Artistic Mysteries of Ancient China

Van James, Honolulu, Hawai'i

[Abridged from the book *Spirit and Art*, by Van James.]

Mold clay into a vessel; from its not-being [that is, the vessel's hollow] arises the utility of the vessel. Cut out doors and windows in the [walls of the] house, from their not-being [their empty space] arises the utility of the house. Therefore by the existence of things we profit. And by the non-existence of things we are served. --Lao-Tzu

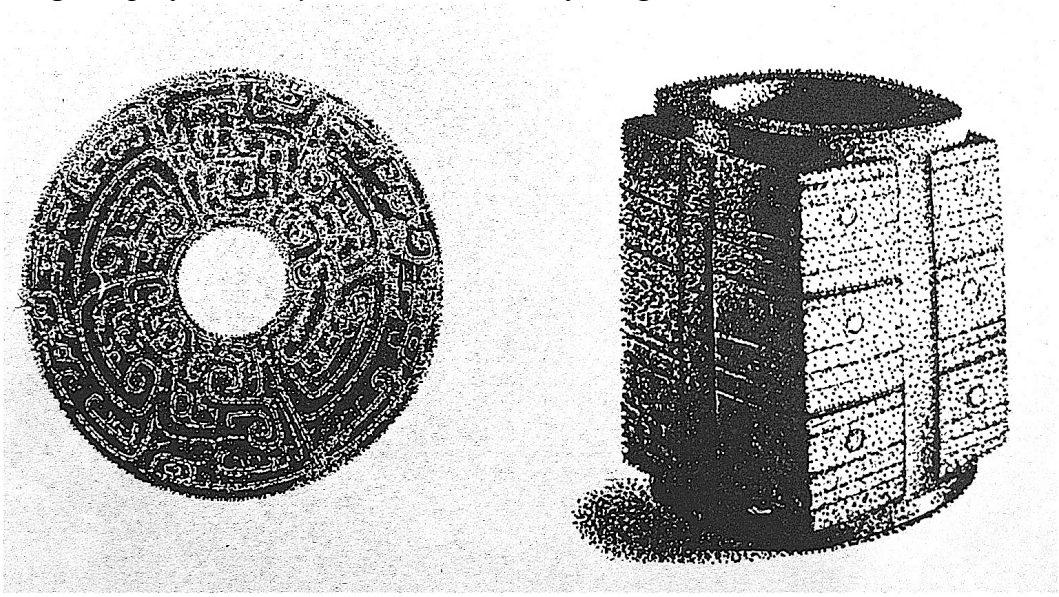

Fig. 1a. The *pi (bi)* disc is a prehistoric Chinese sun emblem, also symbolic of heaven. Buried with the dead to insure spiritual life after death, it may have been used in connection with sunrise sacrifices. Fig. 1b. The *ts'ung* or *cong* column with its square or rectangular shape is an earth symbol used in Shang and Zhou (Chou) dynasty burial practices.

The legendary Huang-ti or "Yellow Emperor," whose reign, according to the old Chinese lunar calendar, began in 2698 B.C.,[1] controlled most of the Asian central plain and areas to the west and north. After forcing most of his enemies to flee, Huang-ti was confronted by his foremost adversary, the horned Ch'ih-yu, inventor of weapons. Using magic powers, Ch'ih-yu enveloped the Yellow Emperor's army in a dense fog, blinding and confounding them. However, a chariot bearing a figure that unswervingly pointed south led the Yellow Emperor out of the fog to safety. Eventually, Ch'ih-yu was defeated and Huang-ti gained dominance over the entire Yellow River Valley. Huang-ti is

credited with inventing the compass and the carriage, developing writing, weaving, and the raising of silk worms, as well as designing innovative clothing, boats, and dwellings.

According to Rudolf Steiner, an exalted spiritual leader who appeared at about this time in China and became a great teacher of humanity, initiated a cultural stream that would last for thousands of years as it spread westward. This exceptional being, who was secluded and grew up in the precincts of an East Asian mystery center, became the first to "grasp through the faculty of human intellect, what had formerly come into the mysteries through revelation."[2] It was through this remarkable figure that Eastern mystery wisdom flowed to the West on the wings of newly born human intelligence and inspired cultures such as that of ancient Greece, with its high art and philosophy. It was this particular influence which, as Gnostic spirituality, lasted up into the fourth century C.E. as a living stream of wisdom before fading from human comprehension. It was in fact, says Steiner, this pagan wisdom that made it possible for early Christians to grasp the deeper spiritual significance of the Christ event. The auspicious Chinese figure behind this spiritual stream ironically became known in later esoteric tradition as Lucifer, "the Light Bringer." One may wonder if these two histories are describing the same being.

Some of the significant images from this period of prehistoric China are the *pi (bi)* disc and the *ts'ung (cong)* column, the archetypal circle and the rectangle. The *pi* is a symbol of the sun, also of heaven, and was often carved in jade, with a hole about a third of the total size of the disc, representing the path of transcendence or the Absolute (*t'ai-chi*) and the eternally fixed Pole Star (fig. 1a). Some discs were placed in the mouth of the dead emperor to insure vitality and prevent the body's decay. Zhou (Chou) period records also mention the disc as being placed under the corpse, but in both cases it was seen as a vehicle for guiding heavenward the spirit of the deceased. It was the highest emblem of noble status and the most important funerary object for assisting communication with the ancestors and the gods. However, it is likely that in earlier periods it was used in connection with daily sunrise sacrifices offered to the Supreme Being of Heaven, Shang Ti.

The word "ritual" in Chinese originally meant "to serve the gods with jade." And the written character for shaman depicts two tools used to draw circles overlapping one another, demonstrating who had the technology and the exclusive power to produce the *pi* disc and to present sacrifices with it.

The *ts'ung* or *cong* is a rectangular container, also carved of jade, with a cylindrical hollow and is often found among Shang and Zhou period grave offerings (fig. 1b). By the Zhou period, the *ts'ung* was placed on the abdomen of the deceased and signified the earth as the *pi* represented heaven. However, as Hugo Munsterberg points

out "...this explanation is very late and may no longer express the meaning that these motifs had in Shang times."[3] Nevertheless, the designation of *pi* as sun and later as heaven, and *ts'ung* or *cong* as earth, are approximations of meaning that point us in the direction of the spiritual significance of these images.

The whorl motif is closely related to the *pi* as a solar emblem (fig. 2). Often found on Shang period bronzes, it consists of a circle with four curving linear leg, reminiscent of a pinwheel. The whorls are likely pictoralizations of the Chinese glyph for brightness and fire, and are also connected with the sun. The whorl is also found in very early astronomical writings, some of the earliest texts in China, as a sun symbol. It pictures the four solar winds that will later be seen throughout the world as the swastika (Sanscrit for “good luck”).

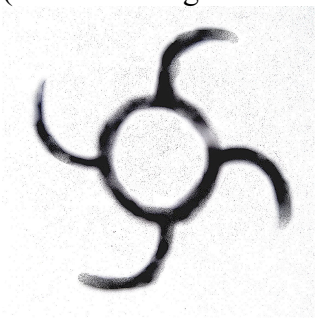

Fig. 2. The whorl motif is a solar emblem, a *pi* symbol set in motion, a swastika.

In contrast to Western symbols abstracted into letters, Chinese writing developed first as pictures that evolved later into glyphs. It is of interest that in Chinese it is said that one "writes" a picture. Both painting and writing are done with brush and ink; painting is usually monochrome and often includes writing. Thus it is easy to understand the old proverb that "a picture tells a thousand stories." The Chinese sensitivity for brush work and its spiritual significance is matter-of-factly expressed by the fifth century master, Wang Wei: "People who discuss painting merely concentrate on the outward aspects and structural effects...Alas!...painting cannot be achieved by the physical movements of the fingers and the hand, but only by the spirit entering into them. This is the nature of painting."[4]

Chiang Yee, in *The Chinese Eye: An Interpretation of Chinese Painting*, points out that "...no definite religious system has ever been evolved in China..."[5] for Daoism and Confucianism are philosophical rather than religious. Dao, or Tao (the Way), has to do with the eternal, natural order and the harmonious sense of wholeness for humanity's relationship with nature and cosmos. Dao underlies the *I Ching,* a twelfth-century B.C.E. practice of divination that uses a sign system for determining changes in the universe

resulting from the polar opposite forces of *yin* and *yang*. According to Dao, the dynamics of the cosmos are made up of two complementary forces that express themselves through polarities such as father and mother, light and dark, sky and earth, dry and wet, mountain and valley, straight and curved. Yang is the male principle and yin is the female in this sense, and they are graphically brought together in the *t'ai-chi t'u* image that was used by Daoists and Confucianists alike as a symbol of the Supreme Power of the Universe (fig. 3). The symbol is later incorporated into Buddhism. "It could decorate everyday objects, gates, ritual objects for exorcism, the robes of a Daoist priest and even the wrap for babies in the belief that the design would be a protective charm against demons."[6]

Fig. 3. The Daoist *yin-yang* symbol, called *t'ai-chit'u*, is later utilized in Buddhist iconography. It represents the great dynamic polarities at work in the universe.

The constant creative interplay of these yin and yang forces is expressed in the two drop-like forms moving together in a reciprocal curving gesture, forming a rounded two-fold swastika with a dot of the opposite's nature, like an eye, in the head of each form. Eight trigrams surround the central form with groups of three solid (yang), broken (yin), or solid and broken lines. Set in the eight directions, these trigrams are associated with heaven and earth, wind and thunder, fire and water, mountain and lake. They were used for consultation of oracles as well as for philosophical interpretation and are still used to this day.

Dao serves as a basis for Feng Shui which deals with the reading and harmonizing of *ch'i* (*qi*) within natural and built environments. Literally meaning "wind" and "water," the two elements that are intermediaries between heaven (light) and earth (solid), Feng Shui, acknowledges the lines of force that manifest as gently flowing life force. Ch'i is often dipicted as undulating, curvilinear designs on vessels and as freely meandering forms between naturalistic images in Chinese art works of various media (fig. 4). Ch'i is considered the cosmic breath and manifests through the changing seasons, weather phenomena, movements of the heavens, seas, human emotions, and thoughts. It has three

phases: *sheng*, which is a moving upward or waxing and has to do with a bright, fresh environment; *si*, which means dying or waning, and is characterized by a depleted and depressed situation; and *sha*, which is harmful, dangerous, negative energy, appearing as malevolent jabbing forces or "secret arrows."

Fig. 4. Ch'i is often dipicted as undulating, curvilinear patterns and designs in Chinese works of art—the mark of the unseen world behind the seen.

Ch'i has five moods or elements: water, wood, fire, earth, and metal. Water, which is wavelike and flows, curves, carries, cleans, and has to do with wisdom and intelligence, but also fear, is the element of the cold north and its colors are black and dark blue, its season is winter, and its part of the body is the kidney. Wood is an element that is characteristically strong yet flexible. Considered a kind and friendly element, its negative side is anger. It is upright, narrow, and rectangular, its colors are green and light blue, its position easterly, and its weather condition is rainy, its season spring, and its part of the body is the liver. Fire shines, is hot and dry, courageous and joyful. It is also hyperactive and rash. Its shape is jagged, its colors purple and red, its position is southerly, its season summer, its organ is the heart. Earth supports because it is solid and displays equanimity and patience, but also worry. Its shape is square and flat. Its color is orange and yellow, its position is in the middle. Earth weather is cloudy and windy, summery as well as autumn-like. The stomach is an earth organ. Metal reinforces, and is the perfection of earth. It represents morality and justice, but also inflexibility. Its form is round, its color white, grey or silver, its direction is west, its weather is clear, pleasent, and autumnal. The lungs are seen as related to the element of metal. According to Feng Shui, an applied geomancy, the shape of a building classifies it as belonging to one or more of these five elements. A low, flat roof connects a building with the earth element; an irregular roof with the water element; a tall, narrow construction fits the wood element; domes are associated with the metal element; and sharp, pointed roofs belong to the fire element (fig. 5). Thus, according to Feng Shui practitioners, a fire form would

not be appropriately placed within the surroundings of water forms for it would not flourish.

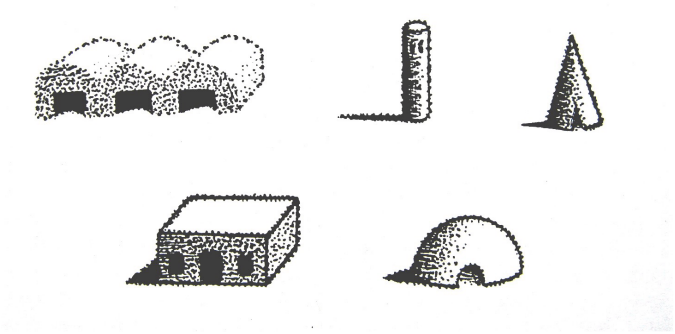

Fig. 5. According to Feng Shui principles, each of the five elements is characterized by a particular shape. Architectural forms thus convey a certain elemental signature.

The five elements must be considered in relation to four directions and their geographic animal characteristics, such as the summer Red Phoenix, who rules over the south and brings invigorating forces and good fortune. The White Tiger dominates the West, is unpredictable and disruptive as an autumn power. In the East, bringing protection and wisdom is the Green Dragon of spring. And to the North is the sleepy and mysterious Black Tortoise, who brings nurturing in the winter season. These four earthly animal powers stand in striking contrast to the twelve cosmic animal powers as inticated in the Chinese calendar.

The position of a dwelling in relation to the four directions, to mountains, rivers and the prevailing wind is of major concern in Feng Shui. The positioning of doors and windows, mirrors, art work, furniture, vegetation, and pathways are all crucial in the directing of *ch'i* and displacement of *sha* in the environment. Royal palaces were always carefully aligned and before many office buildings and homes are built in China today, a Feng Shui master is consulted.

Art works and images are important to Feng Shui planning, as the form and character of a particular object is just as important as its placement. A rounded or squared form, a human or animal image, create completely different spiritual environments for the patron. Although Feng Shui principles were only written down in the centuries C.E., it can be assumed that such doctrines were based on earlier undocumented traditions of a similar nature. What we know of Feng Shui practices today is, like today's astrology, only a shadow of its earlier form.

Feng Shui, concerned as it is with forces at work upon the earth, finds its complement in the sophisticated science of Chinese astronomy and astrology. The

Chinese were very intent on following the movement of the stars and the emperor, as Sun-King, had to live every day and every hour of his life in accordance with the celestial choreography. He was the earthly representative of Shang Ti and the great family of ancestors and was therefore obliged to demonstrate the actions of the entire heavenly system. Sudden, unforseen stellar events such as comets and supernovas were the cause of great anxiety as they foreshadowed change and upheaval. Emperors had to demonstrate great wisdom and control at such times in order to maintain their position and power.

The Chinese, unlike the Indians south of the Himalayas, did not develop clairvoyance based on a perception of their own organism. Instead, by instinctively projecting themselves into their environment they gained exceptional understanding of the outer world. What they knew of the human being arose from their adept penetration of the sense world, whereas the Indians knew the world by means of perceiving their own organism. In other words, the Chinese cultivated *intuition* and the Indians fostered *imagination*, according to Rudolf Steiner.[7] This capacity in the Chinese accounts not only for the sciences of Feng Shui, astronomy, acupuncture, and martial arts but also for the inventiveness and the capacity for making so many practical discoveries such as silk production, gunpowder, the compass, paper maps and writing. It also explains, in part, the general lack of very early anthropomorphic deities and human images (unlike the art of ancient India).

One of the rare exceptions to this absence of deities is a prehistoric image found in northwestern China, of a possible horned shaman featured on the lid of a clay pot (fig. 6). Painted with zig-zags and straight lines, the bearded shaman has a slithering snake form modelled on the back of his head, reminding us of the sacred serpent on the headress of Egyptian pharaohs as the symbol for inner vision and seership. On the front of the star-shaped lid twelve serpent-like lines are painted between straight, bold lines. The two hollow horns may have been used to dispense seed from this cultic vessel at planting times. The shaman was a spiritual advisor in most early communities and China was no exception. *Discourses of the States*, a fourth-century B.C.E. narrative history, describes the importance of these spiritual leaders in early Chinese civilization: "The possessors of such power were, if men, called *xi* [shamans], and if women, *wu* [shamanesses]. It is they who supervised the positions of the spirits at the ceremonies, sacrificed to them, and otherwise handled religious matters."[8] This would also include the healing arts and agriculture. Shamanism was the earliest form of Chinese religo-political-spiritualty and as A.C. Graham describes it, "...the meditation practiced privately and recommended to rulers as an arcanum of government descends directly from the

trance of the professional shaman."[9] The shamanic theme is one that pervades all of Asia and persists to this day in isolated areas.

Fig. 6. One of the earliest intact prehistoric human images is this clay vessel top found in northwestern China. It probably represents a bearded shaman wearing two horns, with a snake slithering up the back of his head. It was possibly used in connection with ritual agricultural practices.

Another naturalistic image from the time of the *Discourses* is that of a cast-bronze Mongolian youth (or maiden) with two ceremonial wands in hand (fig. 7). A carved jade bird sits atop each of the ritual staves in hand--a picture of the spirit-messenger upon the sacred tree. This shamanic bird-imagery, indicative of spirit flight, is apparent in images throughout the world and over the course of time. The staff and bird are a meaningful mystery image seen throughout prehistory. Eliade describes its use in various parts of the world: "In the mythologies of Central Asia, Siberia, and Indonesia, the birds perched on the branches of the World Tree represent men's souls. Because Shamans can change themselves into 'birds,' that is, because they enjoy the 'spirit' condition, they are able to fly to the World Tree to bring back soul-birds."[10] And in Siberia, "The Goldi, the Dolgan, and the Tungus [tribes] say that before birth, the souls of children perch like little birds on the branches of the Cosmic Tree and the shamans go there to find them."[11] Among the Siberian Buryat the eagle is the ancestral shaman. Shaman is a Tungus word meaning a medicine man or woman, but is now commonly used in English to describe these uniquely gifted people.

Fig. 7. This fourth-century B.C. bronze figure of a shaman youth/maiden holding two sticks with sixteenth-century B.C. jade birds perched atop, was misidentified as a falconer, for the birds have hooked beaks which make them unequiped for hunting. The bird symbolizes the shaman's spirit flight, the stick represents the World Tree.

The *lung* is the most important zoomorphic image in China, even to this day. This dragon-like creature, visible only to the gods, has the jaws of a tiger, the brow of a bear, the antlers of a deer, and the body of a lizard or snake (fig. 8). It dwells in air and water, making it a mediator between the regions above and the regions below. It provides rain and is therefore, like the serpent, a symbol of the chthonic powers associated with fertility. Although they are minor deities in India, serpents are powerful beings, regarded as guardians of the earth's treasures and possessors of all the sciences. Called *nagas,* they can appear as serpents with the head of a man. When they came to China they were known as Dragon Kings, and Buddhists may pray to them to this day for rain.

Fig. 8. The *lung* is not simply a dragon, but a zoomorphic composite creature, which, as the guardian of elemental forces, can bring good or ill fortune.

There are numerous accounts of dragons fathering great rulers or appearing in the sky at the time of royal births, and by the first dynastic period the dragon was already a symbol of sovereign power and an emblem of royalty. The emperor's throne was called the dragon throne and his face was the dragon's countenance. Unlike the snake, which is bound to the earth, the dragon has wings and feet. A royal dragon has five claws instead of four. "In contrast to the Western dragon which is thought of as a negative force, representing evil and the devil [or Lucifer], and which is slain by heroes...the Chinese dragon is considered beneficial and auspicious, bringing good fortune and abundance."[12] In this context, the Chinese dragon (*lung*) is more a being of the living, etheric formative forces, while the European dragon is a creature of the untransformed astral or soul realm.

The Ch'an sect of Buddhism reveres the dragon image as a mystical vision of the Buddha-nature. Legend speaks of a dragon rising out of the Yellow River and making known the circular *t'ai-chi t'u* diagram of the yin-yang symbol. Dragon images from the third millenium B.C.E. have been found in China, although the earliest examples known, also associated with water and fertility, are from Mesopotamia.

Fig. 9. *T'ao t'ieh* means "glutton mask" in modern Chinese but clearly holds an esoteric significance related to the head as a sacred vessel and ritual offerings of food and wine for the ancestors. The stylized *t'ao t'ieh* countenance is sometimes human, sometimes animal, but most frequently seen as a dragon or lung face.

The *t'ao t'ieh,* meaning "glutton mask" in modern Chinese, is another zoomorphic mystery image, most often seen on vessels as a stylized mask-like face with two

prominent eyes (fig. 9). The face is always symmetrical, bifurcated, and is usually accentuated by a flange or ridge that runs vertically down the forehead and nose. Different animals are recognizable in the *t'ao t'ieh*, such as the bull (fig. 10), deer, and dragon, but most often the face is that of a tiger.

Fig. 10. The *t'ao t'ieh*, besides appearing as the traditional lung mask, also appears as other animals such as the bull.

The function of the *t'ao t'ieh* is believed to be that of a guardian spirit that protects the living during ritual ceremonies, guards access to the threshold, and drives away evil spirits from the tombs of the dead. The ritual bronze vessels of the Shang and Chou dynasties upon which the *t'ao t'ieh* images most often appear are containers for ceremonial use, holding wine or grain. The ritual vessel, as a container filled with nourishment for the ancestors, provides an imagination of the head as a vessel of *ch'i*-permeated thought substance likewise offered up to the gods. The elaborate curvilinear patterns on such vessels may resemble convolutions of the brain and may represent the dynamic weaving forces of the thinking head similar to the way in which the shaman's horns and pharoah's serpent headress express the visionary capacities of the initiate. In anycase, the patterns are not definite or naturalistic and thus indicate the forces of the unseen world of the gods and ancestors. “In the early Shang period, the eyes within the undefined face on bronze vessels suggest not only seers that transcend the boundary of this world and that of the dead, but an unknown power that sees but cannot be seen, thus producing a sense of fear or unease in the viewers. The lack of definition and separation

between image and ground serves to increase this sense of the unknowable."[13] The eyes suggest the power of an unseen presence while the tiger face suggests a devourer and passage to the other world.

The Tang dynasty emperor, Tai Zong, became very ill after his invasion of Korea. None of the court physicians could relieve his agony for he was tormented by evil spirits. Every night ghosts visited the emperor and robbed him of his sleep, severely weakening him. Two of his generals volunteered to stand guard at the emperor's door and from then on no spirits dared to appear. The emperor soon recovered his health and strength. He released the generals from their watch and hung painted portraits of them to continue the work of keeping the evil spirits away.[14] This Chinese story is associated with the practice of placing images of martial door-gods or heros on either side of a gate or entrance way. Pairs of tomb attendants also appear as funerary figures and were buried with the dead, in place of living attendants, as threshold guardians. Lokapala and Mahakala are the Buddhist guardian deities who stare angrily, weapons at the ready to protect the *dharma*. They are usually positioned at temple entrances and suggest that the power of images is equal to that of living beings. Lions or other animals served the same purpose. This is why throughout prehistory painted images and wood, stone, and clay figures appear as substitutes or stand-ins for actual objects or beings (fig. 11). The artistic image embodies spirit and has been used because of this throughout history, not only in China, but throughout the world.

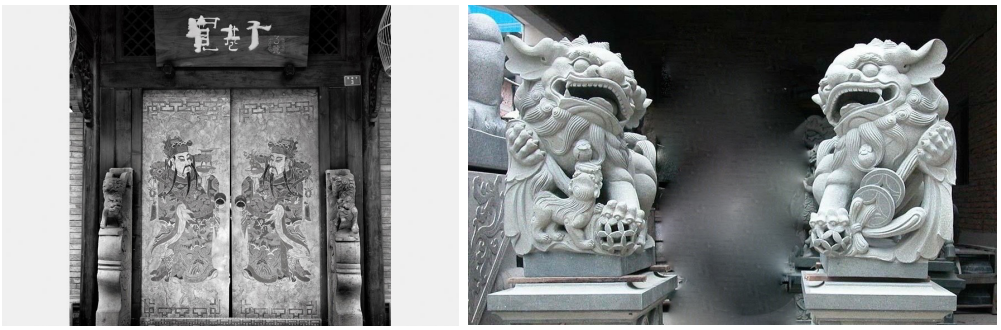

Fig. 11. Human and animal guardian figures are common in both painting and sculpture, not only in China but throughout the world. They often protect entrances to shrines, temples, palaces and homes.

NOTES

1. Smith, B. & Weng, B. *China: A History in Art*, p. 24.
2. Steiner, R. *The Influences of Lucifer and Ahriman: Man's Responsibility for the Earth*, November 4, 1919.

3. Munsterberg, H. *Symbolism in Ancient Chinese Art*, p. 220.
4. Wang Wei, chinese painter, 420-478 A.D.
5. Yee, C. *The Chinese Eye: An Interpretation of Chinese Painting,* p. 16.
6. Munsterberg, p. 239.
7. "The activity of perceiving the spiritual in the outer world, can...be called intuition, whereas the activity of making inner vision outwardly visible is imagination." Steiner, *Art As Spiritual Activity*, p. 211.
8. Pankenier, D. "Mandate of Heaven," *Archaeology*, April 1998, p. 26.
9. Graham, A.C. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. Cited in Ryan, p. 8.
10. Eliade, M. *Shamanism,* p. 481.
11. Cited in Sullivan, W. *The Secret of the Incas*, p. 367.
12. Munsterberg, p. 40.
13. Allan, S. 2016. "The Taotie Motif on Early Chinese Ritual Bronzes," *The Zoomorphic Imagination in Chinese Art and Culture,* p. 54.
14. Blatchford, J. *China: Ancient Inspiration and New Directions,* p. 155.