CHAPTER FOUR

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED IN DONG ZHONGSHU’S WRITINGS

The extent to which it may be claimed that Dong Zhongshu introduced new modes of thought, affected existing institutions or left a heritage for his successors may be judged only in relation to the views and practices currently in vogue at the time when he was writing, and the part taken by his contemporaries when addressing the same issues. It need hardly be said that full information with which to conduct such a study is not available. Readers who wish to avoid a detailed examination of the questions considered here may wish to turn to the summary at the end of the chapter.

The explanations of abnormalities

The sources upon which Ban Zhao 班昭 (48–?116), or any other compiler, drew for including the views of Dong Zhongshu, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE), Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE), or passages from the Jing Fang yi zhuan 京房易傳 in HS 27 ‘Wu xing zhi’ 五行志 cannot be named, and it can only be presumed that these were records which were available in the depository of official documents in Luoyang.1 Altogether the chapter includes seventy-four citations of, or references to, the explanations that Dong put forward for events such as fires, droughts or eclipses. In thirty-five of these they are coupled with those of Liu Xiang, or stated to be in agreement with his pronouncements. In fourteen he explains disasters or abnormalities as being due

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1 Citations from the Jing Fang yi zhuan, presumably the work of Jing Fang the Younger who was executed in 37 BCE, are to be distinguished from the surviving Jing Fang yi zhuan, or Jing shi 晁氏 yi zhuan that is included in the Han Wei congshu, and which is in all probability not authentic (see note 31 below). The citations in HS 27, which sometimes name a hexagram or call directly on the Zhou yi, are applied to events of pre-imperial and Han times, and to years after Jing Fang’s death. They could thus not derive from a compilation of Jing Fang’s interpretations of abnormal events, such as the one which Dong Zhongshu wrote, at least in draft (SJ 121, p. 3128 shu zai yi zhi ji 著災異之記; HS 56, p. 2524 gao 裳) but presumably came from a work on the sixty-four hexagrams, from which the compiler of HS 27 drew selections.
to heaven’s warnings, with the formula Tian jie ruo yue 天戒若曰. He does not allude to the willingness of heaven to reward good deeds, as had been expressed by at least one of his contemporaries, Jia Shan 賈山.²

Except for the explanation of the fires that broke out in Gaozu’s shrine in Liaodong and near to his tomb at Changling 長陵 in 135 BCE, all citations of Dong’s interpretations refer to incidents of Chunqiu times. As seen above the biography of Dong in the Han shu relates how he had written a draft of his views on these two events; how it had been criticised as absurd, and how its delivery to the throne had all but cost Dong his life.³ The biography also states that thereafter he did not dare to express any opinions on abnormalities. That HS 27 includes entries for twenty incidents that occurred between 129 and 91 and twelve eclipses between 139 and 101 with no comments by Dong perhaps lends support to this statement. In these circumstances, it would at first sight seem to be unlikely that Dong’s draft, or a text substituted in its place by Zhufu Yan 主父偃, would have been retained in the imperial archives and made available for Ban Gu or others to consult in Luoyang, some two centuries later.

Han shu chapter 6⁴ records that there were two outbreaks of fire—one in the shrine dedicated to Gaozu in Liaodong 遼東, on the day Yiwei 乙未 of the second month (9 March 135),⁵ and one in the Chamber of Rest (bian dian 便殿) in the park that surrounded his tomb, lying to the north of Chang’an, on the day Renzi 孟子 of the fourth month (25 May 135). According to the biography in the Han shu⁶ the fires took place and Dong’s opinion was brought to the notice of the throne before his demotion to be Counsellor of the Palace (Zhong dafu 中大夫). As observed above, it would make good sense that that demotion indeed followed the disclosure of his draft and took the place of the death penalty from which he had been reprieved. For this

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² HS 51, p. 2335.
³ Chapter Two above, pp. 46, 48.
⁴ HS 6, p. 159, HSBZ 6.3b.
⁵ HS 27A, p. 1331 incorrectly dates this, out of sequence, on Dingyou 丁酉, sixth month, 9 July 135; Qian Han ji 10.9b reads Yiwei third month, again incorrectly as no day identified as Yiwei existed in that month. Zizhi tongjian 17, p. 567 follows HS 6.
⁶ HS 56, p. 2524.