HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 3: Mozi and Logic
Section 2: The Clash of Traditional Mores and Utilitarianism (Western & Chinese)

- Mozi's utility proposal is a proposal to reform how we use the term 'moral' 義 *yi*[moral]

- Mozi's conception of morality looks like Western utilitarianism, with its consequentialist focus: we pick a guiding 道*dào*[way] based on future consequences

- Unlike familiar Western utilitarianism, however, Mozi's core concept is concrete material 利 *li*[benefit] --a symbol of stalks of grain and of blade → harvest.

- By contrast, utilitarianism in the west tended to emphasize subjective states, e.g., pleasure or happiness and their opposites. As a consequence, Mozi can emphasize more the operational (empirical) measurement of benefit. The West, here, tends to focused on the immediacy and privacy of the balance of pleasure over pain

- This recalls our original contrast between a sociological focus (Chinese) versus a psychological focus (Western)

- Contrast the measurement job facing Mozi - how many crops in total - versus the Western utilitarian puzzle of how you measure the pleasure-pain balance among separate individuals

- The focus on crops becomes a metaphor for all the measurable, material benefits that may result from a scheme of social organization.

- Mozi is not blanket anti-war; he opposes attacking but advocates and specializes in defensive warfare. A state may defend itself against an aggressive war.

- Mozi's anti-music stance does not seem to be about whistling to oneself as you work in the field.
- It's more plausible target is the elaborate Confucian music, chanting, ritual and acrobatic performances that waste beneficial public resources for entertainment of the elite.
    - (The character 樂 lèentertainment:music has two pronunciations in modern dialects—yuè (Cantonese ngôk) for music and lè (Cantonese lôk) for enjoyments.
- This signals another distinction between Mozi's 天 *tian*[nature:sky] from Indo-European & Semitic anthropomorphic gods
    - 天 *Tiān's*[nature:sky's] favoring or being concerned for universal benefit describes 天 *tiān's*[nature:sky's] bias in natural consequential behavior, raining down disaster or prosperity and peace but without stressing subjective, inner states at which it aims.
    - The reliability of 天 *tian's*[nature:sky's] bias means our according with natural *dào*s or 義*yi*[morality] consistently produces material benefit.
    - Mozi's moral factor: *human* benefit. Mozi does not clearly give a separate argument for the *human* point of view.
    - While Mozi could fairly read 天 *tian*[nature:sky] as biased towards *benefit*, his evidence (the adaptation familiar in evolution interpreted as an *inclination* of nature) should similarly entail a bias towards benefit (survival) for all forms of existing life
    - We count Mozi as a form of utilitarianism because he shares the Western utilitarian's appeal to the utility for *all* human beings

- In the West, utilitarianism has two formal foci: One focus is on the act. We compute the utility of each particular act. The other familiar focus is on the rule or law. We compute the utility of all following a rule or law
    - We call the first *act utilitarianism* (AU) and the second *rule utilitarianism* (RU). Following this usage, we could call Mozi's version social dào utilitarianism
- Mozi's focus is on a social *dào* - the entire network of role-based conventional social practices that guides our shared performative behavior
- We should choose a social *dào* that results in material benefit for everyone
- Mozi treats this as using the 辯 *biàn*[distinction] between 利*lì*[benefit] and 害*hài*[harm] to make the distinction of 是非*shì-fēi*[this-not that]
- This distinction comes from nature, not transmission of an arbitrary convention; we do not have to be taught to prefer benefit.
- To call a 禮*lǐ*[ritual]–like tradition 義 *yì*[moral] is to say that it is endorsed by the natural standard arising from distinguishing benefit from harm
- When you choose a reformed tradition over the unreformed one, you are making a *this*, not *that* (是 *shì*[right] not 非 *fēi*[wrong]) judgment that entails making all the this-not that judgments arising from the guidance of the reformed social practice or tradition
- For Mozi, the *utilitarian* standard is a way to reform *traditional,* conventional practices. This produces a clash of the reformed and the traditional judgments.

- In the West, we can explain the clash with examples like premarital sex and victimless crimes
    - It feels good therefore it is a ‘pleasure’ and we have a duty to choose pleasure over pain
    - But the traditionalist does not accept the implication that having more premarital sex makes you *more moral.*
    - Western utilitarianism takes the traditional form of a moral law implying a moral duty
- Mozi’s focus is on choosing a path that maximizes material benefit or well-being
- His target is not familiar Western concerns, but those of his day and age—the elaborate burial ceremonies and other costly forms of ritual entertainment that constitute the routine activity (and employment) of traditional Confucian hangers-on.