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THE ROUND WAY

The following excerpt is perhaps the most eloquent expression in Chinese — among a great many — of the notion that the state is a microcosm, a miniature replica of the universe. This is a great document of natural philosophy, but its aim — to justify a political hierarchy that separates ruler and officials — is obvious. Much Han writing on conceptions of Nature lies in the same tradition and is equally political in intent. In this sense scientific theory and political theory were invented in tandem. Like the rest of the book, this excerpt also surrounds the emperor himself with arcana, drawn here from a lost *Book of the Yellow Lord*.

The opening of this chapter explains why one speaks of the Way of Heaven as round and that of Earth as square, but its argument is tailored to its own themes. This contrast was a familiar one in the third century B.C.E. It probably originated in the astronomer's difference between measuring locations in the sky in degrees radiating from the North Pole and those on the Earth in linear distances north and south, east and west. But it also came to stand for the overarching magnanimity of Heaven in distinction to the boundedness of Earth. Heaven and round became the yang in relation to the yin of Earth and squareness. By calling on these yin-yang correspondences Lü implies that ruler and subordinates are inherently complementary, not antagonistic, opposites. Yang is creative, yin receptive, and neither can be realized except by interaction with the other.

But as this symbolism separated Heaven and Earth, they were reunited by the mediation of man, above all of the emperor. When a later book writes of the sage

1. *Lüshi chunqiu*, lan 5:2, p. 1049.

emperor as "bearing the round on his head and treading on the square, holding to the measuring-rod and sleeping with the surveyor's cord,"² it is invoking ritualistic images of symmetry and order.

The Way of Heaven is round; the way of Earth is square. The sage kings took this as their model, basing on it [the distinction between] above and below. How do we explain the roundness of Heaven? The essential *qi* alternately moves up and down,³ completing a cycle and beginning again, delayed by nothing; that is why we speak of the way of Heaven as round. How do we explain the squareness of Earth? The ten thousand things are distinct in category and shape. Each has its separate responsibility [as an official does], and cannot carry out that of another; that is why one speaks of the way of Earth as square. When the ruler grasps the round and his ministers keep to the square, so that round and square are not interchanged, his state prospers.

Day and night make up a cycle; this is the Round Way. The threading of the moon through its twenty-eight lodges, so that Horn and Axletree are connected; this is the Round Way.⁴ As the essences [of yin and yang] move through the four seasons, alternately upward and downward, they encounter each other; this is the Round Way.⁵ Something stirs and burgeons; burgeoning, it is born; born, it grows; growing, it matures; mature, it declines; declining, it dies; dead, it becomes latent [preceding another birth]; this is the Round Way.

The *qi*, as clouds, moves westward, always in motion, not slackening winter or summer. The streams flow eastward, never stopping night or day. What is above never dries up; what is below never fills; the smaller makes up the larger; the heavy makes up the light. That is the Round Way.⁶

The [*Book of the*] *Yellow Lord* says, "The Lord [of Heaven (*Tian*)] does not abide in a single place. If he had such a place he would have no place," by which it means he never stumbles. That is the Round Way.⁷

Human beings have nine orifices. If [the *qi*] abides in a single one, eight will be depleted. If eight are depleted for a very long time, the body will die. If

2. *Wenzi zuan yi* in *Ershier zi*, 29 a-b.

3. This refers to the movements of the energies that correspond to the seasons. See the next paragraph.

4. In the customary enumeration of the lunar lodges — the twenty-eight divisions of the solar, lunar, and planetary paths — Horn (roughly, Virgo) is the first and Axletree (roughly, Corvus) the last. Thus the motion of the moon ties the succession of lodges, and of the constellations they organize, into a cycle.

5. The sentence may also refer to the heavenly bodies considered as pure *qi*.

6. The customary explanation of this riddle is that what is above and smaller is the streams; what is below and larger is the sea; what is heavy is water; and what is light is clouds. Here one suspects that what is above is the clouds.

7. The reference is possibly to the cyclic tours of gods through the universe, which play an important role in astrology and other kinds of divination.

while acknowledging someone we listen, our acknowledgment may falter. If while listening we look, we may stop listening. This refers to concentrating on one thing. In doing so one does not want to stagnate, for stagnation results in failure. That is the Round Way.

The One is most exalted of all. No one knows its source. No one knows its incipient form (*duan*). No one knows its beginning. No one knows its end. Still the myriad things take it as their progenitor. The sage kings took it as their model in order to perfect their natures, to settle their vital forces, and to form their commands.

A command issues from the ruler's mouth. Those in official positions receive it and carry it out, never resting day and night. It moves unimpeded all the way down. It permeates the people's hearts and propagates to the four quarters [of the realm]. Completing the circle, it reverts to the place of the ruler. That is the Round Way. As the command goes round,⁸ it makes possible what is impossible⁹ and makes good what is not good, so that nothing impedes it. That nothing impedes it is because the Way of the ruler penetrates. Thus the command is what the ruler makes his life, and what determines his moral character and security.

People have a body with four limbs. Their ability to control it depends on their awareness when it responds to something. If they are not aware of its response, they are unable to control their body with its four limbs. The same is true of one's ministers. If there is a command and they do not respond to it, one will no longer be able to control them. To have them and not control them is worse than not having them. The ruler is one who must control what he does not own. This was true even of Shun, Yu, Tang, and Wu.¹⁰

When the Former Kings appointed high officials, they insisted that they be upright [literally, "square and correct"], in order to keep their responsibilities definite, so that [the ruler] would not be obstructed by those below. Yao and Shun were worthy rulers. They took worthies as their successors, for they were unwilling to bestow [the kingdom] on their own sons and grandsons. Still, in appointing high officials, they insisted that they be upright.¹¹ Nowadays the rulers of men insist merely that the succession not be lost, so that they can bestow [the kingdom] on their own sons and grandsons. When they appoint high officials they cannot demand that they be upright, for their own selfish

8. Here *ling yuan* literally means "the order rounds." But in this context it also implies "as the order accords with the Round Way." *Yuan* also can mean "complete" or "perfect," further enriching the implication.

9. The text at the same time means "makes the impermissible permissible."

10. Exemplary rulers from legendary prehistory to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty.

11. This sentence is ambiguous, but presumably it means that even exemplary rulers, although not as dependent on their ministers as weaker monarchs would be, insisted on moral probity in their officials.

desires have thrown [the state] into chaos. Why is that so? Because their desires extend so much further than their awareness.

Now [in music] the Five Modes always stimulate a response in each other, because their differences are precise. Each of the five keeps to its place, for the modes are attuned and balanced, and cannot conflict. That is why they are always receptive to each other.

The appointment of officials by a worthy ruler is similar to this. When each of the hundred officials¹² keeps to his responsibilities and puts his own affairs in order to await [the judgment of] the ruler, the ruler will not fail to be secure. Governed in this way, no state will fail to benefit. Forestalled in this way, no disaster will have a way to happen.

[*Lüshi chunqiu jiao shi* 3:5, pp. 171-173 — NS]

The Huang-Lao Silk Manuscripts (Huang-Lao boshu)

During the first six decades of the Han dynasty, a philosophy called Huang-Lao, named after the mythical Yellow Emperor Huangdi and the sage Laozi, was the predominant influence at the imperial court. It seems to have completely disappeared, however, after the ascendancy of Confucianism under Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 B.C.E.) beginning in 136 B.C.E. Known from terse references in historical writings, it was said to advocate a central government controlled by a ruler who had achieved profound states of tranquillity and who governed by taking no intentional action (*wuwei*), concepts found in the *Daodejing*.¹³ It was said to be the product of a master-disciple lineage that reached back for more than a century before the Han dynasty began, but scholars were unable to identify any extant texts as having come from this lineage.

The situation changed dramatically in 1973 with the announcement of the discovery of a major cache of texts at a tomb excavation near the village of Mawangdui, close to the present-day city of Changsha in Hunan province. Among the silk scrolls unearthed at this tomb, which had been closed in 168 B.C.E., were two manuscripts of the *Daodejing* and four texts of varying lengths that were attached to one of them. The four became quite controversial when Chinese scholars initially identified them as the *Huangdi sijing* (*Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor*), lost for almost two thousand years. Amid the flurry of scholarship generated by this discovery, questions were raised about the precise identification of these texts with this lost work. Because of these questions we shall refer to them as the *Huang-Lao Silk Manuscripts* (*Huang-Lao boshu*). Many scholars have taken these works as the first concrete textual evidence of the long-lost Huang-Lao lineage.

12. I.e., "all officials."

13. See ch. 5.