

## Cosmic Resonance Theory

The concept of *ganying* (literally "stimulus-response," and hereafter referred to as "cosmic resonance"), is an ancient and unique element of Chinese cosmology and natural philosophy. In its barest essence cosmic resonance is a theory of simultaneous, non-linear causality. It posits that events taking place at the same time, but separated in space, may exert a subtle effect on one another. For example, a chess game going on in a house and a softball game being played at the same time in the street just outside might be portrayed as influencing one another's outcome (e.g. the team in black uniforms scoring a run whenever a white piece was taken), even though none of the respective participants had any knowledge of or contact with one another. It would not matter if we put our chess players in a sound proof, windowless room or removed the baseball game to the next county, state, or continent, since such contingencies have no effect on the operation of cosmic resonance. To a believer, there is nothing mysterious about these effects, although they occur invisibly; cosmic resonance explains them as fundamental workings of the universe.

### Basic Cosmic Resonance Theory

A theory of cosmic resonance was first explicitly articulated in a work of Chinese philosophy in the third century B.C. The earliest example we have of such a work is the *Lüshi chunqiu*, an encyclopedic text commissioned by the prime minister of the state of Qin (the kingdom that would eventually unify China in 221 B.C. and found a dynasty of the same name) and published in 240 B.C. Following a century after the *Lüshi chunqiu* and closely related to it in content is the *Huainanzi*. Both texts have been fully translated into English.<sup>1</sup> The *Huainanzi* was another encyclopedic work commissioned by the imperial prince Liu An (179-122

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<sup>1</sup> For the *Lüshi chunqiu* see: John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, trs. *The Annals of Lü Buwei*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. For the *Huainanzi* see: John Major, Sarah Queen, Andrew Meyer, and Harold Roth, trs. *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

B.C.) and presented to the court of the Han Emperor Wudi (r. 141-87 B.C.) in 139 B.C. One significant historical development in the time elapsed between the compilation of the two texts is that the concept of cosmic resonance had grown in status from a novel but intriguing idea to become the central and distinctive hallmark of Han dynasty (206 B.C.--220 A.D.) thought. By the time of the writing of the *Huainanzi*, the validity of cosmic resonance theory had been accepted by most major intellectuals of the day and was featured centrally in the works of writers across the philosophical and political spectrum. No challenge to the universal acceptance of cosmic resonance would be registered until the writings of the philosopher Wang Chong (A.D. 27-97), and even his work was not well received until more than a century after his death. I will quote from the *Lüshi chunqiu* and *Huainanzi* interchangeably, as both share a single approach to the concept of cosmic resonance and together provide a full picture of the theory as it was first articulated.

A succinct description of the manifestations of cosmic resonance is contained in Chapter Nine of the *Lüshi chunqiu*:

When the magnet seeks iron, something pulls it, when trees planted close together [lean] apart, something pushes them. When the sage faces south and stands with a mind bent on loving and benefiting the people, and before his orders have been issued, the [people of the world] all crane their necks and stand on tip-toe; it is because he has communicated with the people via the Vital Essence. If a criminal is about to harm a person, that person will also be this way. If now an attacker sharpens his weapons, wears lewd clothes, and eats fine food, in anticipation of the day [he will attack], those he will attack will feel uneasy. It is not that someone has told them; the "Spirit" has reported to them in advance. If a person is in Qin, and someone he loves dies in Qi, his feelings will be upset, there has been a coming and going of Vital Essence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Lüshi chunqiu* 9.5/46/19-24. (ICS Concordance Series, D.C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching, eds. Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1994).

This passage lays out the most basic principles of cosmic resonance. The examples presented are on a par with the hypothetical chess game-baseball game interaction described above. Events and things separated in space, with no observable linear causal connection to one another, are assumed to have an invisible, instantaneous influence on one another. We have since developed scientific explanations for the first two examples (the magnetism of the iron and the tendency of plants to grow towards sunlight) that do not contradict the principle of linear causality. Yet one can appreciate how, in the absence of modern science, these phenomena would be seized upon as examples of cosmic resonance. The fact that both of these processes are readily observable in nature demonstrates an aspect of cosmic resonance theory as it was understood by its advocates: it was not conceived of as a magical or supernatural force, but as a mundane aspect of the natural movements of the universe.

The basic mechanics of cosmic resonance are outlined at the conclusion of the passage. Speaking of the examples of what we would call ESP, the author qualifies that "it is not that someone has told them, the 'Spirit' has reported to them in advance," and "there has been a coming and going of Vital Essence." The meaning of these statements is at first glance opaque. What does the author intend by contrasting being "told" by someone with receiving an advance report from "the Spirit?" Though seemingly obscure, these phrases are essential to understanding the mechanism at the heart of cosmic resonance theory.

"Vital Essence," mentioned twice above, is a translation of the Chinese term *jing* 精. Vital Essence is the most highly refined form of *qi* 氣, the primordial substance (literally "breath" or "air") which constitutes all phenomena in the universe. In various states of coarseness or refinement, *qi* composes all objects in the world and fills all the spaces between them. Everything was assumed to be *qi* in some form, from eminently tangible objects like rocks and logs to more rarefied phenomena like light and heat. In its coarser forms, *qi* coalesces to form our flesh,

blood, and bones. As Vital Essence, it is the vitalizing energy that suffuses and animates our bodies (thus separating us from corpses and inanimate objects).<sup>3</sup>

The term "Vital Essence" is intimately related to another term appearing in the above passage: "Spirit." Spirit is the English equivalent of *shen* 神, a Chinese word with a long history and broad range of meaning. In some contexts, Spirit does literally refer to a spirit, god, or ghost. With reference to the individual human mind and physiology, however, Spirit denotes the entity within the body that is responsible for consciousness. According to the understanding of the ancient Chinese, this entity was (like the body that it animated) also made of *qi*, yet in its most highly refined form--the Vital Essence. The key to understanding cosmic resonance was its correlation with both Vital Essence and consciousness.

Our thoughts, feelings, and sense-perceptions are conceived of as movements of the Vital Essence, which constitutes the Spirit, in response to events we encounter in the world. The infinitely sensitive responsiveness and seemingly instantaneous activation of our thoughts and feelings are attributed to the native properties of the Vital Essence. Cosmic resonance, like consciousness, is an emergent phenomenon resulting from the dynamic properties of *qi*.

The resonance which transpires between objects across space is a movement of *qi* analogous to that which takes place within our mind: it is "a coming and going of Vital Essence." The *qi* or Vital Essence which fills all space conducts sympathetic vibrations between objects. The aptness of this image of "sympathetic vibrations" is illustrated by an experimentally verifiable example that cosmic resonance theorists advanced in support of their ideas:

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<sup>3</sup> Vital Essence is not limited to humanity. Human vitality and consciousness are merely two of the more important consequences of its activities. Vital Essence, the most rarefied and quintessential form of *qi*, was thought to pervade the universe, occasionally coalescing within objects and giving rise to marvelous properties. The vitality of animals was also attributed to Vital Essence, as was the growth of plants and trees and the luster of jade. See *Lüshi chunqiu* 3.2/13/3-5. .

Now when a person who tunes a se

Plays [the note] *gong*, [another] *gong* string responds;

When he plucks a *jue* [string], [another] *jue* responds.<sup>4</sup>

Musical resonance of this type was cited time and again as the prototypical example of cosmic resonance, and this image of two lute strings attuned to one another, vibrating in sympathy, is central to all models of cosmic resonance theory. The speed of the interaction between strings (the speed of sound--too fast for the human ear to notice a significant time-lapse) confirmed ancient theorists' assumptions about cosmic resonance. Because its medium was the Vital Essence, the same quintessential *qi* which constituted our Spirit and thoughts, cosmic resonance was assumed to transpire at the speed of thought (in other words, to require no time whatsoever).

The word "Spirit" (*shen*) was often used adjectivally to describe just this aspect of cosmic resonance: "Spirit-like," it could transverse any expanse of space in the time it took a thought to arise in the mind. This explains the seemingly puzzling contrast noted above, between being "told" by someone and reported to by the Spirit. The author intends us to understand the "report" of the Spirit to be an instance of cosmic resonance. The Spirit, being itself made of quintessential *qi*, receives and responds to vibrations arising from other objects or people and carried by the Vital Essence. It is important to note that within this model the human mind (denoted by the Spirit) is not conceived of as transcending the physical world, but rather is composed of the same "psycho-physical stuff" (that is, *qi*) as the rest of the universe. Human consciousness is thus implicit in and susceptible to the same processes of cosmic resonance that affect trees, iron, magnets, and lute strings. This is exemplified by the wordless communication that passes between a thief and his intended victim and a sage ruler and his grateful subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> Major, et. al., page 220. *Huainanzi* 6/51/18 (ICS Concordance Series, D.C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching, eds. Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1992).

## Yin-yang and Five Phases Cosmology: The Rules of the Dance

We have noted the most essential aspects of cosmic resonance theory as it was articulated by its earliest advocates in the second and third centuries B.C.E. In order to develop practical applications for the theory, early Chinese philosophers articulated a larger systematic context in which the forces of cosmic resonance operated. The *Huainanzi* describes the first building-block of this larger context:

That things in their [various] categories are mutually responsive is [something] dark, mysterious, deep and subtle.

Knowledge is not capable of assessing it;  
argument is not capable of explaining it.

Thus,

when the east wind arrives, win turns clear and overflows [its vessels];

when silkworms secrete fragmented silk, the *shang* string [of a stringed instrument] snaps.

Something has stimulated them.

When a picture is traced out with the ashes of reeds, the moon's halo has a [corresponding] gap.

When the leviathan dies, comets appear.

Something has moved them.

Thus, when a sage occupies the throne, he embraces the Way and does not speak, and his nurturance reaches the myriad people. But when ruler and ministers [harbor] distrust in their hearts, back-to-back arcs appear in the sky. The mutual responses of *qi* are subtle indeed!

Thus,

mountain clouds are like grassy hummocks;

river clouds are like fish scales;

dryland clouds are like smoky fire;

cataract clouds are like billowing water.

All resemble their forms and evoke responses according to their classes.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to discern whether the ironic tone of this passage is intentional or not. The authors begin by declaring that cosmic resonance is beyond the capacity of either knowledge or language, then proceed to articulate a general principle whereby it can be understood. This principle comes at the end, after the long list of examples: "All resemble their forms and evoke responses according to their classes." The operations of cosmic resonance are not random, they are rule-based. They occur in accord with certain distinctive affinities that exist between objects, and there are criteria ("shapes" and "categories") according to which these affinities can be observed and identified.

We have already seen this principle at work in the most general sense, among the examples of cosmic resonance provided in the passages quoted thus far. Human relationships are the most obvious form of affinity between "objects" consistently acknowledged as significant by cosmic resonance theorists. It is for this reason that the death of a loved one far away produces cosmic resonance, as does the concern of a virtuous ruler for his subjects. "Shape" is another type of obvious affinity guiding cosmic resonance, as in the case of the moon traced in ashes and the image of the moon in the sky. The notion of "category," however, suggests a more systematic method of determining sympathetic links between objects that would not be otherwise obvious. The *Lüshi chunqiu* and *Huainanzi* do, in fact, describe just such a system of categories--those of yin and yang and the five phases of *qi*.

Yin and yang are two concepts with which English-language readers have become generally familiar. In general, they refer to the two opposed and complementary forces that pervade the cosmos and that give rise to the myriad bipolar oppositions in the world: soft and hard, dark and bright, male and female,

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<sup>5</sup> Major, et. al., pages 216-217; *Huainanzi* 6/50/14-17.

etc. In the technical vocabulary of cosmic resonance theory, yin and yang represent two states or polarities of *qi*, one passive and yielding, the other active and dynamic. *Qi* was conceived of as constantly in dynamic flux between these polar extremes. Any body of *qi* normally consisted of some in the yin-state and some in the yang-state. Ideally the amounts of *qi* in both states should be balanced. Usually one state predominated over the other. Only very rarely and for brief duration would anything consist of either pure yin or pure yang.

Beyond yin and yang, *qi* can be classed into five "phases" (*wu xing*) or modes into which it coalesces to form the building blocks of everyday matter. The five phases are fire, water, earth, metal, and wood. They were thought to be locked into a dynamic cycle analogous to the fluctuation between the poles of yin and yang. This was called the "succession cycle of the five phases", within which each prevailing phase emerged from the decay and destruction of the phase preceding it. Fire succeeded to Wood, Earth succeeded to Fire, Metal succeeded to Earth, and Water succeeded to Metal. These seven--yin, yang, fire, water, earth, metal, and wood--are thus the basic categories into which all the phenomena in the universe may be classified. Two things that share the same category (for example: two items which are composed primarily of metal *qi*) are considered to be sympathetically linked within the field of cosmic resonance.

The phenomenon to which these various categories were most often correlated was time. Any block of time could be analyzed into segments corresponding either to yin and yang or the five phases of *qi*. The easiest illustrative example is the calendar year. With respect to yin and yang, the year is divided into segments marked by the solstices and equinoxes. The winter solstice is the point of fullest yin, when yang has just been reborn in the frozen land. From this point onward, yin begins to decline and yang to increase. At the spring equinox, yin and yang are in perfect balance. The process continues until the summer solstice, when yang is at its highest point and yin at its nadir. Thereafter



yang declines and yin increases, continuing until the winter solstice when the cycle begins again.

A similar cycle transpires over the calendar year with respect to the five phases. In the first month of the year (which usually begins some time in the solar month of February), the power of Wood is prevalent. This continues until the fourth month, when Fire succeeds Wood. The sixth month is ruled by Earth. The seventh, eighth, and ninth months are ruled by Metal. The tenth, eleventh, and twelfth months are ruled by Water.

Not only periods of time but all other phenomena--sense perceptions, colors, musical notes, heavenly bodies, human artifacts--were susceptible to categorization within the system of yin and yang and the five phases of qi. One hallmark shared by both the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi* (which also found its way into the Confucian classical text, the Book of Rites) is a treatise analyzing the calendar year into its five-phase periods and prescribing which items, tasks, colors and modes of dress, and ritual observance were categorically appropriate to each.

In describing the rules appropriate to the first month of the calendar year, the Huainanzi informs us:

The fullness of Potency is in Wood. Its beasts are [those of the] scaly [class]. Its [pentatonic] note is *jue*. The pitch pipe [of the first month] is Great Budding. The number [of spring] is eight. Its flavor is sour. Its smell is rank. Its sacrifices are made to the door-god. From the body of the sacrificial victim, the spleen is offered first.

The east wind dispels the cold. Hibernating creatures begin to stir and revive. Fish rise and [rub their] backs [against] the ice. Otters sacrifice fish. Look for the geese [to return] north. The Son of Heaven wears blue-green clothing. He mounts [a carriage drawn by] azure

dragon [horses]. He wears azure jade [pendants] and flies a blue-green banner.<sup>6</sup>

The prime category established at the beginning of the passage is the power of Wood (the prevailing phase of *qi*), from which all of the succeeding categories and rules follow. For example: the anatomy was analyzed into five "orbs" or systems, each one centered on a specific organ that was in turn associated with one of the five phases of *qi*. The spleen was the focal organ of the orb correlated with Wood, thus in the first month the spleen is the first organ offered from a sacrificial victim. In like fashion, because blue-green is the one of the five colors associated with Wood, the emperor wears blue-green clothing and uses blue-green equipment.

The justification and operative principle of this entire complex of correlations and categorizations is the theory of cosmic resonance. By following the rules of resonant affinity between objects, the ruler as pictured in the "Treatise on Seasonal Rules" brings about harmony within his kingdom by sending positive resonant vibrations out into the cosmos. This point is made explicitly within the text of the Treatise itself, although it is made in negative, alarmist terms. At the end of the list of rules and regulations for each month, the *Huainanzi* includes a warning of what will transpire if the rules are broken:

If during the first month of spring the ordinances of summer were carried out, then there would be unseasonable winds and rain; plants and trees would wither early, and there would be fear in the state. If the ordinances of autumn were carried out, the people would suffer epidemics; violent winds and torrential rains would arrive at the same time; and thorns, weeds, briars and overgrowth would spring up together. If the ordinances of winter were carried out, floods would create ruin; and there

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<sup>6</sup> Major, et. al, pages 182-183; *Huainanzi* 5/39/3-5.

would be rain frost and great hailstones. The first-sown seeds would not sprout.<sup>7</sup>

These negative consequences, like the positive benefits that accrue from following the rules, are the result of cosmic resonance. Within the universe described in these early texts, all things, people, and events are interconnected by a web of resonant affinities. Every action has consequences surpassing its visible, linear effects in the here and now. No one thing may remain isolated--everything constantly exchanges resonant influences with the situation unfolding around it.

The finer details of the elaborate system articulated in the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Huainanzi* declined in influence over time. Few rulers after the Han attempted to model their court observances entirely upon the "Treatise on the Seasonal Rules." However, aspects of yin-yang and five phases cosmology continued to be influential and remain so to this day. Most importantly, the basic idea of a resonant cosmos never ceased to be persuasive and compelling to Chinese intellectuals, and its associated practices continue to be important in popular activity.

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<sup>7</sup> Major, et. al., page 183; *Huainanzi* 5/39/13-14.