

The Diagram of the Supreme Pole and the Kabbalistic Tree

On the Similarity of Two Symbolic Structures

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Abstract: This paper discusses similarities in both form and meaning between two symbolic structures: the Diagram of the Supreme Pole of Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism and the Kabbalistic Tree of medieval Jewish mysticism. These similarities are remarkable in light of the many differences that exist between Chinese and Judaic thought, and that also manifest in the two symbols. Intercultural influence might account for the similarities, but there is no historical evidence for such influence. An alternative explanation would attribute the similarities to the ubiquitousness of religious-philosophical ideas about hierarchy, polarity, and macrocosm-microcosm parallelism, but this does not adequately account for the similar overall structure of the symbols. The question of how to understand these similarities remains open.

Introduction

This paper calls attention to similarities between two religious-philosophical symbols: the Kabbalistic Tree of the medieval Jewish mystical tradition and the Diagram of the Supreme Pole¹ (*Taiji tu*) of the Neo-Confucian School of the Chinese Song period (eleventh and twelfth centuries). If the components of the Kabbalistic Tree (referred to henceforth as “the Tree”) and their internal relations are mapped out onto to the Diagram of the Supreme Pole (referred to hereafter as “the Diagram”) and its internal relations, many correspondences are revealed. While components that correspond differ in specific meaning due to differences between Chinese and Jewish thought, their roles within their respective structures are often similar.

Since the most plausible null hypothesis about a cosmological symbol from Neo-Confucianism and a theosophical symbol from Kabbalah is

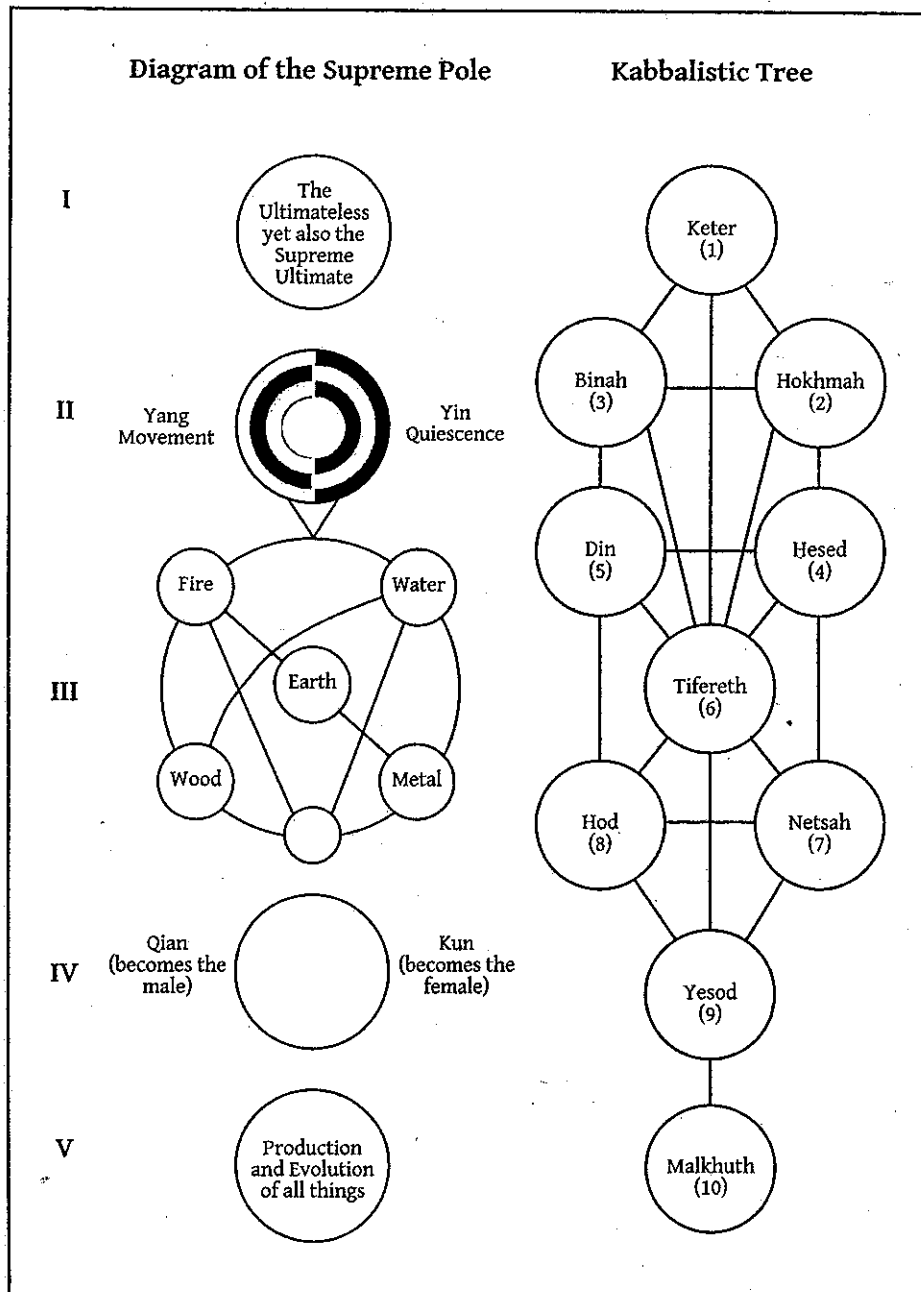


Figure 1. Diagram of the Supreme Pole (left) and the Kabbalistic Tree (right).² The numerals I-V label Diagram substructures, not individual components, e.g., circle II includes the Two Forces (yang and yin) and III includes the Five Agents (Fire, Water, Earth, Wood, Metal). The structures correspond if either one is left-right reversed.

difference, similarities are noteworthy but differences are no less important. One prominent difference between these two symbols is their status within their individual traditions. The Diagram had Daoist precursors, and its importance to Neo-Confucianism was evident at the inception of this movement. By contrast, the origins of the Tree are shrouded in mystery. As a canonical structure, it appears late in the Kabbalist tradition, more as a visual mnemonic than as a symbolic centerpiece. Such differences notwithstanding, the similarities that exist between the two are extensive, as the analysis that follows will show.

Chronology, Overview, and Sources

The symbols differ greatly in the precision with which their first appearances can be dated and in the degree to which a few seminal writings gave them definitive interpretations. The two principal commentaries on the Diagram were written in 1060 by Zhou Dunyi, who recast an earlier Daoist symbol into Neo-Confucian form, and in 1175 by Zhu Xi, the most prominent philosopher of the Song Neo-Confucian school.³ The emergence of this school is described by Fung as follows:

By the beginning of the Song dynasty, i.e., around the year 1000, the major existing schools of thought (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) had all reached roughly comparable stages of development in the course of which a considerable intermingling of ideas had occurred. All that was lacking was the series of great men who were presently to appear, and were to organize and unify all that had gone before into one great system.⁴

Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi, among others, accomplished this unification. Driven by the desire for a coherent cosmology and by the syncretic motive of linking Confucianism to the other Chinese traditions, the Song scholars produced a Neo-Confucian metaphysics influenced by Daoism and Buddhism.⁵ The Diagram of the Zhou Dunyi was the symbolic centerpiece of the Song Neo-Confucian synthesis.

By contrast, the Tree appears late and its origin is obscure. There is no definitive treatment of the symbol that is analogous to the two commentaries on the Diagram. The Zohar (Moshe de Léon of Guadalajara, Spain, 1286) was the central book of the Kabbalah, but Kabbalist doctrine had roots in many earlier works, including the Sefer Yetsirah (third to sixth centuries) and Sefer Bahir (1150-1200) of Provence, France.⁶ The Tree did not appear in these books. It emerged as a canonical structure only in the fourteenth century.⁷ It was not a central symbol for the

Kabbalists. The prominence it later gained is partially due to its importance in occult and Christian Kabbalah. It was the doctrine of the *Sefirot* (literally, “enumerations”)—the ten components of the Tree—that was central to the medieval Jewish mystical tradition. The Sefirot were religious concepts long before they were integrated and visually represented in the Tree. Similarly, the Chinese doctrines of the Two Forces and Five Agents predated their use in the Diagram.

The subjects of these symbols are not the same, but they play similar roles in their respective cultural contexts: for the neo-Confucians, the fundamental metaphysical principle, the Supreme Pole, with its forces, agents, and other manifestations; for the Kabbalists, God, with the Sefirot representing divine attributes or instruments.⁸ To the Western mind, the Diagram is philosophical, or cosmological, while the Tree is

religious, or theosophical. One could say also that the Diagram is religious as well, but not in the Western sense of implying a personal, law-giving, creator God. Conversely, given that for the Kabbalists the structure of God was mirrored in His creation, Kabbalah also offers a cosmology.⁹ This emphasizes its Neoplatonic aspects, but in Kabbalah, mythological and Biblical aspects predominate, and these have no Chinese parallel. Nothing in the Diagram corresponds to applications of the Sefirotic doctrine to Biblical persons, passages, and

events or to the mystical aspects of the Hebrew language. The differences between Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah and between Chinese and Jewish thought are substantial. Given these differences, the similarities of the symbols are striking.

These symbols were not only cosmological or theosophical. Both Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah asserted the parallelism of macrocosm and microcosm. For the Neo-Confucians, this is illustrated by Zhou Dunyi’s use of cosmological ideas for moral discourse. His statement that “it is man alone who receives the finest [substance]” is a dramatic application of cosmology to anthropology. The Confucian centrality of human action is reaffirmed, deepened by a new metaphysical foundation. A human focus also characterized the Daoist precursor of the Diagram, which referred to the “subtle body” of man, which was the instrument and object of meditation. Similarly, as Moshe Idel notes, Kabbalah was both theosophical and “ecstatic.”¹⁰ The Sefirot applied to the human body, psyche, and behavior and to meditative and mystical practice. In the doctrines of Shi’ur Komah, the measurement of the “bodily parts” as it were, of God, and Adam Kadmon, the primordial man or cosmic anthropos, the Kabbalists

gave symbolic human physical form to God. The Diagram and Tree thus depict not only cosmos and God, respectively, but also human physical, moral, psychological, and spiritual structures. Both symbols were used to declare that by perfecting oneself, one harmonized the macrocosm.

The literatures relevant to these symbols are large and diverse. The Diagram was Confucian but had Daoist origins and showed Buddhist influence; the focus here is on the Confucian and Daoist sources. In addition to the original Jewish Kabbalah, there were Christian and occult offshoots, and Jewish Kabbalah gave much less emphasis to the Tree than these later derivatives. Even within Jewish Kabbalah there were various doctrines; this paper focuses on early (pre-Lurianic) Kabbalah.

The scholarly literatures on Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah also differ in the extent to which they are dominated by a single investigator. For Neo-Confucianism and the Diagram, this paper relies heavily on Needham and Fung, especially Needham, whose translations¹¹ of Zhou Dunyi’s and Zhu Xi’s commentaries are used in this paper. Unless otherwise footnoted, all references to these authors are to Needham’s translations. But there is no intention here to suggest that Needham’s views are more authoritative than other interpretations. By contrast, Kabbalah as a subject for scholarly research is due to the monumental work of Gershom Scholem. He is thus the major source for the discussion of the Tree,¹² though this essay also draws on the work of Moshe Idel and other Kabbalah scholars. Relying on these prominent sources must suffice since, as both Idel and Daniel Abrams¹³ note, there is yet no definitive treatment of the history of the doctrine of the Sefirot and their use in Kabbalistic structures.

Meaning and Sequence

The Diagram and the Tree are quite similar in their first three components. In their middle portions, differences are apparent, though similarities also exist. In the final two components similarities are again salient.

The First Three Components

At the top of each symbol is a neutral component representing the highest reality: *Taiji* (the “Supreme Pole”) in the Diagram and *Keter* (Crown) in the Tree. Yet the identity of this first component is not free of ambiguity. Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi both note that “the Supreme Pole is essentially [identical with] that which has no Pole.” There are two concepts here: the Supreme Pole (*taiji*) from the Confucian (and Daoist) classic the *Yi Jing*, and “that which has no Pole,” the “Ultimateless” (*wuji*), from the

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Daodejing.¹⁴ The identity of these “positive” and “negative” (“full” and “empty”) concepts is asserted in the commentaries, but these concepts were not completely synonymous. As Henderson points out,¹⁵ the identification of taiji and wuji is a syncretic statement uniting notions from different Chinese traditions.

A parallel union of positive and negative concepts existed in the Kabbalah in the relationship between Keter and—not included in the symbol—*Ein-sof*.¹⁶ In some Kabbalist writings, *Ein-sof*, “that which has no end,” is more fundamental than Keter and beyond description. In other writings, Keter is the external aspect of *Ein-sof*, indicating a closer relationship. Keter is also referred to as *Ayin*, “nothingness,” a negative concept like *Ein-sof*, whose polar opposite is *Yesh*, “existence,” literally “there is.”¹⁷ There is a relationship between Keter—that which is manifested—and *Ein-sof*, or *Ayin*—that which is unmanifest. *Yesh* arises from *Ayin*, Being from Nothingness. In both traditions, beyond what can be stated as the highest is that which has no name, no end, no pole. Both traditions wrestled with the problem of whether the unmanifested is prior to and distinct from the manifested, or whether the two are in some sense equivalent. Neither the solution of difference nor the solution of identity was completely satisfactory, and so different positions inevitably arose on this matter.

It is not being asserted here that the concept of wuji is identical with the concept of *Ein-sof* or of *Ayin* (although wuji means “no extreme,” quite close to *Ein-sof*, which means “no end”). Virtually every mystical tradition has some notion of Nothingness, as doctrine and as meditative or mystical experience. While notions of Nothingness in different cultures are not the same, it is equally implausible to believe they are completely different. Both Neo-Confucians and Kabbalists faced the question of the relationship between Nothingness and Plenitude. Corresponding terms do not mean the same thing—*Ein-sof* and Keter are theistic concepts while wuji and taiji are not—but the relation between wuji and taiji and the relation between *Ein-sof* and Keter are similar.

In both symbols, the first component gives rise to a dyad representing the fundamental polarity that emanates from the fundamental unity: for the Diagram, the Two Forces yang and yin; for the Tree, *Hokhmah* (wisdom) and *Binah* (understanding or intelligence). In this dyad, the male component is first and the female component second. Zhou Dunyi writes, “The Supreme Pole moves and produces the yang. When the movement has reached its limit, rest (ensues). Resting, the Supreme Pole produces the yin.” Correspondingly, Wisdom and Understanding are second and third in the canonical order of the *Sefirot*. But one should not make too

much of this ordering. The placement of yang and yin and wisdom and understanding implies symmetry for the two components; for the Diagram, this symmetry also inheres in the fact that yang generates yin and yin generates yang. There is a tension here between asserting symmetry and breaking symmetry (sequencing the components); both are required.

The first three components in each structure constitute a primary triad from which the rest of the symbol follows. In Daoist thought, the union in the Dao of yin and yang was an explicit triad, and this was incorporated into Neo-Confucian philosophy. This triad is also recognized in Kabbalist writings as an explicit unit and as the generative source from which creation proceeds.¹⁸ Both triads represent the differentiation of unity into duality with a resulting symbolism of one, two, and three, rooted in an ineffable zero, empty yet also full.

The yin character of Understanding was prominent in Kabbalist thought. While *Malkhut* (Kingdom), the tenth *Sefirah* (*Sefirah* is the singular form of *Sefirot*), was taken to represent the *Shekhinah*, the “Divine Presence” and female aspect of God, there was a doctrine of a higher and a lower *shekhinah*, of which the higher was Understanding and the lower was Kingdom. Scholem writes,

*As the upper Shekhinah of the Sefirah of Binah, [the principle of] femininity is the full expression of ceaseless creative power—it is receptive, to be sure, but is spontaneously and incessantly transformed into a component that gives birth, as the stream of eternally flowing divine life enters into it.*¹⁹

In both symbols, the first three components encompass the distinction between information and matter-energy, but in different ways. Zhu Xi linked the Supreme Pole itself with *li*, principle, and linked yin and yang (circle II) with *qi* (energy), which accords with the inherent generativity of the Two Forces. In the Tree, this distinction is not in Crown (Keter) vs. Wisdom-Understanding, but rather in Wisdom vs. Understanding.

The Five Agents and the Central Sefirot

The middle portion of the Diagram consist of the Five Agents.²⁰ Zhou Dunyi writes, “The yang is transformed (by) reacting with the yin and so Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth are produced.” For Zhu Xi, the order is Water-Wood-Fire-Earth-Metal. The Five Agents are functional and abstract; their names are not intended literally. Agents are major and minor yang (Fire and Wood), major and minor yin (Water and Metal), or neutral (Earth). They are ordered by several sequences, including what Needham calls the cosmogenic order, the mutual production

order, and the mutual conquest order. The middle portion of the Tree consists of the five Sefirot, given here in their canonical order: *Hesed*, Benevolence (or love, mercy; or *gedulah*, greatness); *Din*, Judgment (or law, rigor; or *gevurah*, power);²¹ *Tiferet*, Beauty (or splendor; or *rahamim*, compassion); *Netsah*, Eternity; and *Hod*, Glory (or majesty). Benevolence (4) and Eternity (7) are primary and secondary male Sefirot. Judgment (5) and Glory (8) are primary and secondary female Sefirot. And Beauty (6) is neutral. Here a major difference exists between the symbols: the substructure of the Five Agents is plain in the Diagram, but an explicit pentadic grouping of Benevolence to Glory is not found in the Tree or in Kabbalist literature. While the symbolism of five was salient in Chinese philosophy, it was largely absent in Jewish thought,²² though it existed in occult Kabbalah.²³

If one considers the correspondences of Fire-Benevolence, Water-Judgment, Earth-Beauty, Metal-Eternity, and Wood-Glory, this being the conventional order of the Sefirot, the Five Agents then have the sequence Fire-Water-Earth-Wood-Metal, which is a mutual conquest order. A more compelling parallelism, however, is obtained by aligning the Chinese pentad of Five Virtues, correlated with the Five Agents, with the central Sefirot (see figure 2). This mirror reflects the Five Agents, putting minor yang and yin above major yang and yin.

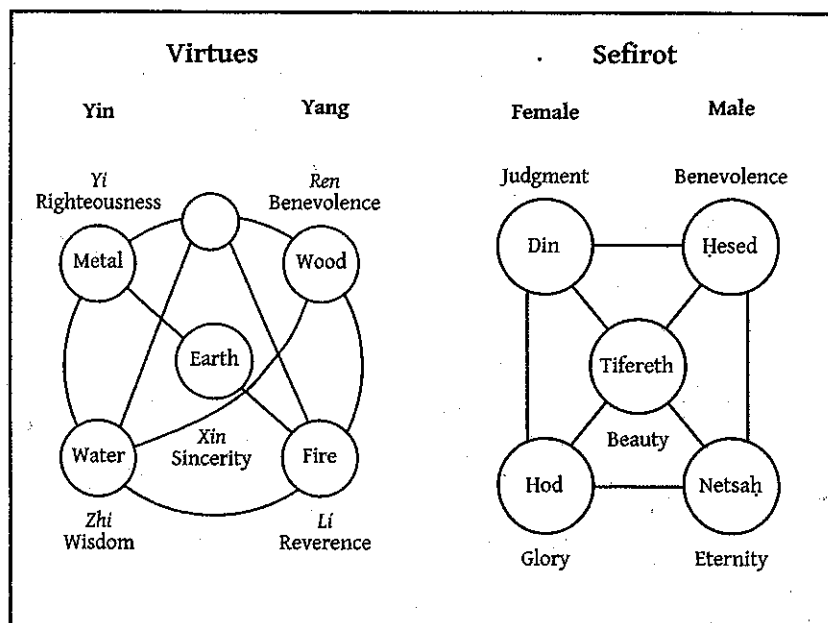


Figure 2. The Five Virtues and Sefirot (4–8).

The Five Virtues are *ren* (benevolence, humanity, love); *yi* (righteousness, rightness); *li* (reverence propriety—not the same character as *li*, principle); *zhi* (wisdom); and *xin* (sincerity, honesty, good faith, trustworthiness). These Five Virtues are associated with Wood, Metal, Fire, Water, and Earth, respectively. *Ren* and *yi* are the major virtues, although they are assigned to the minor yang and yin components, Wood and Metal. The pentad of virtues was central to the transformation of the Daoist precursor of the Diagram to its Neo-Confucian form. In the earlier Daoist version, the Five Agents referred to aspects of meditation, but for Zhou Dunyi—and Zhu Xi agreed²⁴—their primary relevance was to the virtues and the achieving of sagehood:

The sages ordered their lives by the Correct, by Love and Righteousness. They adopted ataraxy as their dominant attitude and set up the highest standards for mankind. Thus it was that the 'virtue of the sages was in harmony with that of heaven and earth.' . . . The good fortune of the noble man lies in cultivating these virtues; the bad fortune of the ignoble man lies in proceeding contrary to them.

For the Neo-Confucians, the Diagram was a metaphysical basis for ethics.²⁵ Human conduct remained their central concern. While meditation (“quiet-sitting”) provided a means of self-cultivation, it was not viewed as an end in itself. Shu-Hsien Liu notes that “the Buddhists’ ultimate commitment is . . . *sūnya* or Emptiness,” but the “ultimate commitment for the Confucianists [remained] *Ren* (Humanity).”²⁶

In this pentad of virtues, *ren* and *yi* form the principal dyad, the former yang and the latter yin. Benevolence was primary, and all other virtues, especially righteousness, flowed from it. Likewise in the Tree, *Hesed* (Benevolence) is prior to and the source of *Din* (Judgment), the first being masculine, the second feminine. Fung notes that righteousness was “the goodness that comes from hardness” and included “decisiveness, strictness, firmness, determination, and steadfastness;”²⁷ these are also the qualities of *Din*. The predominance of *ren* and *yi* matches the predominance of *Hesed* and *Din*, but it is not being asserted here that *ren* and *Hesed* are identical, despite the appropriateness of the translation “benevolence” for both, or that *yi* and *Din* are identical. *Ren* is rooted in—but transcends—the specific obligations belonging to the various human relationships (e.g., between father and son) as emphasized in Confucianism. *Ren* was the subject of extensive scholarly discourse in Confucianism, and the concept of *Hesed* was similarly complex. What is clear, however, is that with respect to the polarity of softness and hardness, *ren* and *yi* parallel *Hesed* and *Din*. Contrary to popular Western

gender correlations, both Jewish and Chinese medieval philosophy assigned mercy to the masculine and severity to the feminine.²⁸ Both Jewish and Chinese thinkers also regarded imbalance within these dyads as a source of evil.²⁹

Aligning the Chinese pentad of virtues with the central Sefirot has an intriguing consequence. At the bottom of the Five Agents in the Diagram, there is a small circle that is not a component in its own right. About it Zhu Xi writes, "The small circle below, connected by the four lines with the Five Agents above, indicates that which has no Pole, in which all are mysteriously unified."

If Wood and Metal are placed at the top of the five agents as displayed in the table above, the small circle is above them, precisely at the site of the "supplementary" Sefirah of *Da'at* (Knowledge), which is not numbered among the canonical Sefirot.³⁰ *Da'at* is not shown in the Tree as reproduced here, but it is sometimes interposed between Wisdom-Understanding and Benevolence-Judgment.

The Last Two Components

The last two components of both symbols are neutral in gender. In circle IV of the Diagram, the two are *qian* and *kun*, and in circle V, there are the "myriad things"; in the Tree, *Yesod* (Foundation) and *Malkhut* (Kingdom). In both, the next-to-last component is the sexual generative power and the funnel through which all components above merge and flow into the final component. The last component is the multiplicity of all things, which results from this influx via the union of sexual powers.

The sexually generative character of the last two circles of the Diagram is asserted by both Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi.

The two qi (of maleness and femaleness), reacting with and influencing each other, change and bring the myriad things into being. Generation follows generation, and there is no end to their changes and transformations. (Zhou Dunyi)

The fourth figure represents (the operations of the qi of yin and yang exhibited in) the principles of (heavenly) maleness and of (earthly) femaleness which pervade the universe. . . . The fifth figure represents the birth and transformation of the myriad things in their sensible forms, each of which has its own nature. (Zhu Xi)

Qian and *kun*, the male and female aspects of circle IV, are the primary yang and yin trigrams and hexagrams in the *Yijing*; they consist exclusively of yang and yin lines, respectively.³¹ This circle thus links the

Diagram to this Confucian classic, which Zhou Dunyi says "is the most perfect." While yin and yang are not generally sexual, in circle IV they are. Needham states that Zhou Dunyi's commentary on circle IV is "undoubtedly chemical, cf. the sexual symbolism of the alchemists."³² In the Daoist antecedent of the Diagram, used to guide meditation, the commentary on circle IV is explicitly alchemical; Zhou Dunyi retained this association.

About the Tree, Scholem writes,

The ninth Sefirah, Yesod, is the male potency, described with clearly phallic symbolism, the 'foundation' of all life, which guarantees and consummates the hieros gamos, the holy union of male and female powers.³³

Foundation has a masculine character in relation to Kingdom, but it is not exclusively masculine, as its placement on the central column attests. The phallic symbolism comes from using the male figure to associate Sefirot with bodily parts, but genital symbolism is really intended. Scholem notes,

The ninth Sefirah, Yesod, "the foundation," is correlated with the male and female sex organs . . . out of which all the higher Sefirot—welded together in the image of the King—flow into the Shekhinah [and] is interpreted as the procreative life force dynamically active in the universe.³⁴

Sexual rites and meditations were associated with Foundation. Scholem quotes a Friday evening hymn of Isaac Luria, the great Safed Kabbalist, which speaks of the union of husband and wife and makes this quite explicit.³⁵ The argument here is not that there was a sexual alchemy within Kabbalah but that the sexual symbolism of Foundation resembles the sexual aspect of Chinese alchemy.

A moral dimension of circle IV augments its sexual aspect. Zhou Dunyi writes,

It is man alone, however, who receives the finest (substance) and is the most spiritual of beings. After his (bodily) form has been produced, his spirit develops consciousness; (when) his five agents are stimulated and move, (there develops the) distinction between good and evil, and the myriad phenomena of conduct appear.

The distinction between good and evil is circle IV; the "myriad phenomena of conduct" which flow from this distinction is circle V. Similarly, Foundation is also called *Zaddik*, "the righteous one." Righteousness is the foundation of the world³⁶ and is associated with moral distinctions

and harmonious equilibrium, with setting things in their proper places. (The righteousness of the Sefirah Judgment is a more general concept, meaning also rigor and power; the righteousness of Foundation refers to specific behavior.) There is also a moral connection to the sexual aspect of Foundation. This Sefirah was associated with the Biblical figure of Joseph, who resisted sexual temptation.

The symbolism of the last component is also similar. Circle V, the “myriad things,”³⁷ is the multiplicity finally engendered by the Supreme Pole.³⁸ This circle is not considered to be yin either by Zhou Dunyi or by Zhu Xi, but in the Daoist precursor of the Diagram it is called the “Doorway of the Mysterious Female” or “The Gate of the Dark Femininity.”³⁹ Circle V corresponds to Kingdom, which unites the Sefirot and represents the attribute of God linked most closely with the material world. Kingdom is distinctively female, corresponding to the lower Shekhinah, the female aspect of God, the divine immanence within the multiplicity of existence. It is “in everything” (*ba-kol*), the “form that embraces all forms” and renders to each form its specific individuality.⁴⁰ Plurality is also reflected in the interpretation of this last Sefirah as representing “Knesseth Israel,” the mystical archetype of the community of Israel.⁴¹

The last component is farthest from the first and is a terminus, yet like the other components it remains connected to its source. There is resemblance between the words of the Sefer Yetsirah at 1:7—“Ten Sefirot of Nothingness: Their end is imbedded in their beginning and their beginning in their end”⁴²—and Zhu Xi’s commentary on circle V—“But all the myriad things go back to the one Supreme Pole.”

The point is weakened by the fact that Zhu Xi says the same thing about circle IV, but he means that all the components of the Diagram are united in their source (as was also held by the Kabbalists about the Sefirot). Circularity in the Diagram is also suggested by its mirror-symmetry: circle V mirrors circle I and circle IV mirrors circle II (yang and yin are inside circle II). In the Tree, circularity is suggested by Kingdom being related in meaning to the first Sefirah, Crown. Kingdom is also called *Atarah*, another word for crown.⁴³ The Tree, however, is visually less symmetric because Wisdom and Understanding are structurally separate, unlike yang and yin in circle II of the Diagram.

Overall Architecture

If we step back from the components and their relationships and look at the overall architecture of the symbols, we can see that their global structures—the hierarchical sequence of levels and the spatial arrangement

of male, female, and neutral components—are very similar. The vertical hierarchy in each symbol articulates levels of differentiation from the primal unity to the multiplicity of existence, but this progression does not imply a simple directionality. Like the tension between symmetry and asymmetry (sequence) for components at the same level, there is tension also between hierarchy (directionality) and nonhierarchy in the relations between levels. The circularity of the symbols counters directionality. Also, although the levels reflect a progression, they are nevertheless not fundamentally different from one another. Zhu Xi writes,

The Supreme Pole . . . should be regarded neither as separate from, nor as identical with, the Two Forces. . . . The Five Agents all come from the Yin and Yang (Forces). The five different things (fit into) the two realities without the slightest excess or deficiency. And the Yin and the Yang (go back to) the Supreme Pole (perfectly), neither one of them being more or less elaborate than the other, nor more or less fundamental than the other.

However, Zhu Xi affirms that the Five Agents and the myriad things all have their “specific natures,” which he does not say about taiji or the Two Forces. This points to the differences that still distinguish the components. The Kabbalists did not stress the equality of all parts of the Tree but suggested a kind of homogeneity in the multiple polar dyads of the neutral column: Crown-Kingdom, Beauty-Kingdom, and Foundation-Kingdom. There are no vertical polar dyads in the Diagram.

The components of both symbols can be assigned to male, female, and neutral vertical columns. In the Diagram, the columns are not explicit, but the principle is clear. Yang, associated with expansion,⁴⁴ encompasses Fire (major yang) and Wood (minor yang). Yin, associated with concentration, encompasses Water (major yin) and Metal (minor yin). The central neutral column includes circles I, IV, and V, and Earth, which is a synthesis of yin and yang. For the Tree (left-right assignments are reversed relative to the Diagram), the columns are quite explicit: the right column includes Wisdom, Benevolence, and Eternity; the left column Understanding, Judgment, and Glory; and the central column includes Crown, Beauty, Foundation, and Kingdom. The right and left columns are of Mercy and Judgment, respectively, representing male and “expansive” versus female and “concentrative” attributes of God.⁴⁵ The central column is neutral but includes the vertical gender polarities mentioned above.

One can alternatively see the structures as consisting of horizontal male-female dyads⁴⁶ often elaborated by the introduction of a third

component representing either the origin of the dyadic terms or a synthesis that reconciles their opposition. Symbolic triads were widely prevalent in both East and West, so it is not surprising to see such triadic schemes in these Chinese and Jewish symbols. What is remarkable is that the union of hierarchical and polar organizing principles produces an identical spatial distribution of components: proceeding downward, both symbols begin with a neutral component, which splits into a male-female dyad, from which are derived a dyad, a neutral component, and another dyad, after which the symbol is completed by two neutral components.

The Diagram and Tree have the same or nearly the same number of components. The Tree is explicitly constructed from the ten Sefirot. The number *ten* had great symbolic resonance in Jewish thought, and the Sefer Yetsirah explicitly insisted upon this precise number: "Ten and not nine;

ten and not eleven."⁴⁷ The Diagram is also composed of ten components if one counts yang and yin (the parts of circle II) as two components, which is suggested by the Two Forces being visually distinct. In circle IV, which symbolizes the sexual potency, two-foldedness is not visually indicated, so this circle can be counted as one component. But it is unnecessary to insist that the Chinese structure has precisely ten components. It is the similarity of this structure to the structure of the Tree, not its number of components, which is interesting. While the symbolism of two and three is

found in both traditions, the symbolism of ten is a Western one, being present in Jewish, Pythagorean, Gnostic, and early Christian writings, and is not indigenous to Chinese thought.

The Tree was sometimes also conceptualized as a triad—Crown-Wisdom-Understanding—followed by a heptad of the remaining seven "Sefirot of Construction," or as three triads—Crown-Wisdom-Understanding pointing up, and Benevolence-Judgment-Beauty and Eternity-Glory-Foundation pointing down—leading to and summarized in Kingdom,⁴⁸ or as a monad (Crown), followed by an octad (Wisdom to Foundation), completed by a monad (Kingdom).⁴⁹ Other spatial configurations appear in the history of the symbol, and there are different representations of the channels connecting the Sefirot.

The Diagram, by comparison, is simpler. It consists of the monad of taiji followed by the yin-yang dyad, then the grouping of the Five Agents, and finally the two single components. Chinese philosophy did not utilize a symbolism of seven, although the union of the Two Forces and Five Agents was conceptualized early in Chinese thought, and the

seven components are referred to as a unit by Zhu Xi.⁵⁰ (Note that this heptad does not parallel the Sefirot of Construction, nor does it parallel the seven vertical levels of the Tree.) To this heptad, circles I, IV, and V were added, and these additions were already present in the Daoist precursors of the Diagram. It is precisely the addition of these circles that establishes its close similarity to the Tree.

Because of its symbolism of ten and multiple organizing principles and because the Sefirot constitute a homogeneous set of components, the Tree is more integrated than the Diagram. The channels between the Sefirot, associated with the Hebrew letters, were often a significant part of the symbolism. In contrast, explicit relations between components of the Diagram show up only within the Five Agents. There are no links between an individual force and an individual agent or between a Force or agent and circle IV or V, nothing analogous to the direct relations between Wisdom and Benevolence or between Beauty and Foundation. The Diagram looks like a set of unconnected substructures. Nonetheless, relations of this sort are implicit in it. Zhou Dunyi writes,

The true (principle) of that which has no Pole, and the essences of the Two (Forces) and the Five (Agents) unite (react) with one another in marvelous ways, and consolidations ensue.

Uses for Meditation

The Diagram can be traced back to a Daoist symbol that was used to guide meditation. For this purpose it was read from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Needham suggests that "it originated with Chen Tuan (d. 969), the famous Wu Dai expositor of the Yijing."⁵¹ The Diagram commentaries reflect Daoist influence in the alchemical reference of circle IV, in the Five Forces, and in the reference to the "Ultimateless" of circle I. Zhou Dunyi reinterpreted this symbol cosmologically and morally. Although meditation was practiced by Neo-Confucians⁵² as part of self-cultivation, the Diagram does not seem to have been linked to this practice.

The Sefirot were also used for meditation,⁵³ and a bottom-up reading of the Tree sometimes characterized such uses.⁵⁴ So both Chinese and Jewish symbols were read upward to guide meditative practice and downward to represent cosmological or divine unfolding. Both symbols offered a hierarchical scheme for the soul (spirit, mind). Both characterized the bottom component as female, but not in the abstract and straightforward sense of yin and Understanding. The femaleness of circle V is "mysterious" and a "doorway," just as "the last Sefirah is for man

Both symbols were read upward to guide meditation and downward to represent divine unfolding.

the door or gate through which he can begin the ascent up the ladder of perception to the Divine Mystery."⁵⁵

As for meditative practice itself, the two traditions were quite different. Generally, the personal experiences of the Kabbalists were not made public, but their meditation practices that we know of were centered in the names and attributes of God and focused on words and letters, which were conceptualized, visualized, or vocalized. In contrast, Daoist meditation employed the circulation of vital energies strongly coupled to breath, sensation, and awareness. The Kabbalist Abulafia, however, did also make use of breathing exercises.⁵⁶

On the Possibility of Influence

Since the "null hypothesis" in comparing a Chinese and a Jewish symbol must be difference, it is similarity that requires explanation. It would be simplest to assume that the symbols developed independently and commonalities reflect religious or philosophical universals of thought and experience. But the possibility of intercultural contact should also be examined, especially since diagrams travel light. To consider the possibility of influence, some relevant dates are worth reviewing. The essay of Zhou Dunyi and the commentary of Zhu Xi were written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, respectively. The similar symbol of Chen Tuan dates from the tenth century. Needham writes that a similar structure occurs even earlier in an eighth-century Daoist book.⁵⁷ However, while Chen Tuan's symbol⁵⁸ was the same as Zhou Dunyi's Diagram, the eighth-century structure⁵⁹ differed from it.

The doctrine of Sefirot goes back at least to the pre-Kabbalistic *Sefer Yetsirah* (third century to sixth century), and the decad as central to creation derives from still older Jewish and Gnostic sources.⁶⁰ The *Sefer Yetsirah* referred to ten Sefirot, but a full metaphysical theory of the Sefirot was not explicitly developed. In the *Sefer Bahir* of Provence (and other texts of the thirteenth century), Foundation was assigned to the seventh place. It was moved to the ninth position in writings of the later Kabbalist school in Gerona, Spain.⁶¹ As for the Tree itself, Scholem indicates that it dates at least to the fourteenth century. At the latest, it appears as the frontispiece of the Latin translation by Paul Ricci published in 1516 of the *Shaarey Orah* of Joseph Gikatila (1248–1323), a translation which contributed to the development of Christian and occult Kabbalah.

Thus the doctrine of the Sefirot and the symbolism of ten appear to be earlier than the Diagram and its Daoist precursors, but the canonical

structure of the Tree appears to be later. Since it is not known when Sefirotic diagrams first came into being, there is no solid chronological basis on which to build hypotheses of contact or influence from one culture to another. The known dates of appearance of the symbols would argue for a Chinese to Jewish direction, and this might be supported by the fact that a permanent Jewish settlement was established in Kaifeng in the eleventh century, which was then the capital city in the Song dynasty and China's principal cultural and commercial center.⁶²

On the other hand, the appearance of the structures themselves might suggest a Jewish-to-Chinese direction. The Tree is highly integrated, while in the Diagram the addition of circles I, IV, and V to the canonical Two Forces and Five Agents seems ad hoc. But as there is no historical evidence for influence in either direction, one might turn to the alternative hypothesis of independent convergent development, since the symbolisms of number and form and the macrocosm-microcosm analogy are ubiquitous in traditional religions and philosophies. However, this hypothesis does not seem satisfactory either, since it is hard to believe that these commonalities adequately account for the extent of resemblance between the symbols.

Summary

To recapitulate: structurally, the two symbols are very similar, having the same distribution of polar dyads and hierarchical levels. In both, neutral components harmonize these polarities or are their source or terminus. If, in the Diagram, yang and yin (circle II) are counted as two components and circle IV as one, there is a one-to-one mapping between the ten components of the two symbols. The hierarchy of each structure closes upon itself, with the first and last components, primal unity and unfolded multiplicity, being circularly linked. Both symbols declare a macrocosm-microcosm isomorphism: they are read downwards as cosmological or theosophical diagrams but upwards as guides to spiritual practice. In both symbols, two ideas, positive and negative—the manifest and the unmanifest—are associated with the first component, and the dualism is resolved in different ways. The meanings of the first three and last two components are similar, with sexual generativity implied in components two and three and component nine. The central portions of both symbols exhibit two dyads and a neutral harmonizing component. They present benevolence and righteousness as the primary virtues, and as male and female, respectively. Moral action is referred in both to component nine. Component ten is feminine and represents the consequences of sexual

generativity (or moral discrimination) of component nine, namely the material (or behavioral) multiplicity of the world.

Given the differences between Chinese and Judaic thought in general, and between Neo-Confucianism and Kabbalah in particular, these similarities are striking.

Notes

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1. The major alternative translation is "Supreme Ultimate." Needham's translation of the word as "Pole" is used in this paper, despite the fact that "Ultimate" is the more common translation (Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* [Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1956]).
2. The Kabbalist Tree is from Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), originally published as *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag AG, 1962), 44; the Diagram of the Supreme Pole is from Yu-Lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 436.
3. Needham, 605.
4. Fung, 433.
5. This is a paraphrase of the account of John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 125.
6. The dates of these works are uncertain and in dispute. Dates given here are from Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: New American Library (Meridian), 1974), 57 (for the Zohar), 27 (for Sefer Yetsirah), 42 (for Sefer Bahir).
7. Scholem, *Godhead*, 106.
8. Idel distinguishes between this common view: (1) the Sefirot as the components of the "divine essence" and its variations, (2) the Sefirot as "nondivine in essence" but as "instruments" or "vessels for the divine influx," and (3) the Sefirot as "divine emanations within created reality," i.e., as "the immanent element of divinity" (Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988], 137).
9. Scholem explicitly rejects the view of Franck that the Kabbalah was pantheist (96), but it is not necessary to go this far to see a cosmology in Kabbalah.
10. The dichotomy of theosophical (theoretical) and ecstatic (experiential) Kabbalah corresponds to a predominant focus on macrocosm and microcosm, respectively, but there is a continuum from theosophy to prayer to meditation. Where to place the "mystical" along this continuum is not always clear. The psychological interpretation of the Sefirot—which merges with the meditative and mystical—

is more identified with ecstatic Kabbalah (e.g., Abulafia); it was deemphasized in Lurianic Kabbalah but was later extensively taken up in Hasidism (Idel, 148–50).

11. Needham, 460–64. For other translations, see, e.g., J. Percy Bruce, *Chu Hsi [Zhu Xi] and His Masters* (London: Probsthain & Company, 1923), 128–33; Fung, 435–38 (for Zhou Dunyi's commentary).
12. Other Scholem works that have been consulted are *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941; New York: Schocken Books, 1946); *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), originally published as *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag AG, 1960); and *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton: Jewish Publication Society & Princeton University Press, 1987), originally published as *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1962).
13. Idel writes, "There is as yet no comprehensive study of the history of the Kabbalistic doctrines of the Sefirot" (*Kabbalah*, 136). Daniel Abrams concurs in his "New Study Tools from the Kabbalists of Today: Toward an Appreciation of the History and Role of Collectanea, Paraphrases and Graphic Representations in Kabbalistic Literature," *Journal des Études de la Cabale* 1 (1997).
14. Needham, 464.
15. Henderson, *Chinese Cosmology*, 125.
16. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88–92; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 235ff.
17. Daniel C. Matt, "The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism," in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), reprinted in Lawrence Fine, *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (New York: NYU Press, 201), 67–108.
18. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 108; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 103.
19. Scholem, *Godhead*, 174.
20. Needham's translation of "Five Elements" is replaced here by the more common "Five Agents."
21. *Din* is given prominence here, although *Gevurah* is more common for this *Sefirah*, because the Tree uses *Din*, and because the meaning of *Din* is clearer.
22. Needham, 297. In Kabbalistic ideas about the hierarchy of the soul (*Nefesh*, *Ruach*, and *Neshamah*), one can find *Ruach* sometimes identified with the six *Sefirot*, Benevolence through Foundation, roughly analogous to five agents in the Diagram.
23. Occult Kabbalah had a developed symbolism of five, and Regardie associated *Ruach* with *Hesed* through *Hod* (Israel Regardie, *A Garden of Pomegranates: An Outline of the Qabalah* [St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1970]).
24. For Zhu Xi, see Chiu Hansheng, "Zhu Xi's Doctrine of Principle," in Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 129–35.
25. Teng Aimin, "Chu Hsi's [Zhu Xi's] Theory of the Great Ultimate," in Wing-tsit Chan, 110. Welch expressed this idea more directly: "This Neo-Confucianism . . . developed because Confucius had never formulated a metaphysics, and the lack of it put his later followers at a disadvantage in their rivalry with the complete philosophical systems of Taoism and Buddhism" (Holmes Welch, *Taoism: The Parting of the Ways* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1971], 158).

26. Shu-hsien Liu, "Orthodoxy in Chu Hsi's [Zhu Xi's] Philosophy," in Wing-tsit Chan, 441.
27. Fung, 447.
28. However, in his commentary, Zhou Dunyi reverses the usual Chinese correlation by writing: "Therefore it is said, 'In representing the Tao of Heaven one uses the terms Yin and Yang, and in representing the Tao of Earth one uses the terms Soft and Hard; while in representing the Tao of Man, one uses the terms Love and Righteousness.'" Perhaps this reflects an admission that this traditional correlation is in some respects counterintuitive.
29. See Scholem, *Godhead*, "Good and Evil in the Kabbalah," and Fung, 446-7, discussing Zhou Dunyi's commentary.
30. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 107.
31. Fung, 454-6.
32. Needham, 461; Fung, at 441, concurs.
33. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 104.
34. *Ibid.*, 143 and 227.
35. *Ibid.*, 143.
36. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, chap. 3.
37. Also translated literally as "the ten thousand things" (Fung, 445), a concept that dates at least back to the *Daodejing* and that is used in Chinese thought to indicate the multiplicity of existence. There is a possible Jewish parallel. Joseph Dan, in his *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel-Aviv: MOD Books, 1993) writes, "Ancient Hebrew, as modern-day Hebrew, does not have a word for any number larger than 10,000. . . . The Hebrew horizon did not extend beyond 10,000" (74).
38. This multiplicity is different from the multiplicity generated by the binary exponentiation of the *Yijing*. The Diagram treats this multiplicity as a unity by its referring to the *Yijing* with the simple circle IV.
39. Fung, 441; Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 166. The concept comes from Laozi.
40. Scholem, *Godhead*, 171, 179.
41. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 167-9.
42. Kaplan, notes that "beginning" refers to Crown and "end" to Kingdom, and explicitly offers a circular visualization of their connection (*Sefir Yeszira: The Book of Creation* [New York: Samuel Weiser, 1990], 57).
43. Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time & Other Essays* (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 143.
44. Needham, 471.
45. Adolph Frank, *The Kabbalah* (New York: Kabbalah Publishing Company, 1926), trans. I. Sossnitz, 106.
46. Needham, 297.
47. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 144.
48. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 107-9.
49. Idel, 55.
50. Fung (547) gives the Zhu Xi quote. The linkage of the Two Forces and the Five Agents was an ancient one, not an innovation of Zhu Xi. Berling notes that "yin and yang and the five agents had first been united in a primitive cosmology by one Tsou Yen, two hundred years before the Han" (Judith Berling, *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], 21). This heptadic grouping notwithstanding, an explicit symbolism of seven was generally absent from Chinese thought. By contrast, seven is ubiquitous in Western symbolism.
51. Needham, 467.
52. Meditation as "self-cultivation" was practiced by both Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi (Julia Ching in Wing-tsit Chan, 282).
53. Kaplan asserts that the *Sefer Yetsirah* is a meditation manual (*Sefir Yeszira*, xi), but a clearer example is the *Shaarey Orah* of Joseph Gikatila (1248-1323), translated into Latin by Paul Ricci in 1516 and printed in Hebrew forty-five years later (Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* [New York: Samuel Weiser, 1982], 127).
54. Kaplan (*Meditation and Kabbalah*, 118, 121, 125, 132) asserts this, referring to the Kabbalist books of *The Gate of Kavanah of the Early Kabbalists* (*Shaar HaKavanah LeMekubalim HaRishonim*; late 1100s), probably authored by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona, and *Shaarey Orah* of Rabbi Joseph Gikatila. See also Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 126. Abulafia also hinted at the ascent through the "ladder of the *Sefirot*" (Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 78-9).
55. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 112.
56. Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 79.
57. Needham (467) gives the title as *Shang Fang Ta Tung-Chen Yuan Miao Ching Tu* (*Diagrams of the Mysterious Cosmogenic Classic of the Tung-Chen Scriptures*).
58. Fung (441) gives only the commentary but not the structure. Chang (164ff.) gives both; these are reproduced in Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, *The Shambhala Dictionary of Taoism*, trans. Werner Winsche (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 15.
59. Fung (439) also provides the structure and gives its title as "Diagram of the Truly First and Mysterious Classic of the Transcendent Great Cave."
60. Idel, 112-22.
61. Scholem indicates that Foundation in the *Bahir* preceded Eternity and Glory (*Kabbalah*, 107). A different order is given by Aryeh Kaplan in his translation and commentary (*Bahir* [York Beach, MN: Samuel Weiser, 1979], 117): Glory (6), Foundation (7), Beauty (8), Eternity (9), Kingdom (10).
62. Michael Pollak, *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), chap. 13. Pollak sees evidence that the Kaifeng community maintained contact with extra-Chinese Jewish centers for at least several generations in the familiarity of this community with Maimonidean doctrine.