

Research on Dong Zhongshu's Five Elements Thought*

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Dong Zhongshu reordered the Five Elements, that is, wood, fire, soil, gold, and water, and believed that this was the order given by heaven and could not be changed. The Five Elements are related to each other. The relationship between the two adjacent to each other is the relationship of generation and father-son; the relationship between the two separated is reciprocal. The soil is in the middle, and the soil has the noblest morality. Therefore, Dong Zhongshu's view of "Filial piety is natural" originates from the father-son relationship between the Five Elements and the nobility of soil virtue. According to the Five Elements, the state management should set up five kinds of official posts in order to achieve the purpose of interdependence, mutual restriction, balance, and promotion. Dong Zhongshu matched the Five Elements with the four seasons, and believed that each of the Five Elements had its own virtues, and thus extended it to the virtues of the monarch. Dong Zhongshu linked the Five Elements with the five things, thinking that the five things of the king will affect the Five Elements; the five things are appearance, speech, sight, listening, thinking, which is given by heaven. To govern the country and the people the king must have five important cultivations.

Keywords: Dong Zhongshu, Five Elements, the Five Elements intergrowth, the Five Elements overcoming, five things, *Book Chunqiu Fanlu*

Yin-yang and the Five Elements are the main source and theoretical support of Dong Zhongshu's thought. Dong Zhongshu uses the principles of Yin-yang and the Five Elements to illustrate personnel and political affairs. This paper discusses Dong Zhongshu's thought of Five Elements. Dong Zhongshu made a special discussion on the Five Elements in nine chapters of *Book Chunqiu Fanlu*. According to Mr. Zhou Guidian, Dong Zhongshu's innovations, in the Five Elements theory, mainly include the following points: first, rearrange the order of the Five Elements, combine the Five Elements to produce and control each other into a complete system, and compare the relationship between the Five Elements to the relationship between father and son or mother and child; the second is to highlight the role of "soil" in the original five parallel elements; third, the relationship between the Five Elements and the power of the internal checks and balances of the regime (Zhou, 2008, p. 432). Here, we will sort out Dong Zhongshu's Five Elements thought.

Five Elements and Their Arrangement Sequence

The Five Elements were not put forward by Dong Zhongshu. The first Five Elements appeared in *Shangshu Hongfan*. The beginning of *Hongfan* tells that King Wu of Zhou defeated King Zhou of Shang and captured Jizi. King Wu of Zhou asked Jizi for advice on governing the country, and Jizi introduced "Hong Fan Jiu Chou". The

* Fund project: Great Research Project of Humanities and Social Sciences of Hebei Provincial Department of Education (ZD202125); Project commissioned by Dong Zhongshu and Traditional Culture Research Center in Hebei Province (JDA2302).

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“Jiu Chou” are the nine principles of governing the country. The first of these is the Five Elements. The basic characteristics and taste of the Five Elements are as follows: The characteristic of water is downward infiltration, and the taste is salty; the characteristic of fire is that it rises upward and tastes bitter; the characteristics of wood are elastic, curved can be turned straight, straight can be turned, and the taste is sour; the characteristic of gold is that it can arbitrarily change its shape, that is, it has plasticity, and the taste is spicy; the characteristic of soil is that it can grow crops, and the taste of crops is sweet. There is no mention here of the other properties of the five elements, nor of their interrelation. The theory that the Five Elements are born and the Five Elements are victorious and the universe theory of the Five Elements pattern existed before Dong Zhongshu. In *Zuo Zhuan*, *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, and *Mozi*, there was already a theory of Five Elements winning each other. Zou Yan in the Warring States Period used the principle of Five Elements winning each other to explain the changes of dynasties, and his theory was called “the theory of Five Virtues Ending and Beginning”.

In the book of *Han History—Five Elements Records*, “After the Qin Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu ruled the ‘Gongyang Spring and Autumn’ school, began to promote Yin and Yang, became the head of Confucianism”. In the 12 generations of the Western Han Dynasty, the experts on Yin and Yang and the Five Elements were headed by Dong Zhongshu. In terms of Yin-yang and Five-Elements, Dong Zhongshu was the master of Han Confucianism. The problem of talking about the Five Elements belongs to the scope of Yin-yang theory in the Han Dynasty, that is to say, yin-yang includes the content of the Five Elements. In Ban Gu's opinion, Dong Zhongshu was the first to deduce and greatly develop Yin and Yang on the basis of inheriting the predecessors' theory of the Five Elements, and played an unmatched role in this respect, so he was called “the first to promote Yin and Yang and the Confucian school”. Let's take a look at Dong Zhongshu's statement about the Five Elements.

Dong Zhongshu rearranged the Five Elements in order: wood, fire, soil, metal, and water. This is inconsistent with the order of “water, fire, wood, gold and soil” in *Shangshu Hongfan*, which first put forward the Five Elements, and is also inconsistent with the statement that we often say “gold, wood, water, fire and soil”. Dong Zhongshu believes that the relationship between the Five Elements is: The neighboring two are interdependent, that is, wood makes fire, fire makes soil, soil makes gold, gold makes water, aquatic wood, wood makes fire, and so on. Between the two separated is the relationship of mutual victory, that is, wood conquers soil, fire conquers gold, soil conquers water, gold conquers wood, water conquers fire, and so on.

Dong Zhongshu believes:

The qi of heaven and earth, combined into one, is divided into Yin and Yang, judged as four seasons, listed as Five Elements. The Elements is Elements, the Elements is different, so called the Five Elements. The Five Elements are five kinds of official positions, adjacent to each other, and separated by each other. Therefore, it is called governance, and the contrary leads to chaos, while the obedient leads to governance. (*Book Chunqiu Fanlu—Five Elements Xiang Sheng*)

Here Dong Zhongshu explained the origin of the Five Elements, mutual relations, and social governance standards. Yin-yang and Five Elements originated from the qi of heaven and earth; Dong Zhongshu deduced from one (qi) to perform two (Yin-yang), from two (Yin-yang) to perform four (four seasons), from four (four seasons) to perform five (Five Elements). The Five Elements are five different kinds of conduct, relative to the existence of the Five Elements, social governance should match them, and five official positions should be set up. The two adjacent elements of the Five Elements are the relationship of generation, and the two separated from each other are the relationship of victory. Social governance should follow the principle of Five Elements mutually reinforcing.

In Dong Zhongshu's view, the Five Elements have their special arrangement order and position, which is based on the way of heaven and cannot be changed. First of all, the relationship between the Five Elements is the relationship between father and son. Dong Zhongshu believes that the relationship between wood and fire, fire and soil, soil and gold, gold and water, water and wood is the relationship between father and son; the front is the father behind, and the back is the son of the front. Secondly, from the three-dimensional layout of the Five Elements, the soil lives in the middle. He further explained that wood is the beginning of the Five Elements, water is the end of the Five Elements, and soil is in the middle of the Five Elements, which is the order given by the heavenly way. Dong Zhongshu thought that the soil was the noblest, so it was in the middle. He said: Wood is at its best in spring, fire is at its best in summer, gold is at its best in autumn, and water is at its best in winter. Wood, fire, gold, and water occupy the four seasons and four directions of the year, and the noblest position in the middle gives the virtue of soil. In Dong Zhongshu's view, the soil is the earth, the earth is the son of heaven, the earth has the heart of great love, and the greatest contribution to the breeding of all things, but it attributes all the credit to heaven.

Wood is on the left, gold on the right, fire on the front, water on the back, and earth in the center, distributed according to the order of father and son. So wood withholds water, fire withholds wood, soil withholds fire, gold withholds earth, and water withholds gold. Whoever bestows it is in the position of the father; all recipients are in the position of sons. The Han Dynasty advocated earth virtue, so Dong Zhongshu believed that the king lived in the center for earth and sat south, so the east was wood and left, the west was gold and right, the south was fire, and the north was water and back. Dong Zhongshu further elaborated on the status of earth in *Five Elements Zhi Yi*. He believed that earth lived in the center and earth was the arms and legs of heaven. Earth plays a role that the other four lines cannot compare. When the Five Elements match the four, wood, fire, gold, and water should be matched with spring, summer, autumn, and winter, respectively, and "soil" is not specially matched with a season, but also manages the four seasons. Soil is the behavior of loyal ministers and filial sons, and its morality is high and beautiful. In short, soil occupies the main position of the five lines and dominates the activities of the other four Elements.

The Relationship Between the Five Elements and Filial Piety

Filial Piety Is the Truth of Heaven

Filial piety is considered as the pinnacle of moral conduct in both heaven and earth, as stated in the Canon of Filial Piety: "Filial piety is the meridian of heaven and the righteousness of the earth" (*Chunqiu Fanlu—Five Elements Dui*). Dong Zhongshu, combining this concept with that of the five elements, provided an explanation to Xian King Liu De. He first elucidated why filial piety represents heavenly principles:

Heaven encompasses Five Elements—wood, fire, soil, metal, and water. Wood generates fire; fire produces earth; earth gives birth to metal; metal engenders water. Water symbolizes winter; gold signifies autumn; earth embodies summer; fire represents spring. Spring denotes birth while summer implies growth. Autumn indicates harvest while winter signifies storage. (*Chunqiu Fanlu—Five Elements Dui*)

Dong Zhongshu commences his analysis from natural phenomena observed in heaven to expound on their laws of so as to introduce human behavior as a reflection of these natural phenomena and entities. In Dong Zhongshu's perspective, there exist five mutually dependent elements—wood, fire, soil, metal, and water—each possessing its own vitality along with unique strengths that correspond to specific virtues. These virtues must be adhered to

without violation or transgression since they are governed by established rules. According to Dong Zhongshu's belief system where man is united with heaven itself through shared willpower expressed within all aspects of nature—including heavenly desires—human ethics are founded upon this existence-based Tao which abides by rules dictated by the interplay among these Five Elements.

Filial Piety Is the Meaning of the Earth

Then, Liu De asked Dong Zhongshu to explain what is “the meaning of the earth”. Dong Zhongshu combined with the “earth” behavior to understand and read. He said, “The clouds of the earth are rain, the air is wind, and the wind and rain are what the earth does”.

The earth dare not have its fame; it will be on the heaven. If the life is from heaven, so say the wind and rain, do not say the wind and rain. If he is diligent on earth and his name belongs to heaven, if he is not righteous, how can he do this?
(*Spring and Autumn Dew—Five Elements Dui*)

Dong Zhongshu said that it is the earth that produces clouds and forms rain, which nourishes all things; the ground gave off air and the wind formed. The earth is the son of heaven; clouds, rain, gas, wind, and other natural phenomena are produced by the earth, which are the work of the earth, but the earth never enjoys its work alone, but attributes the credit to its father—the day, so it is called the sky wind and rain. This is filial piety. The soil is the earth in the Five Elements, the soil is the middle in the Five Elements, and the five virtues of the Five Elements, the soil virtues are the most expensive. The earth, which carries all things and nurtures all things, gathers all the virtues of the Five Elements, which Dong Zhongshu considers to be the supreme righteousness.

It is a major feature of Dong Zhongshu's philosophy to speak of man by nature and matter by things. Through the great love and virtue of the earth, he derived the ethical rules that a man and a minister should follow. “Therefore, in doing things, as the earth does for heaven, it can be called great faithfulness”. The soil, the son of fire, is noblest in the Five Elements. The earth in the four seasons without orders, not with the fire to share fame. Wood names spring, fire names summer, gold names autumn, and water names winter. The character of a loyal minister and the morality of a filial son all originate from the soil. The native, the most expensive of the Five Elements, cannot add its righteousness. Subordinates to superiors, juniors to elders, it is necessary to emulate the moral performance of serving heaven, which is filial piety for elders, and extended to subordinates to superiors, and ministers to Kings, which is loyalty. Filial piety and loyalty go hand in hand. The soil is the son of fire, and the soil is not in charge of any season for the four seasons, and does not share merit and fame with the fire. But the righteousness of the loyal minister and the virtue of the filial son are modeled after the virtue of the soil. The righteousness of earth virtue has reached the highest level and can no longer be surpassed. Dong Zhongshu in order to express the image of “soil” in the Five Elements of the important significance, but also made a metaphor, he said: “the five sounds are more valuable than the palace, the five tastes are more beautiful than sweet, the five colors are more prosperous in yellow, this is the meaning of filial piety”. Among the five sounds, there is nothing more noble than the sound of the palace, there is nothing more beautiful than sweetness among the five tastes, and there is nothing more magnificent than yellow among the five colors, which means that filial piety is the meaning of the earth.

The Balance of Five Elements and Five Kinds of Official Positions

Dong Zhongshu said that the Five Elements are five kinds of official posts, five kinds of official posts should be set up for the Five Elements, the adjacent two are the relationship of mutual growth, and the spacing between

the two is the relationship of mutual victory. If a country wants to govern well, it must follow the relationship between the Five Elements, and the establishment of official posts should be consistent with the Five Elements; otherwise it will lead to chaos in the country. Dong Zhongshu wrote a special article on the Five Elements of the production and the Five Elements of the victory, in order to compare the political affairs and official posts. According to the Five Elements, the five official posts to be set are Sinong (wood), Sima (fire), Department (earth), Situ (gold), and Department of Sikou (water), and according to the relationship between the Five Elements, these five official posts are also interdependent, mutually restrictive, balanced, and promoted.

The Balance of the Five Elements and the Five Official Positions

As mentioned above, the Five Elements are produced, that is, wood makes fire, fire produces earth, earth produces gold, gold produces water, and aquatic wood. According to the principle of Five Elements, Dong Zhongshu derived the relationship between Si Nong, Si Ma, Si Ying, Si Tu, and Si Kou, and gave five virtues respectively, namely five Chang (Ren, Yi, Li, and Zhi): Si Nong Shangren, Si Ma Shangzhi, Si Ying Shangxin, Si Fu Shangyi, Si Kou Shangli. He believes that wood is the foundation of agriculture, Sinong five elements of wood, Sinong should advocate wood virtue that is benevolence, like calling the public, the right monarch guides the people to develop wasteland, cultivate grain, so that the people have a surplus of food, the country's granary is full, and the army will have combat effectiveness. The official position in charge of the army is Sima, and the Five Elements of Sima belong to fire, so wood put forth fire. That is, Snong followed the example of mud, and naturally produced the effect of fire. Next, Sima advocates fire virtue, that is, wisdom, and manages the country like Duke Zhou assisted King Cheng, killing Uncle Guan and banishing Uncle CAI to stabilize the world. After the peace of the world, the rule of the king was also guaranteed and stable. Fire makes soil. Soil represents the stability of the country, and the people live in peace. Division Ying in Five Elements belongs to the soil, advocating integrity, which should be like Jiang Tai Gong to conform to the way of heaven and according to the change of time, use force to subdue the cruel and powerful people. Soil begets gold. Situ in the five acts is gold, advocating "righteousness"; ministers do their duty to the monarch and ordinary people do their duty to their father. Just like Wu Zixu, he crusades against the guilty and the unjust, so the people are attached to and close to him, the border area is peaceful, the thieves do not rise, the country has no prison, so the society will be friendly and peaceful. Gold creates water. Sikou in five behaviors is water, advocating etiquette. Like Confucius, he served as a Sikou in the State of Lu. He tried and judged cases strictly and fairly, and did not act arbitrarily. No one who was condemned blamed him, and various craftsmen made all kinds of instruments in good time. After the equipment is made, it is used to supply the farmers. Water generates wood. These five official posts and their functions are deduced according to the order of the Five Elements, reflecting the relationship of interdependence, mutual balance, and mutual promotion.

The Mutual Restriction of the Five Elements and the Five Official Positions

According to the principle of the Five Elements, the five official positions should be interdependent and balanced. According to the principle of the Five Elements, Dong Zhongshu closely linked the Five Elements with the mechanism of mutual supervision and restriction of the five official positions. He thinks that wood is the Sinong and gold is the Stu. This is called "golden wins wood". Wood refers to farming; if the farmers do not properly lead the people engaged in farming, the people will disobey and rebel, the state will order the Stu to kill their leader and make them correct. Fire is a Sima, law enforcers are Sikou, Sikou in Five Elements are water, Sima breaks the law, law enforcers that water is punished, this is called "water wins fire". Jisun, the upper minister

of the State of Lu, took over all the power, weakened the prestige and virtue of the state, and intimidated and misled the king. Confucius served as the Sikou of the State of Lu, and he enforced the law according to "righteousness", so Jisun had to reduce his power and collect his military armor according to the rules of rank. Soil is the official of the king, wood is farmers, and "farmers, are people also". "If the king is too extravagant and disrespectful, the people are rebellious". "The people are rebellious and the king is poor, so it is said that wood is better than soil" (*Chunqiu Fanlu—Five Elements Xiang Sheng*). Siying is the prime minister of the monarch. If the Siying flattens and flatters the monarch to meet his will, the monarch will fall into a situation of cruelty and injustice, such as the King of Chu building palaces and levying taxes without restraint, the people eventually rebelled, and even the King of Chu was killed. When the people rebel, then the monarch is at the end of the road, hence the wood wins soil.

If Situ is weak and unable to lead an army, Sima will punish him. This is called "fire triumphs over gold". Situ breaks the law and discipline, gets the favor of the monarch inside, is arrogant to the sergeant outside, and abuses the power, such as the Chu general Dechen is such a person. Because he was very arrogant to the army under his command, the soldiers did not obey his orders, the combat effectiveness of the army was weakened, and the State of Chu was in a critical situation, so Sima had him killed. Water, in terms of the official position, refers to the secretary who executes the law. When he was enforcing the law, if he formed a clique for personal gain and acted unfairly, and used the law to persecute others, the Siying would kill him, and Yingdang was such a person. So soil beats water.

Dong Zhongshu expressed an idea here that the power within the regime should restrict each other, including the emperor, all power; as long as it is lost, it will lead to corruption. Restraint is the most important means to prevent corruption. Dong Zhongshu said that every official should fulfill their duties and cooperate with each other in order to put the government's functions on a normal track and operate smoothly. This is political integrity, a virtuous cycle, and governance.

The Five Elements Are in Harmony With Heaven and Man

Dong Zhongshu matched the five elements with the four times, and thought that each of the five elements had its own virtues, and then extended it to the travel of man and king. Dong Zhongshu believes that in 360 days a year, the Five Elements are responsible for 72 days according to their functions, and the cycle repeats. Every line of the master, the state management, and the monarch's virtue must conform, conform to the appearance of good luck, or a disaster.

Dong Zhongshu believes that wood refers to spring in terms of time, and spring has the function of growing all things, which is the fundamental of farming. In this regard, the prince should encourage the people to work hard in farming, not to deprive the people of time to cultivate the fields, to levy a tenth of the tax, to recommend people who have learned the art of governing the state, to release prisoners of crime, and so on. This brings good fortune to the plants and animals. On the other hand, if the monarch does not act in accordance with the season, does not take into account the state administration, and the corvee is numerous, disasters will occur on the people and fish. Fire, in terms of time, refers to summer, which has the property of making all things grow. In this regard, the prince should appoint the virtuous, the excellent, and the talented, make all officials do their best, reward those who are meritorious, grant titles to those of noble character, relieve the poor and poor, and get along well with other countries. Grace is given to fire, and then fire will comply with the personnel and rain. If the king does not conform to the fire, the people will suffer from blood diseases and their bodies will swell, and their eyes will

not see clearly. If such blame is brought to the fire, then there will be a great drought, and there will certainly be a fire.

Soil, which refers to the middle and late summer in terms of time, has the performance of a mature hundred things, and is equivalent to a monarch in terms of official positions. Grace is given to the soil, then the strong seedling will come into being, and the grain will ripen. When grace is given to all, the people will be attached to themselves, the cities will be enriched, the wise and holy will be raised to their places, and the immortals will come down from heaven to earth. If the monarch likes a life of lewd indulgence, then the people will be sick and yellow and black, tongue festering pain. When the blame falls on the soil, the grain cannot grow.

Gold, in terms of time, refers to the autumn; the air of killing began to produce. At this time, it is required to kill the thief, so that the world can be stable. To send troops and raise divisions must conform to the principles. When grace is given to the beasts, they will multiply and the unicorn will appear. If the prince likes war and has no regard for the lives of the people, then the people will get sick throats, cough, muscles cannot straighten, and noses are blocked and stuffy. When this blame is applied to gold, the molten metal will solidify but not melt, and the frozen solid cannot be cast into metal instruments.

Water, in terms of time, refers to the winter, and it is deeply buried in the extremely Yin Qi. At this time, the temple worship began, requiring careful holding of four hours of worship, the son of heaven to worship heaven, princes to worship the ground. Grace is poured on the water, and the sweet spring will spring up. When favours are given to animals such as Jia Jia, tortoises, turtles, and crocodiles will flourish, and large tortoises used for divination will appear. If the monarch neglects or ignores the sacrifices of the ancestral temple, then the people will get beriberi disease, the body swelling, limbs numb and unable to move, and the orifice is not smooth. When such a fault is brought to the water, there will be mist and darkness, and there will be a great flood, and the water will harm the people.

When the master is in charge, he should be kind, gentle, and lenient, to those who break the law and violate the prohibition. When the fire is at the Lord's command, he will set boundaries and trim the land. When the Lord is in charge, he should support the old and care for the little orphans. When Jin was in charge, he should build cities, regulate pure armor and weapons, admonish officials, kill lawbreakers, and show mercy to the elderly. When the water is in charge, the gates of the city should be closed, punishment should be decided, and those who have committed crimes should be arrested.

If the monarch's government reverses the order of the five elements, it will cause disaster, so whether the disaster can be remedied again? Dong Zhongshu thought yes; if the monarch implemented the rule of virtue, he could eliminate the disaster. According to the order of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, he first explained the various forms and causes of disasters, and then proposed corresponding relief measures for different forms of disasters. This actually reflects Dong Zhongshu's political thought of governing with virtue.

If the tree changes, it means that labor and taxes are heavy, and the remedy is to reduce service and taxes, remove grain from the granary, and help the people. If the fire mutates, the way to save it is to promote the virtuous, reward the meritorious, and grant titles to the virtuous. If the soil changes, the way to save it is to reduce the construction of palaces, select and employ people who honor their fathers and brothers, and care for the people. If Metal changes, the solution is to select and appoint honest people, reduce military work, and promote culture and education. If the water changes, the way to save it is to strengthen the management of penalties, care about prisoners in prisons, examine those who do wrong, and kill those who commit crimes.

Five Elements and Five Things

Shang Shu—Hongfan talks about Five Elements, and also talks about five things: appearance, speech, sight, listening, and thinking. Dong Zhongshu borrowed and developed the thought of Five Elements and five things.

Dong Zhongshu believes that appearance (attitude), speech (speech), sight (vision), listening (hearing), thinking (mind) are the destiny given by heaven, and are the five important cultivation that kings must have to govern the country and the people. The king's appearance (i.e., attitude) should be such that people will respect you; speech should be so that others can consciously obey and obey; the vision should be able to distinguish between good and bad, and can distinguish right from wrong; hearing is to be deaf, that is, to be able to analyze the meaning and problems contained in hearing things; The mind should be able to accommodate many different opinions. Attitude makes people respectful, and there is nothing in the world that is not serious; if the words are obeyed, the ministers will earnestly implement their actions and manage the country well. A keen eye is a wise man, who can appoint the wise and dismiss the unworthy, and the whole world will know what is good and encourage each other to do good, and know what is evil and be ashamed of doing evil; if you are sensitive to hearing, you can plan the management of the state together with ministers, and you will not make mistakes in dealing with things. A tolerant mind can be wise and sensible, and wise handling of affairs is very appropriate.

Dong Zhongshu connected the Five Elements with the five things, and believed that the five things of the king would affect the Five Elements and lead to climate anomalies. If the king's attitude is not dignified, it will affect wood and lead to storms. If kings do not take advice, gold does not follow leather, autumn more thunder. If kings see unknown, there's a lot of lightning in autumn. If the king does the five things well, then the Five Elements are normal, the climate is also smooth, and there is no natural disaster. For the king, governing the Five Elements is necessary to consolidate the rule and should not be taken lightly. For ordinary people, the treatment of the Five Elements is also the key to health. Each season has different gas, each has a suitable thing to grow, for example, Shepherd's purse is harvested in winter, and eating it in winter is most beneficial for people's health. Tu is bitter, is grown in summer, and eating has the effect of relieving summer heat. In the same way, what grows in the season, people eat what is new, which is the best food.

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