I) and cyclical relationships (IV), though this vision of correlative thinking is more stridently hierarchical (III), placing a greater emphasis on the supremacy of yang, *mu*, and men. Within this worldview, *pin* and *mu* are primal principles of the cosmos: “The Way of Heaven has a left and a right, a cow and a bull” (Yates, 1997: 161; Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 82).⁷ Yet, the complementarity of *pin* and *mu*, when viewed in concert with their yin-yang correlations, does not signify equality. “Heaven is yang and Earth is yin ... man is yang and [woman is yin] ... the noble is yang and the lowly is yin ... controlling others is yang and being controlled by others is yin ... giving is yang and receiving is yin” (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 82–83). Sourced from a much longer list of comparable phrases, these pairings unequivocally evince a significantly stronger sense of hierarchy than the *Guan* passages, with yang, and by extension *mu*, in the dominant position.⁸

In *Guan* and *Cheng*, the cosmic male-female pair *pin* and *mu* exist within a yin-yang based world related in various ways to questions of governance and social order. They belong to a set of cosmic binaries operating in a combination of complementary, cyclical (proper timing), and hierarchical manners. Between the three, hierarchy lends itself to a fully integrated correlative model, i.e., superior substantive yang things such as Heaven, man, and the warmth of spring and summer are matched with superior yang behaviors like controlling, giving, and virtuous actions. Conversely, inferior yin substantive things accord with inferior yin behaviors. This effectively codifies norms within the value system: men should be active and women should be passive, just as Heaven gives and Earth receives, etc. Such prescriptions tint the complementarity of the “inferior” entities and have major implications for the social order at large. It is this tendency that most significantly sets such hierarchical yin-yang models apart from the other types.⁹

So far, the *pin-mu* inclusive worldviews within the previous texts reveal complementary, cyclical, and hierarchical yin-yang models that do not stray much from its “classic” form. In contrast, the radically antagonistic “female and male” opposites – *ci-xiong* (hen and cock) – that Ryden (1997: 39) insightfully identifies in the text *Cixiong jie* 雌雄節, reject balance and complementarity. Instead, they portray in this third Mawangdui work what Raphals would call an oppositional pair (II), and one where the female hen is held superior to the male cock (III). The *ci-xiong* pair,

as it is used here, not only inverts the *Guan* and *Cheng* valuation of female/male, but also diverges from the *pin-mu* model in that it is neither associated with yin-yang nor related to any substantive or cosmic entities. In fact, this pair simply exemplifies types of *behavior*. To illustrate this point, Ryden chose to translate the more specific terms *cijie* 雌節 and *xiongjie* 雄節 as “hen mode” and “cock mode.” The *Cixiong jie* contrasts them as follows:

Brazen, prideful, haughty, and arrogant: this is what is meant by “cock mode.” Tactful, modest, reverent, and frugal: this is what is meant by “hen mode.”¹⁰ ... Now cock mode is the companion of excess and hen mode is the companion of moderation. (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 70)¹¹

While this passage offers no mention of them, understanding why later thinkers correlated the gentle restraint of a hen and the aggressive chest puffing of a cock with yin and yang, respectively, is not difficult.

Unlike the seasonal uses of virtue and punishment in the *Guan*, the proto-yin-yang female and male pairing in *Cixiong jie* does not suggest that one should sometimes be belligerent and sometimes amicable. The two opposites are presented as absolutist values where cock mode is harmful and proscribed, while hen mode is beneficial and proscribed:

In every instance, when people love to employ cock mode this is what is meant by “obstructing life.” If a great person uses it, they will be destroyed; if a lesser person uses it, they will be lost. Holding to it you will not be at peace ... you yourself will not live long, and your children and grandchildren will not multiply. In every instance, when people love to employ [hen mode], this is what is meant by “inheriting wealth.” If a rich person uses it, they will flourish; if a poor person uses it, they will have enough to eat. Holding to it you will be at peace ... You yourself will [live long, and your children and grandchildren will multiply]. (Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu, 1974: 70)¹²

This passage claims a general, universal truth: cock mode invariably breeds destruction and hen mode inevitably generates prosperity. Interestingly, the parallel structure inferred in the phrasing for cock mode indicates that hen mode promises to fulfill all of the classic goals valued within pre-modern Chinese social orders: wealth, health, and progeny.

As was perhaps the case with our first citation from *Cixiong jie*, the lack of direct reference to yin and yang in this segment may lead one to assume that the oppositional relationship represented by hen and cock has nothing to do with that pair. But in addition to fitting into familiar previously discussed parameters for genderized yin-yang attributes, *ci* and *xiong* are explicitly matched with yin and yang in later works.¹³ What makes the ideas espoused by *Cixiong jie* seem unusual, particularly in juxtaposition to those voiced by companion texts in the Mawangdui cache, is their elevation of the female over the male, the gentle and demure over the aggressive and arrogant.¹⁴ This value system may be possible because the text avoids the word *Tian* 天 (Heaven), unlike in the sections involving *pin-mu* built on a preference for the naturally elevated Heavenly yang. Ryden (1997: 36) raises this point to demonstrate an outlier status, how *Cixiong jie* represents a different philosophical strain than the rest of the *Huangdi sijing*.

Pin-mu and *ci-xiong* deviate because one hierarchy, based on the observable position of Heaven, is inverted by the other: one prefers complementarity and the other oppositionality. Furthermore, one suggests the integration of substance/season with behavior, while the other simply depicts a “mode” of behavior. In this contrast, one finds the seeds of two important strands of yin-yang thought. In the next three cases, those of Dong Zhongshu, *Huainanzi*, and eventually *Heshanggong*, the thinkers play out these incipient tensions and disagreements on these issues of hierarchy, behavior versus substance, and complementarity versus oppositionality.

3. Dong Zhongshu: *Xing* 性 (nature) and *Qing* 情 (emotions)

Sometimes identified as the founder of “Han Cosmology,” Dong Zhongshu offers a particular yin-yang system that combines Confucian debates over human nature, Huang-Lao ascetics’ rejection of emotion, and opposites pairs like those seen in *Guan* and *Cheng*. As Sarah Queen (1996: 77) has expertly shown, Dong’s attributed writings, found in the *Chunqiu fanlu*, contain contrasting content layers likely related to different stages of his life. Following the earlier stratum Queen identified in the *Chunqiu fanlu*, chapter 35 provides a prominent instance of his “Han Cosmology,” one which Queen (1996: 225) also suggests emerges from Dong’s reworking of the Huang-Lao worldview. Hierarchy (III) is prominent with Dong’s vigorous exaltation of yang over yin, often highlighted as male over female, and comparable to what one finds in the *Cheng* as regarding the active yang/*mu* man controlling the passive yin/*pin* woman. Moreover, as in the *Cheng*, Dong’s hierarchical approach remains complementary (I), being part of a holistic moral, ritual, social, and cosmic order. It, however, intensifies the *pin-mu*-related value system by binding yang and yin to good and evil, and to a human nature subdivided into moral nature (*xing* 性) and emotional nature (*qing* 情).

Dong’s inventive human nature partition finds explication in chapter 35 of *Chunqiu fanlu*. It says:

Human sincerity (*cheng* 誠) includes greed (*tan* 貪) and benevolence (*ren* 仁). Both these two *qi* of greed and benevolence exist in the self, and status of the self comes from Heaven. Heaven possesses both the activities of yin and yang, and similarly the human self possesses the two natures (*xing* 性) of greed and goodness. (Lau, 1994: 10.1/45/29–30)

This passage discloses three salient details. First, Dong parses human nature into greedy yin and the benevolent yang. Second, this human binary merely reflects the cosmic order. Third, human moral behavior correlates with people’s yin-yang substances (*qi*). Though this passage on greed and benevolence never references evil (*e* 惡), a questioning of evil’s origin precedes it, and a correlation of benevolence with *xing* (nature) and greed with *qing* (emotion) further follows it.¹⁵ This equation of one’s evil and greedy lesser nature with yin emotion is one of Dong’s most crucial innovations.

Unfortunately, this record from *Chunqiu fanlu* lacks in concrete statements. The best depiction of this conception instead appears in an unconfirmed *Lunheng* quote:

The great pattern (*jing* 經) of Heaven has one yin and one yang; the great pattern of humanity has one emotion (*qing* 情) and one nature (*xing* 性). Nature is born from yang and emotion is born from yin. The *qi* of yin is vile (*bi* 鄙) and the *qi* of yang is benevolent (*ren* 仁). Those who say human nature is good observe the yang; those who say it is evil observe the yin. (Lau & Chen, 1996b: 13/38/8–10)

Assuming this reliably exhibits Dong Zhongshu’s view on human nature, it confirms that he resolves the early Confucian debates between Xunzi and Mengzi with yin and yang. Robin Wang (2005: 220–222), for one, agrees with this view. She insists that by relying on the pair to solve the problem of human nature, Dong infuses yin and yang with new moral significance – yang becomes good nature and yin becomes evil emotion.

In considering why Dong identifies emotions as human evil, recall Sarah Queen’s assertion that Dong’s early cosmology is a remodeling of the Huang-Lao one. It follows, more specifically, that this extreme Han Confucian approach, which degrades yin (emotion) and seeks yang (heavenly nature), emerges under the influence of the “Daoist” or “Huang-Lao” inner cultivation traditions dominant during Dong Zhongshu’s early life.¹⁶ That strand of Daoism, appearing in the *Neiye*, parts of the *Zhuangzi*, and sections of the *Huainanzi*, emphasizes removing emotions as a key practice for attaining the goal of the pure original *qi*, *jingshen*, or *xing* (nature) of Heaven.¹⁷

Dong preserves this basic cosmic hierarchy, particularly the status of emotions. However, his pursuit of the yang nature *xing*, the side of goodness, involves a distancing from emotions not attained through asceticism, but through studying classics, performing rituals, and maintaining social order. In the *Chunqiu fanlu* he says:

Accord with the “three cardinal guides” and the “five relationships”; penetrate the patterns of all the eight virtues; be loyal, honest, and love universally; be sincere, generous, and cherish ritual. Then and only then one can be called good. (Lau, 1994: 10.1/46/23–24)

This passage, also from chapter 35, follows the above quoted section on good and evil natures. It conveys Dong’s conclusion that attaining greater goodness comes from fulfilling prescribed social roles and developing a breadth of virtues. In the larger context of the chapter, this section explains that goodness, actually one’s yang *qi*, requires effort and ritual training to be achieved. Dong thus sides more with the Xunzian method of self-development. Put another way, such labors of socialization and education, what we should call proactive yang styles of behavior, are presented as the keys to increasing a person’s yang *qi*, i.e., goodness. Thus, action and being correlate and transform together.

Prior to Dong Zhongshu, the contrasting poles of emotion and heavenly-aspects like *jingshen* were rarely identified with yin and yang. Dong’s key pivot was splitting human nature by affixing good Heavenly *xing* to yang while affixing evil emotions, what the Daoist held as especially dangerous, to yin. This development incorporates the ascetic rejection of emotions while also tempering ascetic extremes, and results in a complementary and socially integrated theory. Overall, Dong’s yin-yang model not only closely conforms to the *Guan* and *Cheng* sense of opposites *per* Raphals’ categories, but also correlates to the corresponding styles of behavior and substances found in these texts.¹⁸ This last point indicates that because human nature is a manifestation of *qi*, a substance, the yang cultivation methods of learning, ritual, and ordering must by design increase the yang goodness of our benevolent nature (*xing*).

4. Tensions of Heaven and stillness in the *Huainanzi*

More or less concurrent with Dong Zhongshu’s worldview, *Huainanzi* chapters 1 and 7 – two of its more Daoist sections – similarly reject emotion and promote Heaven (often in the guise of the ideal substance *jingshen*). However, unlike Dong’s elevation of total yang, the authors of these chapters simultaneously revere the yin-like qualities of the lowly, the still, the feminine, and the soft similarly exalted in the *Daodejing* and the *Cixiong jie*.¹⁹ While not fully integrated into a yin-yang matrix, a tension emerges between the positive status of stillness (yin) and the negative place of emotion (yin), and the honoring of Heaven (yang) and the rejecting of activity (yang).²⁰ Perhaps, emotion is not yet fully identified with evil yin, and Heaven/*jingshen* and stillness have not become wholly opposed as yin and yang. Still, these concomitant values hint at a friction later manifest in *Heshanggong* not resolvable through classic yin-yang relativity.

Chapter 1 “Yuan Dao” 原道, for instance, presents a cosmic hierarchy of Heavenly nature over emotions (III), but also, in an oppositional fashion, elevates stillness and softness above activity and hardness (II). This suggests an incipient yin-yang hierarchy in regards to placing nature (*xing* 性) over emotions, though unlike in the work of Dong Zhongshu these two are not identified as yang or yin and these substances do not then correlate with behaviors. The text says:

That which is tranquil from our birth is our heavenly nature. Stirring only after being stimulated, our nature is harmed. When things arise and the spirit responds, this is the activity of perception. When perception comes into contact with things, love and hate [*haozeng* 好憎] arise. When love and hate take form and

perception is enticed by external things, our nature cannot return to the self, and the heavenly patterns are destroyed. (Roth, 2010a: 53; Lau, 1992: 1/2/14–16)²¹

This passage never engages yin and yang, though recategorizing these different components by their potential correlations produces noteworthy results. It pairs stillness (yin) with Heavenly nature (yang), something which activity (yang) stimulated emotions like love and hate (opposite of nature and therefore yin) degrade.²² This passage can be interpreted as a precursor to later explanations that describe the same dynamic from within an explicit yin-yang framework: the honoring of yin stillness and yang nature over yang activity and yin emotions. This suggests an oppositional (II) scenario and a discontinuity between exalting yang “substances” like nature and yin “behaviors” like stillness.

An elaborated explication of the “yin” behavioral preference, paralleling the relationships found in the *Cixiong jie*, appears in the following passage:

Therefore, the sage guards the Pure Way and holds to hen mode [*cijie* 雌節]. He accords with things and responds to alterations spontaneously; he constantly follows and does not lead. Through stillness he becomes soft and supple; through a stable [mind] he becomes relaxed and calm. In attacking the great and grinding down the hard, none can compete with him. (Roth, 2010a: 62; Lau, 1992: 1/5/21–22)

Here the exact compound from the *Cixiong jie* reappears. Harold Roth translates it as “the limits of the feminine principle,” but if Ryden correctly reads the Mawangdui materials, it should be “hen mode.” This mode involves the basic ways of being or behaving that the *Daodejing* promotes and that later all become classified as yin qualities: adaptation, placing oneself last, softness, suppleness, stillness, and calm. Here the purpose is to stabilize the mind, but as expressed earlier in the text, the most important goal is ruling with the Way. For this reason, the passage asserts this “hen mode” is the path to the kind of power that defeats the great and hard.

Beyond the political efficacy of hen mode are its benefits to vital bodily substances: “Now the more that the essence, spirit, *qi*, and awareness are tranquil, the more they will be abundant and strong. The more they are agitated, the more they will be depleted and aged” (Roth, 2010a: 76; Lau, 1992: 1/10/7–8). By implication, when the substances (*jing* 精, *shen* 神, *qi* 氣) are fully lost, death occurs. The “substantively” opposed states of life and death emerge from either stillness or agitation, two modes reminiscent of hen mode and cock mode.²³ None of the terms, qualities, or substances in these passages is equated with yin and yang. However, what might be called “yang” substances are elevated,²⁴ while “yin” modes of behaviors are prized. Actually, one could also say that the good “yin” qualities, like stillness, are modes that engender the good “yang” substances like spirit, *qi*, and life.²⁵

“Yuan Dao” prescribes qualities like stillness, softness, tranquility, and pliancy as the keys to success. It even employs *cijie* “hen mode” to summarize these behavioral modes or states, paralleling the Way itself. However, the worldview of this chapter hints at tensions with the yet-to-be identified categories of yin and yang because the softness and stillness of hen mode, if organized according to that binary, would contrast with the valorization of heavenly nature over emotion or life over death.

Chapter 7 “Jingshen” 精神 provides a strikingly similar picture, though with more explicit yin-yang integration. In its opening section, the spirits (*shen* 神) of Heaven and Earth appear as the precursors to the pair yang and yin, and tellingly the chapter depicts humans with their pure refined *qi* (*jingqi* 精氣) as superior to the other creatures comprised of agitated *qi* (*fanqi* 煩氣). This valorization of the *jingqi*, or *jingshen* 精神 is then correlated with the two halves that form a person: *jingshen* or essential spirit correlates with Heaven and bodily structure correlates with

Earth (Roth, 2010b: 240; Lau, 1992: 7/54/26–27). To be fair, the chapter honors both Heaven and Earth, even while elevating Heaven's *jingshen* over Earth's structure.²⁶ The end result is a complementary hierarchy (I & III).

This hierarchy of *qi* extends to include the contrast between emotions and *jingshen*. The chapter records:

Sadness and joy are aberrations of virtue (*de* 德), pleasure and anger are excesses of the Way; fondness and resentment are the fetters of the mind. Therefore, it is said: "Life is the doing of Heaven (*tianxing* 天行) and death results from being transformed by things (*wuhua* 物化). Tranquility is the sealing of all yin; activity is the opening of all yang." When one's essential spirit (*jingshen* 精神) is silent and without extremes, and does not become dispersed by things, the empire will naturally submit. Thus, the mind is the ruler of physical form (*xing* 形); the spirit (*shen* 神) is the treasure of the mind. When the physical form toils without rest, it becomes exhausted; when the essence is used unceasingly, it runs out. Thus the sages honor and esteem it and do not dare to allow it to seep out. (Roth, 2010b: 246–247; Lau, 1992: 7/56/28–7/57/3)²⁷

This selection centers on a near quote from *Zhuangzi* that may have originally indicated a complementary outlook on yin and yang.²⁸ Interestingly, the larger passage utilizes it to emphasize the contrast of problematic activity and emotion with cherished stillness and essential spirit. This juxtaposition emerges from how the "doing of Heaven" (*tianxing* 天行) relates to life, and how "being transformed by things" equates with death. The key reframing of the quote shifts the focus toward life, which make the *hua* 化 "transformations," a term often associated with Earth, a problem.²⁹ The distinction is then between the inferior "yin" side of death and earthly "things," previously identified with denser *qi*, and the important "yang" heavenly spirit that must be preserved for life.

The text additionally articulates the opposition of Yang/Heaven/*jingshen* over yin/Earth/physical-form by describing the core of the mind, the spirit, as residing above the body. This opposition of spirit and body conflicts with the subsequent lines, which appear to be equally concerned with exhausting both the mind and body. Yet, when read in context, the two instances of "it" (*zhi* 之) both refer to spirit, the subject of the preceding sentence. Similarly, the two objects "it" in the final sentence, that which the sages "honor and esteem" and prevent from "seep[ing] out," should likewise indicate spirit. This reading underscores that the diffusion of the body's *shen* or *jingshen* remains the core concern and not the body itself. This is the key point of the entire passage. It starts by listing disruptive emotions, proceeds to the contrast of Heaven and Earth, stillness and action, and then concludes that stillness (implied as an avoidance of agitation) protects one from losing spirit. Again, the whole passage highlights spirit/*jingshen* as superior to physical form/emotions, and that stillness instead of action is the path to preserve that vital human aspect.

One final point involves the passage's use of yin and yang. This manifestation of the binary does not define the substances of Heaven, Earth, spirit, or form, but instead expresses ways of being. Yin matches with tranquility and yang pairs with activity, with the preference for yin stillness being undeniable. Resultantly, one finds the yang of *jingshen*, Heaven, and life (substances) paired with the yin of stillness (hen mode?)³⁰ in opposition to the yang of activity (cock mode?) matched with the yin of emotion, Earth, and death (substances). The "Jingshen" chapter's more fully articulated yin-yang cosmology exposes the complication of promoting one type of yin and rejecting the other, valorizing the opposite type of yang while dismissing its pair.

Both authors of the "Yuan Dao" and "Jingshen" chapters espouse a similar worldview variously integrated into a yin-yang schema. Yet, like other inner cultivation-type Daoist authors, their central project is to teach stillness, removal of emotions, and the limiting of sensory disruption. This contrasts with the Confucian method of ritual and moral education that emphasizes differentiation, external division, and activity. The discrepancy of these two approaches emerges from their

understanding of opposites. The Confucian, or Dong Zhongshu style, requires the yang of education and ritual action to restrain the yin of emotion and thereby enhance the yang of virtuous nature. The more Daoist method relies on yin stillness and softness to disperse emotion and thus increase the yang of one's Heavenly nature. In both cases, the end goal of self-improvement is to restrict or remove emotion and to increase "yang"; however, the methods diverge.

5. Heshanggong's cosmology: yin-yang mode and substance

Chapters 1 and 7 of the *Huainanzi* reveal early efforts at combining the glorification of Heaven over Earth with the hierarchies of behavior promoted in works like the *Daodejing* and *Cixiong jie*. The insipient tensions of that project become more conspicuous in *Heshanggong* due to its increased engagement with yin-yang as foundational categories and its overt incorporation of Dong Zhongshu's popular theory of good nature (*xing* 性) and evil emotion (*qing* 情).³¹ In this case, we can state unequivocally that idealized behaviors like stillness are yin and idealized substances like *jingshen* are yang, a combination resulting in a nuanced yin yang conception that mixes the complementary (I) and the oppositional (II) with yin over yang and yang over yin hierarchies (III). *Heshanggong* does not directly address this latent incoherence, a symptom perhaps of attempting a pure yin-yang cosmology. However, the unique nature of this thought and its actual internal consistency manifests when one analyzes the text's use of yin and yang with the subcategories of "mode" and "substance."

While one finds traces of these divisions in the *Huainanzi* and the *Huangdi sijing* – hen mode (*cijie* 雌節) from which we borrowed "mode" comes closest to half of this division – the details of the relationship in *Heshanggong* need to be spelled out. To start with, consider the list in Table 1, which reveals how *Heshanggong*'s pairs of opposites do not easily resolve into two neat categories. Its organization reflects an attempt to group related terms, but even with this effort the asterisked items (preferred by *Heshanggong*) do not all fall evenly into the Heaven and Earth columns. They do not betray a clear yin-yang value system.

In Table 1, we find other conflicts of value: illumination placed over learning and under the enshadowed, the cow as both superior to the ox and inferior to the profound, and the concurrent adulation of the heavenly and the lowly. Clearly, it remains quite difficult to resolve all binaries into a single set. Furthermore, this issue is not solved with the supposed relativity of yin and yang because the foundational preference for the lowly and weak (yin) in the *Daodejing* establishes an oppositional (II) framework.

Consider this instead: while *Heshanggong*'s conflicting hierarchies of value might head toward paradox, one finds coherence by subdividing them into mode and substance. Using this division, the columns in Tables 2 and 3 exhibit consistent yin and yang categories. All the pairs related to substance neatly align with Heaven's superior yang over Earth's inferior yin, and all those grouped as modes reveal a comparable preference for yin contra yang. To elaborate, qualities the *Daodejing* valorizes, including stillness, obscurity, inclusiveness, humility, silence, non-action, emptiness, femininity, softness, and adaptively fall under yin mode; all that is clear, refined, and light (in weight and color), like Heaven, spirit, virtue, *qi*, and essence, count as yang substance. This clean division speaks to coherent preferences for various yin-yang qualities, and the pattern remains steady throughout the work. Although this analytical language admittedly does not resolve every complexity one finds in *Heshanggong*, it offers a powerful heuristic³² that unearths a more nuanced vision of the commentary's teachings while highlighting diversity and connections within Han correlative thought.³³

To further substantiate this interpretation, the categorization of the above pairs requires closer investigation. This process will also clarify the relationship between groups like yin mode and

Table 1. Failed Hierarchy of Pairs (Asterisked Side Preferred).

Heaven 天*	Earth 地
Yang 陽?	Yin 陰?
Clarity 清*	Turbidity 濁
Spirit 神*	Form 形
Qi 氣*	Flavor 味
Still 靜*	Active 動
Simp. Substance 質*	Surface design 文
Nature 性*	Emotion 情
Zang 藏*	Fu 府
Hard 剛	Soft 柔*
Cock 雄	Hen 雌*
Nameless 無名*	Named 有名
Desireless 無欲*	Desirous 有欲
Elevate 貴	Degrade 賤*
Light 輕*	Heavy 重
Serious 重*	Frivolous 輕
Root 本*	Branches 末
Strong 強	Weak 弱*
Non-action 無為*	Action 有為
Arrogant 驕	Humble 謙*
Full 滿	Empty 虛*
Lead 唱	Harmonize 和*
Ox 牧	Cow 牝*
First 先	Last 后*
Outer 外	Inner 內*
High 高	Lowly 下*
Emit 施	Guard 守*
Peace 平*	Chaos 亂
Plentiful 厚*	Scant 薄
Worthies 賢*	Greedy people 貪
Increase 益	Decrease 損*
Profound 玄*	Female/Cow 牝
Honor 尊	Distain 卑*
Life 生*	Death 死
Virtue 德*	Sensual thing 色
Conspicuous 明	Obscured 昧*

yang substance, and excavate the roles of the complementary, the oppositional, and the cyclical. Consider *ci-xiong* and *pin-mu*. Both pairs appear in the previously mentioned Mawangdui texts, and in the original *Daodejing* (ch. 6, 10, 28, 61). Unlike in those earlier works, *Heshanggong* at times employs the pairs interchangeably and at others holds them distinct. These different applications do not reveal an unambiguous division, i.e., *ci-xiong* as mode and *pin-mu* as substance. Instead, both sets alternate between functioning as substances and modes.

In terms of substances, both pairs correlate with Heaven and Earth and spirit and bodily form. In chapter 6, the female *ci* and *pin* represent the inferior and denser bodily substances received from Earth, and the male *xiong* and *mu* signify the superior refined spirit substances gained from Heaven (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 6.2C/37/4–6). This correlation results from the commentator glossing the *Daodejing* compound *xuanpin* 玄牝, profound and female/cow, as Heaven and Earth.³⁴ This usage

Table 2. Substance Pairs (Yang Preferred).

Heaven 天*	Earth 地
Yang 陽*	Yin 陰
Profound 玄*	Female/Cow 牝
Clarity 清*	Turbidity 濁
Spirit 神*	Form 形
Qi 氣*	Flavor 味
Heart 心*	Stomach 胃
Nature 性*	Emotion 情
Life 生*	Death 死
Peace 平*	Chaos 亂
Plentiful 厚*	Scant 薄
Worthies 賢*	Greedy people 貪
Virtue 德*	Sensual thing 色
Simp. Substance 質*	Surface design 文
Light 輕*	Heavy 重

Table 3. Mode Pairs (Yin Preferred).

Yang 陽	Yin 陰*
Branches 末	Root 本*
Action 有為	Non-action 無為*
Desirous 有欲	Desireless 無欲*
Named 有名	Nameless 無名*
Active 動	Still 靜*
Strong 強	Weak 弱*
Hard 剛	Soft 柔*
Cock 雄	Hen 雌*
Arrogant 驕	Humble 謙*
Full 滿	Empty 虛*
Increase 益	Decrease 損*
Lead 唱	Harmonize 和*
Ox 牧	Cow 牝*
First 先	Last 后*
Outer 外	Inner 內*
High 高	Lowly 下*
Emit 施	Guard 守*
Honor 尊	Distain 卑*
Conspicuous 明	Obscured 昧*
Frivolous 輕	Serious 重*
Elevate 貴	Degrade 賤*

resembles the *Guan* and *Cheng* cosmic substance role for *pin-mu* as well as the hierarchical vision of Dong Zhongshu that elevates all things yang over all things yin. However, aspects of this relationship approach oppositionality (II), as the text encourages the adept to reject all emotion (paired with the yin bodily structure).³⁵

Conversely, when discussing the highest ideals of behavior, *ci* and *pin* stand superior in the two pairs. Chapter 61 says:

*It is the cow [pin] of the empire.*³⁶

“The cow” means ‘yin categories.’ These are accommodation, humility, and harmonization instead of leading.

The cow always conquers the bull [mu] because of stillness,

The reason women can subdue men and yin conquers yang is because they are still, calm, and do not initiate. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 61.3B/131/5, 61.3C/131/7, 61.4B/131/9, 61.4C/131/11–12)

This discussion of “yin categories” (*yinlei* 陰類) does not address yin substances like earth and emotion, instead explicating how success and conquest emerge from cow or female modes like humility, accommodation, and stillness. Furthermore, Heshanggong identifies these yin modes as foundational to his teachings.

Additional support for *cipin* 雌牝 as a preferred “mode” of behavior comes from chapter 10:

Can you act as the hen [ci]?

In regulating the body, one should be like a hen or cow [*cipin*]: peaceful, calm, accommodating, and weak. In regulating the state, respond to transformations and harmonize instead of taking the lead. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 10.10B/43/1, 10.10C/43/3)

Such a comment suggests that one should “act” like *cipin*, something comparable to the *cijie* (hen mode) found in the *Cixiong jie* or the *Huainanzi*. Looking at both of the previous passages, one finds Heshanggong proclaiming a hierarchical (III) and oppositional (II) notion of yin over yang, but only in relation to behavior or mode. This value is seen consistently throughout the text, and applying the modifier “mode” in these cases of superior *cipin* clarifies their different role vis-à-vis their role as inferior substance in chapter 6.

In summary, two inverted hierarchies of yin and yang coexist – yin mode over yang mode and yang substance over yin substance. This reading underscores *Heshanggong*’s unique hybrid of the oppositional/hierarchical and complementary/cyclical approaches to yin-yang cosmology. This hybridity differentiates it from the supposed generic “Han cosmology.”

In regard to cycles, this yin-yang cosmology distinctly involves the alternations of mode and substance. Most importantly, mode stands as the logically prior state, as the quality of behavior or existence that leads to a substantive result. Chapter 45 notes:

When agitation triumphs, there is cold.

“Triumph” means ‘extreme.’ In spring and summer, the yang *qi* is agitated; it rushes upward, and the myriad beings flourish. When it reaches its extreme then [the *qi*] gets colder, and when it is [fully] cold things shrivel and die. This indicates that people should be neither hard nor agitated.

When stillness triumphs, there is heat.

In fall and winter, the myriad beings lie still beneath the Yellow Springs. When it reaches its extreme, then [the *qi*] gets hotter, and this heat is the source of life.

Clarity and stillness lead to an upright empire.

Through clarity and stillness one can be the leader of the empire. Maintain uprightness, and then [the empire] will never reach its end. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 45.8B/105/21, 45.8C/105/23–24, 45.9B/105/26, 45.9C/105/28, 45.10B/105/30, 45.10C/106/1)

This passage corroborates that Heshanggong holds a cyclical view of yin and yang. While one might contend that it only demonstrates alternating extremes of hot and cold *qi*, not mode becoming substance, on closer examination the key role of mode emerges. The passage identifies warm yang *qi* with life and cold yin *qi* with death. These are substances. How do these substances come to be? Cold does not come from an extreme caused by hot yang substances, it emerges from the modes of agitation and hardness. This is why the passage focuses on avoiding these two states. If the hot *qi* of life really equaled the modes of agitation and hardness, the commentary would insist one should embody them instead. Yet, the stillness of winter remains the key to the source of life – hot yang *qi*. The final line then confirms the important principle. One should rely on the power of stillness (not cold) to continually generate life and prosperity on a society-wide level. This is yin mode leading to yang substance writ large.

This seasonal discussion could advise harmonizing with the cycle's different phases, as in the *Guan*, but the added hierarchical exaltation of yin mode and yang substance removes that possibility. The yang substance of living *qi* appears to be Heshanggong's true objective. In this sense, he sympathizes with Dong Zhongshu and his sort. Yet, that Confucian worldview arises from a fixed hierarchy in which all the yang, male, heavenly, virtuous, ritualized behaviors increase the yang in the world. Heshanggong relies on the *Daodejing* tradition that prioritizes lowliness and emptiness, and valorizes these as paths to their opposites.³⁷ From this practical and philosophical origin grows the split of substance and mode. This is how to interpret Heshanggong, in the context of a yin-yang cosmology that emphasizes non-action, softness, and weakness as the keys to attaining the substance of Heaven, *qi*, *jing*, *shen*, and even virtue (*de*). Heshanggong writes as a syncretist, and as such, he strives to resolve the order of the universe through inclusive basic principles. Yin and yang are definitely two of these, but without excavating the implicit mode and substance division, their multifaceted roles remain buried.

6. The Way and virtue

The Way (*Dao* 道) and virtue (*de* 德) are the two title concepts of the *Daodejing*, and their definitions and relationship have been argued throughout the history of Daoism and in the modern age as well. In highlighting the internal complexity of Heshanggong's yin-yang world, we unveil an Eastern Han Daoist conception of these two core notions that have noteworthy philosophical ramifications. Following the current reading of *Heshanggong*, the Way is total yin mode and virtue is the perfect yang substance.

Why is this so? First, consider how virtue (*de*) is both substantive and yang in nature. Chapters 51 and 39 taken together substantiate this reading:

Virtue nurtures them.

Virtue is the One. The One directs and spreads *qi* to nurture and nourish them. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 51.2B/112/22, 51.2C/112/24)

And:

Concerning those of the past to attain the One:

“Past” (*xi*) means ‘past’ (*wang*). The One is original *qi* – the child of the Way. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 39.1B/94/11, 39.1C/94/13)³⁸

These comments define virtue as both the One and original *qi*.³⁹ Consequently, virtue undergirds the substance of the entire universe; it is unified substance itself, and hence it is the One.

Yet, why is the original substance yang? In chapter 42 we also find:

The One generated the two.

The One generated yin and yang. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 42.2B/100/23, 42.2C/100/25)

This conveys the impression that since the One (virtue) precedes the distinctions of yin and yang it could not be yang. While in one sense yin and yang are mutually generated terms contradicting the nature of the One as a unity, when compared to the manifest world with its many divisions and differentiations (yin substance), the undivided One, and by extension virtue, takes the yang role. This interpretation is confirmed by the identification of fine *qi* (*qing* 清) as yang and the gross *qi* (*zhuo* 濁) as yin (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 6.2C/37/4–6), where the supremely refined original *qi* – virtue – must represent the purest yang. Lastly, the previous quote from chapter 51 indicates that the One (virtue) disburses *qi* to the beings of the world, paralleling the function of yang Heaven and implying once again that virtue must be yang.⁴⁰

In some Chinese cosmologies that begin with One substance or with Heaven (*Taiyi shengshui*, *Chunqiu fanlu*, etc.), this original *qi* or yang virtue occupies the pole position (Chen & Peng, 2011: 21; Lau, 1994: 6.6/26/2, 11.1/49/29). Heshanggong, on the other hand, follows *Daodejing* chapter 42 in placing the Way as the true origin of the cosmos:

The Way generated the One.

In the beginning, what the Way generated was the One. (Lau & Chen 1996a: 42.1B/100/19, 42.1C/100/21)

According to the previous theory, all yang substances arise from yin modes. Therefore, if the One as virtue is the supreme yang substance, it too must arise from yin mode. *Ipsa facto*, the Way *is* yin mode. Identifying this root of all existence as yin mode resolves how *Dao* 道 can be both a method of living and also the governing principle of the cosmic order. While such logic follows from this heuristic, we must consider if it accords with the commentary. Overall, the Way can be called yin mode because the text repeatedly defines it as still, soft, fully encompassing, hidden, humble, non-active, empty, and adaptive; all qualities which fall into the yin mode column in the tables above.⁴¹

Yet, as with the single substance of virtue, *Heshanggong* chapter 32 likewise identifies the Way as existing beyond yin and yang categories, something that contradicts the theory the author is asserting.

The Way is constantly nameless.

The Way can be yin and can be yang; it can be lax and can be taut; it can be present and can be absent. Thus, it has no constant name. (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 32.1B/83/10, 32.1C/83/12–13)

This recalls the relativity that some argue for in early Daoism.⁴² Yet, the “no constant name” or the “nameless” identifiers for the Way are not relative terms. The Way always remains nameless and is constantly without a constant name. It exists firmly on one side of the pair of the named and nameless. The nameless stands as the yin mode of this pair, being hidden and unknown. It is also the origin of the named (Heaven and Earth), and thus could be said to include the “can be” of yin and yang, or lax and taut.⁴³ This unmanifest potential inclusiveness appears to affirm the Way’s ultimate yin nature as confirmed by Heshanggong in chapters 15 and 25.⁴⁴

Finally, if one accepts this interpretation of the commentaries' theory of the Way as yin mode and virtue as yang substance, Heshanggong offers a creative resolution to the confusion over the relationships of the Way, Heaven, and the Way of Heaven.⁴⁵ While historically these terms likely indicate different strands of thought found in composite texts like the *Daodejing* or *Zhuangzi*, such a reading explains how the Way and Heaven function as complementary mode and substance combined as the "Way of Heaven."

To summarize the full cosmology, the "transcendent" complements (I) of yin mode (The Way) and yang substance (virtue and vitality) oppose (II) the complements (I) of yang mode (activity) and yin substance (emotion/death). The first set is superior to the second (III), though they all function cyclically (IV) as well. Heshanggong manages to fully unite Raphals' categories of yin and yang into one model, though he extols oppositional linear change. This worldview underwrites the cultivation process during which one shifts from the normal human state corrupted by yin substance (emotions) toward a state of pure yang substance (spirit/virtue). The key to this transformation resides in rejecting yang mode and grasping the Way to embody all the yin modes of humility, softness, stillness, lowliness, weakness, emptiness, namelessness, desirelessness, and non-action.⁴⁶

Conclusion

With the assistance of Raphals' four categories, we have unveiled obscured variations within the opposites and yin-yang models found in the *Huangdi sijing*, the *Chunqiu fanlu*, and the *Huainanzi*. These in turn have facilitated a disentanglement of the interlocking implicit mode and substance layers submerged within *Heshanggong*. This division not only resolves possible inconsistencies in the inner workings of the commentary's cosmology, but also attests to two major historical strands of yin-yang thought merged within it. Simplistically, these can be caricatured as the Confucian and the Daoist strands.

To start with, the yin-yang and *pin-mu* of *Guan* and *Cheng* invoke cyclical (IV), complementary (I), yang dominating (III) worlds, where behavior and substance correlate. This conceptual vector continues through the work of Dong Zhongshu, accruing the further weightiness of yang's moral dominance and a focus on active yang methods as the way to increase yang goodness and virtue. Taken together, these three inhabit a similar "Confucian" yin-yang universe, and one which plays a significant role in Heshanggong's idealization of yang substance.

As for the Daoists, beginning with the *Daodejing* and the *Cixiong jie* proto-yin predominates (II & III), though as a superior form of behavior or perhaps mode. In the *Huainanzi*, this trend merges with the inner cultivation traditions' focus on Heavenly *jingshen* and a tension of mode and substance begins to blossom. *Heshanggong*, situated firmly within this "Daoist" strain, integrates cycles (IV) and incorporates the Confucian hierarchy, in which yang functions as goodness itself.

Heshanggong's full assimilation of yin and yang within a Daoist context, along with the incorporation of certain elements from the Confucian side, necessitates the mode and substance split. Applying those supplemental terms uncovers the work's approach to the Way and virtue, one which holds deep ramifications for Daoism. In this model, the Way is not a thing but a mode of existence, and amazingly that mode precedes substance itself. This means that the substance of *de* comes from no-thing, though not from non-existence, as yin mode remains constant. This mode to substance causality avows a conception of reality that the commentary binds to self-cultivation and every other aspect of life.

Aside from the foregoing insights, the mode-substance interpretation inspires other noteworthy reflections. First, the supposed Daoist preference for the feminine requires reevaluation. While the association of men with superior yang, Heaven, and *jingshen* cannot be traced to the *Daodejing*, we can now postulate that the *ci* and *pin* of the text may simply refer to the proper mode of the male,

as in *Cixiong jie* and *Heshanggong*. At least by the time of the Han, the status of women in Daoism does not appear to greatly diverge from the often-criticized patriarchal Confucianism. Both elevate yang substance after all. Second, clarifying yang substance (spirit, vitality, virtue) as the ultimate goal sought through stillness (yin mode) provides hints to how the “yin” honoring *Daodejing* tradition may have evolved into later Daoist incarnations that promote yang, e.g., the pure yang sought in inner and outer alchemy. This suggests a much greater continuity than previously assumed, as Daoism shifts from the pre-Qin toward the post-Han. In total, unpacking the variety within the seemingly consistent world of Han yin and yang theories results in a new angle on Daoism, and reaffirms the importance of this period as a pivotal moment in the development of Chinese thought.

Notes

1. Heshanggong 河上公 (Old Man by the River) is the penname of an unknown figure. I use the name as a placeholder for the commentary’s author. Previous European language studies by Robinet (1977: 24–39) and Chan (1991) on *Heshanggong*, and one outdated translation by Erkes (1958), were recently supplemented by Tadd (2013).
2. While the commentary’s date and authorship remain unresolved, a growing consensus places it in the early Eastern Han (25–220 CE) (Tadd, 2013: 9–27; Chan, 1991: 107–118).
3. The most recent example is Robin Wang’s six types of yin-yang relationships: opposition, interdependence, mutual inclusion, interaction, complementary, and transformation (Wang, 2012: 8–12).
4. Raphals (1998: 143–144) emphasized the historical stages of different yin-yang types, as compared to this four-part model that uses her categories in a more philosophically minded way.
5. Please also consider Robin Yates’ alternative translation (1997: 107).
6. There is some ambiguity in this passage over whether the cow and bull “gather and become” Heaven and Earth, as suggested by Ryden’s translation (1997: 27), or if they simply “meet with” these two, as in Yates’ translation (1997: 108).
7. This passage is reminiscent of the famous *Xici zhuan* line “A yin and a yang are what is known as the Way” (Lau & Chen, 1995b: 65/77/17).
8. Concerning the relationships seen in *Cheng*, Ryden (1997: 27) suggests that *pin-mu*, etc., are “complementary rather than antagonistic pairs.” However, this insight can be further nuanced by recourse to the hierarchical category suggested by Raphals. Ryden also fails to register the appearance of *ci zhi jie* 雌之節 “hen mode” at the end of *Cheng*, a detail that suggests the chapter had already incorporated *ci-xiong* into its more developed yin-yang cosmology. Perhaps this oversight results from his main interest in sets of pairs, and *xiong* “cock” never appears in *Cheng*.
9. Graham (1986: 28) considers *Cheng* the earliest instance of a yin-yang correlative list, and assumes that its mutually dependent (complementary) represents the model for all yin and yang.
10. This line contains an ellipsis that omits the two characters translated here as “tactful” and “modest.” I follow Ryden’s suggestion to rely on a parallel passage in the *Shundao* 順道 chapter for this supplement ([日 + 死] 濕), while borrowing the translation from Yates (Ryden, 1997: 17; Yates, 1997: 149).
11. This translation is adapted from that of Robin Yates (1997: 129).
12. This translation again generally follows Robin Yates (1997: 129).
13. For example, the *Shuoyuan* 說苑 presents a yin-yang list that groups both *ci-xiong* and *pin-mu* within a unified yin-yang hierarchy (Lau, 1992b: 18.10/153/7).
14. Actually, this “inversion” resonates strongly with the ideals of early Daoist classics like the *Daodejing*, for like *Cixiong jie* the *Daodejing* eschews outrightly identifying these traits as yin or yang.
15. Here, I follow Sarah Queen’s reading of *qing* as emotion (1996: 52). Although it may be a premature identification, *qing* is at least correlated with greed and desire. This reading becomes incontrovertible in the later *Baihutong*, where Dong’s binary nature is expanded into two sets: the five moral natures and the six emotions (Lau, 1994: 10.1/46/11–12; Lau & Chen, 1995a: 30/55/23–56/26).
16. One cannot definitively prove Dong’s equation of emotion and evil results from his early exposure to Huang-Lao. Potential Confucian influences similarly exist like Xunzi, one of Dong’s major Confucian inspirations. John Knoblock describes Xunzi conception of emotion in the following way, “Xunzi argues

that every person experiences the need to give expression to joy and sorrow ... But allowing the emotions uncontrolled venting may damage life itself. The purpose of ritual forms is to provide adequate expression of joy and grief, but to prevent any excess that may interfere with social order or harm the individual” (Knoblock, 1994: 53–54). Emotion exists as a potential evil that must be restrained, though it is also natural and necessary. While this side of Confucianism may be one source for Dong’s stance, but Huang-Lao’s asceticism likely inspired Dong to actually identify emotion with evil.

17. These texts confirm the problematic status of emotions, though they do not always employ the term *qing* 情. Consistently, experiences like anger, happiness, sadness, and fear are presented as key obstacles to one’s higher spiritual potential and the Way (Lau, 2001: 16.1/115/21–22, 16.1/117/27–28; Lau, 2000: 40/15//14–16). Harold Roth (1999: 135, 167) especially highlights this status of emotion in the inner cultivation tradition, proposing that Daoist cultivation, a process he considers “apophatic mysticism,” begins with removing emotions and thoughts. Examples of this tradition in the *Huainanzi* will be discussed below.
18. For example, “The ruler is yang and the minister yin; the father is yang and the son yin; the husband is yang and the wife yin ... Heaven is the ruler that covers things, Earth is the minister that upholds things; yang is the husband who creates things and yin is the wife who supports things” (Lau, 1994: 12.6/57/19–20, 12.6/57/24–25).
19. Han Daoism clearly valorizes Heavenly yang, diverging from the tradition’s reputation as yin-centric. Sarah Allan (1997: 142) has suggested that *Daodejing* ideals like softness, the female, and water become easily correlated under the rubric of yin. Benjamin Schwartz (1985: 203–204) notes the appearance of both yin and yang in the *Daodejing*, but emphasizes how the text key values are the soft, weak, passive – yin.
20. Judson Murray comes to a different conclusion concerning the place of yin and yang in the *Huainanzi*. He contrasts Dong Zhongshu’s approach that praises yang and derides yin with the *Huainanzi* message of mutual value and ideal balance. He explains this difference results from the cosmological contrast between the ideals of an authoritarian *tian* (Heaven) and a *ziran* Way (Murray, 2007, 165–166). While Murray correctly notes this idea of yin-yang balance within the *Huainanzi*, specifically in chapter 5 “Shi ze” that deals with the cycles of the seasons, it is hasty to assume that a similar conception pervades the entire text. As will be demonstrated below, at least chapters 1 and 7 do not promote the ideal of balance.
21. The following *Huainanzi* translations take inspiration from or closely accord with Harold Roth’s work.
22. Roth’s translation relies on the more intellectualized term “preferences” to translate *haozeng* 好憎, though its basic sense as “love and hate” affirms its emotionality.
23. Another evocative case is as follows, “Thus when an army is strong, it will be destroyed. When a tree is strong it will be broken. When leather armor is hard, it will split open. Because teeth are harder than the tongue, they wear out first. Therefore, the pliant and the weak are the supports of life, and the hard and strong are the disciples of death” (Roth, 2010a: 60–61; Lau, 1992: 1/5/6–7).
24. Elsewhere in the chapter, spirit operates as the superior complement to bodily form *xing* 形, implying a substantive hierarchy of yang spirit over yin body (Lau, 1992: 1/10/2–3).
25. Chapter 2 in the *Huainanzi* also hints at this relationship, connecting stillness (*jing* 靜) to the cultivation of nature (*xing* 性) and emptiness (*xu* 虛) to the nourishing of virtue (*de* 德). *Xing* also appears in connection with spirit (*shen* 神), summoned through stillness. This *xing*, yet to be identified with yang, is actually more associated with the qualities of stillness that lead to life than life itself. Even so, one sees that *xing*, virtue, and *shen* somehow respond to stillness, emptiness, and non-activity. Among these, *shen* and virtue are linked with the “yang” of life and Heaven (Lau, 1992: 1 2/17/8, 2/18/11–12, 2/12/22–23).
26. The mutual and complementary roles of Heaven and Earth undeniably coexist with the hierarchical preference for spirit in the following selections. “Therefore, the essential spirit (*jingshen* 精神) is of Heaven; the skeletal system (*guhui* 骨骸) is of Earth ... the Sages model themselves on Heaven and accord with their genuine response (*qing* 情) ... through the stillness of Heaven they become pure. Through the stability of Earth they become calm. Among the myriad beings, those who lose this perish” (Roth, 2010b: 240–241; Lau, 1992: 7/54/25–7/55/2).
27. This translation modifies Roth’s.

28. Roth follows the original *Zhuangzi* passage and translates it as: “In their life, act in accord with Heaven; in their death, transform with other things. In tranquility, share the Potency of the yin; in activity, share the surge of the yang” (Roth, 2010b: 246; Lau, 2000: 13/34/27–28). This reading suggests complementarity instead of oppositionality.
29. One finds a common contrast of *tianshi* 天施 “Heaven enacts” and *dihua* 地化 “Earth transforms,” possibly reformulated here as *tianxing* 天行 and *wuhua* 物化. *Chunqiu fanlu* has a related phrase occurring twice: “Heaven’s virtue enacts (*shi* 施), Earth’s virtue transforms (*hua* 化), and human virtue accords (*yi* 義)” (Lau, 1994: 13.2/58/23, 17.5/85/9). Later, something similar appears in the *Hanshu*: “The three governing main threads are Heaven enacting, Earth transforming, and humans serving” (Zhonghua shuju bianjibu, 1962: 21a:961).
30. A *Zhuangzi* citation in “Jingshen” further confirms that stillness is indeed yin (Roth, 2010b: 7/56/28–29).
31. This theory’s popularity is attested by the *Baihutong*, which defines *xing* as the “manifestation of yang” and emotion as the “transformations of yin.” Elaborating on Dong Zhongshu, it says: “Yang *qi* is benevolence and yin *qi* is greed. So, emotions signify profit and desire, and nature indicates benevolence” (Lau, 1995a: 30/56/23–25).
32. We require this foreign language of “mode” and “substance” because one cannot describe this division with the more common Chinese binaries like *ti* 體 (substance/structure) and *yong* 用 (function) or *li* 理 (principle) and *qi* 氣 (substance). Tadd (2013: 98–108) has previously argued this in detail.
33. Imposing a “Western” categorical division onto early Chinese thought is one potentially dangerous critique of this heuristic. Hall and Ames (1995: 134), for example, have famously argued that the correlative thought of China is foundationally related to “process” in contrast to Western fixation on “substance.” They might then accept the category of mode, related to process, but would be skeptical about considering a distinct “substance.” While a more fully integrated “process” model with complementary and correlated mode and substance may describe Dong Zhongshu’s thought (though counter arguments still remain), for Heshanggong the heuristic division reflects the tension of conflicting hierarchies of value in his syncretic cosmology. Tadd (2013: 434–36) has previously argued this in more detail.
34. Heshanggong takes the perennially opaque passage “The valley spirit never dies. This refers to the profound and female (*xuan pin* 玄牝)” and unpacks the last two characters as the keys to the bodily-self’s structure and cultivation (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 6.2C/37/3–4).
35. Many other examples of this inner cultivation practice can be found in *Heshanggong* (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 1.12C/29/24, 5.5C/36/7, 11.1C/44/8, 12.6C/46/8, 14.13C/50/9, 15.8C/51/25).
36. The original text appears in italic type with the commentary in roman type. All *Heshanggong* translations rely on the *Daozang* edition (DZ 682) as the base text, while also including variants from 37 other received editions identified in the work of Yamashiro Yoshiharu and Zheng Chenghai (Yamashiro, 2006; Zheng, 1971). To facilitate easy reference, D. C. Lau and Chen Fong-ching (1996) ICS edition will continue to be cited. Tadd (2013: 444–572) has previously prepared a full translation of the commentary with complete notes on textual variants.
37. Sarah Queen (1997: 206) identifies a noteworthy contrast between the Daoist or Huang-Lao approach to correlation and the more Confucian version. She sees these two stances even within the attributed writings of Dong Zhongshu. First, she asserts that Dong’s more “correlative” approach seeks to align with the cosmos and reflects the Huang-Lao proclivities of Emperor Jingdi (r. 157–141 BCE). Second, she notes a more “interactive” ritual model during the reign of Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE). While this may cursorily resemble the present analysis, even in the more “Daoist” system of “alignment” with the cosmos Dong Zhongshu still promotes the matching of behavior (mode) and substance: the yang ruler must be active and dominant to “align” with the qualities of Heaven.
38. This comment is possibly corrupted. Instead of *yuanyi* 元氣, some editions have *wuwei* 無為, *yuanyuan* 元元, or *wu* 無 as the gloss for the One. Tadd (2013: 510), Yamashiro (2006: 799), and Zheng (1971: 247) offer further coverage on this issue.
39. Alan Chan (1991: 130–131) suggests Heshanggong’s use of the One helps resolve some of the ambiguity concerning the relations of the Way and the One in the original *Daodejing*. He sees this One as the “mate-

- rially conceived” virtue or original breath (*qi*) of the Way, something which enables the transcendent Way to manifest in the world.
40. Chapters 1 and 6 explain that a human’s *qi* comes from Heaven (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 1.10C/29/15, 6.2C/37/4).
 41. The identification of the Way with these qualities appears in many locations (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 23.6C/66/27, 40.2C/97/17, 25.10C/70/25, 77.1C/155/20, 4.2C/34/13, 37.1C/89/24, 59.2C/128/12).
 42. For examples of this common position, see the essays in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe’s volume on this very topic, as well as Chad Hansen’s work (Kjellberg & Ivanhoe, 1996; Hansen, 2000).
 43. Chapter 1 defines the “named” *youming* 有名 as Heaven and Earth, noting they are named because of markers like yin and yang (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 1.6C/28/28). Following this logic, the unnamed Way could not include the actual pair, only the yin potential that awaits yang manifestation.
 44. Chapter 15 links total inclusivity with the yin qualities of emptiness and namelessness, while chapter 25 binds it to the Way (Lau & Chen, 1996a: 15.10C/52/1, 25.10C/70/25).
 45. Mark Csikszentmihalyi (1994: 193) contends that the emergence of the concept “Way of Heaven” relates to the shift from a more anthropomorphic “Heaven” to one more rationalized and mechanized, which could be modeled by humans. R. P. Peerenboom (1993: 54) argues that the Way is the unity, the ontological source, and standard of all things, with the “Way of Heaven” indicating its natural order. Liu Xiaogan considers Heaven as the focus of Huang-Lao and the Way as Laozi’s core term (Liu, 1985: 77). If Liu is correct, *Heshangong* represents a consolidation of Huang-Lao and Laoist thought. More likely, these terms were constantly contested and *Heshangong* presents only one specific position.
 46. Tadd (2013: 116–259) has previously offered a more complete explication on the methods and purpose of this transformation.

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