

DONG ZHONGSHU AND LATER CONFUCIAN COSMOLOGY

Nowhere is the power of naturalism more evident than in its incorporation into Confucianism. This process probably began during the mid-third century B.C. (recall that Zou Yan may have originally been a Confucian master), but did not become the dominant mode of Confucianism until a century later. The individual most often associated with this transformation of Confucianism is a man named Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179-104), who played an enormous role in the Confucianization of the government of the Han 漢 Dynasty (and of the traditional China of later eras). Although Dong's specific role in the incorporation of naturalistic concepts has recently come into question, and it is now widely suspected that key elements were developed by his later disciples, for the sake of simplicity in this course we will continue to treat Dong as the innovative force behind these changes.

The Han period lies beyond the range of this course, but Dong Zhongshu's ideas and their role in China were, in many respects, the ultimate expression of the philosophy of Zou Yan and form a continuum with it. Therefore it makes sense to consider them here. Before looking at an example of Dong's writings on these subjects, however, we should consider the degree to which naturalistic ideas, and particularly the notion of the five forces, had come to dominate Han thought and society by Dong's time. By the early second century B.C., the theory of the five forces had come to be applied to a very broad range of phenomena. For example, the five forces were each assigned to a direction and a season (with the sixth month, midsummer, being considered a separate season). This seasonal concept allowed the forces to be correlated with phases of the yin-yang cycle of polar influence as follows:

WOOD	East	Spring	Rising Yang
FIRE	South	Summer	Greater Yang
EARTH	Center	Midsummer	Balanced Yin and Yang
METAL	West	Autumn	Rising Yin
WATER	North	Winter	Greater Yin

With these as starting points, the system that emerged became a grand correlative scheme:

<i>Category</i>	WOOD	FIRE	EARTH	METAL	WATER
colors	green	red	yellow	white	black
astral bodies	stars	sun	earth	constellations	moon
planets	Jupiter	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
weather	wind	heat	thunder	cold	rain
sense organs	eye	tongue	mouth	nose	ear
emotions	anger	joy	desire	sorrow	fear
organs	spleen	lungs	heart	kidney	liver
tissue	muscles	blood	flesh	skin & hair	bones
tastes	sour	bitter	sweet	acid	salty
smells	goat-like	burning	fragrant	rank	rotting
animals	sheep	fowl	oxen	dogs	pigs
tools	compass	measures	plumb-lines	T-square	balance
numbers	8	7	5	9	6

The list could be extended indefinitely. Musical notes, constellations, government ministries, geographical regions of China, sacrifice locations--all were incorporated into this system.

Now, Dong's integration of such concepts into Confucianism was a response to a specific set of problems that Confucianism faced at the time that he lived. Although we now tend to think of the Han Dynasty as a Confucian era, this was not so when Dong was a young man. Confucianism had been in disfavor since the rise of the Han, and Huang-Lao 皇老, a syncretic philosophy based principally on Legalism and Daoism, was the official philosophy of state. Confucians had suffered many decades of active persecution because they were seen as a potential threat to the legitimacy of the imperial government of China, which had been established in 221 through the Qin conquests of the other feudal states. Dong's adaptation of naturalism to Confucianism was an attempt to capture government support for Confucianism and displace the Huang-Lao ideology.

Dong's opportunity arose in 140 B.C., when an ambitious new ruler became emperor of China. This man, known as Emperor Wu, was young and anxious to remove from his court the many old advisors whom his predecessors had put in place. Dong Zhongshu proposed to Emperor Wu that Confucianism, as a more practical tool of statecraft than Huang-Lao, be made the established philosophy of the Han, and that an entirely new group of Confucian officials be recruited for state service, trained in a newly established Confucian state academy. This proposal fit the new emperor's needs very closely. However, Confucianism, with its long tradition of political independence, was not in itself an attractive option for an emperor bent on autocratic control of the state.

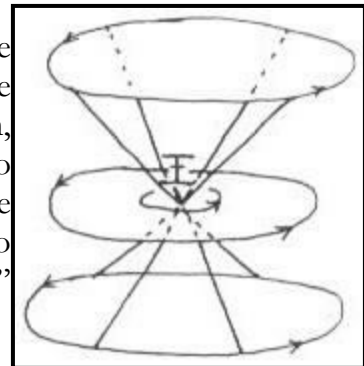
But the naturalistic cosmology that Dong Zhongshu provided for Confucianism made it a far more attractive ideology for imperial patronage. Dong adopted the portrait of a universe governed by the dualism of yin-yang and the rhythm of the five forces. Working to reconcile these with Confucian values of ren and righteousness, and the Confucian interests in humane government and the nurturance of a moral population, Dong argued that the patterns of nature, if properly translated into the human sphere, would produce just such ethical regularities. Moreover, Dong adopted a portrait of the cosmos designed to be attractive to any ruler.

Dong pictured the universe as an organically connected composite of three separate realms of existence: the realm of heaven above, the realm of earth below, and the realm of man between them. Heaven and earth possessed natural types of cyclical rhythms, governed by the forces of yin and yang and by the successive influences of the five forces. This natural realm was largely a homeostatic (balanced and self-correcting) system that harmonized a concatenation of rhythms: the day, the month, the seasons, the year, the circuit of Jupiter, and so forth. But this homeostatic system is not an exhaustive portrait of the cosmos, which also includes elements such as the spirits, mankind, and anomalous natural irregularities, such as comets, earthquakes, floods, and so forth. Dong Zhongshu seems to have viewed mankind as a governor preserving the regularities of nature through action that suppressed the eruption of anomalies.

The central regulator of the human sphere was the king, or emperor. The actions of mankind could not hope to accord with natural patterns if each individual invented his or her own guidelines. Instead, over the course of history, sages had traced the appropriate forms of confluence between human and natural patterns, had developed the complex array of everyday life rituals and focal state ceremonies that ensured a proper fit between man and the cosmos. At the center of this system stands the king, who represents the pivot of all human society, the hub of a constantly revolving wheel of action. The directionality of his actions--his ritual observances, his manifestations of character, his policies--synchronizes the action of the entire human realm. If his acts are appropriate, the entire realm will harmonize

with nature. If the king deviates from the appropriate path, all human action is distorted and the homeostasis of the cosmos is disturbed.

Dong Zhongshu's model of the harmonious universe can be represented by the diagram at right. It pictures the realms of heaven, man, and earth in synchronous motion, with the king at the center, his own directional action tied to the operation not only of the human sphere, but of all the lines of force (yin, yang, five elements, spirituality, and so forth) that link the three realms. The character for "king" (王) was, in Dong's view, a representation of this model.



Dong Zhongshu elaborated the role of the ruler in this system at great length. In doing so, Dong was not only currying favor for Confucianism by appealing to Emperor Wu's self-appraisal as the center of the universe. The portrait of the emperor as the center of the cosmos certainly had the potential to exalt his political standing to heights that were semi-divine, but it also had the effect of sharply *constraining* the emperor. Under Dong's system, the ruler had a very extensive set of "cosmic duties" to perform. And in light of the stimulus-response model which pictured the effect of the emperor's actions on the realm of nature, any natural anomaly could be interpreted as a sign of imperial error, thus opening the door to ministerial remonstrance.

We have many texts bearing Dong Zhongshu's name that discuss the role of the ruler in this system. The following excerpt will convey the degree to which Dong revolved his cosmos around the person of the emperor. Note the resonance with the earlier selection from the "Monthly Ordinances," which was a non-Confucian yin-yang text.

Those who in ancient times invented writing drew three lines and connected them through the middle, calling the character "king." The three lines are Heaven, earth, and man, and that which passed through the earth, and man, passing through and joining all three--if he is not a king, who can do this? Thus the king is but the executor of Heaven. He regulates its seasons and brings them to completion. He patterns his actions on its commands and causes the people to follow them. When he would begin some enterprise, he observes its numerical laws. He follows its ways in creating his laws, observes its will, and brings all to rest in *ren*. The highest *ren* rests with Heaven, for Heaven is *ren* itself. It shelters and sustains all creatures. It transforms them and brings them to birth. It nourishes and completed them. Its works never cease; they end and then begin again, and the fruits of all its labors it gives to the service of mankind. He who looks into the will of Heaven must perceive its inexhaustible *ren*. . . .

Only the way of man can form a triad with Heaven. Heaven's will is constantly to love and benefit, its business to nourish and bring to age, and spring and autumn, winter and summer are all the instruments of its will. The

will of the king likewise is to love and benefit the world, and his business to bring peace and joy to his time; and his love and hate, his joy and anger, are his instruments. The loves and hates, joys and angers of the king are no more than the spring and summer, autumn and winter of Heaven. It is by mild or cool, hot or cold weather that all things are transformed and brought to fruition. If Heaven puts forth these in the proper season, then the year will be a ripe one; but if the weather is unseasonable, the year will be lean. In the same way if the ruler of men exercises his love and hate, his joy and anger, in accordance with righteousness, then the age will be well governed; but if unrighteously, then and bringing about a ripe year are the same; that the principle behind a chaotic age and a lean year is identical. So we see that the principles of mankind correspond the way of Heaven.

Dong's strategy was successful. Confucianism was adopted as state orthodoxy within a few years. Emperor Wu was able to recruit a new staff of bureaucrats to run his state the way he wished it to be run, and Confucians, employing the omenological ideas of Dong Zhongshu, were able to influence policy and check the ruler's excesses by manipulation the reporting and interpretation of anomalous events in the natural world. (Tendencies strongly subversive of autocracy persisted in Han Confucianism, as exemplified by Han interpretations of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which we will discuss at the end of the course. Dong Zhongshu was, perhaps not paradoxically, a central figure in this subversive facet of Han Confucianism.) In this way, the naturalism of Zou Yan found a permanent home at the center of power in China, alongside Confucianism--although it is likely that neither Confucius nor Zou Yan would have acknowledged this hybrid ideology as his own.

Larger philosophical implications of early naturalism

Early naturalistic schools in China developed models of the cosmos that differ in important respects from those with which we are more familiar. The universe of the naturalists, from Zou Yan through to Dong Zhongshu, was one that was distinguished by "forces of rhythm and resonance," rather than the forces that we associate with Newtonian physics.

The operation of yin-yang and the five forces may be analogized on one level to that of a clock. The "times" of the universe are the cyclical alternations of these forces in a regular fashion. Without understanding the astronomical bases of the seasons, the naturalists envisioned a spontaneous law of the rhythmic succession of these forces: the Dao of nature as a regulator of cosmic intervals. Naturalists, like other Chinese thinkers, were in search of the key to refashioning human society as a self-regulating system, and from this standpoint, they were essentially looking towards what we might call a "law of simultaneity" to guide human action. The clock-like regularities of nature implied for them that the key to order was to reproduce in the human sphere the cycle of nature, and both social *and* earthly order would be produced by aligning the "ticks" of human action with the clock of nature.

But naturalism also employed other analogies and the clock-like picture of the universe was supplemented by others. One of these used music as a governing metaphor, and saw the regularity of nature as the product of a harmony among the “vibrations” of the things of the world, as they were all influenced by basic cosmic forces. The notion that arose from this was that human beings could adjust for imbalances in the universe by “fine-tuning” their behavior to enhance certain resonances while dampening others. The concept of resonance and response endowed the cosmos with a basic principle supporting “action at a distance,” and explaining why the conduct of a king or emperor might influence the motion of planets or comets far away.

Here is a selection of a passage from Dong Zhongshu that exemplifies the portrait of the universe as a resonant system.

If water is poured on level ground, it will avoid the places which are dry and move towards those which are wet. If identical pieces of firewood are exposed to fire, the fire will avoid the damp one and ignite the dry one. All things reject what is different from them and follow what is like them. Thus it is that if two *qi* are similar, they will coalesce, and if notes correspond, they resonate.

The proof of this is very clear in the tuning of instruments. The *gong* or *shang* notes, when struck upon one zither, will be answered by the *gong* or *shang* notes from other stringed instruments, and these will sound of themselves. There is nothing spirit-like about this, it is that the five notes are in certain relation to one another; they correspond to natural numerical regularities.

In a similar way, beautiful things attract others among the class of beautiful things, and ugly things attract others among the class of ugly things. This arises from the manner in which things of the same class are mutually responsive, as they are when a horse whinnies and another horse answers, or a cow lows and another cow replies.

When a great ruler is about to arise, suspicious omens first appear. When a ruler is about to perish, there are baleful omens. . . .

The resonance of the *gong* note on stringed instruments when the *gong* note is struck upon a zither is a case of comparable things being affected by members of the same class. The strings are moved by a sound which has no visible form. When people see no form accompanying such motion and action, they describe the phenomenon as a case of spontaneous sounding. Wherever there is a mutual reaction without anything being visible, they describe the phenomenon as “spontaneous.” But in truth, there is no such thing as the spontaneous. . . . Things have a real causative power, invisible though it may be.

Thus the Naturalistic portrait of the world differs in basic ways from the everyday notion of the universe that dominates modern day common sense (though not contemporary physics): the picture of atoms in space governed by “billiard ball” causation. The foremost analyst of the history of Chinese science, the late Joseph Needham, believed that the naturalism that came to pervade Chinese views of the cosmos from the end of the Classical era on was based on what he termed an “organismic” understanding of the universe. This notion points towards the way in which these thinkers tended to picture the cosmos as a holistic, self-regulating system. When we address these issues in class, we will discuss the underlying general concepts of naturalism by surveying a variety of alternative models of causation that fit aspects of naturalistic cosmology in early China - the billiard ball model not being among them.