THE GRAND AURORA

Edward H. SCHAFER

The subject called "cosmology" has come, in recent times, to enjoy a new respectability and even enthusiastic study in the western world. This enthusiasm has not, with a few rare exceptions, caught the imaginations of students of the history of Chinese science. However, now that the serious study of the great reservoir of canonical Taoist texts has become a fact of sinological scholarship, it seems obvious that the speculations—whether traditional, imaginative, or based on empirical study—that are abundantly embodied in the Canon, and also in Taoist poetry, a potential bonanza, should be treated as a resource for reconstructing the vision or visions of the universe held by the men of medieval China.

There are many reasons why scriptural and poetical sources should be studied together. I shall allude only to the chief one. The pages of the "Complete T'ang Poetry" provide us, over and over again, with observations of nature—from garden to galaxy—along with opinions and evaluations couched in vivid and precise language.

There is a real affinity between the linguistic imagery of speculative Taoist texts and the language of poetry. Indeed it seems fair to say that the astral worlds formulated in Taoist literature owe as much to linguistic imagery as they do to observation and experience, to say the least. Poetic metaphor is deeply involved with the terminologies of physics and metaphysics. The men of T'ang expressed the inexpressible, as we do, by analogy or by arbitrary images: some sub-atomic particles have charm, some do not.

My specimen, the term t'ai hsia 太霞, which I have translated "Grand Aurora," must first be considered linguistically, since our only clues to the image it presented to men's minds in medieval China come inevitably from the contemporary connotations of its constituents.

Dr. Schafer is Agassiz Professor of Oriental Languages and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

1 This article is an abridgment and revision of "Taoist Cosmology: The Example of the Grand Aurora (T'ai hsia 太霞)" presented at the Third International Conference of Taoist Studies, held at Unterägeri, Switzerland, 3-9 September, 1979. The following abbreviations are used in footnote references:

CTS Ch'üan T'ang shih 全唐詩 (ed. of Fu-hsing shu-chü 復興書局, Taipei, 1967)
HY Weng Tu-chien, Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature (Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series No. 25; Peiping, 1935), pp. 1-37, which enumerates the contents of the Tao t'ung通藏 serially. (My pagination refers to the reprint of the Cheng Tung version of the canon, published by the I-wen yin-shu-kuan 藝文印書館, Taipei, 1976)
WSPY Wu shang pi yao 上秘要 (HY 1130)
YCCC Yun chi ch'i ch'ien 玄笈七籤 (ed. of Tzu-yu ch'u-p'ao-shu 自由出版社, Taipei, 1973)
We begin with the word *hsia* (Middle Chinese *ghâ*)—an alternate graph is 瑤—itself.² It connoted the faintly pink blush of dawn, made visible by haze, dust or thin films of cloud. It referred also to similar chromatic displays in the sunset sky, but less often, since these usually lacked the same refined pallor. These attractive rosy effects, ranging chiefly through the lighter shades of red and yellow, were, as we shall see, regarded as evidence of otherworldly presences, either abstract or personified. Clues to the history of the word are supplied by other members of the family to which it belongs—that is, other words sharing the same "primitive" or root element, misleadingly reduced in conservative philological tradition to a mere "phonetic" role. An obvious cognate is *hsia* (*ghâ*) 瑤, which *Shuo wen* 説文 defines as "jade, slightly reddened." Since the finest jade was then the purest white, this reddening was considered a defect, and so the word came more and more to be generalized to the sense of "flaw," but its graph was used interchangeably with the now standard graph for "aurora." To this we should probably add *hsia* (*ghâ*) 蝦 "shrimp; lobster, etc." (i.e. pink or red crustacean). Another probable cognate is *hsia* (*ghâ*) 畾 "interval; (hence) leisure," representing another aspect of the semantic cluster embodied in our auroral word—that of a gap, or fissure. Specifically, it suggests the belief that pinkish streamers appearing in the dark firmament were fine vapid extrusions through rifts in the sky-dome from an unimaginably radiant world beyond. Indeed, the early Chinese believed that the apparition we style the aurora borealis was produced in just this way.³

Unavoidably we progress to the question of the appropriateness of "aurora" as a reasonably exact translation of *hsia*. The application of the English word to the "northern lights" is, of course, secondary. Ultimately it refers to the rosy light of dawn, personified as the Roman goddess of the dawn, an avatar of *rhododaktylos Eos*.⁴ This is precisely what the Chinese word means. As a general color word, we use "aurora" for a color "yellowish-red in hue, of high saturation and high brilliance," a description which also fits the standard definitions of "coral" and "tangerine" in respect both to hue and saturation, but "aurora" is more "brilliant" than these.⁵ This color, or range of hues, is of the greatest importance in Taoist imagery and iconography—a distinction it shares with a number of other Chinese color words, such as *chiang* 紅 "scarlet/orange" and *tan* 丹 "cinnabar; vermilion." In Taoist poetry the expression "aurora in cyan" (*pi hsia* 碧霞)—the streaky pink glow of the dawn, suggesting a divine presence set against the indigo of deep space—is an exalted metaphor for the basic "cinnabar and azurite" of the

³See, *inter alia*, E. H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T'ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 86: "With a shortage of yang the sky is split." There are other members of the *hsia* (*ghâ*) word-family whose semantic affiliation with these words is probable, even if the evidence is meager.
commonplace world of minerals and mineral pigments. A typical stanza tells of
the almost unimaginable paradies through which the perfected adept may saunter
at will. 6 Basically, the term is merely an enhancement of the common figure
“clouds in the blue” (ch’ing yun), so common a cliché as hardly to deserve
the epithet “poetic,” 7 transferred to the ethereal colors of the upper regions of
air, themselves presented as intimations of a divine world beyond.

Ultimately, the signs of life-giving red pneumas, revealed phenomenally as hsia
“auroral, wispy hazes,” are leakages through the indigo abyss of emanations from
the remote palaces of the gods. This dark kingdom is often represented by the
word hsiao, a close cognate of hsiao “nighttime.” The latter word conjoins
a number of connotations appropriate to a misty, nocturnal abyss beyond the
dome of the firmament. It is important in the terminology of Taoism: it occurs,
for instance, in the titles of a number of important scriptures, and therefore itself
deserves monographic treatment. I do not propose to attempt a full elucidation
of it here. Suffice it to observe that in color imagery it is, on the most exalted
level, the counterpart of the elemental blue, just as hsia “aurora” represents the
primitive red.

In the technical language of Taoism one word recurs often in intimate associ-
ation with hsia “aurora.” This is ch’en, which signifies the first faint ap-
pearance of sunlight in the dark eastern sky, heralding the fullness of dawn. The
word has significant cognates in ch’en “the zodiacal position of the sun; hence,
the cosmic marker of time,” and in ch’en “divine source of light or enlighten-
ment; hence, the palace or throne-room of a god or divine king.”

The wedding of ch’en “source of morning light” with hsia “auroral gossamer in
sky” is a natural and inevitable one. Since hsia “auroral wisps” represents the
active aspect of ch’en “source of the dawn” from which it emanates, it follows
that the word “aurora,” whether or not it appears in conjunction with the word
“dawn-source” (whose presence is implicit in any case), has the sense of “pre-
cursor or harbinger of a divine presence.” It is a heraldic gleam from a palace in
the depths of space—a spray of vital essence from the ultimate font:

Masked and screened—the prime transmutation begins:
Minute and muted—the protogenic aurora spreads. 8

(Here “protogenic aurora,” for ch’en hsia, is a condensed locution standing for
“auroral emission from the ultimate source of divine light.”) The signalled
Presence becomes partly visible in hallucinatory phenomena of light. The fortu-
nate initiate can detect, but only faintly, the glowing canopy of the sky-borne
carriage of a great deity brushing the pink streamers of the dawn.

6 The example is taken from Ts’ao T’ang (fl. 860-873), “Hsiao yu hsien shih,” 小游仙
詩, no. 63, CTS, han 10, ts’e 2, ch. 2, p. 6b.
102: 91-92.
8 Tai ti chiun tsan tu yu miao ching sung i chang 太帝君踏大有妙經頌章, in YCCC,
ch. 96, p. 1321.
The word hsia "aurora" has had a very important role in metaphor. The
common extension from the dawn sky to other aspects of experience is by no
means restricted to the language of cosmology and religion. The basic sense of
"transparent colored films in the sky" was easily transferred to thin reddish
tissues and rose-colored gossamers in the world of men. Above all, the name was
applied to the distinctive peach-like hue of the fine cottons that, at this time, were
popular among peoples of Indochina, Indonesia, and India: for the Chinese, these
dawn-flushed cotton costumes were most often seen at court performances of the
exotic dances of Champa and India.9

The ideal concatenation of denotations is supplied by descriptions of the
formal costumes of Taoist priests and priestesses. In the iconography of medieval
Taoism the word "aurora" symbolized the garments of divine beings whose filmy
dawn-drenched robes and trailing skirts were imitated by the dedicated aspirants
who aimed to reach the same higher realms inhabited by these super-beings,
themselves only occasionally revealed as rosy ectoplasm. Here is a quatrain on
that theme by Wang Chou 王處, who held office in Szechwan in the tenth
century but is otherwise virtually unknown. It is called simply "Aurora":

A lambent brushing gives birth to crumbling flares,
In layered lamina, like stammel rent apart.
Heaven’s wind scissors it into strips,
Doubtless to make a dress for a transcendent person."10

It was also important to the adept to be able to recognize and identify these
divinities, when they were actualized in visions, from the details of their costumes.
Only then could he initiate the proper gestures and incantations. Moreover, fine
net-weaves, gauzes, and chiffons were cut into copies of the pale flamelike mists
which cloaked celestial beings to provide suitable raiment for the priestesses who
 trod sacred measures on the high altars of the Pole Star in the hours preceding
the dawn. In this, iconography became effectual as imitative magic. Indeed, in
the dreams of neophytes who aspired to perform ecstatic dances among the
constellations, an auroral costume was de rigueur:

My feathered sleeves flourish cinnabar phoenixes;
My auroral kerchief trails painted rainbows.11

But dawn-tinted garments were most characteristic of the radiant ladies called
"Jade Women," who had crystallized out of the Primal Pneuma. One of them
was the "Jade Consort of Eastern Hua" (tung hua yü fei 東華王妃), the younger sister
of the great lord of Fu-sang, the source of the rising sun. The poet Ts'ao T'ang 曹唐 wrote of her:

9E. H. Schafer, The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics (Berkeley,
10Wang Chou, "Hsia”霞, CTS, han 11, ts'e 6, p. 3a.
11Wei Ch'ü-mou 未渠牟 (749-801), "Fu hsu ts' un步虛詞, no. 15, CTS, han 5, ts'e 7,
pp. 2b-3a.
“Eastern Consort dons at leisure her skirt of halcyon and aurora.”

(Note here the typical contrast between “halcyon” [kingfisher blue] and “aurora” [dawn pink], representing the primitive blue/red antithesis embodied in the flush of dawn against the blue sky—and, at the same time, the bird-like flight of the goddess.)

Even the most exalted deities—conceived as masculine—were adorned with the glow of dawn. For instance, the “Yellow Thearch of the Center Point” (Chung yang huang ti  中央黄帝) could be visualized riding splendidly in his “flying palanquin of the yellow aurora.”

The same attribute signalized the high god styled “Supreme Lord of the Tao, the Great Thearch of Cinnabar Forest in Fussang of the Eastern Aurora of Grand Tenuity” (T’ai wei tung hsia Fu-sang tan liu ta ti shang tao chün 太微東霞扶桑丹林大帝上道君). But here we have left symbolism and iconography behind, and come back full circle to the orient source of vitality itself.

The word hsia “aurora” has a natural affinity with certain qualifying words. The one which concerns us here—on the very verge of the sky—is tzu 紫, usually translated “purple,” but covering a larger part of the visible spectrum than does the English word. It has a range of reference from reddish browns to the true amethystine—pale reddish blue. In short, some element of red is always present. Hence, in the end, tzu “purple” is yet another substitute for “vermilion,” “orange,” and their equivalents, with the added overtone of “mana; magic power.” This latter connotation is regularly present in descriptions of divine swords, celestial apparitions, and the palaces of the gods—all regularly invested with a numinous purple glow. Most specifically, purple is the color of the celestial pole, expressed, for instance, in the name of the polar palace of the universal sovereign, “The Palace of Purple Subtlety” (Tzu wei hung 紫微宮). Accordingly, it was quite fitting that the Realized Person of the Clear Void (Ch’ing hsu chên jen 清虚真人) should carol joyfully of “purple auroras dancing in murky space.”

“Purple Aurora” is also the name of a holy region, which an advanced adept might hope to visit. So it was conceived by the ambiguous Lü Yen 吕巖, supposed to have lived in the ninth century, whose name has attracted a heavy burden of apocrypha:

“Straddle a tiger—mount a dragon! a pilgrimage to Purple Aurora.”

---

12 Ts’ao T’ang, op. cit., no. 20, p. 2b. She is listed in Tao Hung-ch’ing 陶弘景, Tung hsuan ling pao chên ling wei yeh t’u 通玄靈寶真靈位圖 (HY 167), p. 6b.
13 “San chiu su yü yü ching chen chueh ts’un szu fa”三九素語精真訣存思法 in YCC, ch. 4b, p. 636.
14 Ts’ao Hung-ch’ing, op. cit., p. 3b.
15 Represented to our eyes by two constellations, the eastern and western walls of the palace (tzu wei yuán 紫微垣), corresponding chiefly to stars in our constellation Draco, along with some others in Camelopardalis, Cepheus, etc. Facing the Void, p. 47.
16 That is, Wang Pao 王褒, the preceptor of Lady Wei Hua-ts’un 魏華存, founder of the earthy tradition of Highest Clarity.
17 “Ch’ing hsu chên jen ko erh chang” 清虚真人歌二章, YCC, ch. 96, p. 1327.
18 Lü Yen, “Ch’i yen”七言, CTS, han 12, ts’e 6, ch. 1, p. 2b. There are alchemical overtones in this verse.
Like other varieties of the aurora, the purple one was readily detected in the delicate, swirling garments worn by divine beings.

Auroral plasmas also merge with the vermilion powders and tinctures of the alchemists’ crucibles. Indeed, Taoist elixirs could rightly be considered to be more than mere exudates and effusions of natural minerals. The austerities and purifications that necessarily preceded their conjunctions and sublimations induced the extraction of potent plasmas—vermillion, rosy, purple—from celestial reservoirs. These invaded the mundane reagents, transforming them into semi-divine substances, without parallel in the natural world. A first step in this process is adumbrated in a couplet by the Taoist poet Wu Yun 変 愚:

As scarlet trees give form to cinnabar fruits,
So purple auroras make cyan exudates flow.  

This is the language of cosmic alchemy, which earth-bound adepts aimed to reproduce in a sublunary and often imperfect form.

Alchemical elixirs were the synthetic equivalents of heavenly nectars and ambrosias. They were divine foods which inhibited malignant agencies in the mortal body, and nourished the embryonic immortal body which, at last, might shed its corruptible husk as a flying insect abandons its exuviae, ready to ascend to higher realms of air.

Some of these elixirs partook of the nature or substance of the auroral emanations from the eastern birthplace of the sun. Ts’ao T’ang 桑唐, in one of his ninety-eight stanzas on “Little Saunters in Sylphdom,” two of which have been quoted already, states this plainly:

If starving, dine on the aurora—worries will instantly depart;
At the entire sounding of a ‘long whistle’—the myriad hills will become verdant.  

Similarly, Ma Tai 馬戴, whose verses are also preoccupied with Taoist themes, promised a priestly friend whom he was seeing off to T‘ien t‘ai that there he would dine on the aurora within the marches of morning.

This imagery can be traced back to the early Han period, in the “Rhapsody on the Great Man” (Ta jen fu 大人賦) of Szu-ma Hsiang-ju 司馬相如:

He sucks the cold night damps:
He dines on the auroras of morning.

These phrases, suggesting chilly northern mists (*ghang-ghai[1] 流寒) in the first instance, and warming solar rays in the second, have their classical pairing, corre-

---

19 Wu Yun, “Pu hsu tz’u 步虛詞, no. 10, CTS, han 12, ts’e 6, p. 8b.
20 Ts’ao T’ang, op. cit., no. 19, p. 2b. The long whistle was a magical technique of whistling by which adepts could call up the wind, tame animals, and affect other aspects of nature and the realm of the divine. On whistling see among others Sawada Mizuhoko 澤田瑞穂, “幽黌の源流,” Tôhô shûkyô 東方宗教, 1974, 44: 1-13.
sponding to yang and yin, in “Saunter Afar” (Yuan yu 远游) of the Ch’u tz’u 楚辞, Chang-ghai, as a sort of refined night-fallen dew, was set out on Taoist altars in T’ang times during winter ceremonies.\(^{22}\)

The noble nutriment called “fluid aurora” (liu hsia 流霞) is mentioned in the text of Pao p’u tzu, where it describes a divine liqueur which immediately banishes hunger and thirst.\(^{23}\) It was given orthodox status in early Highest Clarity (shang ch’ing 上 清) scriptures, where it refers more specifically to an infusion drawn from beyond the stars by the rapt adept than to any beverage imbibed from an earthly beaker.\(^{24}\)

A number of epigene elixirs whose names suggest an affinity with this exalted original are described in alchemical texts. For instance, there was the “Mystically Realized Scarlet Auroral Powder” (hsuan chen chiang hsia sha 玄真绛霞砂), which included mercury as an essential ingredient (sha 砂), “powder” is short for tan sha 丹砂 “cinnabar powder,” the common name for cinnabar as prepared for laboratory and medicinal use). This “powder” was one of the chemical “frosts,” that is, a crystalline efflorescence of great luster and brilliance.\(^{25}\) This was the material equivalent of the solar essence that was revealed to the adept who scanned the sky at dawn, and, as the epithet “Mystically Realized” indicates, was also identical with the solar plasma breathed into the mouth of the initiate directly from the lips of the jade maiden who bore the same title.\(^{26}\)

A number of other alchemical preparations of the T’ang period had auroral aspects. Of these the one of the greatest interest in the present context was the “Cinnabar of the Fluid Aurora” (liu hsia tan 流霞丹), also styled “Cinnabar of Eightfold Divinity” (pa shen tan 八神丹). Mei Piao 梅彪, the lexicographer of T’ang alchemy, records a “Cinnabar of the Diffused Colors of the Dawn Aurora” (chao hsia san ts’ai tan 朝霞散彩丹), also called “Cinnabar of the Snow of [the trigram] ken” (ken hsueh tan 良霞丹), and a “Cinnabar of Congealed Aurora” (ting hsia tan 靈霞丹), otherwise known as “Lesser Returned Cinnabar of the Grand Monad” (T’ai I hsia huan tan 太一小還丹), a “Cinnabar of Ascending Auroras” (sheng hsia tan 聖霞丹), and a “Cinnabar of the Five Auroras” (wu hsia tan 五霞丹), whose other name “Cinnabar of the Five Stones” (wu shih tan 五石丹) refers to the five mineral pigments of the traditional palette—azurite (blue), malachite (green), cinnabar (red), ceruse (white), and carbon (black).\(^{27}\)

---


\(^{23}\) Pao p’u tzu nei p’ien 抱朴子内篇 (P’ing chun kuan 平津館 ts’ung-shu ed.), ch. 20, p. 6b.

\(^{24}\) See WSFY, ch. 94, p. 2b, quoting the Tzu shu chueh 詩書訣, that is, the scripture variously called Tung chen shang ch’ing ching yao tzu shu chen kung ching 洞真上清章經 書 上清金經, Ch’ing yao tzu shu 青要書, or simply Chin chen ching 金經 (HY 1304). Similar techniques are described elsewhere in the Tao ts’ung 道尊, e.g. in Huang tien shang ch’ing chen ch’ueh ti ch’in liing shu tzun wen shang ching 皇帝上清金簡帝君靈書奏文上經 (HY 639).

\(^{25}\) See “Ch’i fan ling shia lun” 凡人靈書論 in YCCC, ch. 69, pp. 979-980; cf. Wei Po-yang 魏伯陽 tien shia sha chueh 讀 仙書訣 HY887).


\(^{27}\) Mei Piao, Shih yao erh ya 石藥器雅 (HY 900), ch. b, p. 2b, 2a, 2b, and 3a.
These last names exemplify once more the close affinity between the divine substances of the celestial realm and their terrestrial analogues: thus the advanced initiate may “actualize and visualize the fluid auroras in five colors within the sun, which will all come and merge with his body, descending to both of his feet.”

Of special importance in the Highest Clarity tradition, possibly ranking with the Fluid Aurora, to which it was closely related, was the ethereal fluid known as “Jade Aurora” (yü hsia 玉霞), a name more important in the technology of solar inhalation than in alchemy properly speaking. The technique is described as the “Superior Method for [Inward] Observation of Purple Glints and Jade Auroras of Grand Clarity (T’ai ch’ing yü hsia tzu ying [nei] kuan shang fa太清玉霞紫映 [內]觀上法). After purification by fasting, washing and the like, the adept meditates in a secluded chamber, gradually eliminating all awareness of the outer world. He sits facing south, and actualizes a purple pneuma above his head, gulps this down thirty-nine times, opens his eyes, clasheth his teeth thrice, and recites a prayer which begins with the words “Fluid Aurora of Highest Clarity . . . .” A similar actualization technique, which leads to the direct absorption of the yang essence, is one called “The Way of Inward Observation of Purple Glints and Jade Auroras of Highest Clarity” (Shang ch’ing yü hsia tzu ying nei kuan chih tao 上清玉霞紫映內觀之道). This procedure requires that the devotee capture the reflection of the sun in a dish of holy water, producing an effect of “fluid auroras” in many colors. Inter alia, the adept invokes the “Red Lad of Cinnabar Aurora” (tan hsia ch’ih t’ung 丹霞赤童), evidently the personification of the yang plasma. The auroras flow into the adept’s body; he then actualizes the disc of the sun, within which is the figure of a transcendent being clad in red, scarlet and vermilion vestments—the solar lad himself—indicating the presence within the adept’s body of the ultimate vitalizing element from the very source of yang below the dawn horizon. Both of the above procedures belong to the class of “Purple Text” arcana (tzu shu chueh 紫書訣).

In summary, the divine aurora was the occasionally visible ethereal emanation from the font of yang essence, which gives birth to the sun and nourishment to the human soul. This agrees with the revelation to Yang Hsi which states, “The sun is the fruition of the aurora; the aurora is the germination of the sun.” To earth-bound witnesses it sometimes affords a peripheral, tantalizing, but still enchanting glimpse of the divine life—represented on the simplest level as the flicker of a pink sleeve through the sky at the end of night:

Within the Void—a sidelong glimpse of auroral garments.

“The Grand Aurora” is the ultimate manifestation of these glimmers and intimations of what lies beyond ordinary experience. The phrase may be better
understood if examined in the context of the class of phrases—part of the terminology of metaphysics, religion, and cosmology—which have the word t'ai “grand; greatest” as their first component. That word implies “greater than great,” “greatest of all,” as when we speak of a “grand duke” or a “grand ball.” We know such expressions from early Taoist literature; for instance, T'ai p'ing 太平 “Grand Tranquility” and T'ai ch'ung 太清 “Grand Clarity,” implying the ultimate and final peace, and the perfect condition of clarity—that is, of non-contamination.

Many phrases of this type represent critical cosmogenic stages—eras of cosmic evolution. Such are those in the standard sequence beginning with the undifferentiated “Primal Pneuma” (yuan ch'i 元氣) and concluding with “Grand Culmination” (T'ai chi 太極), the age of the bifurcation of the primitive substance. Some of these terms have a special significance in Mao Shan Taoism. “Grand Initiation” (T'ai shih 太始), for instance, is, in an important Taoist text, not merely an abstract cosmogenic term, but takes on a marked theological tinge: “At the time of Grand Initiation, Lord Lao descended to become its Master, and from his mouth he emitted the ‘Scripture of Grand Initiation’.33

Even more complex is the case of “Grand Simplicity” (T'ai su 太素), which inaugurated, in the grand cosmogenic scheme, the era of simple unshaped substance, homogeneous and undistributed. For the Taoist mythographers the name referred to a separate epiphany of Lord Lao, equipped with a new cabala. In this system it is no longer simply a question of unshaped matter, but rather of a golden age when all creatures lived in utter purity and simplicity, and men were immortal, subsisting on sweet dew and natural fountains of wine.34

Some other terms beginning with “grand,” however, are cosmographic, that is, they represent cosmic regions or conditions, without temporal reference or a position in the cosmogenic sequence. An example is “Grand Hollow” (T'ai k'ung 太空), which is the space which must be traversed to reach the great palace of the lord of the universe at the celestial pole. This starry reach sometimes echoes to the music performed at divine entertainments there. Another example is “Grand Void” (T'ai hsu 太虚) which, unlike the inactive “Grand Hollow,” has a generative character, and precipitates pneumas (ch'i 氣) which may appear to men as clouds, mists, solar haloes, and comparable phenomena.35

As for Grand Aurora itself—like a number of similar terms of great significance—it has been surprisingly neglected, even in Chinese sources. For instance, it does

33 The complete sequence, following the condition of Primal Pneuma, is “Grand Interchangeability” (T'ai i 太儀), the potentiality within the Pneuma of formal differentiation; “Grand Antecedence” (T'ai ch'u 太初), the germination of formal differentiation; “Grand Initiation” (T'ai shih 太始), when formal distinctions are realized; “Grand Simplicity” (T'ai su 太素), the emergence of matter as undifferentiated substance; “Grand Culmination” (T'ai chi 太極), when yin and yang polarized out of the primitive stuff, and by further subdivision produced the Myriad Creatures (wan wu 萬物). Tai shang Lao chün k'ai t'ien ching 太上老君開天經 (HY 1425); Pacing the Void, p. 28.

34 Ibid.

35 I have treated these concepts somewhat more fully in my article “Wu Yun’s ‘Cantos on Pacing the Void’,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 1981, 41: 377-415.
not figure in the cosmographic sections of the early Sung Taoist compendium "The Cloud Portfolio with Seven Index-Labels" (Yun chi ch'i ch'ien 雲笈七髈). This fact alone justifies the present study.

In an elegant metaphor the Lady of Cloudy Forest (Yun lin fu-jen 雲林夫人) described to the rapt Yang Hsi 楊羲 the domain of the Grand Aurora as seen from outside:

The pylons of the dawn—a frame for the Grand Aurora! We envisage a celestial city whose splendors are concealed behind the bastions of night. At the beginning of the day the great gates open, and beams of golden rose—a kind of celestial phosphorescence—stream out between the great towers that flank that entrance. They show forth a fleeting trace of the promised glory—not fully revealed to any mere mortal—of a perfect world, where the Realized People (chen jen 真人) exist eternally. The same goddess allowed her enchanted pupil another partial view of it:

Look up—a glimpse of the Palace of the Grand Aurora,
Its golden galleries radiant in the purple clarity!

Sometimes the Grand Aurora appears as a mountain—and indeed the palaces of the gods and of divine kings are, in many times and cultures, symbolic representations of the world mountain, itself a cosmic palace. Notable examples were the Śailarāja—"Kings of the mountain"—of medieval Indonesia. A Taoist instance, from an early Highest Clarity scripture, states: "At the court of Grand Nullity (T'ai wu 太无) is the Marchmount (yueh 嶽) of the Grand Aurora, which is named 'Mountain of the Five Interstices'. This is where the Lord within the Dawn of Grand Nullity dwells." Even the mountains of our world are illusory disguises, concealing well the intricate shapes of the true and glorious cities they cover, as the Taoist poets well knew. Here is Hsu Hsuan 徐鉉 in the tenth century:

Once you come into Transcendent Town, you take it to be an old mountain

As to the location of the auroral citadel—it was the shining focus of the empyrean that constituted the orient kingdom of Blue Lad, the monarch who presides over the infinite pool of vitality, a warming, healing, creative volcano that spouts a small portion of its energy over the edge of the world of men with every sunrise. That deity has himself sung of his domain:

---

36 Tien ti pu 天地部 and Jih yueh hsing ch'en pu 行星辰部.
37 Ch'un k'ao 真誥 (HY 1010), ch. 3, p. 6b.
38 Ibid., p. 10b.
39 Yu chen t'ai tung yu ching 真太洞經, quoted in WSPY, ch. 4, p. 8a. There is also the "Mountain of the Yellow Aurora," the dwelling place of the Five Thearchs, and the "Mountain of Flying Auroras," in the Heaven of the Jade Voids, which can be visited by adepts who master the Scripture of the Grand Grotto (T'ai tung ching 太洞經). See ibid., p. 7a.
40 Hsu Hsuan, "Ti po hio miao" 見岳祠廟, CTS, han 11, ts'e 5, ch. 5, p. 3a.
The Grand Aurora fans out flashes of the dawn,
Where the Nine Pneumas have no constant contour.\(^{41}\)

And what is the way to this magical place? The route was chanted by the Lady of Highest Prime (Shang yuan fu-jen 上元夫人), the incomparable handmaiden of the Mother of the West:

Long ago one trudged the Mystically Realized Way—
Then ascended, with bounding steps, the Grand Aurora.\(^{42}\)

The “Mystically Realized Way” is the sunglade, the jet of sunlight whose micro-cosmic counterpart is the breath of the jade woman who injects eternal life into the trance-bound Taoist adept.\(^{43}\)

Should one ask for more precise information about the location of this distant demesne, relative to other regions of space, the evidence is clear only on a single point: the Grand Aurora does not envelop the universe. The texts make it plain that adepts may aspire to the transit of the Grand Aurora to attain a vast, often characterless region beyond.\(^{45}\) This was stated to Yang Hsi in the fourth century by the Lady of Purple Subtlety (Tzu wei fu-jen 紫微夫人):

Let your wheels go above the Grand Aurora;
Gather your reins on reaching the Purple Hill.\(^{46}\)

Similarly, an entertainer at one of Hsi Wang Mu’s celebrated dinner parties sang:

Through Jade Clarity—go out from the Nine Heavens;
From the Divine Hostel—fly out beyond the Aurora.\(^{46}\)

These directions were followed faithfully by Taoist poets of the T'ang period. Wu Yun, notably, in one of his “Pacing the Void” poems, wrote of upward flight “footloose and fancy free” above the Grand Aurora,\(^{47}\) and in one of his “Saunters in Sylphdom” poems he told of

Loosing your person above the Grand Aurora,
In nebulous nowhere, floating in the midst of the Void.\(^{48}\)

It appears, then, that the Grand Aurora is a realm or condition on the verge of a perfect world, beyond the powers of human speech to describe. Parts of this

\(^{41}\)“Fang-chu ch'ing t'ung ko i chang”方諸青童歌章, YCCC, ch. 96, p. 1327.

\(^{42}\)“Hsi Wang Mu yun Han Wu Ti Shang yuan fu-jen t'an yun lin chih ao ko pu hsu chih ch'u i chang”西王母宴演武帝上元夫人彈雲林之歌曲歌之曲章, YCCC, ch. 96, p. 1325.

“Mystically Realized Way” is hsuan chen too 玄真道.

\(^{43}\)See above, p. 27, and n. 26.

\(^{44}\)A worthy candidate for such a universal envelope is the “Great Netting Heaven” (Ta lo t'ien 大羅天), the site of the residence of the Supreme Lord (Yuan siah tien tsu 元始天尊), but this would need systematic verification. See Tao men ching fa hsiang ch'eng ts'ui hsu 道門經法指領次序 (1120), ch. a, p. 14b; Yu yang tsu tsu 易陽雅詠, ch. 22, p. 9.

\(^{45}\)Chen kao, ch. 3, p. 6b.

\(^{46}\)“Shuang li chu t'an yun ao erh ta ko i chang”雙禮珠彈雲歌兩大歌章, YCCC, ch. 96, p. 1326. I assume that “Aurora” here stands for “Grand Aurora.”

\(^{47}\)Wu Yun, “Pu hsu ts'ui”步虚詞, no. 2, CTS, han 12, ts'e 6, p. 7a.

\(^{48}\)Wu Chih-ming, Biyu 倪墨冥, p. 335.
marchland become faintly visible, like the fata morgana, when circumstances are just right. On this ambiguous frontier the adept may perceive supernal beings seemingly clothed in the illusory colors that characterize the world of the senses. It is a region of transition, where the phenomenal is fading into the noumenal. The phantoms detected there may be compared to transient apparitions of the dead, who become faintly visible as filmy, transparent entities hovering between their world and ours. But these pink streamers and orange filaments are no more than small, fleeting ejecta—torn loose, as it were, from the Grand Aurora itself, that vast, incomprehensible kingdom of light.

From the example of the Grand Aurora, at least, it appears that Taoist cosmology was not abstract, geometrical, or rational. It was concrete, qualitative, and sensible. It was indifferent to measurement and computation. All descriptions of it were profoundly dependent upon analogy, similarity, and metaphor. The operations, both ritual and meditative, based upon these descriptions were ultimately an expression of the great Principle of Correspondences, basic to Chinese metaphysics.49

In short, the medieval Taoists treated cosmological speculation and the hopes fed by it as a kind of linguistic enchantment. In the end it was imitative magic.