

Jiugong

Nine Palaces

As the original astronomical connotation of the Nine Palaces developed, it took on a number of different resonances in divination, meditation and medical contexts both inside and outside Taoist traditions. From a description of the ninefold spatial organisation of the heavens traversed by Great Unity (**Taiyi*), the Nine Palaces became a useful metaphor for other sacred spaces: the imperial palace, the body and the brain. The Nine Palaces were often symbolised by a three-by-three square grid, and for this reason was easily homologised to other patterns that stressed the division between an interior (the centre square) and an exterior (the outer eight squares).

The earliest association of the Nine Palaces was with sections of the night sky and with its anthropomorphised denizens. The circular rotation of the stars in the night sky, their rhythm of which was seen by writers such as de Santillana and von Dechend (1969) as universally significant to early societies, was connected with a number of early practices associated with the “masters of methods” (**fangshi*) of the pre-Qin and early imperial periods. The Nine Palaces formed the basis for the *shi* (cosmic board, cosmograph), the early divination tool that became the model for the design of everything from mirror to *liubo* (Game of Sixes, on the *shi* and *liubo* see Loewe 1979, 60-85).

In political-philosophical essays, the traversal of the Nine Palaces by Great Unity became a template for the earthly ruler. The classical ideal of the Hall of Light (**mingtang*) was described in the ritual compendium *Da Dai liji* (Records of Rites of the Elder Dai; probably compiled in the early second century CE) as consisting of nine rooms (*jiushi*, later increased to twelve; Makor 1993, 221-24). by the Later Han, the term Nine Palaces was introduced into the exegesis of the **Yijing* divination. The **Hetu* and *Luoshu* (Chart of the [Yellow] River and Writ of the Luo [River]) were used in early Taoist texts to correlate the Nine Palaces with the winds of the eight directions and the eight trigrams (**bagua*) of the *Yijing*. This was done by adding a ninth 'central' element to the original eight directions or trigrams, similar to the way that fourfold schemata (seasons, directions) became correlated with fivefold schemata like the **wuxing* (Five Phases).

In medieval materials, the sacred geography of the Nine Palaces was projected onto the body of the Taoist adept and on the sacred space of Taoist liturgy. In his commentary to the **Dengzhen yinjue* (Concealed Instructions for the Ascent to Perfection), **Tao Hongjing* (456-536) wrote that “the Nine Palaces in the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) [celestial] palace of Taiwei (Great Tenuity) have Perfected Lords dwelling in them. Therefore the fact that the human head is arranged according to the same positions is simply a matter of mutual resonance” (CT 421, I.5b). In Shangqing meditation practice, a regimen of visualisation of the spirits of the Nine Palaces caused the astral spirits to occupy the nine chambers of the brain (see **niwan*), rendering the adept eventually able to ascend to the Shangqing heaven and receive the treasured talismans (**FU*). According to Isabelle Robinet (1993, 127-31), this method probably is seen for the first time in the fourth-century **Suling jing* (Scripture [of the Celestial Palace] of the Immaculate Numen). The Nine Palaces are described, with slight differences, in numerous Shangqing texts (Kakiuchi Tomoyuki 1998).

The Nine Palaces also played a role in Taoist liturgy as a way of organising sacred spaces. In 744, Tang Xuanzong (r.712-56) established seasonal sacrifices at the spirit altars of the Nine Palaces. These altars were dedicated to Great Unity, Heavenly Unity (Tianayi), and the other spirits of the Nine Palaces. The emperor's movements through these altars echoed those of the Han recipe masters' ideal ruler, which in turn took as their model the orderly movement of the stars.