

## DONG ZHONGSHU

Russell Kirkland, "Tung Chung-shu." *Copyright:* Ian P. McGreal, ed., *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 67-70. *Used by permission.*

**Born:** ca. 195 BCE, Guangchuan, China

**Died:** ca. 115 BCE, Guangchuan, China

**Major Work:** *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (by 115 BCE ?)

### Major Ideas

*Human life and institutions are subject to universal laws instituted by Heaven.*

*All phenomena are intricately and dynamically interrelated.*

*Heaven expressly created humanity to extend and maintain order in the world.*

*Heaven holds the ruler responsible for the world's status.*

*Regular and irregular natural events contain symbolic politico-cosmic meaning.*

Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu) was responsible for establishing Confucianism as the theoretical foundation of the inchoate imperial state during the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 221 CE). Dong attempted to achieve a coherent system of thought that would provide a rational explanation for the entirety of human experience. Some argue that he was noteworthy more for his effect upon Chinese history than for the profundity of his thought. But such criticisms seem to slight Dong's humanistic trajectory: to him, explaining life really meant explaining human history, and explaining the world really meant explaining how human life should be organized in order to be properly grounded in the fundamental nature of things. In another sense, Dong can be interpreted as a religious theorist, whose speculative thought was informed by certain scriptural notions.

### The Background of Dong Zhongshu's Thought

Most classical Chinese thinkers had vaguely agreed that Heaven (*Tian*) instituted the

world, and that it plays some role in human life as well as in the world's ongoing processes. But none of those thinkers articulated any systematic theology: for them, a few basic principles sufficed, primarily as justification of other principles that they considered more pertinent. Dong was, in a sense, working in the other direction: e.g., rather than adduce Heaven to support a specific view of human nature, he adduced a specific view of human nature in order to explicate the way in which Heaven had instituted life. Dong's thought ultimately reverted to a teleological philosophy of history.

Those who assess him as a speculative philosopher are sometimes nonplussed by Dong's apparent obsession with history and government. In actuality, it is not difficult to understand his thought when one appreciates the context in which he lived. In 221 BCE, the state of Qin, organized according to the totalitarian principles of Legalism, had exterminated its competition and instituted a ruthless new centralized state. In 206 BCE, the Qin was overthrown, but meanwhile the Chinese had seen their civilization ransacked. Rulers of the subsequent Han period struggled to understand what had happened, and why. The collapse of the Qin offered a clear moral and historical lesson: there is justice in the world. But if so, why had the ruthless Qin come to power in the first place? The Han emperor Wudi was troubled by these questions, and solicited explanations. In three undatable memorials, Dong Zhongshu offered his views. Fuller and somewhat divergent versions of Dong's thought appear in his principal work, the *Chunqiu fanlu* ("Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals"). However, not only is that text undatable, but modern scholarship has determined that much of it is the work of later hands.

Dong's ultimate goal was to discover universal causative principles that would both explain the past and provide a sound foundation for the future, particularly in the socio-political sphere. But unlike thinkers who seek such principles beginning from abstract a prioris, Dong (like earlier and later Confucians alike) looked instead to his cultural inheritance. He discovered fundamental principles for a complete explanation of life within a text known as the *Chunqiu* ("The Spring and Autumn Annals"), generally considered the work of Confucius himself. Some might think it odd that a philosopher should claim to find an explanation of all reality in a text like the *Chunqiu*, which is (at least to the casual observer) merely a laconic chronicle of political events in the long-defunct state of Lu. But at least some Han Confucians saw in the *Chunqiu* the answers to their most pressing questions: it not only had the unimpeachable authority of

Confucius himself, but it also provided an idea that suited their most crucial needs, i.e., the idea that Heaven is at work in worldly events, mandating certain outcomes in the course of human affairs. Dong concluded that by meticulous analysis of the *Chunqiu*, one could discern the precise patterns of Heaven's subtle workings, thereby learning how all of life could be brought into alignment with the divine plan. Such concepts seem analogous to the thought of certain Western religious theorists who see God's plan encoded in the text of the Bible. But in fact, Dong's thinking was little different from that of Chinese of Han and later times who saw the keys to Heaven's subtle workings in the *Yijing*, the ancient divination text. Dong was actually following a more typically Confucian path by focussing upon history, in fact upon the historiographic activities of Confucius himself.

### **Dong Zhongshu's System of Thought**

Dong's vision of the world began with ideas inherited from classical thinkers, such as the Confucian Xunzi (Hsün-tzu). The activity of "Heaven and Earth" is perfected by Humanity's civilizing activity: Heaven gives birth to things and instills people with moral inclinations (as the classical Confucian Mencius had argued); Earth nourishes things and provides for their material needs; and Humanity completes or perfects all things by maintaining proper patterning (i.e., through rites and music). Such patterning is not the product of human invention, but Heaven's own design. Here Dong goes beyond Xunzi : Dong explains and justifies Heaven's patterning through ideas drawn from natural philosophers like Zou Yan, who had explained the world in terms of (1) *yin* and *yang* -- two basic aspects of reality within the phenomenal world, seen in all pairs of complementary opposites; and (2) the "Five Forces" (*wu xing*), cosmic forces metaphorically identified with fire, water, earth, wood, and metal. Dong Zhongshu is generally remembered as the author of a detailed system of correspondences in which everything was correlated to one of the five fundamental forces, so that everything could be shown to be interrelated in an orderly and comprehensible manner. But in his memorials, Dong never actually mentions the Five Forces. Moreover, his system of correspondences remains quite rudimentary; in reality, the elaborate system usually associated with his name was only fully developed in later Han thought. Dong's own real concern was to demonstrate how Humanity's activities might be integrated with the designs of Heaven. To him, the world is not a field of

self-contained natural processes, but rather (1) a field in which human life is of central importance, and (2) a field in which Heaven acts; hence "*yang* is Heaven's beneficent power, while the *yin* is Heaven's chastising power."

Dong's immediate concern was with Humanity, which (like all Confucians) he considers nobler than other creatures, for two reasons: (1) only humans display the consciousness and will that we see in Heaven's workings, and (2) only humans interact in terms of "benevolence" (*ren*), "correctness" (*yi*), and "wisdom" (*zhi*) -- the fundamental moral principles articulated by his Confucian predecessors. Though he clearly went beyond those predecessors in his concern with universal processes, Dong placed himself squarely within their tradition by insisting that Humanity "possessed clearly marked patterns for...social interaction," and that those patterns are ethical in nature. He also engaged in the Mencius/Xunzi debate over human nature: he agreed with Mencius that we have inherent moral tendencies, but explained them in terms of a theistic teleology: "Heaven, when it constituted human nature, commanded him to practice benevolence and righteousness...." Dong also departed from Mencius' rosy view of human nature: "Mencius evaluates it in comparison with the doings of birds and beasts below, and therefore says that the nature itself is good. I evaluate it in comparison with the doings of the sages above, and therefore I say that the nature is not good." Hence, like Xunzi, Dong considers the legacy of the sages essential for completing ourselves. It is within the activity of the sages (including Confucius' composition of the *Chunqiu*) that Heaven guides us in carrying out its mandate to bring order to the world.

The contention that humans are not wholly good in themselves also serves to justify the institution of kingship: the ruler "gives instruction that gives completion to (people's) nature." The king models himself on Heaven by aligning his actions with the natural processes that Heaven has instituted, such as the four seasons. But history shows that each of the three great dynasties (Xia, Shang, Zhou) had reconfigured certain of its predecessor's patterns, to demonstrate that the "mandate of Heaven" had been transferred to a new ruling house. From that fact, Dong concluded that Heaven had actually established not a single invariable pattern, but rather a changing sequence of three sets of patterns. Accordingly, each current ruler must be alert to possible deviations from Heaven's constantly shifting pattern, as intimated by irregular natural events (a concept attested in an edict of early Han times). Here Dong integrates political principles with the idea of a dynamically correlative cosmos, in which actions on the level of

Humanity (whether proper or improper) stimulate responses on other levels. He sometimes suggests that such responses occur when humanity disrupts the "ethers" (*qi/ ch'i*) of *yin* and *yang*. But such "mechanistic" interpretations seem at odds with the more theistic argument that Heaven takes deliberate action to alter the course of human events by warning rulers when they deviate and by transferring the mandate to a new house when appropriate.

### **Dong Zhongshu's Place in Chinese Intellectual History**

Though Dong's thought seems at first rather far removed from that of Confucius, he was, in the final analysis, truly Confucian: his thought was largely an extension of that of Xunzi and Mencius, qualified mainly by his reading of the *Chunqiu*. The overriding issue of his day was to discover universal processes underlying human history, and Xunzi and Mencius had never gone so far. So to make sense of the *Chunqiu* he expanded his field to make use of ideas from classical thinkers like Zou Yan and Mozi (Mo-tzu), as well as from contemporary sources like the *Yijing* interpreters, and the just-completed *Huainanzi* (another attempt to explain all of life, along generally Taoist lines). It is notable that Dong shows little trace of the thought of Taoists like *Laozi*, probably because earlier Han rulers had adopted certain of *Laozi's* political principles. It is here that we see the motivation behind Dong's promotion of "Confucianism." When Dong persuaded Han Wudi to establish an academy with a "Confucian" curriculum, it was not from sectarian motives. Dong certainly did not reject ideas of non-Confucian provenance: many had great explanatory value. But he was concerned that the authority of the ruler should be solidly grounded in the authority of Heaven, which was codified in the classics that the Confucians had always treasured and promoted. Dong was thus not really concerned to formulate a philosophical "orthodoxy" to which other thinkers had to conform, nor to establish a new "state creed." His goal was essentially the same as Mencius' had been, i.e. to persuade the ruler of the day to put into effect the moral and institutional principles that had been handed down from the sages of old.

Dong's teachings deeply influenced generations of Han thinkers. His understanding of the world as an interactive cosmos eventually permeated most of Chinese society, and became a fundamental element of the general Chinese worldview. But also, his utopian vision of a harmonious union of cosmos and polity inspired other Han officials to produce "revealed" texts

wherein Heaven warned that it might withdraw its mandate from the Han. Such ideas inspired not only rebel political movements (which eventually toppled the Han), but also new religious movements, some of which eventually flowed into the Taoist tradition.

### **Further Reading**

Fung, Yu-lan. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Though dated, volume 2 contains the most extensive introduction to Dong's thought available in English, including substantial extracts from his writings.

Hsiao, Kung-chuan. *A History of Chinese Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. In

Loewe, Michael. "Imperial Sovereignty: Dong Zhongshu's Contribution and his Predecessors,"

in S. R. Schram, ed., *Foundations and Limits of State Power in China*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987. A critical assessment by a leading Han

historian.

***Russell Kirkland***

{Quotations from Dong Zhongshu are taken from Fung Yu-lan.}