

## 2.8 NATURALIST THOUGHT IN THE LATE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Towards the close of the fourth century B.C. the new ruling house of the state of Qi decided to strengthen its prestige by establishing a scholarly enclave at its capital city of Linzi. This scholars district was located near a gate in the city wall known as the Jixia Gate, and was intended to serve as a magnet for intellectual talent that would both redound to the credit of the Qi rulers and perhaps provide them with a promising group of young men from which to recruit government talent. This institution is historically known in English as the “Jixia Academy,” and it became the intellectual center of early third century China.

Jixia was attractive to learned men of every variety. We do not know precisely how men came to receive appointments there, but it seems likely that all that was needed was that a master and his disciples to find a patron among the patricians of Qi to recommend an appointment to the ruler. If the Qi court deemed such a master worthy of installment among the wise men of Jixia, then he would receive from the ruling house a stipend sufficient for his needs – including his need to house and feed his disciples – and in return he would simply be expected to remain at Jixia, accepting disciples and participating in the ceremonial events of the academy.

Once the most famous masters of China were assembled at Jixia, young men came there in numbers to select a master and be trained in some tradition that would provide them with a path to employment, fame, or simply intellectual fulfillment.

Among the schools of thought that flourished at Jixia, one trend in particular seems to have enjoyed the greatest growth during the third century. This was the group of schools that may be called “naturalisms.” The term “Naturalistic Schools” covers a broad range of intellectual trends which became prominent at this time, and which continued to flourish after the close of the Classical age. None of these trends should be conceived of as a “school” in the strict sense – we know little about the way these ideas were transmitted, and next to nothing about their relation to master-disciple lineages. We use the term retrospectively to capture distinctive family resemblances in the ideas of certain texts.

The first of these schools, “**Yin-Yang Naturalism**,” designed theories that portrayed the universe as a net of interactive forces that could be reduced to two major sets. The first was the dual forces of yin (female) and yang (male), and the other was a group of five elements variously referred to as the “five powers” or “five forces”: water, fire, earth, metal, and wood.

A second naturalistic school could be called the “**School of Qi**.” This group of thinkers speculated on the nature of the universe by focusing on the role of *qi*, the “energy” which we discussed earlier in the section on Mencius (don’t confuse *qi* [in italics], the natural force, with Qi, the political state!). *Qi* was conceived as the subtlest of all physical substances, a type of rarified material medium that, in its purest state, animated the universe as a spirit or life force, and in its denser forms, congealed into what we recognize as matter. Thinkers who speculated about *qi* often

discussed it in the context of yin-yang models; the two types of thinking were not mutually exclusive, as we can see from one of the selections below.

In addition, we have a host of speculative writings on the nature of the universe that relate to one another principally by showing that an increasing number of thinkers were turning from the chaos of human society and looking towards nature for key values in life. In this, the naturalists resembled the Daoist thinkers; the difference lay in the naturalists' interest in a type of model-building approach towards nature which we might call "proto-science." Although these thinkers, unlike many Greek naturalistic philosophers, do not seem to have expended much energy in mathematical or experimental labors, they clearly were hoping to learn basic lessons about human life by exploring the regularities of nature and discovering their systematic structures.

In this set of readings, we will first examine the biography of a thinker named Zou Yan, who is often viewed as a "founder" of Yin-Yang Naturalism. We will follow this with selections of anonymous texts that appear to represent what we are calling here the School of *Qi* and other trends of naturalistic thought at the end of the Warring States era.

### Yin-Yang Thought

"*Yin*" and "*yang*" are fundamental notions of a view of the cosmos which first appears in texts about the fourth century B.C. and comes to have enormous influence in China and elsewhere from then on. Yin and yang were believed in this scheme to be two complementary forces or force-qualities which governed the flux of the universe. The yin force was most clearly manifest in all things that ancient Chinese thinkers associated with the female: softness, darkness, submissiveness, cold, and so forth. Yang was the complementary set of qualities: hardness, light, forcefulness, heat, etc. Yin-yang thinkers tended to hold that while the universe expressed an essential unity which was its original and enduring quality, that unity was never static, it was always manifest as a dynamic interaction of the polarities of yin and yang. These forces alternated in their ascendance: for instance, yin was ascendant in winter and yang in summer. But there existed always in even the most predominant state of yin the seed of yang's re-ascendance, and vice versa, thus ensuring an eternal dynamic.

The notions of yin and yang came in the third century to be associated with another set of forces. These are variously known as the five powers or the five forces (the Chinese terms vary). The concept of the five forces seems to have arisen independently of the idea of yin and yang, but during the late Warring States era they became combined into a single system. Five forces thought had various applications. On the broad cosmological level, it was believed that, like yin and yang, these five forces interacted in a constant dynamic that determined the overall rhythms of existence. For example, during the early spring, the force of wood was in the ascendant; the sprouting of woody plants and a wide range of other natural and astronomical phenomena were explained by the dominance of the force of wood. As the season progressed, however, the power of fire would grow until it dominated. Then in midsummer, earth would become dominant; in autumn metal; in winter water; in spring wood once again. All of the regular phenomena of the natural world and many of those pertaining to the human world could be explained by the resonant power of the alternating forces.

A different use for this model, one associated with the third century thinker Zou Yan, pertained to the succession of dynasties. Zou Yan seems to have applied the five power theory to the process of history, which he conceived in terms of dynastic eras. He attempted to explain the process of dynastic change as a transition stage in the revolutions of the five forces. Thus he associated the rise of the Yellow Emperor with the element earth (which, in the five forces system, is correlated with the color yellow); Yu, founder of the Xia, reflected the dominance of wood in his age; the Shang conquest signaled the dominance of metal; the Zhou conquest the ascendance of fire (hence the legend of the fire-crow omen which we encountered in the tale of the Zhou conquest).

The true flourishing of yin-yang naturalism came during the Han Dynasty, when the system of yin, yang, and the five forces became the dominant cosmology of the state, influencing every aspect of government action. We will discuss this in its proper place later in the course. Here, we will look at a portrait of the much more diffuse beginnings of this school in the *Shiji* biography of Zou Yan.

### The Biography of Zou Yan

There were actually three Masters Zou in the state of Qi. The first was Zou Ji, who sought from King Wei an appointment to high rank by impressing him with his skill playing the zither. He did indeed ultimately gain control of the reins of government; he was ennobled as Marquis Zheng and granted an estate as well as the seals of the Prime Minister. Zou Ji preceded Mencius's stay in Qi. Zou Yan was the second Master Zou; he lived after Mencius's time.

In Zou Yan's view, the rulers of his time were becoming increasingly dissolute. They were unable to honor virtue or in the words of the *Poetry's* "Greater Court Odes" to "set themselves first aright, then right the black-haired masses."

Observing with deep care the waxing and waning of the forces of *yin* and *yang*, he wrote the texts, "Bizarre Transformations," "End and Renewal," and "The Great Sage," altogether totaling over 100,000 characters. His discussions were vast and unorthodox. He always began from the observation of some small phenomenon and then extrapolated from it to greater things until nothing lay beyond his theory. For example, beginning with a simple ordering of events commonly recorded by learned men, tracing this history back to the Yellow Emperor, he created a great model of the patterns of flourishing and decay from era to era. Then matching these to parallel records of natural omens and prodigies, and to systems of government rule over the generations, he extrapolated to the most distant past, the dark and obscure age before heaven and earth were born, discerning in this unknowable time the origins of things.

Again, he first composed a list of celebrated mountains and great rivers throughout the Central States (China), recording the birds and beasts, plants and crops, and rare species of things that were found in each of the major river basins and regions. From this he extrapolated to things beyond the seas, which no man can travel to see.

Zou Yan maintained that from the time when heaven and earth first split apart, five powers had circulated in revolving ascendance. There existed principles of government appropriate to the dominance of each, which, when implemented, would elicit in response portents and augers.

He believed that the lands which Confucians call the Central States in fact occupied only one of eighty-one regions in the entire world. He called the Central States the Spirit Region of Vermillion District. This Spirit Region of Vermillion District itself included nine sub-regions: these were the “Nine Regions” as first designated by Emperor Yu, but they did not constitute the complete list of all regions. Outside the Spirit Region of Vermillion District were similar district, for a total of nine: these were the true Nine Regions. Each region was encircled by a small sea, and the people, birds, and beasts of one region could not cross from one to the other. The set of nine comprised a single sector, and there were altogether nine of these greater regions. All the nine were together encircled by an enormous sea that stretched beyond them to the horizon where heaven and earth meet.

All of Zou Yan’s teachings were like this. However, if one sought the fundamental lessons in them, they always returned to the values of *ren* and righteousness, self-constraint and thrift, the proper conduct of ruler and minister, superior and inferior, and the six types of family relationships. It was only that from these common starting points his ideas overflowed all bounds.

At first sight of Zou Yan’s teachings, kings and noble lords of state were awestruck and convinced in a glance. But ultimately they were unable to find any practical use for them.

Master Zou was greatly revered in Qi, and when he traveled to Wei, King Hui himself emerged beyond the city gates to greet him and personally performed the rites of host and guest. When Zou Yan traveled to Zhao, Lord Pingyuan walked by his side as an equal and brushed the dust from Zou Yan’s mat when he sat. When he traveled to Yan, King Zhao came out with a broom to sweep his path clean, and requested permission to sit among Zou Yan’s disciples and receive instruction. The King ordered a residence called the Hall of Stele Mountain to be built, and he would visit Zou Yan there, treating him as his teacher.

(*Shiji* 74.2344-45)

Zou's reception in Yan seems to have been the apogee of his career. The *Shiji* tells us nothing of his later life or of his death. Strangely, despite the apparent popularity of Zou Yan's ideas, which remained influential for centuries, all of his writings were lost, and this brief *Shiji* account of his teachings is best information about them that we possess.

### The School of *Qi*

The name "School of *Qi*" is a scholarly name applied to a group of late Warring States texts which appear scattered in a variety of books and whose authorship is generally not known. It is unlikely that there ever was any "school" as such, that is a master-disciple tradition which passed along a single "*qi*-learning," in the way that, say, Confucian masters trained disciples in Confucianism. *Qi* was a concept available to all and employed as a central aspect of self-cultivation theory by thinkers as different as Mencius and Zhuangzi.

Nevertheless, there are texts where the concept of *qi* serves as springboard for far flung speculation about the nature of man and the cosmos, and in these texts we encounter a style of thinking which might be called proto-scientific, and clearly expresses lengthy reflections upon close observations of the natural world. The term "School of *Qi*" is sometimes used to refer to this style of naturalistic inquiry in a general way, regardless of whether in a particular text the specific concept of *qi* plays a prominent role.

Many such texts were associated with more narrowly focused cultic practices. For example, some *qi* texts explore the way that the purification of *qi* can be achieved through dietary regimens, and some recently excavated texts that date from the late Warring States or very early Han give detailed discussions of the way in which *qi* can be cultivated through finely tuned programs of exercise or elaborate sexual routines. These linkages between *qi*-learning and issues of personal hygiene seem to have been closely tied to cults of immortalism, discussed in the section on religion in a later online reading.

Two brief texts from this composite School of *Qi* are translated here. Both are selected from the *Lüshi chunqiu*, or *The Almanac of Lord Lü*, which is the book associated with Lü Buwei of Qin. Judging by the contents of the current text, Lü was in fact very successful in luring to Qin scholars who clearly carried with them the intellectual traditions of Eastern China, and of the Jixia Academy in particular.

The first of the two texts is principally a hygiene text (the strange title actually means to live out one's allotted lifespan), and is an example of how the theory of *qi* was linked to the practical issue of dietary regimen and perfection of the body. The second text is an exercise in cosmological speculation. In it, *qi* is only one tool among many in constructing a portrait of the universe, but it illustrates the way in which naturalistic schools, perhaps inspired by Zou Yan, turned their efforts to all-encompassing theories linking the cosmos, the individual, and the state.

### Exhausting One's Number

Heaven gives birth to yin and yang, cold and heat, dry and damp, the transformations of the seasons and the changes of the world of things: none of these is without benefit; none of these is without harm. Sages investigate the appropriateness of yin and yang and the benefits of the things of the world to accommodate their own lives, hence their essences and spirits are at ease within their forms and they live out the length of their life spans.

Long life is not a matter of extending what is short, it is completing [one's allotted] number. The key task of completing one's span lies in removing what is harmful. What does removing what is harmful mean? Great sweetness, sourness, bitterness, spiciness, and saltiness: these five, if filling the form, bring harm. Great happiness, anger, care, fear, and grief: these five, if meeting the spirit, bring harm. Great cold, heat, dryness, damp, wind, rain, and fog: these seven, if moving the essence, bring harm.

Thus in nurturing life, nothing is so important as knowing the root; if one knows the root, there is no path through which illness can enter.

The essence\* is the accumulation of the *qi*: there must be a route of entry.

When it accumulates in winged birds, they fly;  
 When it accumulates in moving beasts, they run;  
 When it accumulates in pearls and jade, they gleam;  
 When it accumulates in trees, they flourish;  
 When it accumulates in the sage, he shines afar.

When the essence of *qi* comes,  
 It is raised by its lightness;  
 It runs by its motion;  
 It is valued by its beauty;  
 it is nurtured by its growth;  
 It is enlightened through wisdom.

Running water never corrupts; the hinge of a door is never infested: this is because they move. The form and *qi* are also thus. If the form does not move then the essence does not flow; if the essence does not flow then the *qi* becomes stultified.

If [stultified *qi*] is in the head,

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\*Pure essence refers to the most refined sort of *qi*, while the term “*qi*” itself here points refers to all manifestations of this force.

then the head or face swells;  
 If in the ear, one becomes hard of hearing or deaf;  
 If in the eye, one becomes cataracted or blind;  
 If in the nose, it becomes stuffed or clogged;  
 If in the belly, it becomes swollen or ill;  
 If in the foot, they become ill or lame.

Where the water is thin, there are many people who are bald or have tumors. Where the water is heavy, there are many with swollen feet or lame. Where the water is sweet there are many who are good and beautiful. Where the water is pungent, there are many with boils and sores. Where the water is bitter, there are many crookbacks and dwarfs.

In diet, one should never force abundance, and flavors should never entail strong tastes or heavy wine, for these are known as illnesses for the head. If one can be timely in one's diet, one's person will surely be free from harm. The Dao of eating includes not being famished or full: this is called the protection of the five organs. The mouth must be pleased with the flavor, it must make the essence harmonious and the bearing upright, and in this way, the *qi* will be spirit-like. The hundred joints will be content and all will move forward to receive the *qi*. When drinking, one should constrict the throat, sit upright and make no untoward motions.

Nowadays, people take divination and prayer to be of greatest importance, hence illnesses are increasingly prevalent. It is as if in archery one were to blame the target when one's arrow did not hit it. How would that improve one's shots? If you use hot water to stop water boiling it will only boil the more; remove the fire and it will cease. Shamans and doctors, poisonous drugs, using these only drives away [the spirits] or cures the [particular] ailment. The ancients viewed them cheaply; they are only the outer branches.

(*Lüshi chunqiu*, 3.2)

## The Cyclical Dao

The Dao of Heaven is cyclical, the Dao of earth is a grid work. The sage king emulates these; they are the means of setting what is above and below.

What do we mean by ‘the Dao of Heaven is cyclical?’ The pure essence and *qi* alternatively rise and fall, circulating everywhere and repeatedly intermixing, stopping in no place: hence we say that the Dao of Heaven is cyclical.

What do we mean by ‘the Dao of earth is a grid work?’ The things of the world are of different species and different forms; each type has its allotted office and these do not mutually impinge upon one another, hence we say that the Dao of earth is a grid work.

If the ruler grasps the cyclical and the ministers dwell within the grid work, with the cyclical and the grid never changing places, the state will thereupon flourish.

The cycle of day and night is the cyclical Dao; the procession of the moon through the twenty-eight lunar mansions, the house of Zhen [#28] proximate to that of Jiao [#1]: this the cyclical Dao.\* The essence proceeds through the four seasons, first rising then descending, each encountered in accord: this is the cyclical Dao. Things move and sprout up, sprouting they live, living they grow, growing they become large, growing large they mature, maturing they decline, declining they are killed, being killed they are stored up: this is the cyclical Dao.

The *qi* of clouds proceeds westward, always traveling, never ceasing summer or winter; the stream of the waters flows eastwards, never ceasing night and day, the upper reaches never exhausted, the lower reaches never full, the small streams becoming large, the heavy drops becoming light mist: this is the cyclical Dao.

The Yellow Emperor said, “The Lord has no constant place, where he is, thereupon he is not.” This describes his unobstructed movement: it is the cyclical Dao.

People have nine orifices. When one is at the focus, the other eight are vacated; if they are vacant for very long, the body withers. Hence when one responds and then listens, the responding stops; when one listens then looks, the listening stops. If we say that one of these is most pleasurable we do not want to stop long therein. To stop the successive motion is to be destroyed. This is the cyclical Dao.

The One is equal to the most honored:

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\*The twenty-eight lunar mansions are an ancient zodiac. The point here concerns the fact that the last gives way to the first, forming the eternity of a ring.

None knows its source;  
 None knows its font;  
 None knows its beginning;  
 None knows its end;  
 Yet the things of the world take it as their ancestor.  
 The sage kings emulate it  
 To complete their natures,  
 To set what is upright,  
 To issue their ordinances.

The ordinances issue from the mouths of the ruler. The officers in their offices implementing these, night and day never resting, broadly penetrating below, entering the hearts of the people, through to the four quarters, circulating and returning again to the place of the ruler: this is the cyclical Dao. When the orders circulate, the permissible and impermissible, good and not good are all unblocked [from view]. When all are unblocked, the Dao of the ruler penetrates. Hence rulers take ordinances as their destinies and the means by which worth and unworthy, security and danger are determined.

People have a form and four limbs; their ability to employ these is because they are able to be stimulated and be aware of it. If they were to be stimulated but not be aware of it, then they would not be able to employ their bodies and limbs. It is also so of ministers: if they are not stimulated by commands and ordinances they could not be employed. If they are possessed but cannot be employed, it would be better not to have them at all. A ruler should be one who employs that which he does not possess: Shun, Yu, Tang, and Wu were all such rulers.

When the former kings set up high officials, they made sure they fit a grid work. When they are a grid then their allotments are set and being set they do not conceal one another. Yao and Shun were worthy rulers, and both selected worthies to succeed them, unwilling to pass their thrones on to their sons and grandsons: this is like making sure officials fit a grid work when setting them up. The rulers of today's generation wish to pass the throne by heredity to their sons and grandsons without any break, and in setting up officials, they are unable to make them fit a grid work because they are disordered by personal desires. Why is this? What they wish is distant, and what they know is what is close.

Now, none of the five tones fails to achieve resonance because their allotments have been investigated. Each of the tones, *gong*, *zhi*, *shang*, *yu*, and *jiao*,\* occupies its place and their harmonies are evenly tuned: they never transgress upon one another, and thus there is no encroachment. The worthy rulers' appointments to office are of this nature. Each of the hundred officials occupies his

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\*The pentatonic scale included these five relative tones.

duties and orders his tasks in service to the ruler: in none of these is the ruler unsettled. If one rules a state in this way, no aspect of the state will not profit. If one guards against crises in this way, crises will have no route by means of which to arrive.

(*Lüshi chunqiu*, 3.5)

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## KEY NAMES AND TERMS

*yin and yang*

Zou Yan

the five forces

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What behavioral changes do the authors of “Exhausting One’s Number” and “The Cyclical Dao” wish to bring about?
2. How do their naturalistic theories support their prescriptions for action?
3. How “religious” are the ideas of these essays? How “scientific?”
4. How do these two essays, each in its own way, reflect the social environment of the Warring States period?

## Sources and Further Readings

The basic information about Jixia is recorded in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* and other early sources. The texts that are most often identified as examples of naturalistic trends of the fourth and third centuries B.C. are located in two compendia: *Guanzi*, which is sometimes viewed as an anthology of short philosophical and political writings by Jixia scholars themselves, and the *Lüshi chunqiu* or *Almanac of Lord Lü*, the text compiled by retainers of the great Qi statesman Lü Buwei. There is a full translation of the *Guanzi* by Allyn Rickett (Princeton: 1985, 1998; 2 vols.), and the *Lüshi chunqiu* has been translated in full by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel as *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: 2000).

Although there are a number of extended studies on Jixia in Chinese, there is none in English. However, there does exist an interesting contrarian article by a senior scholar, Nathan Sivin, that argues against the viewing Jixia as of particular importance and of naturalism as a coherent intellectual movement of the Warring States era: “The Myth of the Naturalists” (in Sivin, *Medicine, Philosophy, and Religion in Ancient China* [1995]).