

The Relationship between Politics and Cosmology in the Song Dynasty: An Analysis of Cheng Yi's 程頤 Reinterpretation of Correlative Theory

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Abstract

During the Northern Song, several intellectuals began to reassess the merits of traditional correlative cosmology and advance new conceptions of the relationship between the cosmos and humanity. The pioneering Neo-Confucian philosopher, Cheng Yi 程頤, occupies an important position in this larger intellectual trend. As is well known, Cheng Yi's conception of the relationship between the cosmos and humanity differed considerably from that proposed within correlative cosmology. In his recorded conversations, Cheng in fact critiqued correlative cosmology and asserted that the Han Confucians who propounded it had failed to grasp the true nature of the cosmos. Despite this, however, Cheng still accepted a key claim found in correlative thought; namely, that human conduct could disrupt the operation of the cosmos and initiate disasters. Cheng Yi proposed two theories that were designed to incorporate this claim into his philosophical system. First, he argued that stimulus and response operated through the mechanism of principle (*li* 理) as opposed

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to *yinyang* and the five phases. On the basis of this argument, he contended that the occurrence of disasters and anomalies could be reduced if the government abided by principle in its implementation of political policy. Second, he acknowledged that some disasters were natural occurrences, unrelated to human affairs. He maintained that the government could reduce the negative consequences arising from such natural disasters by focusing its efforts on providing for the welfare and education of the populace. It is argued here that, as was the case with several other Northern Song thinkers, Cheng Yi recognized the political utility of correlative cosmology and reinterpreted its doctrines in order to advance his political ideals.

Key words: correlative cosmology, Cheng Yi 程頤, Song dynasty theories of the cosmos, Song dynasty political theory, Neo-Confucianism

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