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Follow the Way of Heaven for Health Preservation: Dong Zhongshu's Perspective of Life

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Abstract

This study uses the qualitative research method to analyze Dong Zhongshu's perspective of life based on the way of Heaven, providing reference value for modern nourishment. The theoretical foundation of this study is his philosophy of Heaven. The methodology for this study is essentially a textual research approach. Dong Zhongshu's primary work, *Chunqiu Fanlu*, provides insight into his *Yin-Yang* philosophy. He established unequivocally that Heaven and humans are in the same category, with human life being the most valuable. Humans should follow the way of Heaven to preserve their health. The principle of *Yin-Yang* embodies the way of *Zhong He*. It is a full way of maintaining one's health. Dong Zhongshu's philosophy of health preservation is more than just keeping the body healthy; it is also about having a positive attitude toward life and living in accordance with the theory of Heaven and human. A complete appreciation of life's significance can only be attained by developing a noble and ideal personality and addressing life with benevolence and responsibility. The ultimate goal is to create peace between Heaven and humans, body and mind, and societal harmony. It injects a new force into the Confucian thought of health preservation. It also serves as a reference and inspiration for modern health and wellness.

Keywords Dong Zhongshu; health preservation; *Yin-Yang*; *Zhong He*

Introduction

Modern industrialization and urbanization are causing enormous conflicts and changes in the interaction between humans and nature, resulting in dual tensions between material domination and humanistic values (Bai, 2023a). Environmental pollution, work stress, and faster-paced lives endanger, and threaten people's health. Integrating traditional health wisdom with modern health concepts, such as traditional Chinese medicine health practices, dietary changes, and *Qi Gong* (氣功), provides more scientifically sound theories and practical advice for health preservation (Yu, 2013). Dong Zhongshu, a notable person in Han Dynasty Confucian thought, synthesized and developed Confucian health preservation beliefs after Confucius, incorporating health practices from modern *Huang-Lao* (黃老) Taoism (Zhou, 2008; Chen, 2017). He recommended preservation of health by the way of Heaven, creating a holistic philosophical foundation for life (Xu, 2014; Jin, 1987).

The central theory of Dong Zhongshu's philosophy is the relationship between Heaven and humans, which also underpins his view of life. This study examines his thoughts on preserving health through the way of Heaven and explores his view of life.

First, we explore Dong Zhongshu's perspective on life through the lens of the Heaven-human relationship. He asserts that humans share a fundamental connection with Heaven, placing them above all other entities and viewing them as the most valuable existence. In both the physical realm and the ethical and moral context, Dong Zhongshu extends the highest regard and reverence to human life, demonstrating his profound respect and positive affirmation of human existence.

Secondly, we examine the integration of health preservation and virtue in his thought. While material sustenance is necessary for survival, Dong Zhongshu emphasizes nurturing the mind with righteousness. He argues that cultivating a noble character is essential for true health preservation.

Thirdly, we consider Dong Zhongshu's concept of *Zhong He* (中和之道), which encompasses neutrality, balance, and harmony, derived from the *Yin-Yang* principle. He advocates that health preservation should follow

this balanced approach, recognizing the interplay between inherent constitution and acquired health practices.

Lastly, we analyze the convergence of health preservation and governance. Dong Zhongshu envisions a comprehensive life philosophy that links the Heaven-human relationship with individual well-being and societal order. By aligning governance with the heavenly principles of *Zhong He*, harmony can be achieved among Heaven, human beings, body and mind, and within society.

Following the way of Heaven in health preservation is an important feature of the holistic thinking of the excellent traditional Chinese culture (Yu, 2002; Lai, 1966). Heaven and earth, *Yin-Yang*, as well as human beings and all things, belong to the *Qi* (氣). The human body is also a whole. Human beings and things constitute another whole, the so-called “*heaven and earth, and all things are one*” (天地萬物一體). Confucianism focuses on the inner nature of the mind in cultivating the body, while health preservation emphasizes the outer body (Zhang, 2002). Bai & Qiao (2023) and Yu (2002) noted Dong Zhongshu’s “morality for health preservation”. From the perspective of a gentleman’s health preservation, Tang (2023a) uses food as an entry point to construct Dong Zhongshu’s concept of the way of Heaven. *Yin-Yang* and five elements are the theoretical basis of his theory of health preservation (Wu, 2020). Xiao & Huo (2017) argue for the legitimacy of “*Zhong He*” as the root of health preservation and longevity from the point of perspective of virtue.

Experts largely agree that *Yin-Yang* serves as the theoretical foundation for Dong Zhongshu’s life philosophy, which perspectives life as a whole and emphasizes moral cultivation. The most central theory of Dong Zhongshu’s philosophy is the relationship between Heaven and humans (Hua, 2024; Mou, 2006; Queen, 2010). His perspective of life is also based on the philosophy of Heaven. Humans are the most valuable existence, alongside heaven and earth, and above all things. Whether in the physical sense of life as an individual or in the ethical and moral sense, Dong Zhongshu gave the highest respect and praise, reflecting his high degree of self-confidence and affirmation of human life (Jin, 1987; Wei, 2020). The way of Heaven advocates neutrality and righteousness, and the nourishing life should also follow it.

Discussion

Humans are a product of the nature of heaven and earth and are of course a part of nature, with which he has an intrinsic life connection. Dong Zhongshu noted that heaven, earth, and humans are the fundamentals of all things. Heaven blesses all things with benevolence and virtue, earth nourishes all things with food and clothing, and humans accomplish all things with rites and music. Dong Zhongshu gave the highest praise to “humans” and emphasized the subjectivity and initiative of humans.

1. The Preciousness of Life

Dong Zhongshu constantly contends that heaven is the same as humans in terms of number and category (Su, 1992). In this approach, he emphasizes the value of human life. In terms of numbers, a human has 12 major bones, and a year consists of 12 months. There are 360 tiny bones in the human body, just as there are 360 days in the year. Humans have four limbs, while heaven has four seasons. He used categories to express what could not be expressed numerically. Humans have flesh and bones, which correlate to the heaviness of the earth; human beings have ears and eyes to see and hear, which symbolize the sun and moon; human beings have acupuncture points and blood veins, which represent rivers and valleys; human beings have feelings of sadness, joy, and anger, which are similar to the warmth and coldness of the sky. Human beings correspond to heaven in terms of their external physical appearance and internal physiological structure. There is so much correspondence between human beings and heaven and earth, which cannot be compared with other species. Dong Zhongshu puts human beings together with heaven and earth, *Yin-Yang*, the five elements, and the four seasons, which together constitute the ten elements of this colorful and complex cosmic world, shining with the glory and power of human nature. He distinguished human beings from all other creatures. Human beings are above all things, similar to heaven and earth, and are the most honored in the world. This is his affirmation of the value of human life, and his great praise of human subjectivity.

Dong Zhongshu noted that since Heaven and humans are of the same category, they will sense each other. Just as water flows towards the damp and fire towards the dry, Heaven and humans are inducted into each other

through the *Qi* of *Yin-Yang*, and the interaction with each other. However, in his thought of the interaction between Heaven and humans, Dong Zhongshu opined that humans are not passively subject to the induction of Heaven. Human positions and roles are always proactive. First of all, understand the reasoning behind the operation of *Yin-Yang*, and utilize it to help people accomplish some things. For example, we can use *Yin* energy to seek rain and *Yang* energy to stop rain. Secondly, the reason why Heaven and humans can be sensed is that humans have strong positive initiative. Dong Zhongshu tried his best to eliminate the mysterious color of Heaven and human induction. He did not rely on mysterious powers to stop the rain. Rather, they work by being wise and actively perceiving the subtle truths that similar things trigger each other. Thirdly, he encouraged people to give full play to their initiative, emphasizing that they should not rely only on heavenly induction but neglect human efforts.

2. The Health Preservation and Cultivation of Virtue

If life is valuable, why did Confucius remark, “It is enough to die at the same time as one hears of the way” and Mencius say, “One sacrifices one’s life for righteousness?” As a result, Dong Zhongshu’s claim that humans are the most valuable is not based on the life and body that God has bestowed upon them. There is something more valuable than human life. He believed that a person’s ability to be respected by others was determined by his virtue rather than his station or identity, adding “virtue” in the first position. A man of virtue prioritizes human life and understands what it means to love and care for others.

Confucianism has always had the concept that “to preserve life, one must cultivate virtue”, linking the cultivation of virtue with health preservation (Zhang, 2002). This concept of life is also recognized by medical doctors. Sun Simiao, a medical doctor in the Tang Dynasty, said that if one’s moral character is not good, even if one takes elixirs, one cannot prolong one’s life. Confucius said that people with benevolence and virtue live longer. *Li Ji* records that a gentleman nourishes his body with virtue (Kong, 1999). According to Dong Zhongshu, both the health preservation and cultivation of virtue are needed by human beings, and both should follow the way of Heaven.

Dong Zhongshu said that people are born with righteousness and profit. Material benefits are used for health preservation. The most important organ in a person's body is the heart, so one must use benevolence and righteousness to nourish the heart. Heaven gave humans life so that they would practice benevolence and righteousness and be ashamed to do shameful things. One should not be like birds and beasts that live only to live. That would be like walking like a corpse, losing the original meaning of life. Even if one lives in poverty, if one can use benevolence and righteousness to nourish one's character and keep oneself clean, one can still live in poverty and enjoy oneself. On the other hand, if one has a lot of wealth, which is enough to nourish one's body, but one's character is lacking, and one suffers shame and misery, one will not experience the joy of life for the rest of one's life.

The first step in health preservation is to start with "nurturing the heart". The reason why most people with benevolence and virtue live long is that they keep their minds calm and neutral and choose the best things in heaven and earth to take care of their bodies. Dong Zhongshu elaborated on the principle that the heart is the master of *Qi* and proposed the method of "nourishing the heart" before "nourishing *Qi*". Eliminate evil thoughts in the heart and make the heart calm. When the heart is calm, the spirit will be stabilized, and naturally, one will be able to cultivate righteousness. The best thing in heaven and earth is benevolence. Those who are benevolent cultivate their bodies and minds, and spiritual pleasure and moral satisfaction contribute to the well-being of the body and mind. The "longevity" of a "benevolent person" is not only the continuation of life in terms of duration but also the quality and state of spiritual life, i.e., a life that is by the way of Heaven and that survives harmoniously and peacefully. Therefore, cultivating the virtue of love and benevolence is the key to health preservation.

The Spring and Autumn Annals record most of the wars. When there are wars, there are bound to be casualties. Following the principles of it, one cannot requisition the people to build palaces in the year of famine, to prevent the people from suffering more. It is intolerable to make the people suffer, much less to cause them harm. It is not bearable to hurt the people, let alone kill them. By analyzing the issue of war, it can be seen that Dong Zhongshu attached great importance to human life (Su, 1992). Therefore,

those who waged wars for their interests were most hated and deprecated by *the Spring and Autumn Annals*.

The Spring and Autumn Annals also records an incident in which King Zhuang of Chu (楚庄王) led his army to besiege the state of Song for nine months. The people of Song in the city had no clothes and food, so much so that they exchanged children to eat and split skeletons for cooking. The Song general Hua Yuan met with the Chu general Sima Zifan Xiang late at night. Hua Yuan told Sima Zifan about the tragic situation of the people of Song. Sima Zifan was shocked by the news. He told Hua Yuan that the Chu army could not hold out much longer and had only 7 days of food. The two of them agreed to withdraw from the army, thus relieving Song of its plight. Under the law of *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, it is stated that ministers should not make unauthorized decisions, let alone inform the enemy of the military situation. Sima Zifan violated this law. But he was highly praised by Dong Zhongshu, who argued that Sima Zifan could not bear to see the miserable sufferings of the Song people. At that moment, he was no longer a minister of Chu, but an expression of true human emotion. In front of life, there is no difference between Song people and Chu people (Deng, 2001). Dong Zhongshu praised him as a truly benevolent human because of the benevolence and cherishing of life in his heart.

The health preservation mentioned by Dong Zhongshu must be both internal and external. Nurture the heart with benevolence and righteousness to achieve harmony and unity between the outer state of life and the inner spirit. To keep the external life and the internal spirit in a state of peace and harmony is what Dong Zhongshu called “external peace” and “internal fulfillment”. This is in line with the traditional Chinese medicine health preservation which emphasizes on “form and spirit together”. Chinese medicine emphasizes the importance of nourishing the heart. Calmness of mind can make the *Qi* and blood harmony, harmony of internal organs, thereby strengthening the body’s immunity, and promoting physical and mental health. Also, the modern sense of the World Health Organization on the definition of “health” coincides with: “health is the physical, mental and social adaptation to the state of integrity, not only the absence of disease and weakness”. It can be seen that health is not only a biological state but also a good state of mental

and social relations (Cao, 2021). Moreover, from Dong Zhongshu's perspective, "internal fulfillment" was more important than "external peace".

3. The Health Preservation by the Way of Zhong He

"*Zhong He*" is the most ideal state for all things in the universe and human society (Liu, 1990). *Zhongyong* (中庸) noted that *Zhong He brings heaven and earth together, nurturing all things* (致中和, 天地位焉, 萬物育焉) (Zhu, 1983). *Zhong* (中) is the end and beginning of heaven and earth, representing the starting point and destination of all life and death. *He* (和) is the growth and maturity of heaven and earth (Lai, 1966). Everything, from birth to death, is a process of "*Zhong He*" interaction and continuous maintenance of life. Therefore, those who can take care of their bodies according to the way of *Zhong He* can follow the natural principles of life, which helps them maintain the vitality of their health, and prolong their lives (Tang, 2023b). The word "*He*" appears 75 times in the *Chunqiu Fanlu* (春秋繁露). Dong Zhongshu noted that heaven and earth are filled with the *Qi* of *Yin-Yang*. All things in heaven and earth are in harmony with each other in order to achieve the state and realm of "*Zhong He*". Of all the ways of heaven and earth, "*Zhong He*" is the most beautiful (Zhong, 2005).

The flow of *Qi* in heaven and earth is organized. The categories of *Yin-Yang*, the four seasons, and the five elements are all the results and expressions of the movement of *Qi*. Life must also follow this principle. Dong Zhongshu pointed out that there are "*two He*" (两和) to make "*two Zhong*" (两中) in Heaven, which are of infinite use. This is the key to the operation of Heaven. The two *He* refers to *He* of the east and the *He* of the west, which refer to the vernal and autumnal equinoxes respectively. The two *Zhong* refer to *Zhong* of the south and *Zhong* of the north, which refer to the summer and the winter solstice respectively. *Two He* and *two Zhong* alternate in cycles.

Figure 1 illustrates the *Yin-Yang* operation, highlighting two instances of *Zhong* and two of *He*. During the *Zhong* of the north (winter solstice), *Yang Qi* begins to emerge while *Yin Qi* reaches its peak, causing all growth to occur underground. Conversely, in the *Zhong* of the south (summer

solstice), *Yin Qi* begins to emerge while *Yang Qi* is at its peak, resulting in the most luxuriant growth above ground. “*Zhong*” signifies the culmination of the *Yin-Yang* cycles, marking the end and the beginning of all things. “*He*” represents the balance of *Yin* and *Yang*, facilitating the sprouting and maturation of all things (Zhong, 2005).

At the winter solstice, growth begins underground but cannot sprout without passing through the *He* of the East (the spring equinox). Similarly, the summer solstice’s luxuriant growth above ground cannot ripen without passing through the *He* of the West (the autumn equinox). The interaction of *Yin* and *Yang* during the spring and autumn equinoxes creates “*He*”, symbolizing the nurturing force of life.

The winter solstice aims toward the spring equinox, and the summer solstice aims toward the autumn equinox. Without the solstices, equinoxes cannot occur. This cyclical process of beginning, ending, sprouting, and ripening demonstrates the dynamic growth and development of all things. The interplay between *Yin* and *Yang* is essential and interdependent, reflecting what Dong Zhongshu termed the order of the Heavens and the profound beauty of this operation.

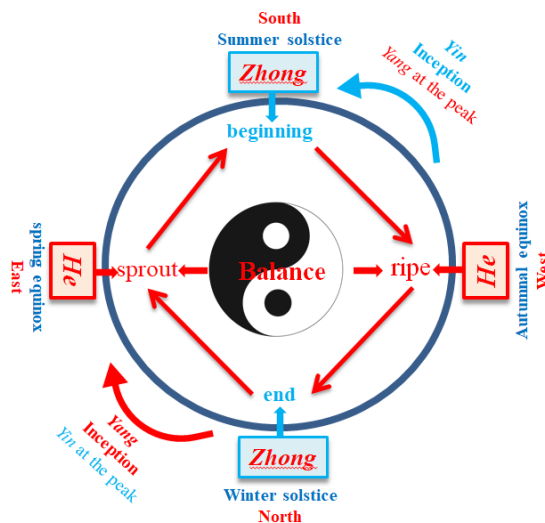


Figure 1. *Yin-Yang* operation with two *Zhong* and two *He* by Dong Zhongshu

Autumn harvest and winter storage are the principles of growth of all things. The essence of heaven and earth is displayed in their richest and fullest form. The seasons turn, *Yin-Yang* operation, and at any point in time, there is always a suitable thing to represent the will of Heaven. People should rhythmically acquire food and master the right time. Dong Zhongshu used two plants, *Ji* (芥菜) and *Tu* (荼菜), as examples to prove that the choice of food in winter and summer should correspond to the time of the year (Su, 1992). The *Qi* of winter is water. *Ji* has a sweet flavor and grows luxuriantly with *Qi* of water. Sweetness can overcome cold, so eat more of it in winter, thus nourishing *Yin* and useful for health preservation. The *Qi* of summer is fire. *Tu*, bitter in flavor, grows vigorously through *Qi* of fire. Bitterness can eliminate summer heat. So, eating more bitter foods in summer is good for health preservation. Though Heaven does not speak, it tells people how they should be health preservation with the growing species. This is the will of Heaven and order. In fact, in the traditional Chinese concept, spring, summer, autumn, and winter correspond to different tastes, such as sour, bitter, pungent, and salty, which is also in line with the principle of *Yin-Yang* and the five elements. Like an interpreter of the way of Heaven, Dong Zhongshu converted profound truths directly into visible and practical life experiences. By carefully observing the way of Heaven, one can grasp the principle of diet. Choosing food according to the principle of life and death is also the best method of health preservation. In addition to food, Dong Zhongshu also discussed in detail the need to be in harmony with the way of Heaven in terms of dressing, housing, activity, and rest. Clothing should be kept clean, neither hunger nor satiety should be excessive, labor and rest should be moderate, and warmth and cold should not be out of proportion. The house in which one lives should be spacious but not empty. Emotions should be in harmony with the center. Do not be greedy and selfish and eat and live according to the seasonal changes. In this way, the best state of neutralization can be achieved.

By emulating the way of Heaven, the way of human has grasped the way of *Zhong He*. Everything occurs, develops, and matures in the realm of *Zhong He* of heaven and earth, *Yin-Yang*, and humans must follow suit. Human compliance with Heaven is not a simple mechanical imitation, but rather an in-depth examination of the way of Heaven, from which one can

determine the most appropriate and moderate approach to care for one's health and mind.

While the length of a person's life is influenced by Heaven, it is also shaped by their actions. Dong Zhongshu objectively analyzed the impact of one's innate constitution and acquired health preservation on longevity, emphasizing the strong connection between health preservation and the lifespan of individuals. A person's natural constitution is the foundation of the length of life. Whether or not one pays attention to health preservation to maximize the growth and development of the natural constitution is a key factor affecting the length of life. He further pointed out that some people live long lives despite their licentious behavior, which is increased by heavenly destiny. Some people have a short life expectancy even though their behavior is upright, which is a decrease of the heavenly destiny. One should not doubt the usefulness of health preservation just because of these circumstances. If Heaven gives a man a long life but he harms it, the long life will be shortened. If the life span given to humans by Heaven is short but he takes good care of it, the short life span will be lengthened. There is a mutual constraint and interaction between Heaven and humans, and the two must work together synergistically.

4. Governing by the Way of Zhong He

Confucianism's concept of harmony has a threefold meaning: harmony between Heaven and humans, mind and body, and ultimately social harmony. Dong Zhongshu regards health preservation as a whole concept. He noted that the way of "*Zhong He*" is the most constant truth in the world. It is both a principle of health preservation and a principle of governance. An ideal society should be harmonious, stable, and orderly. To realize this ideal, the king has a leading role. He should follow the way of Heaven and rule the country in the way of *Zhong He* (Cao, 2021; Hanxing, 2017).

Specifically, the king emphasizes titles to show dignity. They love the people to govern with benevolence. He appoints capable people and observes and listens to information from all directions so that he can see clearly what is going on. The king also emphasized the importance of reward and punishment by awarding official positions according to ability

and ranking them according to merit and demerit, and by promoting those who had meritorious service and dismissing those who had no merit. This is the way to create a good culture. In short, if a country is administered according to the way of Heaven, there will be long-term peace and stability; otherwise, will be in complete turmoil.

Dong Zhongshu encouraged eating seasonal vegetables to maintain good health. According to the *Han Shu*, during Emperor Yuan's rule of the Han Dynasty, people had to keep fresh vegetables warm in winter by keeping fires day and night in the room. One of the ministers believed that the unseasonal growing of vegetables was not only damaging to health but also resulted in significant waste (Ban, 1999). So, he requested the emperor to stop cultivating it. This would result in annual cost savings. During the Tang Dynasty's Zhenguan period, some people build fires underground to grow vegetables. When a minister offered these vegetables to Emperor Tang Taizong (唐太宗), he dismissed him for being too wasteful. It can be seen that advocating the consumption of seasonal vegetables was not only based on health preservation considerations in ancient times but also on the consideration of ruling the country as a government. In Dong Zhongshu's perspective, the governance of the body and the governance of the country were originally connected, and both should follow the path of harmony.

Conclusion

From the outer body to the inner mind, from individual life to national governance, Dong Zhongshu's philosophy of health preservation is not merely maintenance of the body but an attitude toward life and a positive state of living under the guidance of the theory of the unity of Heaven and human. His concept of life fully affirms the positive nature of human beings' self-growth, self-improvement, and self-creation in front of life. It is a breakthrough and forward-looking concept in the Confucian philosophy of life, providing us with a fundamental philosophical perspective on the maintenance of life, which is still of great practical value today. In modern society, people face a variety of stresses and health problems, and conflicts between human beings, between human beings and society, between human beings and nature, and between different civilizations. These situations, to a certain extent, become obstacles to

social development. Drawing on the wisdom of Dong Zhongshu, who preserved health preservation and governed society based on the way of *Zhong He*, can help people realize the importance of healthy and harmonious development of individual body, mind, and society.

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