

The Concept of the Manifestation of God in Chinese Symbolism: An Inter-civilizational Hermeneutic Study

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Abstract

This article's hermeneutic approach accommodates transcultural interpretation of symbols and metaphors, providing for a "fusion of horizons" between civilizations with different cultural heritage. The idea that seemingly incompatible symbols can be allusions to a common underlying meaning makes it possible to develop connections between worldviews and perspectives commonly considered incommensurable, in our case between the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God and corresponding Chinese philosophical and religious concepts. This paper demonstrates that there are elements of the Chinese tradition that resonate deeply with the Bahá'í notion of the Manifestation of God.¹

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Resumé

L'approche herméneutique du présent article intègre une interprétation transculturelle des symboles et des métaphores, qui permet de faire une « fusion des horizons » entre les civilisations fondées sur des patrimoines culturels différents. L'idée selon laquelle des symboles apparemment incompatibles peuvent avoir une signification sous-jacente commune permet d'établir des liens entre des visions du monde et des perspectives généralement perçues comme incommensurables, en l'occurrence entre le concept bahá'í de la Manifestation de Dieu et les concepts philosophiques et religieux chinois correspondants. L'auteur démontre que certains éléments de la tradition chinoise trouvent une résonance profonde dans le concept bahá'í de la Manifestation de Dieu.

Resumen

El enfoque hermenéutico de este artículo acomoda la interpretación transcultural de símbolos y metáforas, proveyendo una "fusión de horizontes" entre civilizaciones con diferente patrimonio cultural. La idea que símbolos aparentemente incompatibles pueden ser alusiones a un significado común subyacente, hace posible desarrollar conexiones entre perspectivas mundiales y perspectivas comúnmente consideradas inconmensurables, en nuestro caso, entre el concepto bahá'í de la Manifestación de Dios y los conceptos chinos filosóficos y religiosos correspondientes. Este ensayo demuestra que hay elementos de la tradición china que resuenan profundamente con la noción bahá'í de la Manifestación de Dios.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a common belief that the concept of prophets of God that exists in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith is essentially foreign to the Chinese tradition and is incompatible with its long-held beliefs and unique culture. We argue in this article that the Bahá'í concept of "the Manifestation of God" (*mazhar-i-iláhí*) can be observed in certain aspects of the symbolism found in Chinese classics, language, and culture. If proven, this hypothesis may well lead us to the conclusion that the concept of the Manifestations of God as discussed in the Bahá'í Writings most likely also has existed in ancient China.

We begin our search by introducing a philosophical term used both in Bahá'í Writings and in Chinese texts. The term "Perfect Man" (*insán-i-kámil*) is a mystical term in Islamic and Bahá'í literature symbolizing a being with the loftiest level of spiritual perfections.²

The Perfect Man thus becomes the standard for human progress, a model the mystic wayfarer should strive to emulate. This term is also used in the Islamic texts and in the Bahá'í Writings ('Abdu'l-Bahá 114) to denote the prophets or the Manifestations of God. But there is a difference between the Perfect Man of mysticism and the Perfect Man as a prophet. Whereas mystics believe in the possibility for the wayfarer to become a Perfect Man,

the prophet or Manifestation of God holds a unique station, a state of being impossible for even the most perfect human to attain.

Likewise, the term Perfect Man (*zhiren*) is found in the Chinese classics³ and conveys both of these meanings: the ideal model of perfection for a mystic, and a sage holding a station unreachable by human beings. The term Perfect Man is the most accurate equivalent, according to Carl Jung (293) and Izutsu (4), for various Chinese concepts of a sage, a saint, or a "sacred man" (*sheng ren*), and the "true man" (*zhen ren*).

As we explore such Chinese designations in this paper, we will see that—similar to what we observe in the Bahá'í Writings—the Perfect Man and equivalent terms used in Chinese classics share the characteristics associated with the notion of the Manifestation of God (in addition to their mystical meaning).

The Bahá'í Writings make clear that the term Perfect Man, when referring to the station of the Manifestation of God, denotes a station unattainable by ordinary human beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: "But from the beginning which has no beginning, to the end which has no end, a Perfect Manifestation always exists. This Man of Whom we speak is not every man; we mean the Perfect Man" (196). The Báb makes this distinction clear in His emphatic statement: "I am the Primal Point from which have been generated

² See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 237.

³ For example, in *Texts II* 13..

all created things. . . . The substance wherewith God hath created Me is not the clay out of which others have been formed. He hath conferred upon Me that which the worldly-wise can never comprehend, nor the faithful discover” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, 126). Accordingly, Manifestations of God hold a station that is absolutely unattainable, even by the wise and saintly.

The central question we address in this paper is whether or not the concept of the Manifestation of God can be located in Chinese culture. Chinese civilization, differing in many ways from the civilizations residing to its West, is commonly understood to be devoid of the concepts of an anthropomorphic God, prophets, and related notions that are observed in the Abrahamic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or the Bahá’í Faith). Contemporary Chinese generally consider these concepts foreign to them. Prominent modern historian of Chinese philosophy Fung Yu-lan⁴ believes there is a fundamental difference between the Chinese civilization and the cultures in which religion is dominant and that the role played by the theistic concept of “prophets” in other cultures has been played by “philosophers” in China. He asserts, “In the world of the future, man will have philosophy in the place of religion. This is consistent with Chinese tradition” (10).

⁴ As Chinese names are rendered, the last name appears before the first name throughout this paper.

Indeed Chinese philosophers have offered moral and ethical teachings that they believe, if practiced, will solve the problems facing humankind. The importance of education, harmony, justice and equity, filial piety, moderation, detachment, collaborative spirit—even sacrificing for community and society at large—and a vision of universal brotherhood are among such teachings.⁵

In other words, one might understandably conclude that in China the function of divinely appointed prophets has been fulfilled by philosophers who, Chinese often believe, can play the same role in the future.

The perspective on this issue from Bahá’í beliefs is antithetical to this idea—the Bahá’í teachings assert that, since the beginning of humankind, all people have been in need of and have benefited from the guidance of the Manifestations of God. In the Qur’án 10:47 we find the axiomatic assertion, “And every people hath had its apostle” (Rodwell 127). In a 4 October 1950 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, we find a reply to a question raised by an individual believer that should answer why, if this premise is valid, we do not find in the Bahá’í Writings any extensive references to non-Semitic or Asiatic prophets: “The only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic prophets is because their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is mentioned

⁵ See Chew 97–116 and related chapters.

and Zoroaster in our scriptures—both non-Jewish prophets or non-Semitic prophets. We are taught there always have been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names” (qtd. in Hornby 381–82).

While in this statement issued on behalf of Shoghi Effendi there is no mention of Confucius, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, addressing the subject of “dependent” and “independent” prophets, elucidates that “Confucius renewed the ancient conducts and morals,” in contrast to Buddha, who “established a new religion” (188). Regardless of the station and mission of specific saintly figures in China’s past, Shoghi Effendi considers China a country “which ranks foremost among all nations in material, cultural, and spiritual resources and potentialities” (qtd. in Chew 37).

We can conclude that based on the Bahá’í point of view, it is almost certain that Manifestations of God have existed in China and its associated civilizations, such as Japan and Korea, that share in many ways similar perspectives on religion and philosophy. Indeed, our exploration of this subject will demonstrate that the concept of the Manifestation of God is not foreign to China, especially if we consider a cultural translation of symbols related to Chinese philosophical beliefs.

In order to pursue such a cultural translation, we will focus on the function a symbol performs in a specific culture in order to determine whether or not it is equivalent to the function of a similar or even completely different symbol in another culture. Symbols

may be expressed in diverse linguistic and non-linguistic forms, in dissimilar metaphors and visual images. In spite of these distinctions, they sometimes allude to the same abstract concept or meaning, and with this understanding we are able to locate symbols in the Chinese culture that allude to the concept of the Perfect Man in the Bahá’í Writings. By examining such symbols and performing a cultural translation of them, we can thus observe the appearance of this concept in unique Chinese forms.

THE “PERFECT MAN” IN CHINESE CULTURE

We should keep in mind the difference between the term “Perfect Man” as used in this paper and other saintly figures or categories of pious or noble people who, through their own effort, achieve a relative state of spiritual perfection. Whereas the designation of Perfect Man normally employed in the Bahá’í Writings alludes to those Who are inherently perfect expressions of Godliness, albeit manifest to us initially by Their association with a human persona, They have not acquired Their spiritual qualities through effort, cultivation of self, or learning.

In the Chinese classics we come across designations and terms used for people who are spiritual, saintly, and morally superior—not inherently so, but through effort. They became superior by attaining piety through learning and through spiritual practices. Likewise, great educators such as

Confucius were aspiring to instill moral and ethical attributes in their pupils.

The word *jun zi*, or “superior man,” appears 107 times in Confucius’s *Analects* (Chan 15). Because such a person has attained this station through accumulated effort, it is clear that, from this perspective, an ordinary individual can become a superior man (134). In contrast, the concept of the Perfect Man we are searching for in the Chinese tradition does not refer to ordinary people who are superior due to their learning and effort but to Figures personifying the Bahá’í concept of the Manifestation of God, the matchless representative of God in the world Who functions as an intermediary between God and creation.

What we discover as we study Chinese texts is that the concept of the Manifestation of God is not absent in Chinese tradition. In ancient Chinese texts, the terms “sage” (*sheng*) or “sage person” (*sheng ren*) resemble this concept. *Sheng* is the one who understands “the Way of Heaven” (*tian Dao*) and manifests it to humanity. Heaven (*tian*, “sky”) in Chinese tradition has been a symbol for the supreme, omnipotent, and omnipresent power (Wilhelm 35). For centuries the term “Heaven” referred only to God and not to sky (Chew 211–12). In that sense, “the Way of Heaven” manifested through *sheng* represents God’s Will, or the manner in which God wills creation to come into being.

The pictographic character (written form) of the Chinese word *sheng* supports such an understanding. The

word is composed of two parts, one meaning “ear” and the other meaning “manifest,” “disclose,” or “reveal.” Ear represents hearing and understanding “the Way of Heaven.” *Sheng* is the one who understands the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming*) (Taylor 12) and subsequently manifests, or discloses, it to humanity. In Taylor’s words, “If there is a significance to the meaning of this phonetic, then the sage is he who hears the Way of Heaven and in addition manifests or reveals it to humankind” (24). Thus, if *sheng* has the ability to understand God’s Will and reveal the Way of Heaven to humanity, this figure serves as an intermediary between Heaven and humankind—as is the case with the notion of the Manifestation of God in the Bahá’í Faith.

Sage (*sheng*) in Confucian texts is a designation primarily assigned to ancient sage-kings (*sheng wang*) of the Shang and early Zhou dynasties of China (Taylor 23). The Shang dynasty ruled from around the eighteenth century to the twelfth century BCE, and the Zhou dynasty from the twelfth to the third century BCE. The period of the Shang dynasty is marked by a strong religious character of the society, including the belief in an anthropomorphic God (Chan 3). In Confucian classics, the sage-kings of the Shang and Zhou dynasties are referred to as models of conduct for humanity (Taylor 23–25). Two legendary sage-emperors, Yao and Shun, living in the third millennium BCE (Chan xv), are often cited in Chinese classics, and the attributes assigned to

legendary sage-emperors like Yao and Shun resemble the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God.

However, in Confucian doctrine it seems that despite being designated “the Son of Heaven” (*tian zi*), the sage-king possesses his unique station only as long as he remains virtuous (Taylor 12). In that sense, sage-kings are not inherently infallible or perfect, from a Confucian viewpoint. In general, attributing a unique divine status to the sage-kings, a station unreachable by ordinary people, has been debatable and unsettled, as we will discuss in the following pages.

DEBATES ON THE STATION OF SAGE-KINGS

In ancient Chinese texts, a special and unique station has been explicitly or implicitly ascribed to sage-kings. Yao and his successor Shun are highly revered. Similarly, Yu of the second millennium BCE, the king who saved the country from devastating floods by diverting water to the sea, is revered as a sage-king in Chinese texts (Chan 76). Yet, can ordinary people become like the sage-kings Yao and Shun? Did Heaven endow these figures with unique and extraordinary powers and perfections that ordinary people lack? Let us explore these questions as they appear in some of the major schools of Chinese philosophy from ancient times to the present.

CONFUCIANISM

The ancient Chinese, especially before the Zhou dynasty (i.e., approximately

before 1,000 BCE), believed that sage-kings ruled by divine appointment and thus represented the Will of Heaven (*tian ming*). These sages were the only ones who had a “direct apprehension of the Way of Heaven” (Taylor 41). In contrast, centuries later, in the fifth century BCE, Confucius emphasized education and taught that all men are similar in nature and only become different through enlightenment and effort (227).

At the same time, he alluded to the sages of antiquity as special beings who were superior to ordinary human beings. He stated that he himself is not at the level of such “sacred men” (*sheng ren*, or sage) (Izutsu 430). To Confucius, sages were limited to Yao, Shun, and Yu (Taylor 41). With respect to Confucius’s classic *The Analects*, Taylor writes, “What is particularly apparent in the context of the *Analects* is the separation of the sage from the capacities of ordinary persons. There is no attempt to suggest that one can reach the state of sagehood” (41). Therefore, although Confucius emphasized education, he also believed in the existence, in ancient times, of sages with a unique station beyond the reach of ordinary people, a station that is impossible to achieve through effort and education. However, subsequent Confucian philosophers debated this viewpoint.

IDEALISTIC CONFUCIANISM

In contrast to Confucius himself, Mencius—Confucian philosopher of

the fourth century BCE— seems to have taken an uncertain position on this matter. On the one hand, he assigns a unique station to the sages. He maintains that sages like Yao and Shun are “the ultimate standard of human relations” (Chan 73) and that their example should be followed by all rulers: “Never has one fallen into error, who followed the laws of the ancient kings” (Legge, *Works of Mencius* 289).

Mencius does not see sage-kings only as perfect exemplars for people. He assigns to them a unique station. He points out that only sages can become perfect models for humanity. He declares that only the sage can put the nature endowed by Heaven into full use (80). Additionally, Mencius believes that the sages possess special capabilities and unique powers that cause the transformation of other people. He mentions that “there is a sense of wonder in the sage’s presence” (qtd. in Taylor 42). Also, on one occasion, he differentiates between those who, by nature, were true sages, like the sage-kings Yao and Shun, and those kings who through personal cultivation practiced humanity and righteousness (Chan 80). In fact he wished that a true sage would appear again (Legge, *Works of Mencius* 192).

On the other hand, however, Mencius does not necessarily suggest that people do not have the capacity to become sages. He believes all men are born with the potential for being good. He is known as effectively saying that all men can *become* sage-kings (Chan 133 footnote). Thus he states, “The

sage and I are the same in kind” (55).

Overall, Mencius’s emphasis on the goodness of human nature led him to differ from Confucius with regard to the station of the sage-kings. Whereas Confucius saw sage-kings as perfect models that one could not fully emulate, Mencius was more optimistic about human potential. Mencius’s idealism paved the way for the Neo-Confucians of later centuries who strove for the full realization of human potential. Neo-Confucians were determined “not to stop learning until they become equal to sages” (Taylor 43). Therefore, Confucius’s emphasis on education takes an idealistic form in Mencius’s philosophy. Under Mencius’s influence the Neo-Confucians’ humanism holds considerable faith in the ordinary human being’s capacity. But although agreeing on the point of human capacity, not all Confucian philosophers were so positive about human nature, as we will discuss next.

REALISTIC CONFUCIANISM

Xunzi,⁶ a philosopher of the third century BCE, is called a realist or naturalist Confucian, as opposed to Mencius, who was an idealist Confucian. While Mencius believed all people are born good, Xunzi believed human nature is inherently evil in the beginning and thus human beings would need to strive to overcome this base nature. However, they both believed in the perfectibility of human beings and that all

6 Hsun Tzu.

people could become perfect through education and practice (Chan 115).

In spite of Xunzi's stand on the original evil nature of human beings, he believed that everyone has the faculty to discern virtues, as well as the capacity to practice them. Therefore, if one studied and practiced day after day and persisted in acquiring virtues, eventually he could "be as wise as gods, and form a trinity with Heaven and Earth" (134). Xunzi concludes, "Thus the sage is a man who has reached this state through accumulated effort" (134).

On the other hand, Xunzi considers this philosophical position only hypothetical. Giving the example of sageking Yu, he points out that no one has actually become a sage like him: "It is possible for every man in the street to become Yu, but it does not follow that every man in the street is able actually to do so. However, the fact that he is not able actually to do so does not destroy the possibility of his doing so. It is possible for a man with feet to walk all over the world, and yet so far there has not been any who is able actually to do so" (134).

Thus, while Xunzi considers his idea that everyone can become a sage as purely hypothetical, he has still been recognized for holding the position that everyone has the faculty to acquire knowledge of those virtues possessed by sage-kings, as well as the capacity to acquire them (133). Indeed, his maxim, "Any man in the street can become Yu," has been often cited by Chinese philosophers.

Other Confucian philosophers—namely Neo-Confucians—adopted a similar stand.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM

Neo-Confucianism is the continuation of idealistic Confucianism, especially the mystical ideas of Mencius (Fung 440), but it is influenced by both Taoism and Buddhism. Neo-Confucians assigned a special status to the human species. Zhou Dunyi,⁷ the philosopher of the eleventh century CE who laid the foundations for Neo-Confucianism, writes, "It is man alone who receives (the Five Agents⁸) in their highest excellence, and therefore he is the most intelligent. His physical form appears and his spirit develops consciousness" (Chan 463). According to Zhou Dunyi, inasmuch as human beings possess the most perfect natural composition, they have the potential to become sages. In his context, he poses the question as to whether sagehood can be learned or acquired, and he replies that it can be. He asserts, "Being clear and penetrating, impartial and all-embracing, one is almost [a sage]" (de Bary 678).

But again, do we infer this conclusion to imply that Zhou Dunyi does not assign a unique station to sages? He describes the distinct and enigmatic character of the transformation that

⁷ Chou Tun-I

⁸ "Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth" (Chan 463), representing elemental qualities in existence.

takes place through the agency of the sage: “As the Way of heaven operates, all things are in harmony. As the virtue of the sage-ruler is cultivated [in people⁹], all people are transformed. The great harmony and great transformation leave no trace, and no one knows how they come to be: This is called spirit. Therefore, the foundation of the multitudes lies in one person. . . .” (Chan 470). Yet, regardless of the importance Zhou Dunyi assigns to the mysterious transformative agency of the sage, he—like the Neo-Confucians who followed him—seems to believe that everyone has the potential to become a sage.

In a Neo-Confucian text of the eleventh century CE written by the philosophers Cheng Yi and his brother Cheng Hao, we come across speculations on the aforementioned Mencius’s position on the sage-kings like Yao and Shun. Mencius believed that these sage-kings were born with the knowledge of good, while ordinary people needed to acquire such knowledge through learning and effort. The Cheng brothers confirm that sage-kings Yao and Shun possessed an innate knowledge from birth that others lack. At the same time they believe it is possible for people to achieve the station of sagehood through learning. However, this learning should be through the exploration of their inner being, not through outward learning or by “effortful memorization, clever style, and elegant diction making their

words elaborate and beautiful” (550). Clearly this type of learning that is not an accumulation of knowledge but rather stems from one’s heart resembles the mystical perspective of treading the spiritual path by the wayfarer.

Yet, Neo-Confucianism did not particularly prescribe mystical practices or the pursuit of ecstatic experiences for achieving the station of sagehood. At the same time, like Taoism—the mystical tradition of China—Neo-Confucianism took the position that anyone could become a sage, the Perfect Man. Neo-Confucianism prescribed education for such purpose, in contrast to Taoism, which emphasized spiritual cultivation, detachment, and purification of oneself.

To summarize, Confucianism, including the idealist, realist, and Neo-Confucian variations of it, emphasized education. Confucius himself was primarily an educator, albeit by some assumed to be a sage. Confucian philosophers revered sages as personages unique and rare in history, possessing a station higher than normal human beings. But they believed that, at least in principle, every individual could be educated and become a sage. The idea of cultivating one’s nature in order to become equal to sages gave a mystical flavor to Confucianism (Taylor 45). Mystics generally believe that through purification of the self one can attain the station of the Perfect Man, and this is very similar to what we observe in Taoism.

9 Words in brackets are my additions.

TAOISM

Taoism is as ancient as Confucianism. Like Confucianism, Taoism has been a mainstream philosophical doctrine and, additionally, a religious practice in China. Dao (Tao), literally “the Way,” is the transcendent reality through which the universe was generated, exists, and is sustained (Bowker 950). Accordingly, the material world is given life and is sustained by the non-material transcendent Dao.

However, the distinction between the material existence and the transcendent Dao is not definite. Dao is not of the physical realm; it is supreme, heavenly, supernatural, and beyond understanding. At the same time, the Dao of a thing and that thing itself are not entirely separate. Materiality is not insulated from spiritual reality, nor is the heavenly distant or entirely distinct from the corporal. As such, nature holds a special place in Taoism, and, at times, the transcendent Dao (i.e., Heaven) and nature coalesce into a single entity.

This Taoistic perspective about reality contains implications about how one should live life. Although the notion that human beings possess a corrupt or base nature that needs to be controlled and tamed exists in Taoism, the emphasis in the Taoist philosophy is on the need for human beings to follow the way or path of nature; the wisdom inherent in the laws of nature should be studied and heeded. Similarly, in Taoism, one’s intuition possesses a higher value or power than reason

or the knowledge acquired through formal education. Indeed, strenuous exercises of the mind, sophisticated planning, and complex strategies of civilization are viewed with suspicion in Taoism. Instead, simplicity is valued.

Taoism is thus more of a mystical tradition focusing on the spiritual development of the individual, in contrast to Confucianism, which is more concerned with education, order, and upholding social customs and traditions. As a reaction to Confucianism’s emphasis on education and refinement of society through traditions, laws, and governance, Taoism accentuates the individual’s inherent innocence and natural growth and development. From a Western perspective, we can discern in this antithesis the same contrast we find between the Age of Enlightenment’s regard for reason and order and the Romantic regard for intuition and the purity of the “natural man.”

Thus, Taoism objected strongly to artificial controls and the burden of elaborate laws and regulations. It considered them ineffective, at times harmful, and only temporary cures for society’s ills. On the contrary, it deemed spiritual cultivation of individuals as the only permanent and truly effective remedy. Taoists tension with the principle of administration of laws and governance has been particularly noted and, at times, harshly criticized by non-Taoist Chinese philosophers.

In relation to the concept of the sage-king, it should be no surprise that

Taoism as a mystical philosophy felt very comfortable with the notion of the “sage” but not with the idea of the “king.” Taoism cherished spiritual development and mystical practices but was not comfortable with concepts of administration and ruling. As we will see, although the idea of the sage-king is strongly present in Taoist texts, certain Taoist philosophers extolled the sagely aspect of the sage-king while largely rejecting or even despising the “kingly” aspects of this figure.

LOA TZU AND CHUANG TZU

In order to examine the notion of the sage-king in the light of Taoism, let us briefly review the teachings of two greatest philosophers of Taoism, Laozi (Lao Tzu) and Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu).

Laozi is commonly believed to be the founder of Taoism. According to legend, he met Confucius and conversed with him. *Dao De Jing*, the classic work attributed to him, is well known as the essential Taoist canon. Zhuangzi, who lived in the third century BCE, is considered by some to be even more important than Laozi. His highly mystical, metaphorical, and imaginative passages are well known and often quoted by the Chinese people. But to continue our theme, let us review what these two philosophers thought in relation to the problematic of the sage-king.

Laozi considers the “sacred man” (the sage) equivalent to Dao (Izutsu 407). He also uses the term “Emperor” for Dao, or, as Izutsu puts it, for God (388). In relation to Laozi’s

point of view regarding the concept of the sage-king, Izutsu observes, “It is interesting to remark in this connection that in the *Tao Te Ching*¹⁰ the ‘sacred man’ is spoken of as the supreme ruler of a state, or ‘king’, and that this equation (Saint=King) is made as if it were a matter of common sense, something to be taken for granted” (301).

The unique station of the sage-kings is also addressed in a text¹¹ written by Wenzi (Wen-Tzu), reputedly a pupil of Laozi (Bodde 288). He attributes most of the text to Laozi, but he might have actually written it himself (Cleary vii).¹² Wenzi makes a direct relationship between Heaven and the sage-kings. Heaven is a symbol for the divine, the transcendent reality of Dao. Its mandate, the Way of Heaven, is propagated by the Sons of Heaven, the sage-kings: “Emperors are called offspring of heaven insofar as they establish the world by means of the Way of heaven” (123). Additionally, Wenzi praises the sage-rulers, as they govern through spiritual means: “Only those who rule by spiritual influence are impossible to overcome” (147).

10 *Dao De Jing*.

11 Thomas Cleary, trans., Wen-Tzu, *Understanding the Mysteries, Further Teachings of Lao-Tzu*.

12 It was a common practice in old China for the authors to attribute their own work to another well-known and respected personality (Cleary vii).

In Wenzhi's text we see that spiritual reality has priority over the material reality. Wenzhi praises the sage-kings' sacrifice of their material and physical wellbeing: "Shen-nung was haggard, Yao was emaciated, Shun was burnt black, Yu was callused" (122). This aspect of personal sacrifice is particularly noteworthy because the great philosopher Zhuangzi found sacrificial struggles of the sage-kings in conflict with his Taoist philosophy, as we will discuss next.

The prominent Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi occasionally praises the two sage-kings Yao and Shun, as they were in natural harmony with Heaven; they were not concerned with the worldly advantages, and they practiced the Taoist way of ruling.¹³ But he is not consistent in his judgments. More frequently, he criticizes them for having devised administration and laws, developed plans, accomplished complicated tasks, punished the guilty, and exerted intensive endeavors, even sacrificial ones (Legge, *Texts I* 295, *Texts II* 171), all of which are at least symbolically in conflict with the naturalistic and passive *wu wei* (non-action) principle of Zhuangzi's mystical philosophy. According to the Taoist doctrine of "non-action," one should let nature take its course and not interfere with it because simple and effortless actions are in harmony with the natural flow of affairs and produce better results than

hardhearted and unyielding interventions accomplish through complex designs and governance.

This perplexing contradiction in Zhuangzi's attitude toward sage-kings—on the one hand praising them and on the other hand criticizing them—is probably intentional on his part. That is, Zhuangzi is making exaggerations in order to underscore his philosophy of natural and childlike simplicity, spontaneity, and non-action. He goes as far as saying, "Yao killed his eldest son, and Shun banished his half-brother," both of which are believed to be exaggerated claims and misrepresentations (Legge, *Texts II* 178).

In general, in Zhuangzi's texts we come across exaggerations, allegories, metaphors, and imaginative narratives that, if taken literally, certainly divert us from the point the author is trying to make. One needs to take his particular philosophical context into consideration in order to understand his texts; he is dealing with mystical concepts that by nature cannot be explained objectively or in a clear and precise manner.

But to understand Zhuangzi's position on the sages we cannot limit ourselves to his references to Yao and Shun. Along with his occasional praise and, more frequently, his scorn of the historical sage-kings Yao and Shun, Zhuangzi uses various terms to refer to people with an especially high spiritual nature, at times defining a hierarchy for their stations. These various titles and designations as a whole resemble the aforementioned principle

13 See James Legge, *Texts of Taoism I* pp. 225 and 338, and *II* pp. 31 and 183.

of the Perfect Man (*insán-i-kámil*), particularly as the concept was employed by the Islamic mystical school of Sufism.

For instance, Zhuangzi ascribes imaginary supernatural attributes and powers to an exceptional exemplar he labels the "spirit-like man" (*shen ren*). His spirit-like man is an ideal model for humanity, possessing an exceptionally high spiritual station. He is so lofty that he is capable of creating sage-kings like Yao and Shun.

Noted Scottish sinologist, James Legge, composes a list of the highly imaginative statements made by Zhuangzi about the spirit-like man and his miraculous abilities. He observes that the spirit-like man is "a 'Spirit,' 'the Blessed and only Potentate,' 'Who covereth Himself with light as with a garment, Who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, Who layeth the beams of His chambers in the waters, Who maketh the clouds His chariot, Who walketh on the wings of the wind,' 'who rideth on a cherub,' 'who inhabiteth eternity'"¹⁴ (*Texts I* 127–28).

In Zhuangzi's text we come across an unusual description uttered by a madman (a recluse) about the spirit-like man. The person who recounts the madman's words says he is frightened by these statements that he does not believe correspond to reality. But after he expresses his disbelief in such things about the spirit-like man, he receives the following reply:

The blind have no perception of the beauty of elegant figures, nor, the deaf of the sounds of bells and drums. . . . That man, with those attributes, though all things were one mass of confusion, and he heard in that condition the whole world crying out to him to be rectified, would not have to address himself laboriously to the task, as if it were his business to rectify the world. Nothing could hurt that man: the greatest floods, reaching to the sky, could not drown him, nor would he feel the fervour of the greatest heats melting metals and stones till they flowed, and scorching all the ground and hills. From the dust and chaff of himself he could still mould and fashion Yao and Shuns; how should he be willing to occupy himself with things. (Legge, *Texts I* 171)

As we see, the spirit-like man in Zhuangzi's passage holds a very high station, considerably higher than the station of the ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun. He rectifies the world through the irresistible transformative power of the Dao, a power that comes naturally to him and seems to emanate from him.

According to Zhuangzi, sages possess far-reaching transformative powers, but they do not ascribe them to themselves. The source of their transformative power remains hidden. As a result, people do not recognize their unique connection to Heaven, their

14 Legge's source for these is not clear.

matchless and exalted station. About the intelligent (enlightened¹⁵) kings (*ming wang*) Zhuangzi writes,

In the governing of the intelligent kings, their services overspread all under the sky, but they did not seem to consider it as proceeding from themselves; their transforming influence reached to all things, but the people did not refer it to them with hope. No one could tell the name of their agency, but they made men and things be joyful in themselves. Where they took their stand could not be fathomed, and they found their enjoyment in (the realm of) nonentity. (Legge, *Texts I* 262)

The sage's influence reaches the whole universe but it is not possible to tell where it comes from—people are incapable of understanding that this capacity or power emanates from the heavenly or spiritual nature of the sage. In his lifetime he might not be recognized and revered by the masses. But even though his station may not be acknowledged, he has within him what makes him “The Great Man”: “The sage embraces in his regard both Heaven and Earth; his beneficent influence extends to all under the sky; and we do not know from whom it comes. Therefore though when living one may have no rank, and when dead no honorary epithet; though the reality (of what

he is) may not be acknowledged and his name not established; we have in him what is called “The Great Man”¹⁶ (Legge, *Texts II* 105).

Sages are not like ordinary human beings; therefore, Zhuangzi calls them “abnormal.” The “Perfect Man” of Zhuangzi is an abnormal man (*ji ren*) for the others because he is a person “who is totally different from other men, while being in perfect conformity with Heaven” (qtd. in Izutsu 431). Sages manifest Heaven or the Way (Dao). They are misunderstood because they reflect the attributes of the Way, a state that is beyond the understanding of most people: “If it is not laughed at, it would not be worthy of the Way,” in Laozi's words (432).

While the sage's transformative influence is at work, all efforts to change society for the better are considered to be trivial, as we read in Zhuangzi's text: “When the seasonal rains are coming down, if we still keep watering the ground, will not our toil be labour lost for all the good it will do?” (Legge, *Texts I* 169). These are the words of the sage-king Yao who felt that if he continued ruling his kingdom, he would be “vainly occupying the place.” Therefore, he begged his counselor, a sagely person, to accept the throne. But the sage responded, “Return and rest in being ruler, —I will have nothing to do with the throne” (170).

This sage does not show any interest in occupying the position of a king, seeing himself as performing a

15 Translation used in *Zhuang Zi*, 139: “enlightened king” is more appropriate.

16 *Da ren*.

function different from that of ruling the kingdom. Here again Zhuangzi is making a contrast between the sage-king Yao and a "sagely man." As opposed to the sage-king who chooses to transform society by ruling, the sagely man is not interested in ruling. Through this hypothetical dialogue, Zhuangzi emphasizes his Taoist teaching of non-action and his preference for spiritual transformation of people as opposed to governing their material circumstance.

In Zhuangzi's texts there is mention of a man who is human in appearance but embodies in himself the nature of Heaven. Gently and with patience he teaches people according to their capacity, causing their transformation—the words in parentheses in the following passage have been added by Legge, the translator:

He is a man who satisfies the true (ideal of humanity), a man in appearance, but (having the mind of) Heaven.^[17] Void of any thought of himself, he accommodates himself to others, and nourishes the true ideal that belongs to him. With all his purity, he is forbearing to others. Where they are without the Tao, he rectifies his demeanour, so that they understand it,^[18] and in consequence their own ideas melt away and disappear. . . . (*Texts II* 42–43)

17 Has the nature of Heaven.

18 Preferred translation: "Where they are without Dao, he helps them understand."

As we see, regardless of how the specific sage-kings Yao and Shun are depicted in the often highly symbolic and poetic texts of Zhuangzi, the archetypal principle of the sage is not absent in his texts. The various titles and terms he adopts—the intelligent kings, the spirit-like man, the perfect man, the sagely man (e.g., Legge, *Texts I* 169), as well as the hierarchies he at times defines—make the principle of the Perfect Man strongly present in his texts.

Despite the fact that Zhuangzi makes a distinction between the sage and the one who rules, the concept of "the sage one," or sagacity itself, is not separated from the notion of the ruler in Taoist thought. This point is particularly clear in Laozi's and Wenzhi's passages quoted earlier. One can say Zhuangzi, and in general Taoism, moved the sage-king principle closer to Heaven, emphasizing the transcendent and divine aspect of the sage-ruler.

The Taoist philosophy of Zhuangzi prescribes a mystical path to the transcendent reality. Zhuangzi implies, or explicitly claims, that the mystic wayfarer can have direct access to that transcendent reality, a concept that might be interpreted as a denial of the station of the sage-kings. However, to assume that Zhuangzi, or Taoist philosophers in general, deny the importance of the sage-kings and eliminate their unique role as an intermediary between Heaven and man would be an oversimplification.

Yet, even though in the above

quotations from Zhuangzi we find essential resemblances with the concept of the Manifestation of God, we cannot disregard the fact that Zhuangzi is offering a mystical philosophy with all its ambiguities and perplexities. He is designating a perfect spiritual exemplar for the mystic wayfarer to emulate, an ideal station that the wayfarer should strive for. On the other hand, his ideal and perfect model possesses extraordinary qualities that are beyond human reach. Zhuangzi's sage demonstrates perfections and attributes that ordinary people cannot fully comprehend or emulate.

Such perplexity is not unique to Taoist mysticism, distinguishing it from non-Chinese spiritual doctrines. Certain Sufis believed they can reach the station of the Perfect Man, despite the fact that they considered Muhammad to be the Perfect Man, the personage who is titled "the Seal of the Prophets" and is believed to be the chosen messenger of God, superior in station not to only to all human beings but to all previous Prophets.

Overall, the question of whether ordinary people can in practice achieve the station of the sage-kings remains unanswered in Taoism. Since their inception, and throughout centuries, neither of the two major schools of thought, Confucianism or Taoism, has offered a firm and unequivocal answer to this question. But the question has not lost its importance or disappeared as China has entered the age of modernity, intellectual enlightenment, and rationalism.

RATIONALISTIC PHILOSOPHIES

As we get further away from the ancient times and closer to the age of modernity, rationalistic tendencies grow stronger in Chinese philosophy. We encounter the aforementioned twentieth-century philosopher Fung Yu-lan with a proclaimed objective of "continuing the materialistic thought in the history of Chinese philosophy, the type of thought that is for the people, scientific, and progressive" (Chan 779). Fung's intention is to maintain traditional Chinese philosophy, but with a new emphasis and interpretation that is in line with materialistic philosophy. This approach may well have influenced his position on the station of the sages.

Quoting from Shao Yung, the eleventh-century philosopher who said "the sage is the ultimate of man," Fung explains that "by the ultimate of man is meant the perfect man, one who can fully develop the nature of man and investigate the principle of man to the most" (Chan 761). Such a perfect person fulfills his universal duty, "forming one body with all things" and serving Heaven (762). Fung maintains that every individual can become such a sage, the universal ideal of humanity. In support of his position, he quotes the previous philosophers' adages of "People filling the street were all sages" and "All people are equal" (778-79). It is noteworthy that even with Fung's pronounced materialistic orientation, he does not seem to be deviating in a significant way from traditional

discourses about the unique station of the sages.

But there is no doubt that the spiritual beliefs of ancient China cannot be readily reconciled with contemporary materialism, rationalism, and scientific objectivism. Therefore, modern philosopher Kang Yu-wei (1858–1927) questions the historicity of sage-kings Yao and Shun. Kang believed Confucius attributed his own reformist ideas to sage-kings of antiquity only to give precedence to his ideas. To Kang, Confucius did so “even to the extent of imagining great achievements of sage emperors Yao and Shun whose historicity is doubtful” (724).

But in general Kang’s philosophical positions were considered to be “a cyclone, a mighty volcanic eruption, and a huge earthquake” (724). As Chan puts it, “This bold dismissal of the age-old Confucian idols [sage-kings Yao and Shun] virtually amounted to a revolution”¹⁹ (724). As we see, even by the advent of the twentieth century, categorically denying the historicity of legendary sage-kings had not been a trivial matter.

BEYOND HISTORY

In our exploration of the concept of the Manifestation of God in China, we are not so much concerned with historicity. What we are looking for in the very ancient Chinese civilization are not particular sage-kings but the

sage principle. We find overwhelming evidence in Chinese classics that the principle of the Perfect Man has existed in China, a person who is an intermediary between the transcendent reality and the mortal human reality and, furthermore, who is an exemplar for human perfection.

According to the Bahá’í viewpoint, appearances of such intermediaries and exemplars are not isolated cases. Rather, these personages are manifestations of one and the same divine reality. This reality appears at different times in distinct historical ages and conditions, as well as in unique human forms, each one revealing teachings appropriate for the needs of the particular age in which he appears. The eternal reality of the Manifestation of God (as this figure is titled in the Bahá’í Writings) has cyclical appearances through these personages who successively and progressively transform civilization.

This process is the basis for the principle that in the Bahá’í Faith is called “progressive revelation.” The transcendent and divine Truth progressively reveals itself in measures and by degrees as appropriate to the capacity of people at a given time and in a given civilization. In this sense, the Manifestations of God are fundamentally the same reality, even though They appear at different times, Each with a distinct personality, and with successively more advanced social teachings. The heart of the spiritual teachings They reveal is changeless, simply evermore expansively explained.

19 Words in brackets are my additions.

In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (*The Book of Certitude*), Bahá'u'lláh elucidates the station of unity or sameness of the Manifestations of God: "In this sense, neither the person of Jesus nor His writings hath differed from that of Muhammad and of His holy Book, inasmuch as both have championed the Cause of God, uttered His praise, and revealed His commandments" (21). Although they prescribe differing laws and ordinances, what is appropriate for the needs of the age they appear in, the Manifestations of God all proclaim the same eternal Truth, identical divine and spiritual principles. In another occasion, Bahá'u'lláh proclaims, "This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 85).

Accordingly, the phenomenon of the appearance of the Manifestations of God is at the same time a historical and an ahistorical process. These individuals reveal the same transcendent reality and pursue the same spiritual purpose. They continue previous undertakings and progressively move humanity forward but Each playing a specific role in this ever-advancing process, as appropriate to the age in which They appear. It is in this sense that Bahá'u'lláh describes Their individuality and Their particular mission as part of Their "station of distinction":

The other is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. In this respect,

each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfills a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 176)

Thus, in this section we explore these dual stations or aspects of the Manifestation of God as it seems to appear in the Chinese culture, the phenomenon of the cyclical appearances of the eternal reality of the Perfect Man in the station of distinction—as particular historical individuals.

THE STATION OF ESSENTIAL UNITY

In the Chinese classics we come across texts pertaining to the underlying unity of the sage-kings. The eternal qualities of the Perfect Man appear in distinct sages at different times. Yet, these sages all manifest the transcendent Dao and transform society according to the Way. They all teach the eternal Dao but in the manner appropriate to the time in which they appear.

Wenzi explains that the laws and regulations of each age are tools for establishing a timeless and placeless purpose—that is, the Way of Heaven: "Laws, regulations, rites, and music are tools of order, they are not what

makes order order” (Cleary 160). Dao is the ultimate order, what gives purpose and meaning to laws. Therefore, Wenzi points out that although the laws of each age are different, they are in harmony with each other. They are all in accordance with the Dao, the transcendent reality that is beyond time and space. Accordingly, sages are in harmony with each other, as they all teach aspects of the same Way.

Another similarity among the sages is that they all transform people through spiritual means. Hence they succeed in penetrating hearts. Their approach to changing society is thus effective because it is essentially spiritual in nature. Signifying the same transcendent reality of Dao and adopting the same spiritual approach to transformation, they cannot but be in harmony with each other: “Those who are imbued with the Way and commune with all beings have no way to deny each other. That is why the laws of enlightened leaders of ancient times were different in their measures yet were at one with each other insofar as they won the hearts of the people” (Cleary 111).

Wenzi explains why the laws of ancient sages were different from each other. He observes that as time transpires and new eons emerge, change becomes necessary. Referring to the sage-kings of the ancient times as the Five Lords, Wenzi sates, “The Five Lords took different paths, yet their virtue converted the land. . . . This is because they changed according to their times” (175).

Deliberating on why the laws prescribed by the sage-kings change, Wenzi explains, “Sages adapt to the changes of the times” as “[d]ifferent ages have different concerns. . .” (71); therefore they “abandon regulations of former kings when no longer appropriate, and they take to the enterprise of later ages if they are good” (175).

Because sages renew and revise past directions and guidance in accordance with the needs of their time, Wenzi asserts, people should not be attached to a specific code of conduct and tradition or “behave in fixed ways” (8). He again notes, “Ways can be guides not fixed paths, names can be designated, but not fixed labels” (8). In that sense he is reminding people not to be thoughtlessly attached to their tradition or to follow it blindly.

Wenzi possibly sounds like a calculating policy-maker when he emphasizes the need for changes in laws and practices: “Do not do anything without calculated planning; if the power and momentum of a movement or trend do not follow reasonable measure, even spiritual sages cannot achieve success thereby” (121). But to Wenzi, the sages’ adjustment of laws to fit the requirements of their specific time is not based on wisdom, intellect or experience, as is the case with the scholars or policy-makers; rather it stems from the eternal and changeless reality with which they are imbued: “So when the sages embody the Way, they revert to changelessness in order to deal with change; they act, yet without contrivance” (76–77).

At the same time that there is an element of logic and rationality in the laws and directions established by the sages, there is an unfathomable spiritual foundation for their guidance. Their directions are manifestations of the eternal and changeless Dao, a transcendent reality that cannot be understood by ordinary human beings: "The laws of the sages can be observed, but their reason for making laws cannot be found out; their words can be heard, but their reason for speaking cannot be formulated" (72). He makes this clear in another occasion when he observes, "The Way of heaven is . . . always evolving along with people, but knowledge cannot grasp it" (120).

Wenzi explains the need for the appearance of the sages. He believes there is a "celestial design," a "celestial nature" that people are born with. The natural celestial design that people are born with is in accordance with the eternal and heavenly nature of Dao (9). However, this natural in-born goodness of the human being cannot be realized without the help of the sages: "Human nature includes the qualities of kindness and duty, but unless they are guided by sages, they cannot be rightly detected" (116).

Likewise, according to Wenzi, when inner celestial design of the human being is influenced by outward and worldly knowledge, the likes and dislikes of the human condition replace it (9). The intervention of sages are thus needed to remedy the situation: "The virtue of the Way corrects what has gone wrong and makes it right; brings

order to chaos, transforms decadence and corruption into simplicity and purity. When virtue is reborn, the world is at peace. The pivot is the leader, who is the guide of the people" (77). Accordingly, humanity is always in need of the sages. Each time the society declines, sages appear in order to remedy the situation. This observation leads us unmistakably to the notion of a cyclical intervention of the sages in human history.

THE CYCLICAL APPEARANCES OF THE SAGES

The concept of cyclical change is an important principle in Chinese culture and philosophy, and the cyclical interpretation of history has been a persistent concept in China (Chan 245). The cyclical decline of society that necessitates the rising and intervention of a sage is clear in Wenzi's text. Wenzi notes that when the time arrives in which society is "about to lose its essential life, it is like the arising of negative energy, the leadership is ignorant, the Way is neglected, virtue dies out" (Cleary 182). When such conditions arise, it is time for the sage to intervene and advance society: "It is the Way of the universe to turn back when it has come to an extreme. . . . Therefore sages change structure to remedy deterioration" (177).

Two great philosophers of China, Confucius and Mencius, have also expressed the idea of the cyclical intervention of the sages. Mencius believed that a true king would appear once

every five hundred years (Chan 245). The Confucian doctrine of the periodic appearance of sages is explicit in Mencius and implicit in Dong Zhongshu, the philosopher of the first century BCE (Chan 289).

In addition to the concept of periodic appearance of sages, one comes across the concept of the greater cycles of history in Chinese texts. This idea is similar to the concept of the Universal Cycles in the Bahá'í teachings. In particular, it parallels the discussion in the Bahá'í Writings of the Adamic cycle. According to the Bahá'í texts, the Adamic cycle commenced with the appearance of the Prophet Adam—Who, rather than being portrayed as the first man, is depicted as the first major prophet from God as a new cycle of human history is initiated. During the Adamic cycle that began with Adam and ended with Prophet Muhammad, the last prophet in that cycle, multiple prophets appeared. The Adamic cycle was a greater cycle of history encompassing smaller cycles of spiritual regeneration by Manifestations of God like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Accordingly, the creation or the beginning of time does not mean the physical creation but the spiritual regeneration that initiated a new greater cycle in history, the Adamic cycle, according to the Bahá'í Writings. We come across the concept of the greater cycle of history in Chinese classics, as well.

Shao Yung, the Chinese philosopher of the eleventh century CE mentioned earlier, defines a cycle of history that

started with Fuxi, the legendary sage-king who taught people how to use fire for cooking. At a very ancient time Fuxi initiated a greater cycle. Sage-emperor Yao is at the peak of this cycle that ends in the third century BCE: "The law (of history) began with Fuxi, completed in Emperor Yao, modified in the period of the Three Kings, reached its limit in the period of the Five Despots, and disappeared in the time of Ch'in (221–206 BCE). This is the track of the cycle of peace and chaos throughout the ten thousand generations" (Chan 491).

SAGE-KING IN NON-TEXTUAL SYMBOLISM

In our exploration of the Chinese symbolism as it parallels the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God, we have thus far relied on Chinese texts—written scripts, mainly classics. We observed that in Chinese classics terms like "the spirit-like man," "the sage-king," and "the true man,"—are linguistic metaphors and symbols denoting the principle of the Perfect Man as a unique station not attainable by ordinary people.

In this section we review ancient non-textual symbolism unique to Chinese culture to discover whether there might be further insight into the parallelism between the Chinese concept of the Perfect Man and the Abrahamic concept of the prophet. The non-textual symbols selected represent archetypal concepts we have previously examined in Chinese texts so we can

explore how the same underlying concepts can be discovered in fundamentally different types of symbolism, especially when the symbols are studied as they function in a cultural context rather than in their distinct method of representation.

CHINESE CHARACTER SYMBOLISM

Existing for around 6,000 years of history, the Chinese system of writing is most likely the oldest continuously used system in the world. As most non-Chinese are aware, the Chinese written language does not use words composed of alphabetic letters; instead it uses pictographic symbols, logographs referred to as “characters” by Chinese linguists. As opposed to alphabetic letters, Chinese characters represent concepts instead of sounds. Thus, one or more such characters will function as a word, representing a concept rather than the phonetic sound of the word. Some logographic characters have direct iconic resemblances. For instance, the character for fire is 火 (*huo*), resembling flame, and the character for forest is 林 (*lin*), resembling a pair of trees. Throughout history, various media have been used for inscribing Chinese characters; they have been discovered on turtle shells (oracle bones), bronze vessels, seal engravings, and scripts. Chinese characters have also been used outside China in various other Far Eastern countries.

The character *wang*, meaning “king,” is particularly pertinent to our discussion. The *wang* character is made

of three strokes of horizontal lines and a vertical stroke connecting the three, appearing as 王. In the standard dictionary²⁰ composed by Xu Shen in one hundred CE, we see a definition of this character: “Everything in this world submits to his rule. . . . The ancient people who created this character named the three strokes connected by the middle which is the King. These three strokes are heaven, earth and human beings. The one who joins and connects the three of them is the King. Confucius said: The one that penetrates the three is the King.”²¹ Likewise, based on Chinese sources, Legge notes that the vertical line connecting the three realms is the symbol for “the highest possible conception of power or ability” (*Works of Mencius* 196).

Interestingly—and perhaps not coincidentally—the character *wang* (王) and its symbolic value bear a striking resemblance to what is called “the Greatest Name” (*ism-i-a`zam*) symbol in the Bahá'í Faith. Also known as “the ring symbol,” this calligraphic representation devised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appears as follows:



²⁰ *Explanation of Script and Elucidation of Characters* (*shuo wen jie zi*). See Bodde 747.

²¹ Some believe the character *wang* is in the shape of an ax, symbolizing the administrative rank of the king carrying an ax

Starting from the top, the three horizontal lines represent respectively the world of God (the Creator), the world of Revelation (the Manifestations of God), and the world of humankind, (creation). The vertical line, a repetition of the middle horizontal line, connects the three horizontal lines and represents the station of the Manifestation of God, the Perfect Man ('Abdu'l-Bahá 114), Who is an intermediary between the worlds of God and Creation.

Another interpretation of the vertical line is that it represents the Holy Spirit descending from God to the world of creation by means of the appearance of the Manifestation Who translates the essential unknowable and imperceptible attributes of God into human expression, both through His utterance and through example as the Perfect Man. So it is that the two letters utilized in these lines—"h" or h and "b" or b represent the Prophet-Forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb (the Gate), and Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the twin Manifestations for this age. Likewise, the stars (or pentacles) on either side of this calligraphic arrangement represent the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.

In a similar manner, the Chinese character *wang* represents the sage-king who is an intermediary between Heaven and earth. Heaven in the Chinese culture represents the Divine realm, and earth represents the realm of creation, as explained in the Chinese classic *The Book of Changes*.

PERFECT MAN SYMBOLISM IN
THE BOOK OF CHANGES

The Book of Changes (Yi Jing) is an ancient Chinese classic and is probably the most important book with respect to its influence on Chinese thought from antiquity to modern times. In fact, both Taoism and Confucianism have their roots in the ideas expressed in this book.

The book is composed of simple images composed of two linear symbols—the divided line or *yin*, and the undivided line or *yang*:

Yin line (divided) — —
Yang line (undivided) — — — —

The book contains images composed of various combinations of these two lines. Each image is accompanied by a concise text interpreting the meaning of the particular arrangement. This succinct explanation is accompanied by layers of commentaries and interpretations written for each image in ancient times, most of which are attributed to Confucius.

Four holy individuals are noted to be the authors of this book: Fuxi, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius. Fuxi, the sage mentioned earlier, is a legendary figure of the hunting and fishing era. He is believed to have invented cooking and some of the line symbolism we see in *The Book of Changes*. This shows how old and ancient the origins of concepts in this book may be. The other three authors are thought to be responsible for the

textual explanations and interpretations of the images throughout the centuries.

The older parts of the book were generated in the form we see today, a century before Confucius, who lived in the fifth century BCE. Fortunately, *The Book of Changes* has escaped the fate of the other Chinese classics that were burned by the order of a Chinese monarch (Wilhelm and Baynes *lx*).

The highly symbolic nature of line images contained in *The Book of Changes* and the cryptic and poetic character of the commentaries and explanations within it have made the contents of the book open to many levels of interpretation. As a source for explaining change and transformation, widely differing interpretations can be developed, all relevant to the line images in the book. The work can be seen as addressing a variety of instances of change and transformation related to personal, familial, social, and global situations, as well as transitions taking place in nature, such as the changing of seasons. This variable applicability of the work has made *The Book of Changes* endure through the ages as a source of guidance and wisdom for many, a result made possible through the generic nature of its geometric images and the allegorical language of the commentaries and interpretations it includes.

In particular, the work's inherent openness to interpretation makes possible the book's use for divination. For instance, it has been so seriously regarded that some Chinese kings

consulted the work before engaging in a battle and would give commands according to what the book seemed to indicate as the most propitious course of action. Taken thus seriously, many Chinese know the book and still regard it as an important source of guidance.

And yet, it is also because of this enduring importance that the book has been denounced for its superstitious and outdated contents, as well as its perceived regressive ideas that are portrayed as hindering progress and modernization. Nevertheless, many still consider the book a source of ancient wisdom containing profound philosophical and social teachings to be studied and reflect upon. Overall, the book has been a source of awe and wonder such that today, one of the most common comments one hears regarding this work is how extremely difficult, if not impossible, it is to understand.

For the purpose of this discourse, let us examine a few selective interpretations from the book, or at least the parts of them that are pertinent to our theme. Our ongoing intent is to further trace the concept of the Perfect Man in ancient Chinese thought. By the same token, let us examine the designations "the great man" or "the superior man" not as these terms are commonly understood—as indicating a saintly person, one who through cultivation of self has achieved a high moral or spiritual station; rather, let us examine these concepts as the sage or the Perfect Man, one who is inherently superior. Let us also examine various

translations into English to determine whether these interpretations hold up, though the translations we examine are meticulously and reliably executed by accomplished and prominent scholars.

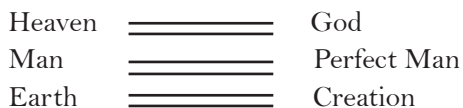
SYMBOLS IN *THE BOOK OF CHANGES*

Again, as we have noted, all of the symbolic arrangements in *The Book of Changes* are composed of but two types of lines. The *yin* (the divided line) traditionally represents such variable but thematically similar attributes as darkness, earth, rest, softness, receptivity, and the feminine, among others. While *yan* (the undivided line) most often represents light, power, Heaven, movement, and what are traditionally considered “male” qualities.

When we combine six of these *yin* and *yang* lines, we create a “hexagram,” an image composed of one or both types of these lines, such as ☰ or ☷, though various combinations are possible. In fact, a total of sixty-four such hexagrams can be constructed by different combinations of *yin* and *yang* lines—the sixty-four hexagrams we see in *The Book of Changes* (Appendix A).

Each hexagram has a designated name to symbolize a situation, normally pertaining to an individual or society. Some examples are “Youthful,” “the Clan,” and “Modesty.” The most important of these hexagrams is perhaps the first one in the book, called “the Creative,” and it is composed of six *yang* lines: ☰ .

In their generic structure, all hexagrams, regardless of their specific composition of *yin* and *yang* lines, represent the three fundamental principles of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Each two lines of the hexagrams represent one of the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and Man, as shown in the figure below. The lower two lines represent Earth, the middle two lines Man, and the upper two lines Heaven. This is explained in *The Book of Changes* as follows: “The two lowest places are those of the earth, the third and fourth are those of man, and the two at the top are those of heaven” (Wilhelm and Baynes 265). If we consider Man to be the highest spiritual station possible in the human form, or the Perfect Man, the hexagram’s generic structure resembles the three worlds of God, Revelation (Manifestation of God), and Creation, which, as discussed above, we see in the Bahá’í ring-stone symbol:



For the above diagram I have used the first hexagram of the book, the Creative (composed of six undivided lines). But the three-world structure is generic and true for all hexagrams of the book.

When we compare the three levels of Heaven, Man, and Earth in *The Book of Changes* with the concept of three worlds in the Bahá’í Greatest Name symbol, it is important that we are

clear about one particular point. If in Chinese symbolism Earth and Heaven are taken as complementary principles of *yin* and *yang* that mutually participate in the act of creation, there will be an essential difference between the symbolism in *The Book of Changes* and the Greatest Name symbolism. That is, in the Bahá'í ontological model, God and creation do not complement each other or participate in a collaborative act of creation; God oversees creation and is fully independent of His creation. Or stated axiomatically, creation requires God, not vice versa.

In *The Book of Changes*, as in the Bahá'í viewpoint, Heaven is not at the level of the Earth but is superior to it. This is true despite the fact that in ancient Chinese religious beliefs we come across the concept of the earth-god and the idea that during the Shang dynasty, Earth at times was considered more important than Heaven (Wilhelm and Wilhelm 37). Regardless of these exceptions, however, in the indigenous Chinese religion, Heaven was the supreme God, the highest level in the hierarchy of gods and supernatural powers: "Heaven was the supreme anthropomorphic power of the universe directing the operation of the spiritual world" (Yang 23).

Likewise, there is no dualism in *The Book of Changes*, suggesting that equal forces of Heaven and Earth have collaborated in creating the world and have jointly ruled it. Heaven is the source of rule over the whole of creation. A commentary in *The Book of Changes* explains this forthrightly:

"There is heaven, the upper world of light, which, though incorporeal, firmly regulates and determines everything that happens, and over against heaven there is the earth, the lower, dark world, corporal, and dependent in its movements upon the phenomena of heaven" (Wilhelm and Baynes 281).

Subsequently, it would seem we are well justified in perceiving a connection among the three worlds of God, Revelation (Manifestation), and Creation in the Bahá'í symbol of the Greatest Name and the generic structure of hexagrams in *The Book of Changes*.

THE CREATIVE HEXAGRAM

We saw how the imbedded generic structure of the hexagrams of *The Book of Changes* can represent the concept of the Perfect Man functioning as an intermediary between Heaven and Earth. Let us now study a specific hexagram of *The Book of Changes* called "the Creative" (*Qian*), exploring its symbolic meaning in relation to our present discussion. As mentioned earlier, the Creative hexagram is composed of six yang or undivided lines.

The six undivided lines in the Creative hexagram (or the Creative Principle) symbolize different stages or aspects of the activity of a dragon (or dragons). In Chinese culture, the dragon carries a completely different symbolic meaning than in Western cultural tradition: "The dragon is the symbol of the electrically charged, dynamic, arousing force that manifests

itself in the thunderstorm. In winter this energy withdraws into the earth; in the early summer it becomes active again, appearing in the sky as thunder and lightning. As a result the creative forces on earth begin to stir again” (Wilhelm and Baynes 7). Regarding the symbolism of dragon in the Creative hexagram, we read,

The dragon is the symbol employed by the duke of Kau^[22] to represent “the superior man” and especially “the great man,” exhibiting the virtues or attributes characteristic of heaven. The creature’s proper home is in the water, but it can disport itself on the land and also fly and soar aloft. It has been from the earliest time the emblem with the Chinese of the highest dignity and wisdom, of sovereignty and sagehood, the combination of which constitutes “the great man.” (*The Book of Changes* 59)

Based on this explanation, we can quite legitimately consider the dragon a valid symbol for the archetypal principle of the Perfect Man, or the Manifestation of God as portrayed in the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. Such an analogy is supported by the interpretations in *The Book of Changes* for the lines of the Creative hexagram.

In *The Book of Changes*, each line of the Creative hexagram symbolizes a specific condition of the dragon

and its activity. The text in the book provides an interpretation of the lines of the hexagram, one by one from the bottom up—numbering the lines, the lowest line is designated to be line one and the highest line six.

The interpretations and commentaries contained in *The Book of Changes* denote that the condition and activity of the dragon changes as we go sequentially from line one to line six at the top. The dragon that was completely hidden in line one gradually soars into the sky and manifests itself. It becomes fully manifest in line five, and in line six it prepares to become hidden again, as was the case in line one. This gradual change of condition and its return to the original condition in the first line can be depicted as a circular or cyclical movement.

This concept, especially as it can be applied to historical cycles, bears a remarkable resemblance to the Bahá’í concept of the cyclical release of spiritual energy in the world with the periodic appearance of the successive Manifestations of God. But also similar is the period of the absence of the Manifestation of God, the hidden dragon in this imagery. In the Bahá’í teachings, in the dispensation of each revelation comes a period of decline or darkness (symbolized by nighttime in the scripture) when the power unleashed by the new prophet is no longer adequate to provide guidance for a changed social condition, both because advancement and change are inevitable and beneficial and, even more importantly, because the followers will,

22 Duke of Zhou.

over time, come to lose sight of the spirit and teachings of the Prophet; consequently, the religion will become perverted by those seeking to control it or else to use it perversely as tool for gaining secular power. Or, to employ the Chinese symbolic language from *The Book of Changes*, each period of fulfillment and enlightenment is necessarily and naturally followed by a period of absence, “the hidden dragon” condition.

Another analogy can be made between the concept of the Manifestation of God and the Creative hexagram. Interpretations provided in the book for the lines of the hexagram in some respects are analogous to the gradual disclosure to the people of the world by the Manifestation of God regarding His station and purpose. The lower lines of the Creative hexagram can thus be interpreted to symbolize the period when the divine station of the Manifestation of God is hidden or veiled by the earthly or human guise in which He appears. At this beginning stage, the spiritual station of the Manifestation of God is unknown to people; He appears among them as an ordinary person because He has not revealed His mission. As we move up the lines, the divine aspects of this Perfect Man become increasingly manifest and unveiled. By the fifth line, the revelation, mission, and station of the Manifestation have been fully revealed and unleashed.

As mentioned earlier, the cryptic and symbolic nature of the passages included in *The Book of Changes* make

them open to many levels of interpretations, particularly in relation to one's personal or social life. With that in mind, I quote here selected passages and texts from the interpretations in the book for the hexagram lines that can be perceived as allusions to the stages of progressive manifestation or revelation and activity of the Perfect Man:

Line one (the bottom line) is a symbol for the hidden dragon. “Here this creative force is still hidden beneath the earth. . . . [T]his symbolizes a great man who is still unrecognized” (Wilhelm and Baynes 7). In a commentary for this line we read, “According to Master,^[23] this symbolizes someone dragon-like in his virtue who conceals his light, avoids all compromise with the world, makes no name for himself, withdraws from the worldly life without regret, cares not that no one seeks him out. . . . Firm as a rock, he can by no means be uprooted. Such a man may well be called a concealed dragon!” (Blofeld 86).

For line two we read, “Here the effects of the light-giving power begin to manifest themselves . . . this means that the great man makes his appearance in his chosen field of action. . . . Such a man is destined to gain great influence and to set the world in order.” For line three we read, “A sphere of influence opens up for the great man. His fame begins to spread. The masses flock to him.” For line four we read, “A place of transition has been reached.”

23 “Master” is a reference to Confucius.

Now the great man has the choice to stay in seclusion as a “holy sage,” or “he can soar to the heights and play an important part in the world” (Wilhelm and Baynes 8–9).

Line five of the hexagrams in *The Book of Changes* typically represents the peak of an activity. In the Creative hexagram it represents the full appearance of the dragon. For the interpretation of line five of the hexagram, we read, “Flying dragon in the heavens. It furthers one to see the great man” (Wilhelm and Baynes 9). The commentary written by Confucius for this line of the hexagram is “All creatures follow with their gaze the advent of a holy sage” (Blofeld 88). In other commentaries, we see “This passage presages the emergence of a being who is truly great” (Blofeld 88). And we read, “Thus the superior man creates order out of confusion” (Wilhelm 51). Wilhelm points out that here the Chinese word “creates” (*tsao, zao*) refers not to an ordinary creative activity but to divine creative activity. According to Wilhelm, the word appears only once in *The Book of Changes*, “where the creative personality appears as the representative of God” (51).

Line six of hexagrams normally represents a reverse in the situation, the return to line one. The dragon’s gradual process of appearance is complete. It is time for the dragon to hide himself again. For an interpretation of this line, we read, “The ruling-sage has gone through all the sphere in which he is called on to display his attributes; it is time for him to relax” (Legge 59).

At this point, “The strengths of the Creative and the mildness of the Receptive unite” (Wilhelm and Baynes 10).

Of further related interest is the fact that the name of the second hexagram in *The Book of Changes* is “Receptive,” a hexagram that represents the receptivity of the earth. The dragon’s return to line one means, “Receptive does not combat the Creative but completes it” (10). At this stage the earthly and the heavenly, the material and the spiritual, are not in opposition; the world of existence is in accord with the divine Will. This indicates the stage of fulfillment, the realization of the purpose for the appearance of the dragon, or, in our analogy, the Manifestation of God.

As we have seen, interpretations in *The Book of Changes* for the lines of the Creative hexagram include allusions to the gradual appearance and the progressive nature of the activities of the holy sage. The same concept is seen in the Bahá’í Writings in relation to the appearance and activity of the Manifestations of God. According to the Bahá’í perspective, as an act of mercy to humankind, the Manifestations of God reveal Their station and Their new laws and ordinances gradually and in stages. Bahá’u’lláh explains:

Know of a certainty that in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity. Consider the sun. How feeble its rays

the moment it appeareth above the horizon. How gradually its warmth and potency increase as it approacheth its zenith, enabling meanwhile all created things to adapt themselves to the growing intensity of its light. How steadily it declineth until it reacheth its setting point. Were it, all of a sudden, to manifest the energies latent within it, it would, no doubt, cause injury to all created things. . . . In like manner, if the Sun of Truth were suddenly to reveal, at the earliest stages of its manifestation, the full measure of the potencies which the providence of the Almighty hath bestowed upon it, the earth of human understanding would waste away and be consumed; for men's hearts would neither sustain the intensity of its revelation, nor be able to mirror forth the radiance of its light. Dismayed and overpowered, they would cease to exist. (*Gleanings* 87–88)

Examples for the gradual disclosure of the station, mission, and purpose of the Manifestations of God can be located in history. In the case of the Bábí and Bahá'í dispensations, such a process of gradual revelation is clearer, as the holy texts of these dispensations are authentically preserved and a chronological progression can be accurately verified. Thus was it that the Báb gradually made His true station clear to the public in His writings, though few understood His full

station from His early writings. He was originally understood by many of His followers to be merely a gate to the hidden twelfth Imam of Shi'a Islam. But progressively and by successive stages, He made His station as an independent Manifestation of God clear to all.

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh was at first understood by many to be a follower of the Báb and a revered and prominent teacher of the Bábí faith. Later, for a period of time He was regarded as a mystic sage among other mystics in the mountains of Kurdistán. Thus, the process of His revelation that had begun in a hidden manner in a prison called the *Siyáh-Chál* (the Black Pit) in Tehran was followed by His disclosure of His unique station to those present in the Garden of Ridván immediately before He was exiled from Baghdad in 1963. Eventually in Adrianople, He commenced the public announcement of His station and teachings to the Bábís and to the world at large through His letters to the kings and rulers of the time.

As we have seen, then, the concept of the three levels of reality represented in the Bahá'í Greatest Name symbol is also to be found in the ancient Chinese classic *The Book of Changes*. Additionally, the concept of the cyclical appearance of the Manifestations of God in the Bahá'í Faith corresponds to the cyclical appearance of the dragon (the great man) in the symbolism of this book. Likewise, the Bahá'í concept of the gradual revelation of the station of the Manifestations of God

corresponds to certain interpretations of the Creative hexagram.

SUMMARY

The common belief of the Chinese people is that China, as opposed to the countries to its west, has been a land that always lacked the concept of divinely sent prophets—personages inherently superior in their spiritual station sent from the metaphysical realm with a divine mission and superhuman power and authority. Although the largest number of Buddhists of the world are Chinese—and there are Muslim and Christian Chinese, as these religions have been brought into China—they have been more or less assimilated by the Chinese culture. As such, these religions are not native to China.

The mystical philosophy and religion of Taoism is a spiritual practice, but Laozi, its legendary founder, and other prominent Taoist figures, like Zhuangzi, are known as philosophers, not as prophets of God. Confucius is also known as an educator who was transmitting and reviving China's very ancient traditions and beliefs, but he is not understood to have professed any claim of a divine mission and authority. As a result, Chinese often consider the religions to their west as alien beliefs that do not have any affinity with or relation to their own indigenous tradition and culture.

Many contemporary Chinese see an essential incompatibility with and conflict between the Chinese tradition

they love and respect and those religions that have emerged outside of China. The West has had its own impact on the contemporary understanding Chinese have about their tradition. Secular perspectives associated with the age of enlightenment and the scientific revolution have played a pivotal role in political, popular, and academic thinking of the country.

As a result, at times even heavy-handed pressure has been exerted in China to uproot and destroy old traditions and symbols because they were considered obstacles to modernization and enlightenment, historically keeping China underdeveloped and weak. The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was the peak of such thinking and led to the destruction of numerous Taoist and Buddhist temples and cultural relics. Consequently, in contemporary China, at the same time that a vacuum for morality and spiritual outlook is clearly being felt, religion, by and large, is perceived to be outdated, superstitious, and backward-thinking, especially in academic circles, as is generally the case within Western academic worldviews.

This condition does not mean that various forms and manifestations of spiritual and religious practices cannot be observed in contemporary China; nor does it mean that concepts and philosophies similar to what we see in the religions to its west have not existed in the Chinese indigenous tradition. The core and foundation of religious belief is the faith in the existence of God, a transcendent

reality that through intermediaries or prophets (the Manifestations of God in the Bahá'í terminology) guides humanity. It is for this reason that in this research we have identified symbols in the Chinese culture that resonate with the notion of the Manifestation of God in the Bahá'í Faith and also named in the Bahá'í Writings as the Perfect Man.

The terms “sage” and “sage-king” in ancient Chinese texts can be considered symbolic representations of the principle of the Perfect Man, and our examination of the concept of the sage-king and its variations in the main Chinese philosophical schools seems to bear out this conclusion. Overall, throughout history we can observe a transition from Chinese antiquity’s supernatural and religious images of the sage-king to the contemporary political evaluation of the term, as well as the rationalistic and secular interpretations of the concept. But throughout such transitions, sages and sage-kings have not decisively lost their unique station in the minds of Chinese philosophers.

Of course, as we have noted, the question of whether people can, through effort, become sage-kings has been answered somewhat ambiguously in Chinese philosophy. The humanistic stance that upholds belief in the capacity of every human being would imply that all people possess the potential to become a sage. Additionally, the mystical objective of spiritual cultivation for the purpose of achieving the station of a sage is clearly present.

At the same time, these viewpoints have generally coexisted with the religious perspective of an essential and ontological difference between the sages and the ordinary human being. Indeed, we have demonstrated how the sage-king principle can also be located in written characters of the Chinese language as well as in the symbolism of *The Book of Changes*. Furthermore, we have noted how the Bahá'í concept of the three levels of reality as expressed in the Bahá'í ring stone symbol can be found in the Chinese principles of Heaven, Man, and Earth, as expressed in Chinese characters and hexagrams.

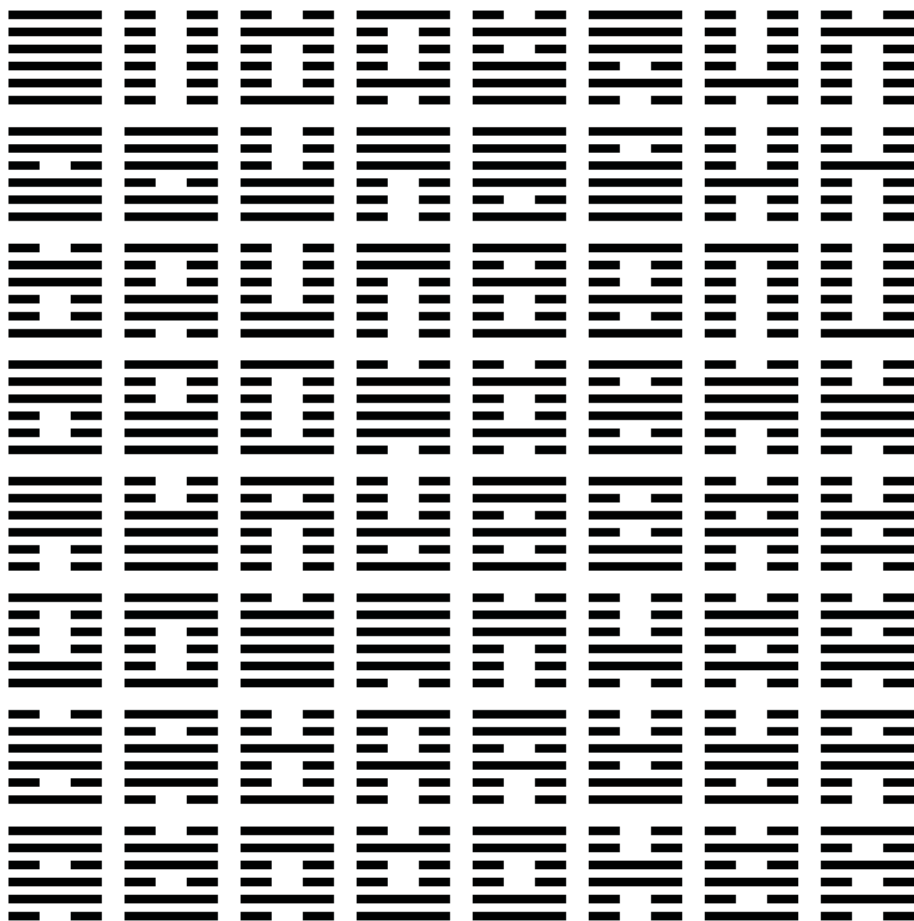
Finally, we have observed how the concept of the cyclical appearance of the Perfect Man can be seen in ancient interpretations of the Creative hexagram in *The Book of Changes*, as well as the notion of the gradual manifestation of His true reality each time the Perfect Man appears, concepts also parallel to the Bahá'í view of how human history proceeds with the advent of successive Manifestations to advance human progress and thereby create “an ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 214).

We can thus conclude that the underlying concept of “the Manifestation of God,” an intermediary between God and creation, has existed in China throughout its history, observable in linguistic and graphic symbolisms. Such a conclusion defies the notion that the concept of the prophets as intermediaries between the divine and human realms—a common belief in

the Near East and the West—is somehow foreign to China and to the Far East.

Appendix A, Hexagram Images in *The Book of Changes*

(Modified from *The I Ching, The Book of Changes*, Legge, p. 56)



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