

Zhou Dunyi's Supreme Polarity Diagram
(*Taijitu*)

Commentary by Zhu Xi

Translated by Joseph A. Adler
Kenyon College

Copyright © 2008 by Joseph A. Adler
NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Note: This is an unfinished draft translation, which I am placing on the web only for consultation and comment by scholars. The source text is Zhang Boxing, comp., *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* (1708), in *Zhengyi tang quanshu* (Library of Zhengyi Hall), *Baibu congshu jicheng* ed.

The Supreme Polarity Diagram

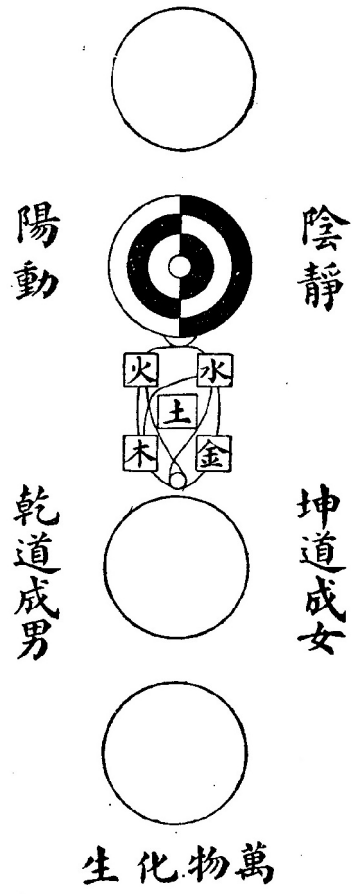
(*Taiji tu*)*

Master Zhu said: The Supreme Polarity Diagram was created by Master Lianxi.

Master Zhou's [original] name was Dunshi and his style name was Maoshu. Later, to avoid [Emperor] Yingzong's name, he changed [his own] to Dunyi. His family lived along Lian Stream (Lianxi) in Rongdao County in Daozhou. He was broadly learned and energetic in practice, and he heard the Way early. In handling affairs he was firm and determined; he had the style of a man of old. In governing he was careful to take reciprocity seriously and was fully devoted to moral principle. He created the Supreme Polarity Diagram, the *Penetrating Writing (Tongshu)*, and the *Penetration of the Yi (Yitong)*, altogether several tens of chapters. His emotions were light-hearted, his manners were exceedingly pleasant, and he especially enjoyed fine landscapes. At the base of Mt. Lu there was a stream where the master enjoyed sitting at the edge, so he called it Lian Stream (Lianxi) and built his study on its bank.

* The remarks by Zhu Xi on this page, except for the first sentence, are excerpted (by Zhang Boxing) from Zhu Xi's *Yi-Luo yuan-yuan lu* (Record of the origins of the Luoyang school). Zhu Jieren, Yan Zuozhi, Liu Yongxiang, eds., *Zhuzi quanshu* (Zhu Xi's Complete Works), 17 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), v.12:923-925.

Numbered footnotes, except where noted, are interpolated notes by Zhang Boxing.



Master Zhu's Explanation of the Diagram (*Zhuzi tu jie*)

○ This stands for "Non-polar (*wuji*) and yet Supreme Polarity (*taiji*)!" [*Taijitu shuo*], which is the fundamental substance (*benti*) by which *yang* [arises] from activity and *yin* from stillness.¹ But it is not separate from *yin* and *yang*;² it is precisely *yin* and *yang* that indicates the fundamental [substance].³ It is only for the sake of speech that it is distinguished [lit. not mixed] with *yin* and *yang*.⁴

⊕ This is the active *yang* and still *yin* of ○ [*wuji/taiji*]. The central [inner] ○ is the fundamental substance.⁵ ☵ is the activity of *yang*; the functioning of ○ is how it operates. ☷ is the stillness of *yin*; the substance of ○ is how it is established. ☵ is the basis of ☷, and the ☷ is the basis of ☵.



This is *yang* changing and *yin* combining to generate water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. This ☵ is *yang* transforming, and this ☷ is *yin* combining. Water ☵ is the flourishing of

¹ *Taiji* is *li*. *Yin-yang* is *qi*. What enables *qi* to be active and still is the *li* as master (*zai*).

² The Way (*dao*) is not separate from implements (*qi*).

³ The Way within implements.

⁴ The Way is the Way; implements are implements. Already in the above three sentences the necessity to see in terms of unity and multiplicity is clarified.

⁵ This is the *taiji* of the first paragraph.

yin;⁶ therefore it resides on the right.⁷ Fire 火 is the flourishing of *yang*;⁸ therefore it resides on the left.⁹ Wood 木 is the fragility of *yang*;¹⁰ therefore it is below fire.¹¹ Metal 金 in the fragility of *yin*;¹² therefore it is below water.¹³ Earth 土 is blended *qi*;¹⁴ therefore it resides in the center.

The connection between water and fire above by the ☵ is *yin* [water] based in *yang* [fire] and *yang* based in *yin*.

With water there is wood, with wood there is fire, with fire there is earth, with earth there is metal, and metal returns to water [liquid]. Like a beginningless circle, the five *qi* are arranged and the four seasons proceed.



"The Five Phases are simply *yin* and *yang*" [*Taijitu shuo*]; there is nothing other than

⁶ In autumn *yin* appears and in winter *yin* flourishes.

⁷ The place of north.

⁸ In spring *yang* appears and in summer *yang* flourishes.

⁹ The place of south.


¹⁰ When *yang* first appears it is fragile.

¹¹ The place of east.

¹² When *yin* first appears it is fragile.

¹³ The place of west.

¹⁴ The four [above states of] *qi* blended.

these five manifestations [of *qi*] and two actualities.¹⁵ "Yin and yang are simply the Supreme Polarity" [*Taijitu shuo*], without distinction [lit. no this and that] between essential and gross, root and branch.¹⁶ "The Supreme Polarity is fundamentally Non-polar" [*Taijitu shuo*] means that "the operation of Heaven above has neither sound nor smell."¹⁷ "In the generation of the Five Phases, each one has its nature" [*Taijitu shuo*] means that the manifestations of *qi* and the differences in its materiality each have their own ○, without borrowing [overlap].¹⁸  This is how the Non-polar, the two [*qi*], and five [phases] "mysteriously combine" [*Taijitu shuo*] without interruption.¹⁹

○ Qian is male and Kun is female; in terms of the transformations of *qi*,²⁰ each has its unique nature, yet male and female are "the one Supreme Polarity" [*Taijitu shuo*]. ○ The myriad

¹⁵ Water, fire, wood, metal, and earth each has its polarity. [The corresponding sentence in the *Taijitu shuo* is "each has its nature." So polarity (*ji*) here implies that each has a specific configuration of the yin-yang polarity.] Yin and yang together are a balanced [centered] polarity (*zhong ji*). But the polarities of the Five Phases are also the polarities of yin and yang. It is not there in the Five Phases there is something that is lacking from yin and yang.

¹⁶ "Essential" means the Supreme Polarity and "gross" means yin and yang; *li* is the root and *qi* is the branch. But while there are these differentia of essential and gross, root and branch, the reality is undifferentiated into distinctions such as this and that.

¹⁷ [Translator's note:] *Zhongyong* 33 (last line), quoting *Shijing*, no. 235. Zhu Xi quotes this is the first line of his commentary on the *Taijitu shuo*.

[Zhang:] The Way, which is above forms [metaphysical], is fundamentally cannot be spoken of in terms of named characteristics.

¹⁸ [Translator's note:] That is, each thing has its own unique nature, symbolized by the separate, non-overlapping circles of the Five Phases.

[Zhang:] The Supreme Polarity is not a non-existent thing; all things contain it. Therefore it does not depend on borrowing.

¹⁹ *Li* and *qi* blend together and mysteriously combine, and only then are able to generate the myriad things.

²⁰ Generating by receiving the natural *qi* of heaven and earth is called "the transformations of *qi*."

things transform and generate; in terms of the transformations of form,²¹ each has its own nature, yet the myriad things are "the one Supreme Polarity."²²

"Only humans receive the finest and most spiritually efficacious [*qi*]" [*Taijitu shuo*]; what is meant by "human" lies simply in this. Thus form is the character of ☵.²³ and spirit is the expression of ☱;²⁴ the fivefold nature is the virtues of ☷,²⁵ good and evil is the distinction of male and female;²⁶ and myriad events are the images of the myriad things.²⁷ This is how the activity of Heaven puts in order the interactive process,²⁸ and what good fortune and misfortune, repentance and regret, follow in life.²⁹

Only the Sage receives the refined, undivided essence³⁰ and is able to complete the

²¹ In the human world, things are generated when they receive the *qi* of heaven and earth and then interact and stimulate each other; this is called "the transformations of form."

²² Up to this point the discussion analyzes the substance of the Diagram. From here on it fully extends the ideas based on the Diagram.

²³ Receiving the Supreme Polarity and the *qi* of *yin* stillness.

²⁴ Receiving the Supreme Polarity and the *qi* of *yang* activity.

²⁵ Receiving the Supreme Polarity and the *li* of the Five Phases.

²⁶ *Yang* is good, *yin* is evil.

²⁷ Heaven's ability to transform and generate things, humans' ability to differentiate the myriad events.

²⁸ Physical nature [per se] is unordered; moral nature is ... mixed.

²⁹ In following with *li* there is good fortune; in going against *li* there is misfortune. Repentance comes from bad fortune and hastens good fortune. Regret comes from good fortune and tends toward misfortune.

³⁰ The Sage receives the finest, purest, unmixed, most unified, and undivided [portion] of the two *qi* and Five Phases that Heaven produces. This is what makes him unique among humans.

substance and function of ☯ [wuji/taiji].³¹ In this way, the alternation of activity and stillness reaches its peak (*ji*),³² and all situations under Heaven stimulate and respond (*gantong*) to the centrality of the still and unmoving (*jiran budong*).³³

Now, centrality³⁴ is humanity.³⁵ Stimulation³⁶ is represented by the ☰,³⁷ and the function of ☯ is how it operates.³⁸ Correctness³⁹ is rightness.⁴⁰ Silence⁴¹ is represented by the ☷,⁴² and the substance of ☯ is how it is established.⁴³ Centrality and correctness, humanity and rightness,

³¹ All humans embody the principle of activity and stillness. The Sage completes the virtue of activity and stillness.

³² Following with *yin* and *yang* accords with the natural order (*tianli*).

³³ In the nature of ordinary people, the physical endowment is unbalanced and impure, so they cannot overcome errors. The nature of the Sage is clear and unified, enabling him to quietly stimulate the myriad affairs without obstruction.

³⁴ Centrality is ritual propriety, correlated with fire.

³⁵ Humanity is correlated with wood.

³⁶ Wood and humanity in terms of the seasons are spring. Fire and ritual propriety in terms of the seasons are summer. Spring and summer are the time of the growth and flowing of the creative process. Humanity and ritual propriety are the human mind's mechanism for displaying *li* through stimulation.

³⁷ Following the pattern of *yang*'s activity.

³⁸ Spreading out is the function.

³⁹ Correctness is wisdom, correlated with water.


⁴⁰ Rightness is correlated with metal.

⁴¹ Metal and rightness in terms of the seasons are autumn. Water and wisdom in terms of the seasons are winter. Autumn and winter are the time of gathering and storing in the creative process. Rightness and wisdom are the human mind's system for nourishing *li* through silence.


⁴² Following the pattern of *yin*'s stillness.

⁴³ Harvesting and storing is the substance.

are the pure, complete substance,⁴⁴ yet stillness is always the master of it.⁴⁵

So the human ○ is established in this way,⁴⁶ and  heaven and earth, the sun and

moon, the four seasons, ghosts and spirits cannot oppose it.⁴⁷ The superior person's caution and fearfulness is how he cultivates this and has good fortune.⁴⁸ The petty person's recklessness and depravity is how he perverts this and has misfortune.⁴⁹

The Ways of Heaven, earth, and humans are each the one ○. *Yang* [Heaven], firmness [earth], and humanity [humans], represented by , are the origin of things.⁵⁰ *Yin*, the yielding,

⁴⁴ Although centrality and humanity are correlated with active functioning, and correctness and rightness are correlated with still substance, nevertheless the four are all the virtues of the nature and are thoroughly contained within the Sage's complete substance.

⁴⁵ Ordinary people, due to the injury to their natures caused by feelings and desires, often act deficiently. The Sage maintains the centrality of the unmanifest [nature] in the harmony of his manifest [activity], and therefore always makes stillness the master.

⁴⁶ "Cultivating the Way is called education" (*Zhongyong* 1).

⁴⁷ Heaven and earth, the sun, moon, and four seasons, ghosts and spirits have nothing that is not the two [modes of *qi*] and the five [phases] mysteriously combining and constituting [things]. The Sage completes the substance and function of the Supreme Polarity, and so throughout the universe what can oppose it? The *Zhongyong*'s statement, "Heaven and earth are established, the myriad things are nourished," is correct (*Zhongyong* 2). This is the moral order (*daoli*).

⁴⁸ This is learning how to know what is beneficial and to put it into effect to serve the functioning of one's material endowment. The elementary learner questions this, but the achievement is great. This is how one can cultivate oneself and have good fortune.

⁴⁹ Under stimulation by things the desires act up and one does not understand moderation. Then the human desires become reckless and the natural order (*tianli*) is extinguished. This is how one perverts oneself and has bad fortune.

⁵⁰ "Non-polar and yet Supreme Polarity!" (*Taijitu shuo*).

and rightness, represented by ☵, are the end of things.⁵¹ This is what is meant by change, and the Way of the three ultimates (Heaven, earth, humans) is established therein. In reality there is just one ○.⁵² Thus, "In change there is the Supreme Polarity" is the meaning of ☯.⁵³

⁵¹ "Supreme Polarity is fundamentally non-polar" (ibid).

⁵² The myriad principles are none other than one principle.

⁵³ The Supreme Polarity is nothing other than *yin* and *yang*.