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Front Cover: Chung K'uei

Back Cover: Left: The Purple Planet  
Right: Chang Tao-Ling

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Pak Tai: Emperor of the North



The Purple Planet



## PAK TAI: Emperor of the North

When a friend of mine was enquiring about Pak Tai a young acquaintance of his told him quite confidently that Pak Tai was none other than Kuan Ti in another guise. He was wrong but there is a reason for his error. They do much the same job in heaven. They are both military protectors of the state and many of the associations of one have been ascribed to the other. Of the two, Pak Tai's origins are, by far, the older so it would seem that this passage of associations has largely been one way.

In order to fit him into the Taoist scheme whereby Gods achieve their place in the heavens through a prior earthly existence several biographies have been mooted.

One account says that he lived around 2,000 B.C. and was responsible for introducing flood control and drainage systems. Another has it that he was a sage who practiced perfection on the mountain Wu T'ang Shan. Because of his attainments he was invited by one of the immortals to join their company. Yet another says that his family name was Li – the same as Lao Tzu's – and that he lived in the Chou dynasty. One day while washing his feet in a stream on Wu T'ang Shan he was called to heaven to aid them in defeating two monsters who were ravaging the northern districts. It is also said that he was an orphan who was brought up by an aunt. He had an aversion to water but one day he demanded a bath. When he had washed himself he told his aunt not to throw the water away. This insistence seemed nonsensical and she ignored it. Next morning she heard a lot of noise in the street outside her house and went to investigate. Her neighbours were busy collecting gold from the gutter and she herself only managed to pick up a few nuggets. She ran up to her nephew's room but he had already been transferred to paradise. Only then did she understand the meaning of his order – he had foreseen his death.

There are many other variations built round much the same elements: water, barefeet, and sudden transference to heaven. The manner of his ascent to heaven is of less importance than what he did there. On this

point there is much less divergence. Two monsters, a tortoise and a snake, were ravaging the earth. Pak Tai was placed at the head of the heavenly armies and sent to earth to subdue them. Barefoot, his hair flowing over his shoulders and dressed in a long black robe, Pak Tai engaged the monsters in battle and utterly destroyed them. He then flung them down a huge chasm which exists in Szechuan and which is considered to be the maw of hell. On his return Pak Tai was made First Lord of Heaven.

This event is usually placed at the time of the war of the Chou and Shang dynasties. Another version of the entire story which is current in Taiwan goes like this:

There was once a pig butcher who came to see that his work was evil and wishing to repent became a hermit. He meditated for a long time but this was not enough to atone for the guilt of killing so many animals. He therefore disembowelled himself and cast his innards into the sea. By doing so he had separated the two souls of his body. His 'Shen' rose to heaven and became a god while his 'Kuei' rose out of the sea in the form of two demons – a turtle and a snake. When he saw that they were harming mankind he returned and subdued them. He then placed them in heaven as the stars of Ursa Major, the northern measure, under his control. He himself controlled them from his palace in the North Star i.e. the Pole Star.

Because the pole star is The North Star one scholar in the Ching dynasty put forward the idea that China was not the 'Middle' but the 'Northern' Kingdom; a heresy that seems to have gone unpunished.

The placing of Pak Tai, Emperor of the North, in the North Star clearly associates him with the highest of all the Gods, Shang Ti, Superior Emperor. Shang Ti has no characteristics. Descriptions of him do not exist. He is the unifying principle of the void. He is the absolute. He is the unknowable first cause of the universe. His operations can be subdivided into two aspects, The Dark Heavens and the Moving Heavens. Pak Tai's title is Hsuan T'ien Shang Ti, Dark Heavens Superior Ruler, and, as we have seen in the introduction, The Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, is also Moving Heavens Superior Ruler. Of these two the moving heavens are more knowable.

We find an exact parallel here with the philosophical premises in the Tao Te Ching. Behind, above and prior to all things is the unnameable, which, if it can be said to be anything, is the harmony of all opposites. This unknowable principle has two more knowable facets: Tao and Te. Both of these are forms of power. Tao is the power behind all manifesta-

tions; Te is particularized power. Tao is related to inaction, Te to action. Tao, the "darker than any mystery," is the less knowable of the two. For this reason Tao can also refer to the Nameless that is behind Tao and Te. Pak Tai is popularly known in Taiwan as "Shang-ti yeh" or Grandfather Superior Ruler.

What are this God's origins? Where is his place in the order of things? When the Chou dynasty broke up into rival fiefdoms one of the most powerful was the domain of Ch'in. It was the Lords of this territory who gave birth to the concept of instituting Gods by proclamation. The Green Emperor(East) was created by Duke Hsuan (675-664 B. C.); The Yellow and Red Emperors (Centre & South) by Duke Ling (424-415 B. C.) and the White Emperor (West) by Duke Hsien-(384-362). It was their descendants who became the Emperors of the Ch'in dynasty. Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the first Emperor of that dynasty chose black as his Imperial colour. Nevertheless Black seems also to have been associated with the Han dynasty which superceded the Ch'in. Lacquer ware which began to be produced in these times was originally coloured black, though as lacquer itself is transparent this can only have been symbolic in intent. Liu Pang became Han Kao-Tsu on ascending the Imperial throne. Kao-Tsu means 'Supreme Ancestor'. It is he who is credited with instituting the cult of the Black Emperor.

During the Sung Dynasty the need to systematize the universe was felt. They attempted to create an Imperial pantheon. For a God to be incorporated there had to be a manifestation. And so it came to pass that in 1118 A. D. the Emperor's Shaman invoked Pak Tai to appear. The sky darkened and there was thunder and lightning. Suddenly the Emperor and his court saw a great Turtle and a huge Serpent appear in the sky. In a flash they disappeared to be replaced by a single bare foot standing in the court yard. Unable to see the entire personification, the Emperor begged the God to reduce his size. Pak Tai complied and the Emperor saw in front of him a ten foot tall man, bare footed and grave faced. He wore a black robe and carried a sword. There is no record of a conversation.

If we are to comprehend Pak Tai's true stature we must leave behind us this mish-mash of stories and go back to the very beginnings of Chinese civilization, before the advent of towns and Lords, cities and Kings. We must go back to the earliest conceptions of space.

The earliest division of the world was in sexual terms. There was Yin; female, active in winter and dark places, and Yang; male, active in summer and in the full light of day. Yin was associated with the

North, Yang with the South. Ideas connected with death posited that the dead lived in a place under the earth called the Yellow Springs. These springs were the source of running water. In winter they dried up, in spring they began to flow again containing the souls of the dead who wanted to return to life. The Yellow Springs were therefore Yin, while running water was Yang. They were both a prison of the dead and conversely the reservoir of life. But if running water was male, the earth that it renewed had to be female.

Domestic earth was female and it appears that a man went to live with his wife's family and the name that was passed on to the children was that of the wife. When a child was born the first action was to place it on the ground. The dying too were placed on the ground and when they were dead they were buried with the head to the North.

Later, in the feudal period, the practice of mourning was developed into a highly complex system. The first son had to withdraw from life for a period of time. He had to walk barefoot, wear only a loose cloak, sleep on the earth and abstain from all things. He could not wash until his mourning was over.

Similar ideas relating to water are evident among the Mongols though it took a different form. They placed a sacred prohibition on washing in running water.

In the feudal period space was further organised. Spiritual Guardians were placed at the four compass points. Meanings and attributes were distributed amongst the four Emperors. The north was assigned earth. earth = life; north = death.

At this time too the cult of Heaven was established. It was an official cult. Heaven was all seeing and the source of all moral authority. The lord was the Son of Heaven. It was through him that earth and heaven were bound. If there was chaos in Heaven then too there was, inevitably, chaos on Earth. As the heavens were the source of order and of time and the seasons, so his son too ordered time by his actions. He wore black in winter. He inaugurated spring by ploughing a furrow in the field of the Earth God.

Despite this care, or perhaps as a sign that the lord had been lapse in the performance of his duties, the heavens periodically showed their disapproval in the form of a solar eclipse. When this happened all the people of the towns would be drawn up into ranks, each wearing the colour of his division. The lord and his attendants wore yellow and stood in the centre of the square. Society was reconstituted in its ideal form. At the moment of greatest danger arrows were fired at the

sun and drums beaten to keep at bay the Celestial Dog who threatened to devour the sun. This association of Heaven and Earth is manifest in the language; 'T'ien' with a high tone means: Heaven, sky, day and to increase; 'T'ien' with a high falling tone means; peaceful, gentle flow of water, fields, to cultivate land and the noise of a drum. To this day pots and pans are beaten throughout an eclipse.

Pak Tai is the overlord of the realms of the dead but, as the Yellow Springs are the source of the springs of life, so too does he partake in generation and fertility. As the ancestors are spiritual guardians of their descendants so also is Pak Tai Guardian of Society and thus First General of Heaven's Armies. As wealth depends on fertility, gold is related to running water.

I was told this story: A man who had had a run of bad luck rented a shop which stood at a bend at the bottom of a hill. Facing a road seemed inauspicious. Whenever it rained, however, the water rushed down the road and swirled into his premises. The annoyance of having to mop it up was adequately compensated for by the sudden improvement in his luck. The business flourished and in many other ways fortune smiled.

When chaos reigns and there is destruction Pak Tai is believed to descend from heaven to restore peace and order. Here he is identified with the very principle of regularity which underlies all things and which is Shang Ti's province.

On the Island of Cheung Chau he is revered as a life giver for it was his agency that brought to an end a plague that hit the island at the end of the last century. His temple is called the Palace of Jade Vacuity. The idea of "Jade Vacuity" or "Void" is a clear identification with Shang Ti.

Before Pak Tai became personified the North was ruled over by the "Dark Warrior", the Tortoise. The tortoise was seen not only as supporting the heavens but as representing them. Its shell symbolised the vault of the sky and its belly the earth which moves upon the water. The tortoise is a creature with hybrid characteristics. It is amphibian, an animal of the land and the water. It goes underground in the late autumn and re-emerges in spring. It thus follows the water. In winter it dwells in the "Yellow Springs" and in spring when the waters gush forth it too re-emerges. The absence of visible sexual organs makes it an ideal embodiment of "Yin" the female principle that dominates the dark season. It is considered to be an unchaste animal and "son of a tortoise" is a colloquial term for "bastard". Conversely it is thought to

be able to conceive by thought above. It is interesting that the idea of fertility seems necessary – no doubt an inevitable extension of the idea that the world of the dead is the source of new life. The last expression of this idea is the inclusion of a snake – image of the male principle, son of the dragon of spring – itself a hibernating reptile. We remember that Huang-ti and Nu Kua were half-snake and half-human. Together these two animals symbolise the ambiguous potency of the winter season.

Because the Tortoise visits the world of the dead who are the source of regeneration and who as spirits have access to the knowledge of the future, the shell is used for divination.

In early times the tortoise was sacrificed and a question was asked. The shell was then passed through the sacrificial fire and the cracks on the surface gave either a 'Yes' or 'No' answer. Later, when the system of trigrams was invented, its source was attributed to the markings on the tortoise shell. To this day fortune tellers will shake three coins in a tortoise shell. 'Kuei', meaning tortoise, is identical in sound to the word for "compasses, rule, law" (規), a tone difference relates it to "a hill spring" (汎), a place of religious significance, and 'spirit' (鬼). Is it because the tortoise shell sounds like 'law' that it became of divinatory significance or did its divinatory significance suggest the idea of law? It is a tantalizing but unanswerable question.

We have come a long way from the story of the orphan whose bathwater turned into gold, yet there still remains the mystery of the warrior image. Is this because he is the executioner (Kuei) who kills enemies and traitors (Kuei) to enforce the law (Kuei)? Is it because winter was the season of military conflicts – when one Lord waged war on his neighbour? War was never called war but punishment – to rectify a trespass against the law.

Lastly let us look at his hand gesture. The arrangement of hands is used in Buddhist art to clarify the symbolic meaning of a particular representation. One of these gestures – or mudra – has the upright index finger of the left hand sheathed by the fist of the right hand. This mudra means the suppression of darkness. This is an apt – almost humourous-touch for Pak Tai is the Lord of darkness and so his index finger remains unsheathed.