COSMOGONY AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

This article examines Zhou Dunyi's 周敦頤 (1017–1073) *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained* (*Taiji tushuo* 太極圖說) (hereafter, *Diagram Explained*) and its shifting interpretations—in particular those of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and Wang Tingxiang 王廷相 (1474–1544)—as a canonical cosmogony and its alternatives in the Confucian tradition. In doing so, this article explores the significance of "cosmogony" in relation to the changes in worldview from the Song dynasty through the Ming. My specific objective is to outline new possibilities for approaching the texts. These new possibilities have implications for how we are to understand the changes in political philosophy in late imperial China as Dao Learning (*Daoxue* 道學) came into question.

Why the interpretations of the *Diagram Explained*? First, the *Diagram Explained* is itself a text that is concerned with cosmogony in its most inclusive sense—that is, it includes a theory of both the origins and the character of the world.[1] In addition, cosmogony is the best medium through which we can discuss what we might call a worldview,[2] for it most effectively epitomizes the way that one thinks the world *is.*

Second, since the *Diagram Explained* became one of the core expressions of cosmogony in the Chinese intellectual tradition, it was the object of comments by philosophers who wanted to reconsider the fundamental order of things. Shifting interpretations of the *Diagram Explained* thus present a genre that is remarkably amenable to the kind of inquiry I am interested in: as a set of writings addressing the same subject matter over an extended period of time, these texts afford a view of how intellectual perspectives on a shared topic—worldview in this case—evolved in late imperial China.

Rather than provide an exhaustive selection of commentaries on this crucial text, I have chosen two other, representative texts—from the philosophical expositions of Dao Learning in the Song dynasty (907–1276) and from an important alternative system of thought in the mid-Ming (1368–1644), respectively. Indeed, from Zhou Dunyi's *Diagram Explained* to Zhu Xi's and Wang Tingxiang's interpretations, there are discernable shifts in the ways these thinkers thought about the way the world as a whole works.

It should be noted at this point, however, that a so-called worldview or way of viewing the world may be too large a notion to attempt a fruitful unity of analysis. Neither will I be able to discuss all aspects of what a worldview may imply, nor am I interested in the religious dimensions of a worldview as the term cosmogony tends to suggest. Instead, I will focus on a somewhat "mundane" aspect of worldview: the

link between the fundamental nature of reality and political philosophy. In other words, I will suggest the ways in which we can interpret the *Diagram Explained* as an embodiment or representation of political philosophy within the frame of the larger order of things.

A note on what I mean by "political" seems to be in order at this juncture. The meaning and function of the political is highly disputed among political theorists; as William E. Connolly puts it, the political is an "essentially contested concept."[3] Generally speaking, the concept of the political has been contested because the term "politics" in English has a quite broad connotation, producing hundreds of different definitions of the word, from the managing of political institutions to the creation and application of political policies to defining a whole way of life. It is not my concern to stabilize the meaning of the word "political," or locate an essential, univocal definition, but rather to describe its usage. Specifically, I will attempt to describe the notion of the political in ways that serve to interpret the *Diagram Explained* as an expression of political philosophy.

To do so, what is first needed is to distinguish what the political is generally assumed to mean in social science as well as philosophical contexts.[4] Many social scientists view politics in terms of its specificity within society. The specificity of the political domain emanates from the particular quality of power as a means of shaping the organization and hierarchy of the social fabric. Max Weber, for instance, considered the political order, understood as the exercise of monopoly to legitimate violence, to be discrete from the economic and the social order. Each sphere of activity—either political, social, or economic—is subject to institutions and regulatory principles of its own. In short, according to this view, politics constitutes a subset of the social system as a whole.

On the other hand, in a more philosophical sense, the political refers to the processes or procedures out of which springs the social order as a whole. In this vein, Claude Lefort defines the political as "the notion of a principle or a set of principles generating the relations that people entertain between one another and with the world."[5]

This sense of the political presupposes the existence of the pre-political, the problematic situation in which it is difficult to draw up rules whereby the community can live in peace, avoiding discord. Understood in this way, the political can be defined as a sphere of activity that produces social order out of (seeming) chaos.

This sense of the political is particularly useful in understanding the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate,* as I shall show in the next section.

Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained

> The Ultimate of Non-being [*wuji* 無極] and also the Great Ultimate *(Taiji)*! The Great Ultimate through movement generates yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil. Through tranquillity the Great Ultimate generates yin. When tranquillity reaches its limit, activity begins again. So movement and tranquillity alternate and become the root of each other, giving rise to the distinction of yin and yang, and the two modes are thus established.

By the transformation of yang and its union with yin, the Five Agents of Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth arise. When these five material forces (*qi* [氣]) are distributed in harmonious order, the four seasons run their course.

The Five Agents constitute one system of yin and yang, and yin and yang constitute one Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate is fundamentally the Non-ultimate. The Five Agents arise, each with its specific nature.

When the reality of the Ultimate of Non-being and the essence of yin, yang, and the Five Agents come into mysterious union, integration ensues. *Qian* [乾] (Heaven) constitutes the male element, and *Kun* [坤] (Earth) constitutes the female element. The interaction of these two material forces engenders and transforms the myriad things. The myriad things produce and reproduce, resulting in an unending transformation.[6]

As was indicated earlier, I interpret the *Diagram Explained* and its own shifting interpretations as a unique worldview with political bearings. In other words, I am not interested in many questions that have preoccupied those who have been studying the *Diagram Explained.* For one thing, it does not serve the present purpose to ask what place the *Diagram Explained* occupies in the overall system of Zhou's thought. In addition, I am not interested in how the *Diagram Explained* contributed to Zhu Xi's so-called "synthesis" (*jidacheng* 集大成) of various Northern Song philosophies. By the same token, this essay is not concerned with the famous debate between Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyan on how to interpret the relationship between the Ultimate of Nonbeing and the Great Ultimate. Whether the language employed in the *Diagram Explained* is of Confucian or Daoist origin is also not the concern of this essay. My aim is rather to consider the work as a substrate through which subsequent thinkers develop their own worldviews pregnant with the implications of political philosophy.

This being so, what is noteworthy, particularly in the context of what I mean by the political, is how the text conceives of the emergence of (social) order out of chaos. Of course, the text does not deal with sociopolitical order in particular, but order in general, including the order of both the human and natural worlds. Still, it does not prevent us from teasing out sociopolitical significance, given the fact that premodern thinkers did not separate the human from the natural in radical fashion. Indeed, generally speaking, premodern Chinese thinkers refused to isolate moral and political propositions apart from propositions about how things are in the cosmos and how they came to be that way.

In this light, it can be said that the *Diagram Explained* clearly delineates the process of how order emerges. While the beginning of the Ultimate of Nonbeing / Great Ultimate represents a kind of undifferentiated or amorphous form of the primal condition, the myriad things at the end, in contrast, convey the well-articulated form of the cosmos. It is in the middle of these two that one can find the description of the evolution of order. If we assume that the Ultimate of Nonbeing and the Great Ultimate constitute more or less one stage, which subsumes two different substages, the main body of the text presents the chronology of creation made up of interlocking stages: from the Great Ultimate through Yin and Yang and the Five Agents to the myriad things. Each stage is structurally marked by the addition of new intermediaries for

the next development. The dichotomy of *Qian* (Heaven = the male element) and *Kun* (Earth = the female element) indicates that the myriad things are the outcome of the cosmic interaction of duality.

Whatever each stage precisely means, one can get the unmistakable sense of architectonic order as well as a sense of completeness and symmetry after creation unfolds. That is, the fact is revealed that the *Diagram Explained* clearly represents, as most cosmogonies do, the evolution of order out of chaos. To the extent that the natural and the human orders are interrelated in this picture, it can be said that the evolution of order concerns the central questions of political philosophy such as how to create or discern "order," that is, the relationship of individual to group and group to society as a whole.

What is the exact nature of this order? This is precisely the question that the *Diagram Explained* poses and leaves for subsequent thinkers. As for the origin of this order, among other things, Zhou seems to offer his own view. That is, this order does not come into existence by chance or without intention. At the same time, there is no dramatic spectacle involving the willful activity of a creator at the beginning. It seems that a mythological "nothing" (the Ultimate of Nonbeing) harbors its own internal promptings toward the stage of something-ness (the Great Ultimate) of phenomenal life. In addition, insofar as the mythological "nothing" harbors its own internal dynamics, there is no sense of *creatio ex nihilo.* According to the interpretations of subsequent thinkers, something exists prior to the act of creation—whether it be *qi* or *li* 理.

What Zhou does not offer is the answer to the question of the relationship between such a unity at the beginning and the multiplicity of the myriad things at the end. That is to say, if creation begins with some sort of unity, and then proceeds to a duality and then multiplicity, what kind of relationship does the individual being, after the creation process, maintain between itself and the larger unity? It is Zhu Xi's interpretation that takes up this question.

Zhu Xi's Commentary on the Diagram Explained

> There has been no time when the mystery of the Ultimate of Nonbeing (無極之妙) was not present in each and every thing. The Five Agents (五行) are different in terms of their native substance and the four seasons are different in terms of their *qi.* However, none of them go beyond Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang differ with respect to position, and movement and tranquility differ in terms of when they take place. However, none are separate from the Great Ultimate. As for what constitutes the Great Ultimate, there is nothing experiential like sound and smell. Such is the substance of the nature. How could there be a thing which exists outside of the nature? However, when the Five Agents arise, the endowment of each is different according its physical substance (氣質). Thus, it is said that each has its specific nature. The real meaning of "each has its specific nature" is that the undifferentiated whole of the Great Ultimate exists in each thing without exception. From this we can see that the nature is omnipresent. . . . As *qi* agglomerates, form is produced. As forms interact, *qi* is stimulated, and thus forms are transformed. Through this process, human beings and things are produced and reproduced. Changes and transformations are

endless. If we take the case of man and woman and examine it, each corresponds to his or her nature (*xing* 性). That is, man and woman both correspond to the one Great Ultimate. If we take the case of the myriad things and examine it, each thing corresponds to its nature *(xing)*. That is, each of the myriad things corresponds to the one Great Ultimate. Speaking from the point of view of undifferentiation, the myriad things as a whole correspond to the one Great Ultimate. Speaking from the point of view of differentiation, each thing possesses the one Great Ultimate.[7]

Before we read Zhu Xi's interpretation of the *Diagram Explained,* we should note that time and again Zhu Xi defines the Supreme Ultimate as *li.* Keeping this point in mind, the whole process of creation of order is reinterpreted through the dichotomous framework of *li* and *qi.* Among other points to discuss, let us focus on the question of the individual being's relation to the unity of the cosmos. Zhu Xi makes two interesting points about this question left by Zhou: first, there is one unitary *li* at the beginning of the universe; second, after the unitary *li* has been unfolded into the myriad things, each of the myriad things possesses *li* in its entirety, not just part of the *li.* How are we to make sense of this seemingly mysterious definition of the individual's relation to the whole? In particular, what does this have to do with the question of political philosophy? To answer this question, we need to turn to the intellectual context of Dao Learning, of which Zhu Xi is the main theoretician.

Dao Learning

Dao Learning represents first and foremost an emphasis on personal morality.[8] Of course, attention to personal morality was never without precedent in Chinese intellectual history. And yet, the reassertion of personal morality by practitioners of Dao Learning was made in their own distinct intellectual context and thus possessed distinct qualities. The distinctiveness of their position could best be understood through their critical stance toward the political reforms of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086).[9] As is well known, Wang Anshi's vision, which supported the broad current of political reform in the Northern Song, upheld the radical hope of reshaping society through the transforming impulses of the political center. In particular, it invoked the benefit of large-scale, state-wide institutions. When the Northern Song collapsed, many intellectuals attributed this to the disastrous effects of Wang Anshi's policies. Accordingly, it is quite understandable that as enthusiasm for broad institutional reforms waned, intellectuals wanted to bring personal morality to the fore.[10] It is not that Dao Learning completely ruled out institutional action. Yet, it is certain that the Southern Song witnessed a shift away from radical political reform toward an emphasis on the regeneration of individual morality. This is what we know as the Dao Learning movement.[11]

Along with the concern of Dao Learning practitioners with personal morality was an emphasis on introspection and the regulation of one's mental state. Common Dao Learning activities like quiet-sitting (*jingzuo* 靜坐) are also pregnant with psychological implications. In this regard, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Dao Learning practitioners were interested primarily in the state of an individual's mind and heart.[12]

However, no matter how seriously one is engaged in introspection and discourse on human nature, such a preoccupation with inner self-cultivation never implies a religious impulse that is removed from sociopolitical implications. Dao Learning should not be regarded as representing a simple inward turn, or a forsaking of one's responsibility for the world beyond the apparently confined self.[13] It should be noted that, from the formative stage of Dao Learning onward, its practitioners were driven by the need to order the world properly. This philosophy should, thus, be understood as proposing the fostering of personal morality as a much more fundamental, and ultimately more effective, way of social regeneration. In sum, Dao Learning's inward turn was not an escape from social responsibility but a reassertion of it.

How, then, could it be that a preoccupation with personal morality meant neither world renunciation nor self-indulgence, but a way of fulfilling one's social responsibility? It was Dao Learning's idea of unity that fulfilled this theoretical task.[14] This belief in the unity of the world was represented by the Dao Learning concept of *li* 理 (pattern or principle).

What is most interesting about Dao Learning's understanding of *li* is that *li* represents a great, all-embracing unity despite the fact that it has diverse manifestations. The idea of multiple *li* is not *li* according to Dao Learning, which saw *li* as synonymous with totality. When his disciple asked, "Given the diversity of the myriad things, I am wondering if the myriad things are the same?" Zhu Xi replied, "*li* is just one."[15] This point is often expressed as *li yi fen shu* 理一分殊.

This understanding of *li* had significant consequences for personal morality. For, in the realm of the self, *li* meant human nature. The identification of human nature with *li* is best represented by the formula *xing ji li* 性即理 ([human] nature is principle), which Cheng Yi first advanced and Zhu Xi acknowledged as a genuine, unprecedented theoretical breakthrough.[16] A thorough understanding of the implications of *xing ji li* is critical for understanding how Dao Learning could propose personal morality as the starting point for social regeneration.

The Dao Learning idea of *li* implies that there is a fundamental identity of the self with the universe—a notion characteristic of Chinese Buddhism. That is, unity in Dao Learning was not the kind of unity that was generated by connecting multiple parts. It was unity in the sense that each of the myriad things contained the essence of the whole universe. If we use the metaphor of the moon mirrored in various rivers,[17] the reflections of the moon in the river are not partial embodiments of the moon in the sky. Even if a full moon in the sky were reflected in more than a hundred rivers, the reflected image would still be the full moon, not a partial representation of the moon. In short, a thing in the world is a microcosmos in itself, not a part of the larger cosmos. By the same token, *xing* is not part of the pattern of the integrated process of heaven-and-earth, but the pattern itself.

The idea of the self's underlying identity with the world first and foremost resolved the troubled relationship between self and world and established an emphasis on self-rectification as the essential method of fulfilling social responsibility. Now, the self is not a freestanding, partial, or isolated individual but a great being

on whom things in the world, in their entirety, depend. The world forms a single continuum with the self in that human nature *(xing)* is the same as the normative principle *(li)* innately endowed in all things by heaven-and-earth. Furthermore, the self is not just part of the cosmos, it *is* a microcosm in the sense that the *xing* residing in the self is not a partial fulfillment of *li* but *li* in its entirety.

The main consequence of this notion was that the possibility of appropriating the whole world was inherent in the very structure of the self. To realize one's authentic existence (human nature) meant to realize the heavenly principle of the world. The individual self was thus redefined as a moral agent with the immense power to transform the whole world. In this way, Dao Learning was still able to lay claim to the larger world beyond the apparently limited range of the individual self.

Perhaps this unique view of the individual moral agent, grounded in a belief in the unity between self and world, might be hard for modern minds to accept. However, without a belief in the unity of self and world, the Dao Learning project, which upholds personal morality as *the* foundation of social well-being, cannot be theoretically sustained.

This unique vision of the self's relation to the world, which is symbolically illustrated in Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Diagram Explained,* had profound political implications. First of all, morality and politics were not seen as two separate realms, in the sense that the perfection of personal morality was believed to bring order to the world. Second, a specific field of politics was obscured by the attempt to include all phenomena within "nature" and to explain their workings by a common unifying principle. Third, this vision represented a well-defined intellectual position capable of justifying literati opposition to the court. For personal morality took precedence over a government-oriented political aspiration that was realizable through officeholding.

Fourth, this vision corresponded to a diminution in the institutional activism of the government and a concomitant expansion of the activities of local literati elites.[18] In recent decades, scholars have explained the rise of Dao Learning by the dynamics of officeholding in the Southern Song. Their arguments go like this: Competition for access to political and economic power became increasingly intense during the Southern Song, and the probability of gaining official position became increasingly low. Since the prospects were dim, Chinese intellectuals channeled their aspirations to self-realization into various activities in local society. As the political concerns of Chinese intellectuals moved from the central government to the local regions, Dao Learning became more and more popular among these intellectuals. Followers of Dao Learning put a high value on the local activities of intellectuals such as organizing and activating community compacts and establishing private academies.

Fifth, the unique vision of a relation between self and world in Dao Learning nonetheless allowed intellectuals to feel socially engaged with local society despite their not being able to hold office. In this unique vision, self and world were seen as coextensive, and there was no tension between part and whole. One was at the very center of one's own world, and thus the followers of Dao Learning often came to

reject the idea that one needed to be at the political center in order to be an active participant in society.

Wang Tingxiang's Critique of Dao Learning

From the time of its emergence in the Song dynasty, Dao Learning had an astounding impact on Chinese intellectuals, even on those who perceived it as a misguided teaching. As it spread abroad to Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan, it became one of the most powerful and widespread influences on thought and social action in East Asia. However, around the mid-Ming, it began to be seen as problematic and found itself in competition with other intriguing and alternative ways of thinking.[19] Wang Tingxiang's vision represents one of these alternative systems of thought.[20] His recasting of the *Diagram Explained* signals a new worldview and new political philosophy:

> The Supreme Ultimate (*taiji* 太極) is the name that refers to the ultimate state of the *Dao*'s transformation (*daohua* 道化). The Supreme Ultimate has no image (*xiang* 象) and number (*shu* 數). Among Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things, there is nothing that does not come from the Supreme Ultimate in its coming into being. The Supreme Ultimate is *qi* in its nebulous and undifferentiated state. Therefore, it is called the primordial *qi* (*yuanqi* 元氣). Confucians said, "The Supreme Ultimate is scattered and becomes the myriad things; each of the myriad things possesses one Supreme Ultimate." This statement is wrong. Why? Primordial *qi* transforms itself and becomes the myriad things. Each of the myriad things receives (part of) the primordial *qi* and thus comes into being. Thus, there are beautiful things, and ugly things; impartial/unbalanced things and unimpaired things; human being and things; big things and small things. That is, each and every thing is different (*wanwan buqi* 萬萬不齊). Thus, it can be said that each thing possesses one *qi* of the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji yiqi* 太極一氣); it cannot be said that each thing possesses one Supreme Ultimate (*yi taiji* 一太極). The Supreme Ultimate refers to primordial *qi* in its undifferentiated and whole state. [Each of] [t]he myriad things possess[es] nothing more than a branch (*yizhi* 一支) of it.[21]

Wang Tingxiang also conceives a cosmogony that explains the origin and unfolding of this world. However, he does so in terms of *qi*, not *li.* For Wang, the Supreme Ultimate is *qi*, not *li.* In contrast to *li*, *qi* is very much an entity conceived in terms of quantity. *Qi* is ether-like matter. Thus, when it unfolds as the myriad things, the myriad things are endowed with a part of the whole amount of *qi.* When a being's life comes to an end, the *qi* of which the being is made disperses and returns to its rarefied state.[22]

In this picture, nothing in the universe can go beyond its own confines and appropriate the whole universe, since everything just possesses its own lot of *qi*: "[I]t can be said that each thing possesses one *qi* of the Supreme Ultimate (*taiji yiqi* 太極一氣); it cannot be said that each thing possesses the one Supreme Ultimate (*yi taiji* 一太極)." "The myriad things possess nothing more than a branch (*yizhi* 一支) of it." Thus, an individual self never contains the whole world in its entirety. Dao Learning's aspiration to appropriate the world in the realm of the self is theoretically impossible from the beginning.

To appreciate fully Wang's reworking of the *Diagram Explained,* let me explain Wang's world-picture in more detail. First of all, Wang did not believe that there existed an overarching unified structure to the universe. Wang says, "The myriad things have the myriad *li.* Each of them possesses its own distinctiveness."[23] Wang's denial of the unity (of *li*) of the world does not mean that he denied any order in the world. What he denied was the idea of an overarching unity that penetrated (the myriad *li* of) the whole world. In other words, Wang repudiated the totalizing aspiration contained in Dao Learning's notion of *li* or principle.

Second, we cannot find sustained unity in the world even when we regard the world historically. The world is constantly changing. Wang says, "The dynamic force of the world (*tianxia zhi shi* 天下之勢) is a way that changes and then never comes back to its previous state. The *Dao* has no fixed locus (*dingzai* 定在)."[24] This seems to suggest that there is a single *Dao* that is changing. In reality, though, the changing *Dao* means nothing other than that multiple *Dao*s exist according to their corresponding times.

Third, Wang's disintegrating unity is most significant in view of his rejection of Dao Learning's theory of human nature. According to Wang, there is no shared original goodness in human nature.[25] However, we should note that Wang does not define human nature as bad. He sees raw tendencies of goodness and badness coexisting in human nature. The nature of each human being is different according to his or her physical endowment. This shows that the most important implication of Wang Tingxiang's philosophical anthropology lies not only in his dismantling of the idea of a moral nature but also in his dismantling of the idea of human commonality sustained by a moral nature.[26]

Let me summarize the implications of Wang Tingxiang's understanding of human beings. First, Wang has abandoned the optimism contained in Dao Learning's notion of the goodness of human nature. Second, he rejects the notion of human commonality sustained by the idea of moral nature. Thus, there is no ground for shared value at the level of human nature. Third, because Wang does not posit the existence of a perfect and original human nature, the process of learning is no longer the process of self-realization. Accordingly, the moral agent in Wang's vision does not possess an inner source of normativity. Instead, human beings in Wang's vision are raw material of varying quality, awaiting nurture and education.

Taken together, all these points indicate that the Dao Learning project could no longer be sustained. Instead of sticking to its original vision, Wang proposes that we acknowledge what he thinks is the real picture of the world: we live in a world in which individuals and societies recognize different moral necessities and different ways of conceiving an ideal life.

It is through this new perception of the world that we are able to understand more fully Wang's reworking of the *Diagram Explained.* Wang's dismantling of the unified world-picture opens up the fundamental question of political philosophy all over gain. What is the principle or set of principles generating the relations that people entertain between one another and with the world? What is the process or procedure out of which springs the social order as a whole? Insofar as Wang was

dedicated to the notion of social responsibility, it would have been difficult for him to relinquish a concern for the whole and let the world lapse into ethical relativism or an unresolvable conflict among selfish individuals.

Wang's Alternative: Reviving the Role of Institutions

What was Wang Tingxiang's alternative? The most apparent difference between his vision and Dao Learning was Wang's increased role for legal institutions in the achievement of social well-being and a concomitant decrease in the role of individual morality. Indeed, Wang conferred roughly *equal* importance to morality and legal institutions: "The way of sages simultaneously uses (*bingyong* 並用) the *dao,* virtue (*de* 德), ritual (*li* 禮), music (*yue* 樂), and the penal law (*xingfa* 刑法)."[27] Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Wang regarded criminal punishment as a fundamental aspect of governing that had been relatively downplayed in the Confucian tradition in favor of moral exhortation. Such emphasis on the binding force of external institutions like ritual and criminal punishment is understandable when we recall Wang's understanding of human psychology.

A New Conception of Morality

However, to appreciate this new vision more deeply, we need to understand Wang's conception of morality as well. Wang, in effect, redefined the meaning of morality. Going against the basic assumptions of Dao Learning, Wang believed that morality was externally created rather than generated from within. In a sense, morality became a part of the institutional framework, rather than its counterpart:

> There are both goodness and non-goodness in human nature. Accordingly, there are right and wrong in the *Dao.* Thus, if each person acts according to his/her nature, order cannot be brought into the world. The sages worried about this, and thus established teaching *(jiao* 教*)* by cultivating the *Dao,* and created standards *(zhun* 準*)* for the people.[28]

This passage shows how human nature in Wang's vision requires external norms. First of all, nature has both goodness and badness. Second, the goodness and badness in human nature are nothing more than raw tendencies. In order for these tendencies to become moral categories according to which men bring order to their lives, the sages had to process them into full-fledged, concrete moral concepts.

The moral standard thus conceived is not simple self-realization or the natural development of human nature, but something that had to be invented by the sages. Before sages defined raw tendencies in moral terms, one did not know which tendencies were good and which were bad. The sages identified which traits were useful in bringing order to communal life and then defined goodness on that basis. Thus, Wang repeatedly writes: "it is after sages establish teaching that goodness and badness are standardized."[29] In this vision, being a moral person depended on the invention of norms.

Sagehood

Accordingly, Wang Tingxiang's notion of sagehood was very different from the Dao Learning conception of sagehood. Compare the following two statements. Zhan

Ruoshui 湛若水 (1466–1560), a theoretician of Dao Learning, said: "The sage is the one who is able to see the mind all people share (*tianxia zhi dongxin* 天下之同心) and connect the minds of the people into a unity. Governance of the world (*tianxia zhi zheng* 天下之政) is carried out by exerting the mind to the utmost."[30]

By contrast, Wang Tingxiang's sage no longer seeks a permanent, inherent, unambiguous principle or mind: "The rise and fall of the *Dao* of the world and the change of the drift of the times are ceaseless! Accordingly, sages and worthies should ceaselessly try to save the world by being attuned to the times!"[31] Seen in this light, the main virtue of Wang Tingxiang's sage is his ability to cope with the complexity of a world in which people live together with their own pluralistic interests and limitations, and in which circumstances are constantly changing. In such a disunified world, it is a daunting and never-ending task to generate and regenerate shareable norms, which are indispensable for the fabric of human community. One continually has to hear a diversity of conflicting views, compare them, negotiate between them with flexibility, and then deliberate about the best course under the changing circumstances. According to Wang, only certain people are qualified to carry out such a daunting task. He denies the universality of sagehood.

Before considering the political implications of Wang's ideas in his own time, let me summarize Wang's worldview. For Wang, the world lacks unity and a normative dimension. Reality, as it is, is devoid of value, which has to be imposed from the outside. Wang's sage represents a governing authority who imposes value on reality. In his view, being moral is a matter not of self-realization but of fulfilling obligations imposed by the authority. Obligation differs from self-realization in an important way. When we seek self-realization, the force that value exerts upon us is attractive and voluntary; when we are obligated, it is compulsory. Naturally, the idea of obligation is associated with the idea of law rather than morality. Thus, we can see a shift from morality to law in Wang's philosophy.

Whether or not Wang's new political philosophy resonates with various intellectual and political changes in late imperial China remains to be explored, and goes beyond the scope of this essay. However, it does not seem impossible to make a connection between Wang's ideas and the politics of his time. For example, one may better understand Wang's position regarding the Great Ritual Controversy in light of his worldview.[32] In the Great Ritual Controversy, the Jiajing emperor wanted to disregard the legitimate dynastic succession, which had been supported by most of the scholars of the Cheng-Zhu tradition at the court.[33] Wang Tingxiang was actively engaged in this controversy and expressed his support for the emperor.[34] Regardless of how closely the Jiajing emperor embodied Wang's vision of sagehood, the emperor's position can be viewed as being theoretically better supported by Wang's political philosophy than by Dao Learning, in the sense that Wang advocated a flexibility that gave the emperor greater political latitude. It has been said that "the resolution of the debate marked a resurgence of despotic imperial authority."[35] This may or may not be the case, but it does not mean that Wang Tingxiang's political philosophy has no place in the politics and culture of late imperial China, despite the fact that he was more or less ignored by Chinese historians after his death.

Conclusion

A closer examination of various philosophical texts in the mid-Ming period reveals the fact that Dao Learning was called into question by many thinkers while it was supported by the court through the civil service examination. Such a challenge means that, at least to some intellectuals, it became harder for personal morality to present itself as the preeminent method of achieving social well-being. As is shown in the discussion of Wang Tingxiang's thought, there are alternative ways of ordering the world whereby resort is made to authoritative political leaders and "external" measures that fully take into account the conflicting values and the moral imperfections of people.

This essay set out to show that there was also a reconsideration of the fundamental order of things operating beneath this kind of change in political philosophy. It is no wonder that a practical philosophy—social or political—characteristically presupposes an account of the whole of reality, for every practical philosophy explicitly or implicitly offers at least a partial conceptual rationale for a certain type of cosmos in which social and political actions play a role. For example, the cases of Zhu Xi and Wang Tingxiang show that the primacy of personal morality as a fundamental means for achieving social well-being is hard to sustain without a belief in a metaphysics that supports the ontological possibility of shared value and normativity. In this sense, it can be said that we have not fully understood the claims of any political philosophy until we have spelled out what its underlying worldview would be.

To the extent that the notion of "worldview" is such an all-encompassing notion, it is not an easy task to discuss, nor can it be approached in a facile way. Fortunately, in spite and because of its usual succinct form, cosmogony serves as an armature upon which thinkers continued to sculpt their ideal image of the basic structure of the cosmos without losing sight of fundamental questions of political philosophy. And the commentaries on the *Diagram Explained* by Zhu Xi and Wang Tingxiang show the rich variety of ways in which the basic structures of cosmogony were constantly reinterpreted and thus the shifting currents of intellectual change in late imperial China.

The shift discussed above corresponds, to a considerable extent, to the shift in the key philosophical concept according to which the cosmos was conceived, namely from *li* to *qi.* Much has been discussed about *li* and *qi* in the scholarly discourse on Chinese thought, and this essay is one part of this discourse in the sense that it takes on this concept as the focus of discussion. However, let me conclude by adding a couple of caveats. I do not mean to suggest that this essay deals with the transition from *li* to *qi* as a whole. A closer examination of philosophical texts that discuss *li* and *qi* reveals the fact that a number of so-called *qi* philosophers do not represent a sociologically distinct or wholly self-conscious "school" of thought in late imperial China. In my view, there were different problematic and historical contexts from thinker to thinker, even among those who put the concept of *qi* in the forefront.[36] The differences are diverse, so much so that they do not represent a

generally coherent philosophical, religious, and moral vision of life, whether it is called "practical learning" or "progressive learning."[37]

At the same time, no matter how abstruse the concepts of *li* and *qi* may appear, the importance of these concepts in making sense of the late imperial intellectual world cannot be overestimated. As was shown in the changing interpretations of one particular text, the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate,* when a unifying assumption was displaced, the vision of the world as a whole was radically transformed. That is, the displacement or significant alteration of the concepts of *li* and *qi* resulted in a different kind of political theory. Accordingly, subordinate ideas (e.g., the idea of disunity) became prominent; primary ideas (e.g., the idea of unity) receded into secondary importance.

Thus, despite my objection to the monolithic treatment by those who are called philosophers of *qi,* it is my argument that the two different cosmogonies based on *li* and *qi,* respectively, frame distinct modes of conceiving reality. They also raise questions about the various constraints on ethical and political systems, and, within these constraints, which kinds of questions and answers make sense and which do not.

Notes

1 – See Lovin and Reynolds 1985, p. 67.

2 – For the discussion of the terms cosmogony and cosmology, see Lovin and Reynolds 1985, pp. 354–355.

3 – See Connolly 1983; also see Gallie 1962, pp. 121–146.

4 – My discussion of this distinction draws on Rosanvallon 2001.

5 – Lefort 1986, p. 8.

6 – Chan 1963, p. 463; I have substituted pinyin romanization here.

7 – Zhou Dunyi 1990, pp. 4–5.

8 – Several modern scholars have called attention to the importance of individuality. The most notable example is Wm. Theodore de Bary. See his essays in de Bary 1991. More recently, Peter K. Bol has portrayed Dao Learning as the cultivation of self-reflection for personal morality rather than as mere self-serving ideology. See Bol 1997, p. 29.

9 – For a portrayal of Dao Learning as an alternative to the vision of Wang Anshi, see de Bary 1975, pp. 6, 161–163; Bol 1989, pp. 163–171; Metzger 1977,

pp. 75, 155–158, 188. Also, it should be noted that Dao Learning was not the only alternative to the vision of Wang Anshi, but one of many alternatives.

10 – This does not mean that all intellectuals at that time went in this direction. For example, those like Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143–1194) still retained an active interest in political reform. For Cheng Liang, see Tillman 1982.

11 – This does not mean that the Dao Learning movement can be *fully* explained from this perspective. A full account of the rise of Dao Learning remains to be attempted.

12 – It has been pointed out by de Bary that quiet-sitting, a remarkable formal practice in self-cultivation that was previously absent in Confucianism, is an example of Dao Learning's comparative imbalance in favor of individual cultivation as opposed to political involvement (de Bary 1975, pp. 14, 162–163).

13 – Dao Learning's emphasis on social concerns is confirmed by the fact that its followers were opposed to the monastic ideal of Buddhism and the Taoist ideal of the recluse.

14 – In English-language scholarship, this point has been put forward by Thomas Metzger. See his discussion of "predicament" and "linkages" in Metzger 1977. For critical reviews of Metzger's trail-blazing work, *Escape from Predicament,* see *Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (2) (February 1980). In these reviews, his interpretation of Dao Learning (Neo-Confucian) metaphysics and its implications were criticized for not doing full justice to the historical context, while many of his other points were appreciated. While reserving my view on Metzger's analysis of modern Chinese history as "an escape from predicament," I found his analysis of Dao Learning metaphysics viable at a general level. However, I would like to place Dao Learning metaphysics within the Southern Song and mid-Ming context and thus give a more elaborate account of it.

15 – Zhu Xi 1986, p. 99.

16 – "Until Cheng Yi advanced the formula of *xing ji li,* no one was able to make such a remark" (Zhu 1986, p. 2425). Zhu Xi also makes the following statement on *xing ji li*: "The Way is a general term, whereas nature is used with reference to one's own self. The Way is the principle inherent in all things, whereas nature is the principle inherent in the self" (adapted from Chan 1963, p. 616).

17 – For an explanation of the metaphor of the moon, see Tu 1979, p. 76.

18 – For a discussion of Dao Learning's concern with local institutions, see Hymes 1986. In his two-volume study of the historical world of Zhu Xi, Yu Yingshi offers a different understanding of Dao Learning. He seems not to take seriously the emphasis by Dao Learning practitioners on local activities. According to Yu, people like Zhu Xi and Lu Xiangshan were concerned with the reordering of the political center as much as Wang Anshi was. In other words, Yu

proposes that we should see Dao Learning as essentially favoring a New Policies type of reform despite some differences (Yu 2003). However, Peter Bol criticizes Yu's point and reaffirms Hymes' in his review of Yu's book (Bol 2004).

19 – For the mid-Ming intellectual landscape, see Kim 2000. Wang Tingxiang very much revealed himself as part of this mid-Ming intellectual discourse, as he criticized the ideas of such influential contemporaries as Wang Yangming and Zhan Ruoshui. For Wang's critique of Wang Yangming's concept of *liangzhi* 良知 and Zhan's concept of *suichu tiren* 隨處體認, see Wang 1989, p. 873.

20 – Wang Tingxiang, also known as Wang Junchuan 王浚川, was born in Yifeng 儀封 in Henan, although his father, Wang Zeng 王增, was a native of Lu'an 潞安. During his lifetime, he was famous as a scholar-official, philosopher, military strategist, and music theorist. Also, in the history of Chinese literature he is well known as one of the seven early masters in the mid-Ming period. He became a *jinshi* 進士 in 1502 and despite setbacks was very successful in his official career. In 1533, Wang's disciples printed his collection of philosophical reflections, *Shenyan* 慎言. In 1539 appeared *Yashu* 雅述 and also *Neitai ji* 內臺集, an important collection of his works. *Wangshi Jiazang ji* 王氏家藏集, another collection of his writings, was published in 1636–1637. For detailed information on Wang's life and works, see Ge 1987. While it is true that Wang was very active as an intellectual in his own time, his ideas seem not to have been very influential after his death. In the twentieth century, Chinese Marxist scholars retrospectively admired Wang for the purported materialism of his thought. Although there are a few works on Wang in Chinese and Japanese scholarship, Ge Rungjin's 葛榮晉 publication is the only book-length study on Wang in an East Asian language. It is deeply imbued with the perspective of Marxist historiography. Wang's thought has been more or less ignored in English-language scholarship; for a discussion of Wang's view of cosmology in English, see Henderson 1984. Also, there is a brief discussion of Wang's theory of music in Lam 1998, pp. 155–157. Recently, Michael Leibold published a book-length study of Wang in German, *Die handhabbare Welt: Der pragmatische Konfuzianismus.*

21 – Wang 1989, pp. 849–850.

22 – For a detailed account of this process, see Zhang Zai's *Correcting Youthful Ignorance* (*Zhengmeng* 正蒙), chap. 1, and Wang Tingxiang's discussion concerning Zhang's ideas on *li* and *qi* (*Hengqu liqibian* 橫渠理氣辯).

23 – Wang 1989, p. 889.

24 – Ibid., p. 782.

25 – According to Dao Learning, since a human being possesses perfect selfhood in the name of human nature, the learning process is essentially understood as realizing nature or "returning to nature" (*fuxing* 復性). In contrast, Wang

Tingxiang utterly denies the idea of returning to nature: "It is foolish to insist that one should return to one's original state (*fuchu* 復初)" (Wang 1989, p. 855; for another example of Wang's critique of the notion of *fuxing,* see p. 889).

26 – For Wang's critique of the idea of human commonality, see Wang 1989, pp. 837, 855.

27 – Wang 1989, p. 856.

28 – Ibid., p. 850.

29 – Ibid., p. 765.

30 – Zhan 1997, pp. 57–101.

31 – Wang 1989, p. 795. For similar statements, see pp. 763, 781–782, 843.

32 – When he died, the Zhengde emperor had neither produced an heir nor adopted one. As he left no explicit instructions concerning the succession, everything was put into the hands of his grand secretaries. Due to the efforts of Chief Grand Secretary Yang Tinghe 楊廷和, Zhu Houcong 朱厚熜, the deceased emperor's cousin, succeeded to the imperial throne and became the Jiajing emperor. However, when the Jiajing emperor wanted to offer the imperial rituals and titles for his natural parents, the scholars of the Cheng-Zhu tradition criticized the emperor. So began the Great Ritual Controversy. For the details of this controversy, see Fisher 1990 and Mote and Twitchett 1988, pp. 440–450.

33 – It should be noted that Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), a leading theoretician of Dao Learning during the Song dynasty, strongly objected when Emperor Yingzong 英宗 acknowledged his natural parents and instituted sacrifices for them in a similar case. See Mote and Twitchett 1988, p. 444.

34 – Goodrich and Fang 1986, p. 1431. Wang was one of the members of the Zhang Fuching 張孚敬 group at the court. This group supported the Jiajing emperor's position in the Great Rites Controversy, and thus enjoyed imperial favor.

35 – Mote and Twitchett 1988, p. 450.

36 – Given the fact that many East Asian scholars use the term "the learning of *qi*" (*qixue* 氣學) or *qi* philosophy (*qi zhexui* 氣哲學) in discussing Chinese thought, one may be tempted to locate Wang in the tradition of what is called *qixue* or *qi* philosophy. It is true that many thinkers who have been characterized as *qi* philosophers represent departures from Cheng-Zhu learning. However, it is not very fruitful to locate a thinker in the so-called *qi* tradition of philosophy. For there are many radical differences among those thinkers who have been assigned to this philosophy, and they do not represent a distinct or wholly self-conscious "school" of thought. For example, Yamanoi Yu maintains that *qi* philosophy shows a populist aspect that reflects a lower-class point of view (in contrast to *li* philosophy, which reflects a higher-class point of view), but

this view does not apply to Wang Tingxiang. For a further discussion of this is-sue, see Kim 2003.

37 – By contrast, what has been called Dao Learning, which emphasizes the notion of *li,* represents a very coherent intellectual position.

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