The ancient Chinese city as a cosmological symbol

Paul Wheatley

The following notes are designed, in keeping with the purpose of the rest of this part of the investigation, only to draw attention to those symbolic features which link the early Chinese city — and indeed its successors — to the general course of world urbanism.

The *locus classicus* for the layout of Chinese capitals was the *K'ao-kung Chi,* a document with some claim to antiquity which was substituted for a lost section of the *Chou-Li* by Liu-Hsiang during the second half of the first century BC. The relevant passage reads as follows [Chüan 12, f. 14 recto of the 1886 edition]:

> The artificers [lit. carpenters] demarcated the [Royal Chou] capital as a square with sides of 9 *li*, each side having 3 gateways. Within the capital there were 9 meridional and 9 latitudinal avenues, each of the former being 9 chariot-tracks in width.

It will be remarked at once that this idealized urban plan relied on the same principle of subdivision as the old well-field system of land settlement. In this system, it is alleged, eight peasant families each cultivated their own holding (*ssu-t'ien*), at the same time as all joined together to cultivate a centrally located demesne tract belonging to the lord (*kung-t'ien*). However, whereas the latter resulted in eight units arranged about a central tract, the layout advocated in the *K'ao-kung Chi* was a more complicated affair of sixteen quarters or wards. There was, moreover, no central unit, only a group of four fulfilling that role, and occupying not a ninth, but a quarter, of the total area. It was also possible to space the nine internal avenues regularly only by allowing two of them to run along the outer walls of the city. In Ch'ang-an, the T'ang capital which approximated most closely of all Chinese cities to the canonical prescription, no attempt was made to achieve an equidistant spacing of the meridional arteries. Instead the arrangement depicted in figure 1 (p. 149) was adopted. Even though this schema was subsequently employed, sometimes in much modified form, in the layout of all the great capitals, and is particularly evident in Ch'ang-an (whence it was copied first at Nara, and subsequently at Kyōtō, Lo-yang, K'ai-feng, Nan-ching, Hang-chou, and, of course, Pei-ching [Peking], I had suspected that the text of the *K'ao-kung Chi* might have incorporated a confusion between the postulated nine meridional and nine latitudinal *avenues* of the city and the nine *units* of the well-field system. It was tempting to suppose that the ideal-type city should have originally comprised a regular nonary layout of eight sectors, pivoted about a central unit consisting of one-ninth of the total area. Nor was it difficult to imagine how the vicissitudes of transmission would have facilitated such a corruption of the text. That this may not have been the case is implied by the fact that the canonically sanctioned urban form prescribed for the Indian culture realm by the *Arthaśāstra* is identical with that enjoined by the *K'ao-kung Chi*. Although the *Arthaśāstra* has traditionally been attributed to Kauṭilya, chief minister to Candragupta Maurya, modern views as to the date of this work differ widely. What is perhaps the best opinion holds that it was an immediately pre-Guptan elaboration of an original Mauryan compilation. But, although the *Arthaśāstra* may have been roughly

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COMMUNITY SCALE		I	II	III	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
EKISTIC UNITS		ANTHROPOS	ROOM	HOUSE	HOUSE GROUP	SMALL NEIGHBORHOOD	NEIGHBORHOOD	SMALL POLIS	POLIS	SMALL METROPOLIS	METROPOLIS	SMALL MEGALOPOLIS	MEGALOPOLIS	SMALL EPERopolis	EPERopolis	ECUMENOPOLIS
ELEMENTS	NATURE															
	ANTHROPOS								●	●						
	SOCIETY								●	●						
	SHELLS															
	NETWORKS															
SYNTHESIS: HUMAN SETTLEMENTS									●	●						

contemporary with the *K'ao-kung Chi*, the urban form which it prescribed was certainly much older. A rather similar layout appears to have been used in the construction of the Indus city of Mohenjo-daro (fig. 2). Subsequently, however, Indian city planners seem to have preferred the "well-field" layout, such as is exemplified in the ground plan of Śiśupālgarh in Orissa, a city which has been dated to the first and second centuries AD, and numerous temple-cities of later times such as Śrīrangam, Madurai, and Tiruvannamalai. I am not sure what is the precise relationship between these two bases of city-planning, but clearly both were expressions of basically similar attitudes towards the ordering of urban space[1] and it is this topic which we shall now take up.

Underpinning urban form not only in traditional China but also throughout most of the rest of Asia, and with somewhat modified aspect in the New World, was a complex of ideas to which René Berthelot has given the name of astrobiology.[2] Berthelot sees this mode of thought, which presupposes an intimate parallelism between the mathematically expressible régimes of the heavens and the biologically determined rhythms of life on earth (as manifested conjointly in the succession of the seasons and the annual cycles of plant regeneration), as characteristic of that phase of social and intellectual development intervening between the stages of preurban folk society, with its intensely personal participant apprehension of phenomena on the one hand, and, on the other, modern industrial society with its predilection for reducing individual events to types subject to universal laws.[3] It was, therefore, the style of thought associated with the phase of traditional urbanism. Some important elements in the system, particularly those associated with the delimitation of space, had been incorporated from a still earlier phase, which Berthelot subsumes under the term *bio-astrale,* and some have persisted under various more or less deceptive guises into the modern world; but preeminently this was the mode of thought into which were fitted the new patterns of social and spatial organization which we associate with the Urban Revolution. Berthelot was almost certainly correct in looking to Mesopotamia for the earliest expression of these ideas, but I am less readily disposed to concur in his suggestion that the conception of the parallelism of macrocosmos and microcosmos derived originally from the haruspicy [divination by inspection of entrails. Ed.] practiced in the ancient Near East.[4]

I hold it to be at least as likely that haruspicy was itself but one manifestation of an already well-established and pervasive intellectual order. Moreover, some of these beliefs were as ancient as man himself; they were beliefs that had taken their rise coevally with the human mind, and had become so inextricably interwoven with the pattern of human thought that they were not consciously recognized as beliefs at all. Rather they inhered in the texture of life itself, so that symbolism was the natural and universal mode of thought. The divine, as Walter Otto phrased it in connection with another early civilization, was "neither a justifying explanation of the natural course of the world nor an interruption and abolition of it; it was itself the natural course of the world."[5] In any case, for present purposes we can restrict our remarks to those aspects of this system of beliefs which relate to the ordering of space. In general terms the rationale of this mode of thought was something as follows.

For the ancients, who conceived the natural world as an extension of their own personalities and who consequently apprehended it in terms of human experience, the "real" world transcended the pragmatic realm of textures and geometrical space, and was perceived schematically in terms of an extramundane, sacred experience. Only the sacred was "real" and the "purely secular — insofar as it could be granted to exist at all — was the purely trivial."[6] By means of rites dramatizing the inception of the universal order, ritual specialists sought to establish an ontological link between the realm of the sacred and the realm of the profane. Although all religions dramatize their conceptions of world origins in this way, Erich Isaac, in a prescient discussion of the role of religion in ecological adaptation, has discerned a polarity in regard to their power of landscape transformation.[7] For those faiths which derive the meaning of human existence from revelation no site is, apart from a possible incidental soteriological sanctity, intrinsically more holy than another. The divine, in other words, is abstracted from the landscape, and those rites reactualizing the specific event which sanctioned human order have comparatively little direct effect on the landscape. On the other hand, those religions which hold that human order was brought into being at the creation of the world tend to dramatize the cosmogony by reproducing on earth a reduced version of the cosmos. Sacrality (which is synonymous with reality) is achieved through the imitation of a celestial archetype, as a result of which such religions can be powerful transformers of landscape, sometimes to an extreme degree. Throughout the continent of Asia, where this latter category of religious dramatization was strongly represented, there was thus a tendency for kingdoms, capitals, temples, shrines, and so forth, to be constructed as replicas of the cosmos. Mircea Eliade has illustrated this point with a plethora of examples drawn primarily from the architecture, epigraphy, and literature of the ancient Near East and India, and numerous others could be adduced from Southeast Asia[8] and Nuclear America.[9] In the astrobiological mode of thought, irregularities in the cosmic order could only be interpreted as misfortunes, so that, if a city were laid out as an *imago mundi* with the cosmogony as paradigmatic model, it became necessary to maintain this parallelism between macrocosmos and microcosmos by participation in the

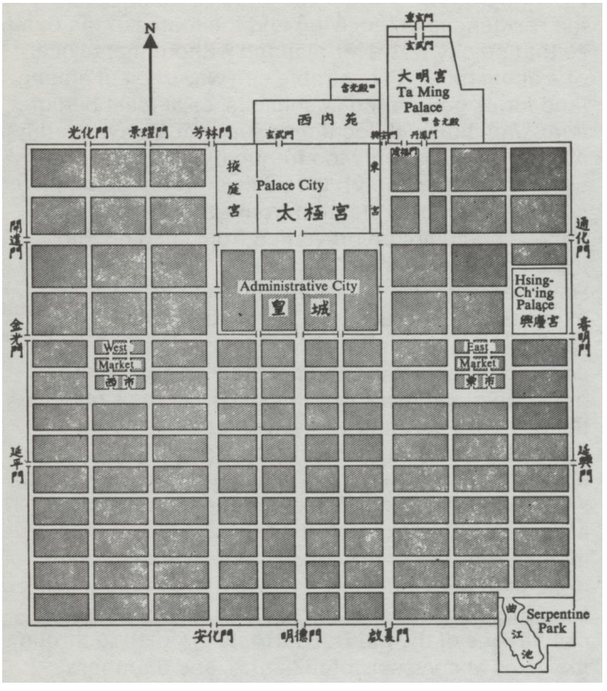

Fig. 1: T'ang Ch'ang-an. Based on a plan in Ma Te-chih, 'T'ang-tai Ch'ang-an Ch'eng k'ao-ku chi-lüeh,' *K'ao-ku,* no. 11 (1963), plate 2.

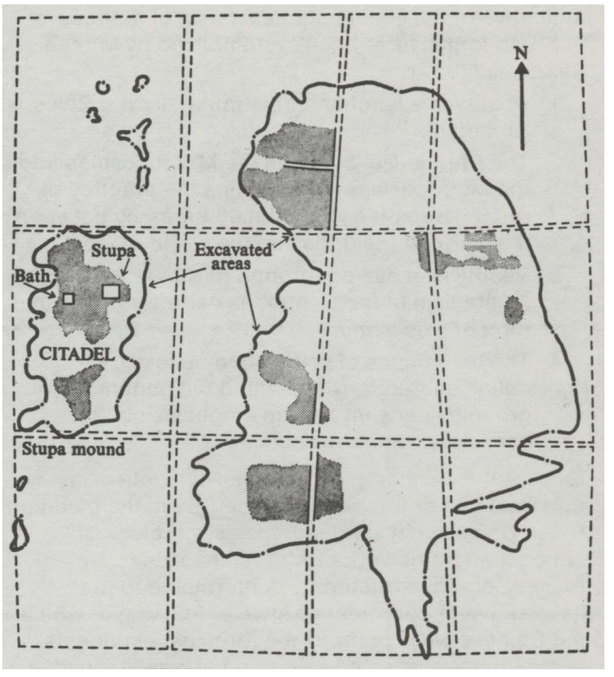

Fig. 2: A reconstruction of the probable ground plan of Mohenjo-daro. Redrawn from Stuart Piggott, *Some Ancient Cities of India* (Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 14.

seasonal festivals that constituted man's contribution to the regulation of cyclic time, and by incorporating in the planning a generous amount of symbolism.

Associated with this transcendental schema was the realization that, although the whole world was the handiwork of the gods, its maximum potential sacredness was realizable at only a few points. Before territory could be inhabited, it had to be sacralized, that is cosmicized. Its consecration signified its "reality" and, therefore, sanctioned its habitation; but its establishment as an imitation of a celestial archetype required its delimitation and orientation as a sacred territory within the continuum of profane space. This could be effected only in relation to a fixed point, namely the village, city, or territory of the particular group, whence the sacred *habitabilis* necessarily took its birth (unsanctified, that is "unreal" territory being uninhabitable), and whence it spread outwards in all directions. This central point, this focus of creative force, was thus quintessentially sacred, and as such the place where communication was likely to be effected most expeditiously between cosmic planes, between earth and heaven on the one hand, and between earth and the underworld on the other. And through this point of ontological transition passed the axis of the world, normally symbolized by a pillar (*universalis columna*), a tree, vine or other plant (the Tree of Knowledge in both its Semitic and Mayan hierophanies; the *Chien-mu*; Yggdrasil; the shaman's sapling) or, most commonly of all, a mountain (Mount Meru of Indian mythology). This central axis of the universe, of the kingdom, the city, or the temple could be moved to a more propitious site or duplicated whenever circumstances rendered this desirable, for it was an attribute of existential rather than of geometrical space. From this point, the holy of holies at whichever hierarchical level it might occur, the four horizons were projected outwards to the cardinal points of the compass, thus assimilating the group's territory, whether tribal land, kingdom, or city, to the cosmic order, and constructing a sanctified space or *habitabilis*. The sacred space delimited in this manner within the continuum of profane space provided the framework within which could be conducted the rituals necessary to ensure that intimate harmony between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos without which there could be no prosperity in the world of men. As the *Li-Chi* puts it, "Rites obviate disorder as dikes prevent inundation."

These basic modes of symbolism which are manifested in the ideal-type city of much of the traditional world, that is preeminently the capital city, and which are

indicative of the cosmo-magical basis of that genre of urban forms, have been systematized by Mircea Eliade as follows:

1. Reality is a function of the Imitation of a Celestial Archetype.
2. The Parallelism between the Macrocosmos and the Microcosmos necessitates the practice of ritual ceremonies to maintain harmony between the world of the gods and the world of men.
3. Reality is achieved through participation in the Symbolism of the Center, as expressed by some form of *axis mundi*.
4. The techniques of orientation necessary to define sacred territory within the continuum of profane space involve an emphasis on the cardinal compass directions.[10]

Each of these modes of traditional symbolism is apparent to a greater or lesser degree in the planning of the Chinese city. Indeed, the astrobiological conceptual framework of which these ideas are an expression was structurally conformable to the associative or coordinative style of thinking of which the Chinese were perhaps the foremost exponents. In fact, it might even be said that the preestablished harmony of the Chinese universe, which was achieved when all beings spontaneously followed the internal necessities of their own nature, and which led Chinese philosophers to seek reality in relation rather than in substance, represented the most sophisticated expression of astrobiological concepts ever attained by any people. But this is by the way. What is beyond dispute is that the symbolic framework is clearly evident in those cities, Pei-ching [Peking] preeminent among them, which, although laid out in traditional times, have persisted into the modern world, and is scarcely less visible in the archeological record relating to others.

The cosmo-magical element in Chinese city planning

Geomantic precautions: Like architects in other realms of Asia, Chinese city planners were well aware that the fortunes of a city could be assured only if its site were adapted to the local currents of the cosmic breath (*ch'i*). These local influences (*hsing-shih*), the dynamic powers of the *genius loci,* were modified from place to place by the morphology of terrain and from hour to hour by the dispositions and conjunctions of heavenly bodies. The analysis of the morphological and spatial expressions of *ch'i* in the surface features of the earth constituted the pseudoscience of *feng-shui,* the art of adjusting the features of the cultural landscape so as to minimize adverse influences and derive maximum advantage from favorable conjunction of forms. Expertise in this art, which was a prerogative of diviners known as *k'an-yü chia,* was of crucial importance in siting the residences of the living and the tombs of the dead, so that no city was ever planned without the advice of a geomancer. A desirable site was one set among land forms generating auspicious, or at least benign, *feng-shui,* but such locations were not always readily available, so that only too frequently the geomancers were forced to concern themselves with the negative consideration of protection from evil influences or, if these could not be prevented from seeping into the city, allowing them to drain out of the area. However, not even unpropitious siting was wholly irremediable, for judicious excavation could both remove isolated boulders or hillocks, which were considered unlucky, and open new channels for the drainage of undesirable influences. At the same time, the selective planting of trees and shrubs could convert the contours of an inappropriately rounded eminence, a manifestation of superabundant *yin*, into an abrupt *yang*-denoting scarp face, or, of course, effect the reverse transformation. Continual modulations in the flow of *ch'i* naturally rendered it difficult to distinguish the results of poor initial siting from the misfortunes consequent upon subsequent oscillations of the natural currents circulating through the veins and vessels of the earth, and doubtless served to conceal not a few erroneous interpretations of *feng-shui.* A good example of the uncertainties in *feng-shui* interpretation is afforded by the movements of the capital of the Protectorate-General (Second Class) of the Pacified South [*An-nam Chung-tu Hu-fu*], that is present-day Tong-king, as preserved in certain Vietnamese sources. Despite the fact that the capital of Dại-la (MSC = T'ai-lo) had been laid out on a cosmic plan as recently as the end of the eighth century AD, by 825 the geomancers had come to realize that the Bắc river, flowing to the northward of the city, was an unpropitious stream, an instrument through which evil influences of the north were being channeled into the district, where they bred revolt in the minds of the populace. The experts then chose a new site within the environs of present-day Há-nội, but, some months after construction had recommenced, the geomancers announced that the desirable location was now on the opposite bank of the river, where the new capital was in fact eventually erected.

Because of the nature of the evidence on which we have to rely, there is no direct record of geomancy in the service of city planning in Shang times, but there are ample indications that the Chou chroniclers did not consider it anachronistic to attribute divinatory measures to Shang architects. In the Ode *Wen-Wang yu sheng* [Mao CCXLIV], which forms part of the *Shang-Sung,* we read that:

> He who took the omens was the King (Wu)
> He took up his residence in the capital [called] Hao;
> It was the tortoise[-shell] oracle which decided the matter.

Again in the Ode *Mien* [Mao CCXXXVII] there is an alleged recollection of the founding of the first Chou

capital in the Wei valley by Duke Tan-Fu which incorporates a reference to divination.

> The plain of Chou was wide and fertile,
> Even the *chin* and *t'u* plants were [sweet] as honeycakes.
> And so he set to work, and so he devised a scheme.
> He notched our tortoise[-shells],
> Which indicated that this was the place and time.
> And that houses should be built here.

These are by no means the only references to divination in the service of site selection in ancient China. There are, in fact, others in the *Shih-Ching* itself, notably the mention of an auspicious tortoise oracle consulted prior to the construction of a new Wei capital in 658 BC, and in succeeding centuries the practice is recorded with ever-increasing frequency.

Cardinal orientation and axiality: Prominent among the morphological features which the ideal-type Chinese city shared with a majority of the great capitals of Asia were cardinal orientation, cardinal axiality, and a more or less square perimeter delimited by a massive wall. In China this schema, glimpsed even in the plans of some of the earliest cities,[11] was most apparent in the design of the imperial capitals, but even the smaller *hsien* cities usually exhibited the rudiments of cardinal axiality and orientation. The *fang-chih* contain numerous plans and representations of cities whose spatial form was distorted by the need to adapt to exigencies of terrain, but invariably some attempt was made to preserve these two elements of cosmic symbolism. The development of extra-mural suburbs often brought radical change in the shape of a perimeter, but this was, as it were, the putting on of flesh by a healthy urban organism, and seldom obscured the structural skeleton established at the birth of the city. Perhaps the best example of an imperial capital where the full expression of the cosmic pattern was severely repressed by an intractable terrain is afforded by Hang-Chou.[12] During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries this city was squeezed onto a neck of land, approximately half a mile in width, between the West Lake and the Che river, but even here, and although the rulers of the Southern Sung euphemistically referred to their adopted capital as Hsing-Tsai or the Temporary Abode, every effort was made to maintain the roughly rectangular form and approximate cardinal orientation that had characterized the original seventh-century ramparts; while the congestion and disorder of a century of rapid change that transformed this provincial town into the most populous city in the world failed to disrupt the axial predominance of the Imperial Way, the great thoroughfare that ran longitudinally through the city (fig. 3).[13]

Although the urban forms of China and of the other great culture realms of Asia were, even though mediated through very different cultural traditions, expressions of closely related attitudes towards the cosmological ordering of space, there was a difference

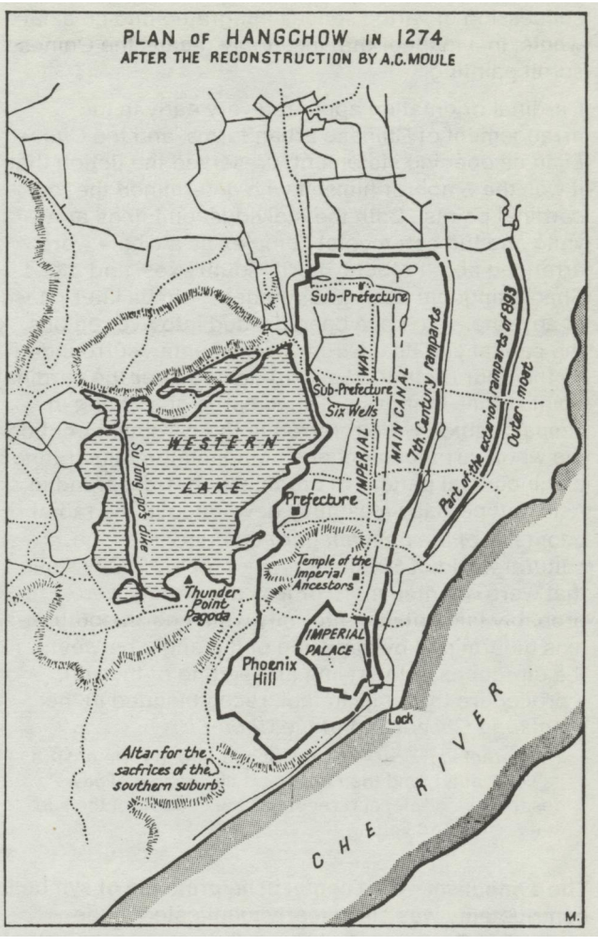

Fig. 3: Plan of Hangchow in 1274 after the reconstruction by A.G. Moule (from *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion 1250-1275* by Jacques Gernet [Allen and Unwin, 1962])

of emphasis in one important feature of their plans. In the Chinese city the main processional axis running from south to north, "the celestial meridian writ small," was of much greater significance than any avenue running from east to west. Along this axis were ranged the most important official buildings. Without exception, in the imperial capitals these faced south, but, as would be expected, there were occasional deviations from this precept in cities of a lower order.

It should be noted in passing that the function of the north-south axis in the Chinese city was quite different from that of the vista avenue in the Baroque city of Europe. Whereas the latter was designed to impress by the prospect it afforded of a distant architectural feature of central importance, the Chinese processional way was of symbolic rather than visual significance. In fact, its full sweep was never revealed at one time or from one point. It was not so much a vista as a

succession of varied spaces integrated into an axial whole, in a manner that inevitably recalls the Chinese scroll painting.

Cardinal orientation appeared very early in the arrangement of Chinese urban forms, and the *Chou-Li*, in its opening statement, preserved the fiction that it was the Emperor himself who determined the four cardinal points. Both the individual buildings at An-yang and the ceremonial complex as a whole were arranged about roughly north-south axes, and the Shang kingdom itself was reputed — in its later phase at any rate — to have been divided into five regions: the capital and its environs at the center, surrounded by the Four Districts (*Ssu-t'u*) named after the cardinal points of the compass. The suburbs of a Shang in similar fashion were referred to the cardinal directions, the whole arrangement and nomenclature illustrating a quincuncial pattern of organization widespread in Asia, but perhaps most fully developed in the radial geometry of the *pañcanāgara* that pervaded the cultural world of Southeast Asia proper.[14] City walls that were oriented more or less accurately were probably laid out in conformity with a north-south axis determined by bisection of the angle between the directions of the rising and setting of the sun, a procedure that was, in fact, recommended in the *K'ao-kung Chi* section of the *Chou-Li:*

> They erected a post, took the plumb-line to it [to ensure its verticality], and then observed its shadow. They described a circle, and recorded the shadow of the sun at its rising and setting.[15]

The symbolism of the center: The principle of symbolic centripetality was also clearly manifested in the traditional Chinese city, though the cosmo-magical basis was there transmuted in its expression through stylized, specifically Han-Chinese cultural forms. The essential Asian mode of urban design was, as it were, refracted through the lens of a Great Tradition whose primary concern was with the ordering of society in this world rather than with personal salvation in a future life. As a result the centrally situated temple of the archetypal South Indian and Southeast Asian city was replaced in the Chinese realm by the seat of secular authority. In the case of the *hsien* city this was often the *ya-men*, not infrequently a somewhat undistinguished building, but in the imperial capitals the symbolism of the center was more strongly developed, for it was at this quintessentially sacred spot that was raised the royal palace, which corresponded to the Pole Star (*Pei-Ch'en*), the residence (at the axis of the universe, be it noted) whence T'ai-i watched over the southerly world of men.[16] In the *Chou-Li* it is explained how the official known as the *Ta-ssŭ-t'u* calculated the precise position of this *axis mundi (ti-chung),* which is there characterized as "the place where earth and sky meet, where the four seasons merge, where wind and rain are gathered in, and where *ying* and *yang* are in harmony.[17] A gnomon erected there was held to cast no shadow at the summer solstice, a belief to which there were numerous parallels in other parts of the world. The Icelandic pilgrim Nicholas of Thverva, for example, in the twelfth century reported that at Jerusalem (which was built on the rock that constituted the navel of the earth) "on the day of the summer solstice the light of the sun falls perpendicularly from Heaven."[18] Peter Comestor preserved an analogous tradition that the sun at the summer solstice cast no shadow on Jacob's Fountain, near Gerizim, as a result of which "*sunt qui dicunt locum illum esse umbilicum terrae nostrae habitabilis.*"[19] We may note in passing that the Pole Star is also situated directly above Meru, the sacred mountain that constitutes the *axis mundi* of Indian mythology,[20] as indeed it surmounts Sumbu, the holy axial mountain of the Uralo-Altaic peoples,[21] and Haraberezaiti (Elburz), sacred to the Iranians.[22]

A similar conception that first took form among the Western Semites in very ancient days was eventually absorbed into the traditions of Islam, for we find al-Kisā'ī of Kūfah, early in the ninth century, arguing that the Ka'bah constituted the culmination of terrestrial topography because, being below the Pole Star, it was consequently "over against the center of Heaven." In this instance the concept of the *omphalos* had become fused with the idea that the axis of the world was the point where earth most nearly approached Heaven, [23] a belief which found expression in the Muslim tradition that prayer was likely to be more efficacious, because more easily heard, at Mecca, the center of the universe. Furthermore, Mecca was not only the navel of the earth, *ṣurrat al-ard:* it was also the spot from which the creation of the world had been initiated.[24]

This feeling that an *omphalos* should be raised as near the heavens as possible seems to have been an almost universal concept in the traditional world, so much so in fact that the pyramid and the temple mountain became characteristic features in both the Old and the New Worlds. In ancient Mesopotamia with its ziggurats, in the Indian and Southeast Asian culture realms with their temple-mountains, in the Mexican, Mayan, and Andean territories with their pyramids, temples and shrines were raised towards the heavens, the better to facilitate communication with the divine. In not a few cases these *axes mundi* were also held to extend below the earth to establish contact with the underworld, and sundry symbolisms were devised to foster this illusion. The apparent exception to this tendency to raise the temple on a mound was the Egyptian pyramid, which was itself a tomb and not a means of elevating a temple. The analogous feature in the Nile valley was in fact the raised step at the entrance to an Egyptian temple. In ancient China the raising of important buildings on *hang-t'u* platforms is attested archeologically from Western Chou times onwards, and is confirmed by

scenes incised on bronze vessels. Such features are especially prominent in archeological remains of the old capitals of Chin in the New Fields, in the Lesser Capital of ancient ·lan (where there were more than fifty such platforms), in a former capital of Yen and in G'ân-tân, where they delineated the earliest known example of that dominance of the north-south axis which was to become an integral feature of later Chinese cities. I suspect that it may also have been this same concept of the *omphalos* reaching up to Heaven which the Taoist-inclined Emperor Wu of Han had in mind when he commanded young couples to dance on the summit of a high terrace within the precincts of his capital.[25]

This symbolism of the center is perhaps even more explicit in an oration allegedly delivered by the Duke of Chou at the founding of the city of Glâk-di̯ang (as described above):

> May the King come and assume responsibility for the work of God on High and himself serve [in this capacity] at the center of the land. I, Tan, say that, having constructed this great city and ruling from there, he shall be a counterpart to August Heaven. He shall scrupulously sacrifice to the upper and lower [spirits], and from there govern as the central pivot.
>
> [Transl. Karlgren, mod.]

Later tradition, as represented by, among other works, a second-century commentary on the *K'ao-kung Chi,* held that the Duke "established Lo-i (or Glâk-di̯ang: Lo-yang) in the center of the earth in order to govern the whole world," a statement which subsequently has often been understood by both Western and Oriental authors in a literal sense as signifying the center of the Chinese culture realm. There can be no doubt, however, that the centrality of the capital related to existential rather than to geometrical space. Finally, in the *Lun-Yü* Confucius is alleged to have remarked that, "He who exercises government by means of his moral force may be compared to the Pole Star, which keeps its [central] position while all the [other] stars do homage to [that is revolve about] it."[26] What may be less appreciated is the added force which accrues to this simile from the equatorial character (that is concentrating attention on the Pole and circumpolar stars) of Chinese astronomy as opposed to the ecliptic-emphasizing nature of Greek and medieval European astronomy, and that based on azimuth and altitude as practiced by the Arabs.[27] These passages are, of course, simply expressions of the doctrine which viewed the Emperor as the great mediator between Heaven and Earth, the Son of Heaven whose appropriate locale was at that axis of the universe which was also the axis of the kingdom and the only site for an imperial capital. In the Mencian phrase, it was the Emperor's role "To stand in the center of the earth and stabilize the people within the four seas..." [VII, A, xxi, 2]

Instances of capital cities focusing the supernatural power of a kingdom within their enceintes, and therefore symbolizing whole states, are not difficult to find in the traditional world. One of the most instructive examples is afforded by the ceremonial and administrative complex of Yasodharapura, laid out by Jayavarman VII of Cambodia at the end of the twelfth century AD. The centrally situated temple-mountain, known today as the Bàyon, consisted essentially of a central quincunx of towers, representing the five peaks of Mount Meru, axis of the world, surrounded by forty-nine smaller towers, each of which represented a province of the empire. According to Paul Mus's elucidation of the symbolism of this structure,[28] the chapels below the smaller towers housed statues of apotheosized princes and local gods connected with the provinces of the empire, so that the Bàyon as a whole constituted a pantheon of the personal and regional cults practiced in the various parts of the kingdom. By thus assembling them at the sacred axis of Kambujadeśa, the point where it was possible to effect an ontological passage between the worlds so that the royal power was continually replenished by divine grace from on high, Jayavarman brought these potentially competitive forces under his own control.

It is interesting to compare Jayavarman's efforts to concentrate the divine forces in his own capital with the ancient Roman, probably ultimately Etruscan, ritual known as the *evocatio*. Essentially this was an incantatory formula inviting the tutelary deities of a besieged city to migrate to Rome, where there would be greater scope for their powers. The Hittites had apparently practiced an analogous rite in the second millennium BC.[29] In Italy the first recorded use of the *evocatio* in 496 BC brought Castor and Pollux, twin gods of Tusculum, into the Roman pantheon.

Another instance of this *pars pro toto* relationship between capital and empire is exemplified in the symbolism associated with the Roman *pomerium.* According to Latin tradition, the founding of Rome began with the excavation round what later became the Comitium of a trench, into which were thrown the first fruits of the fields and, significantly, handfuls of earth brought from each man's home locality. The ditch itself bore the name of *Mundus* (World), "the same," so Plutarch phrases it "as that of the universe."[30] Subsequently Romulus was alleged to have marked out the compass of the future city by driving a furrow round it, carefully turning the clods inwards, "not suffering any to remain outwards," thus cosmicizing and rendering habitable the quintessentially sacred pivot about which the *Orbis Terrarum* would revolve. It was this ritually drawn line which was followed by the *pomerium.* In Republican times this was delimited by lines of stones and accounted holy, and, so far as the auspices were concerned, was adjudged the boundary between city and country. Moreover, it seems originally to have enclosed only the politico-religious community

of the Quirites, to the exclusion of the plebeian classes on the Aventine hill. What is of interest to us here is that Tacitus remarks in a passage in the *Annals* that an extension of the *pomerium* was admissible only on the grounds of an extension of the legal boundaries of the empire.[31] In other words, the *Urbs,* whose foundations incorporated soil from dependent territories, symbolized the Roman imperium. The line of the *pomerium* did, in fact, remain unchanged until the time of Sulla.

It may also be remarked parenthetically that, as late as the reign of Augustus, the *Urbs* was still considered the material manifestation of the power of empire, as is witnessed by the erection of the *Milliarium Aureum* in the Forum to mark the center of the Roman ecumene, after the first map of the empire had been completed in AD 29. And it was not fortuitous that it was from this point that the legions set out on their campaigns, bearing on their banners the cosmic power generated at the axis of the world, just as the commander of a Chinese army received his commission in the ancestral temple of the ruling house in the capital of the state, and sacrificed at the altar of the state God of the Soil before undertaking a campaign.

Stemming directly from the role of the capital city as the material manifestation of the concentrated power of the state is the widely diffused coronation rite in which the new king ceremonially circumambulates his capital. In Cambodia, for example, even in this century, the newly crowned king would take possession of Phnom Penh by marching round its perimeter "à l'imitation du monarque universal de la légende qui prit possession du monde en faisant une circumambulation le long du rivage de l'océan extérieur."[32] The cosmic symbolism of this royal circumambulation was further emphasized when the king changed both his mode of transport and his headdress at each cardinal point of the compass, so as to conform with the *vāhana* and costume of the appropriate Lokapāla. In Thailand also the new king formerly undertook a Progress *(Liap Mo'an)* round his capital, but the pious Buddhist monarch Rama IV transformed this circumambulation into a tour of the principal wats of Bangkok.[33] The same rite of circumambulation was practiced by Burmese kings, though Thibaw, the last king, chose to forego this part of his coronation for fear that a usurper might occupy his palace, the *axis mundi* of the Burmese ecumene, during his absence.[34] These Southeast Asian practices derive from the ancient Hindu rite of *pradakṣiṇa,* or delimitation of sacred space, whether shrine or capital city. There is no evidence that this rite was known in Vedic times, but both the *Agni Purāṇa* and *Mānasāra* depict the Indian coronation ceremony as concluding with the king riding round his city. The *cakravartin* also undertook a formal circuit of the *Dīpa,* a practice reminiscent of the quinquennial visitation inaugurated by the Chinese Emperor Shun to the four sacred mountains on the borders of his realm. Having thus delimited the bounds of the kingdom, in the intervening years the emperor remained in his capital, symbolizing the axis of his ecumene.[35] By beginning his peregrination at the eastern mountain in the second month and following the march of the sun (the southern mountain in the fifth month, the western in the eighth, and the northern in the eleventh month), the emperor integrated space and time, and thus coordinated the dispositions of his sanctified territory and the ordering of the calendar. Like the Khmer king, the Chinese emperor also emphasized the cosmo-magical character of his perambulation by changing his costume and carriage as he arrived at the different quarters of his realm.

This ritual encompassing of the sacred enclave occurs far beyond the cultural realms of South and East Asia. In ancient Egypt, for example, each new Pharaoh came to Memphis to perform the Circuit of the White Wall, as it was alleged Menes had when he had first laid out this sacred city, known to ancient texts as the Fulcrum of the Two Lands. In the absence of this rite the ruler could not consider himself a true Pharaoh.[36] The circular rampart traced by Romulus's plough (*designat moenia sulco*)[37] was an expression of this same need to delimit sacred space, and it is not unlikely that the ritual race of the Luperci round the Palatine Hill on February 15, which is usually categorized as a magic rite ensuring the safety of the settlement, was in fact derived from a ceremonial definition of the sacred enceinte, beyond which profane powers could not pass. Moreover, the fundamental conceptions manifested in the ceremonial progress of the Ark of the Lord round the city of Jericho, as decreed by Joshua, may have had their ultimate origin in the same desire to convert profane (hostile) space into sacred (propitious, habitable) space.[38]

There is, however, another aspect to this picture of centrality. The capital, the *axis mundi,* was also the point of ontological transition at which divine power entered the world and diffused outwards through the kingdom. When Jayavarman VII of Kambujadeśa had his own face, in the likeness of Vajradhara, carved on each of the four sides of each of the fifty-four towers of the Bàyon, he was ensuring the projection of divine power, of which he was the transmitter, to the four quarters of his kingdom. Analogous in conception was the construction of the altar to the God of the Soil in the Chou capital — or rather the manner in which Han authors believed that altar to have been constructed. According to these relatively late sources, the tumulus which denoted the axis of the world was faced with earths of colors appropriate to the cardinal directions. At his investiture a noble carried a clod of earth from that side of the sacred altar facing the direction in which

his benefice lay to the capital of his territory, where it formed the nucleus of his own altar to the God of the Soil.[39] In that way supernatural power reaching the earth at the sacred axis of the world was diffused to the four quarters through cosmo-magically sanctioned channels, so that the preordained dispositions of symbolic space were maintained and harmony prevailed in the realm. It was not fortuitous that, according to one tradition, Shun inaugurated his reign by opening the four principal, that is cardinally oriented, gates of his capital.[40]

The city gates, where power generated at the *axis mundi* flowed out from the confines of the ceremonial complex towards the cardinal points of the compass, possessed a heightened symbolic significance which, in virtually all Asian urban traditions, was expressed in massive constructions whose size far exceeded that necessary for the performance of their mundane functions of granting access and affording defense. In the architectural canons of South and Southeast Asia the cosmo-magical reason for the extraordinary size of the city gates was often explicit, and, whereas the *Mānasāra-Silpaśastra* authorized the building of religious and residential edifices only up to twelve stories in height, *gopuras* could be constructed up to sixteen or seventeen stories (chaps. 20-30 and 33). In China, on the other hand, the cosmo-magical justification for the massiveness of these structures had apparently been long forgotten. Moreover, whereas in the representative South or Southeast Asian temple-city the *gopura* often reproduced, and not always on a much reduced scale, the temple or temple-mountain at the center of the city, the kingdom and the universe, the Chinese gate-tower conformed to the same general architectural principles as did the imperial palace. Like so many other aspects of urban design, this feature is perhaps best illustrated from Pei-ching [Peking], where the Gate of Heavenly Peace at the entrance to the Imperial City overtops all buildings within the walls, and the Meridian Gate all those within the Forbidden City;[41] but the architectural prominence of the main gate-towers is a characteristic feature at all levels of the city hierarchy in China. One contrast between the South Indian temple-city and the Chinese city lies in the fact that, whereas in the construction of the former the outer and higher walls and *gopuras* were raised last of all, in the Chinese city the walls were the first architectural features to be built. Such at least is the conclusion to be derived from the Ode *Mi̱an* [Mao CCXXXVII, *q.v.*] and from the practice of later times. This means that, whereas the Indian temple-city was easily extensible, the frame and internal ordering of the Chinese city tended to be fixed, notwithstanding occasional irregular suburban development outside the walls. It also follows that all the interior space of a Chinese city was not always built over immediately after the walls had been raised, or perhaps ever.

The parallelism of macrocosmos and microcosmos: The need to maintain harmony between the world of the gods and the world of men — what A.J.L. Wensinck called the dramatic conception of nature[42] — required that man should participate in cosmic events by accompanying them with appropriate rituals. Such ceremonies, either actual or idealized, are well documented in China from Shang times onward, being epitomized in the saying of the *Li-Chi* that "in ceremonies of the grandest form there is the same hierarchical relationship as that which exists between Heaven and Earth." But in many parts of the world the coordination of natural and social forces was expressed not only ceremonially but also plastically, by laying out the capital as a model of a celestial archetype. Wensinck, Eliade, Roscher, Soustelle,[43] and others have illustrated this theme with an abundance of examples from the early Middle East and Mesoamerica. All Babylonian cities, for example, had archetypes among the constellations: Sippara in Cancer, Nineveh in Ursa Major, Assur in Arcturus, Babylon in Cetus-Aries, and so forth.

In South and Southeast Asia temple-cities were not infrequently laid out as chronograms symbolizing a sacred cosmography. Some of the more dramatic examples of capital cities designed in this way are to be found in ancient Kambujadeśa, "diagrammes magiques tracés sur le parchemin de la plaine" as they have been called.[44]

In subsequent centuries symbolism began to extend out beyond the precincts of the temple-mountain to embrace the whole of the ceremonial complex. By the beginning of the thirteenth century Jayavarman VII's capital, presently known as Aṅkor Thom, had been laid out as a representation in stone of a series of Indian cosmological myths extending over more than six square miles of ground. On the outer side of each entrance gate a file of fifty-four heavenly gods is locked in petrified contest with an equal number of gods of the underworld. It is clear from the disposition of these gods and demons that the serpent over which they are contending is twined symbolically around the temple-mountain of the Bàyon, so that the whole is in fact a representation of the myth in which the gods and demons churned the ocean to extract the liquor of immortality, using the cosmic serpent Vāsuki as a rope and Mount Meru as a churning stick. Moreover, the *naga* or serpent in Indian cosmology was often used as a synonym for the rainbow, also called the bow of Indra, and interpreted as a bridge between earth and heaven. In conformity with this metaphor, twin statues of Indra seated on his three-headed elephant were placed in the angles of the *gopura* immediately behind the naga bridge, so that there could be no doubt in the mind of the pilgrim that, as he crossed over the bridge, he was indeed passing from the world of men into the realm of the gods, a realm made both immortal and

fruitful by the labors of the gods and demons in the churning of the cosmic ocean. For him all roads did quite literally lead to Heaven.

In the Hindu realm the ideal-type city also conformed to a cosmo-magical pattern, and its founding was treated as the preparation of sacrificial ground, as the sanctifying of a *habitabilis.* The site was selected with care according to the ritualistic (and sanitary) prescriptions preserved in the traditions and treatises of the master-builders, and the city was laid out as a moated, rectangular enclosure exhibiting cardinal orientation and axiality. It was then divided into four wards by two axial avenues terminating in impressive *gopura.* It was also considered canonically desirable to provide four supplementary gates, one at each corner of the enceinte.[45] Round the outer edge of the city ran the *Maṅgalavīthī*, the Auspicious Way or Path of Blessings, along which was drawn the chariot of the presiding deity, and along which the population proceeded in the rite of *pradakṣiṇa.* Hence its alternative name of *Janavīthīkā*, or the Path of Men.

Despite differences in detail, it is certain that Indian cities were often planned according to the basic cosmo-magical traditions which we have been discussing. Even in relatively modern times Jaipur was constructed on these principles by a Bengali Brāhman, Vidyādhar Bhattācharyya, and as late as 1857 Mandalay, in the Theravāda Buddhist kingdom of Burma, was designed by five high officers of state according to the canonical prescription.

It is a truism that every ritual has a divine archetype, that it is an attempt to imitate what the gods did *in illo tempore.*[46] By reactualizing the mythical moment when the cosmogonic act was first revealed, traditional man obtrudes a sacred instant into the flow of profane time, and in so doing initiates a new era in the cyclic regeneration of the world as he conceives it. As the construction rituals associated with capital [sc. sacred] cities were, in the traditional world, frequently simulations of the cosmogony, it is natural that the archetypes on which they were patterned should have been drawn from the past. Indeed, the past was normative and conformity with its precepts required no justification. Hence King Wen, *mindful of the past,* "retained the design of his predecessors," and "Heaven charged the corps of princes/To establish the capital where Yü [the Great] had wrought his works," just as Sennacherib constructed Nineveh according to "the plan delineated from distant times," and Pharaoh could say of his temple-city, "It was according to the ancient plan."[47] It was the goddess Nanshe who revealed to Gudea of Lagash a plan of the temple he should build in honor of Ningirsuk.[48] The city of Jerusalem seen by the prophet in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch II (chap. 4, verses 2-7) had been "prepared beforehand here from the time when I took counsel to make Paradise," and Solomon's temple "was prepared aforehand here from the beginning." When St John the Divine "saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband," his vision was one which had already had a long history among the Western Semites. Likewise, the traditional Indian urban form was modeled on that city where in the age of gold the Universal Sovereign had dwelt.

Although the plastic representation of cosmological concepts was less strongly developed in East than South Asia, yet there is abundant evidence that the location of the capital, that point of absolute reality about which the world revolved, was intimately connected with the welfare of the kingdom, so that its precise siting was a matter of extreme concern.

A close association of capital with dynasty was formerly common to most Asian political traditions. In some instances, indeed, the association was between capital and individual ruler. Each king of classical Kambujadeśa, for example, sought to construct a new capital, or at least a new temple-mountain, which after his death would become his mausoleum and the shrine for his personal cult. Not all rulers enjoyed long enough or peaceful enough reigns to achieve this aim, but the frequency with which temple-mountains and capitals were built is impressive testimony to the power of the idea: the Bàkoṅ at the center of Hariharālaya; Phnom Bākhèn marking the axis of the first capital at Aṅkor; Koh Ker, briefly the capital of Jayavarman IV; the Phimeanakas that of Jayavarman V, and the Bàphuon that of Udayādityavarman II. In *Campā*, Java, and Burma it is possible to point to similar successions of capitals. In the last region, as late as 1857, Mindon Min abandoned the old capital of Amarapura, which had been associated with disastrous events during the reign of his elder brother, and established its population of 150,000 souls in a new city at Mandalay.[49]

In China, capitals became relatively permanent foundations at an early date, but fairly reliable traditions record at least five movements of the capital under the Shang.

As a colophon to this section we may appropriately quote a few lines from the *Yin-Wu* (Mao CCCV), which appear to epitomize the cosmo-magical role of the ancient Chinese city. This ode (fig. 4) forms part of the *Shang-Sung* section of the *Shih-Ching,* and as such may preserve the traditions of the Sung ruling house when it was still not fully assimilated to Chou culture.[50]

> The capital of Sïang (Shang) was a city of cosmic order,
> The pivot of the four quarters.
> Glorious was its renown,
> Purifying its divine power,
> Manifested in longevity and tranquillity
> And the protection of us who come after.

It is by no means established that the city referred to in these lines was the old capital of the Shang at An-yang. As the people of Sông (Sung) were regarded as

descendants of that dynasty, so the term Shang became a literary honorific for the state of Sông, and the ode may have referred to a capital of the later kingdom. My own feeling, however, is that the eulogy was probably considered appropriate for any Sung or Shang capital, including the Great City Shang founded by B'waân-kăng at An-yang. I would suggest that a translation something after this fashion not only elicits a unity in the stanza which is less evident in previous versions, but also exhibits the chief modes of traditional urban symbolism which have been discussed in the preceding pages: namely, in the order in which they occur in the ode, the imitation of a supramundane archetype, the symbolism of the center and cardinal orientation, the role of the *omphalos* as a point of ontological transition where supernatural power enters the world, and the parallelism of the macrocosmos and microcosmos. In other words, the city functioned as an *axis mundi* about which the kingdom revolved, and was laid out as an *imago mundi* in order to ensure the protection and prosperity "of us who come after."

I am aware that the forms of Asian, and especially of Chinese, cities have sometimes been explained along other lines. In particular Nelson Wu, in what must surely be the most sensitive interpretation of Asian cities ever penned, has gone so far as to state categorically that, "The Chinese walled city is not to be confused with the idealized Indian village or city plan of the *Mānasāra-Śilpaśāstra*.... They differ in every respect."[51] Great as is my admiration for Professor Wu's insights into the cultural bases of these cities, I find myself compelled to differ from him on this point. Of course, it is not to be denied that to the casual visitor the traditional Chinese city presented a very different appearance from that of the Indian city. Nor is anyone likely to dispute the fact that there are vast differences between the regional traditions within the Chinese and Indian culture realms themselves. And even within those regional traditions the complex interplay of historical variables has induced a rich variety of urban forms. But in my reading of the evidence the ideal-type cities of India and China are affinal expressions of shared conceptions of the ordering of space, of a common "astrobiological" mode of thought. Each was established only after an array of geomantic considerations had been satisfied. Each was constructed as an *axis mundi* incorporating a powerful impulse to centripetality. Each was laid out as a terrestrial image of the cosmos, in a schema which involved cardinal orientation and axiality and, as a corollary, strong architectural emphasis on the main gates. On the capitals in both traditions, at whatever level of the political and administrative hierarchy they occurred, devolved the maintenance of the prosperity of their respective territories, and, as such, they became paradigms for all other cities.

Of course, in each culture, as indeed in the cultures of the rest of Asia, the material forms through which

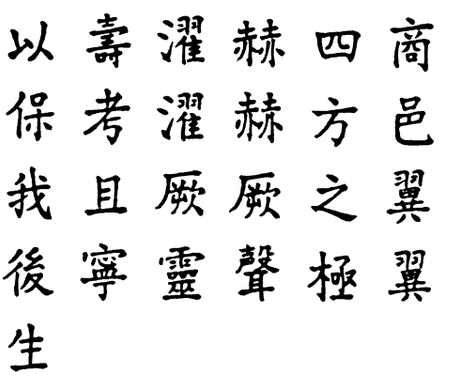

Fig. 4

this cosmo-magical symbolism was realized were highly distinctive. The palace of the Chinese emperor could hardly have been more different from the sanctuary at the heart of the South Indian temple-city, or both from the temple-mountain of twelfth-century Kambujadeśa, but each symbolized an *axis mundi*, an *omphalos,* about which their respective kingdoms revolved. Similarly, whereas in these cultures cardinal orientation involved the positioning of the sides of a square or rectangle so as to face the cardinal points of the compass, in ancient Mesopotamia it was normally the corners of the enceinte which were directed in this manner. But in both instances the *principle* of cardinal orientation was strongly developed, the four compass directions were the reference points by which the sacred enceinte of the city was located in the continuum of profane space. Structural regularities in the traditional urban symbolism of Asia are to be sought not in the specific architectural units which make up the city, nor perhaps in their precise spatial interrelationships, but rather in the manner in which the whole assemblage that we designate a city was believed to (not necessarily did) function. The classical city plan of China was not, as Wu claims, "unnatural"[52]: it was a response to the basic need, which the Chinese shared with men elsewhere, to delimit and orient an *habitabilis* in space, and was achieved with the aid of the archetypally "natural" ("bio-astrale" Berthelot would call it) progressions of the heavenly bodies. As those were regular and predictable, so the cosmicized territories, the ideal-type cities, of men everywhere tended to reflect this regularity. The "Chinese world of walled cities" and "the Indian world of holy places"[53] *in this respect* were not, as Wu stipulates, fundamentally opposed. That the value systems of these two Great Traditions were to a large extent opposed is a truism, but in the technical business of delimiting space both had been constrained to make use of the same astrobiological tool-kit. When and how these concepts were accepted into the Chinese intellectual universe is a difficult

question, discussion — if not the resolution — of which can be left for another occasion. Suffice it to say here that, although Chinese preoccupation with "success and frustration in the arena of living," as contrasted with the Indian search for the metaphysical meaning of life, certainly caused these two civilizations to mediate the symbolism of urban form through widely different architectural designs, these latter never entirely obscured the shared astrobiological symbolism.

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