

“Empire” in the Classical Era in China (304 BC–AD 316)

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Empire exists because it can; it will find justifications for itself when they are needed. This essay focuses on materials drawn from three discrete eras in the “classical period” of China – roughly the third century BC through the third century AD – materials whose reflections upon the closest Chinese equivalents to “empire” do not precisely correspond to one another, let alone to the *imperium* under Rome.¹ Works of the late third and early second-century, anticipating the benefits of unified rule in the Central States (Zhongguo 中國) – standardization of weights, measures, coinage, and penal laws; co-ordination of vast public works projects, especially waterworks and road construction; and, above all, enforcement of a lasting peace – seek mainly to strengthen the arguments for unitary rule under a wise leader whom the people regard as “father and mother.” Works composed ca. 100 BC, a century or so after unification by Qin in 221 BC, take for granted the superiority of unified rule over all rival forms of government, even as they bear witness to the catastrophic consequences of despotic acts carried out on an ever-grander scale. By contrast, the classicizing constructs from the closing decades of Western Han and the opening decades of Eastern Han (AD 25–220) focus on supernatural precedents and “proofs” for the legitimacy of the Han ruling house at the precise historical moment when serious questions were being asked in the court and in the outlying provinces about the benefits of unified rule.

Of necessity, this essay analyzes only core samples drawn from the corpus of received and excavated writings inherited from the classical era, for nearly all the extant literature in classical Chinese reflects, in some way or another, upon the contemporary political situation. The advantages of extracting three sample cores from the bedrock of the classical era may become apparent in the following pages. As two samples drilled a few feet apart into actual bedrock will almost certainly produce two different pictures of the stratum, reliance on the sample core method of history serves to remind us of the severe limitations on the analyses produced by extrapolation from the evidence in hand, particularly when the extant corpus represents such a minute fraction of the writings once available. The conceit of the sample core becomes valuable to the extent that it intentionally denies readers – as well as writers – the luxury of a single, sweeping narrative, for the historian’s task is to present the evidence in a way that does not assume that the distant past is known in advance.² The core precludes the author’s positing grand historical processes

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1 This essay uses “China” to refer to the landmass roughly corresponding to the present-day People’s Republic of China, minus some of the Autonomous Regions. As the inhabitants of this landmass were by no means ethnically identical with the present majority population of the PRC, the (confusingly) called “Han Chinese,” the essay reserves the term “Chinese” for the writing system employed there continuously since ca. 1300 BC. This essay, as stated above, defines the “classical period” in China as the late fourth century BC to the early fourth century AD.

2 Cf. Bagley, “Shang Archaeology,” *The Cambridge History of Ancient China. From the origins of civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) [hereafter CHAC], 125.

based on a paltry handful of sources, forgetting that “the diversities between the different parts of the land, the degrees of intellectual advancement, and the extent of independent artistic creation are often too wide to permit more than the formulation of certain questions”³ – rather than broad generalizations. At this remove, the written sample cores seem to register an initial exhilaration at the radically expanded reach of unified rule, which quickly prompted a much more marked ambivalence about the concentration of powers at center. Classicizing language was then constructed that conveyed a preference for the “old” and “tried and true” methods of governance associated with Zhou rule, and such language justified, even when it did not absolutely champion, a dramatically reduced role for the Eastern Han rulers.⁴ But whether this gradual shift in rhetoric reflected actual changes in the historical situation – that is a hypothesis that remains to be tested, not a fact already ascertained.⁵

On firmer ground, we note that the early texts mined for the “data” now organized under the rubrics of myth, history, and philosophy were originally fashioned to persuade those in power of the “proper Way” (*dao* 道) to address contemporary problems, with the result that a portrait of the Han founder written a hundred years after his death, to cite but one example, is likely to tell us a great deal more about perceptions in 100 BC than about events of 200 BC. Well-worn tropes might contrast the “good ol’ days” with the more decadent present, but such tropes were standard *façons de parler* long before the Han.⁶ Quasi-historical reconstructions were practically required in late Western and Eastern Han, when court convention mandated that all critiques of the ruling house be delivered through “indirect remonstrance” (*jeng* 諷), which allowed critic and ruler alike a kind of plausible deniability.⁷ (Nonetheless, many advisors, Liu An, Dong Zhongshu, and Gan Zhongke among them, had the temerity to suggest that the grasp of the ruling house on the reins of power was weakening.) More importantly, the past is rarely mentioned for its own sake in the writings sampled here, nor do the early writings invariably claim a sort of privileged access to eras far distant in time from their own. Indeed, it is not entirely certain in all of these writings that the past was conceived of as a period wildly at variance with the present.⁸ Typically, writings that speak of the past (*gu* 古) seek a “useable past” whose account can be made to support persuasive alternatives to the failures of present rule. The modern propensity, nonetheless, to read in Han constructions of the past the reliable “traces” of much earlier eras – a determination fanned by nationalists

3 Michael Loewe, “China’s Sense of Unity as Seen in the Early Empires,” *T’oung Pao* 70 (1994), 7.

4 The subject of Michael Puett’s book, *Ambivalence and Creation. Debates concerning innovation and artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), is the supposed tension between newness and oldness. In arguing simply that the tension was never entirely resolved (what human dilemma ever is?), Puett fails to give us much sense of changes over time.

5 People have hazarded this as the primary reason why Liu Xiang’s edited versions are called “new books,” but see the more sophisticated analysis in Marc Kalinowski, “La Production des Manuscrits dans la Chine Ancienne,” *AS/EA* 59.1 (2005), 131–168.

6 Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, “Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China,” *T’oung Pao* 89.1–3 (2003), 59–99.

7 On the importance of “indirect remonstrance,” see, e.g., Liu Xiang 劉向, *Shuiyuan* 說苑 (Sibu beiyao ed.) [hereafter SY], chap. 9, “Zheng jian” 正諫 (Upright Remonstrance).

8 Cf. the remarks of Harold Bloom, Introduction to *Henry IV, Part I* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), xxvii, “To the Elizabethans, life centuries ago was more or less the same as life in their own era: Cleopatra plays billiards, a clock strikes three in *Julius Caesar* and cannons thunder in *King John*.”

wishing to locate “unbroken continuities” in China through the archaeological record – hinders research today, insofar as it highlights parts of the accumulated record that are serviceable while consigning the rest to oblivion.⁹

Though many classical sources lacked true historicity, the potential of historical events and agents to eventually “reveal their own evaluation” was presumed before unification under Qin in 221 BC. Would-be policy-makers found it harder to dismiss their rivals’ proposals as “empty moralizing phrases” (*kongyan* 空言) when those rivals had taken the trouble to “verify” their conclusions by examples drawn from the past.¹⁰ This helps to explain a very curious phenomenon: the proponents of classical learning (Ru 儒) in the third and second century BC offer no consistent account of the precise nature of antique rule of the legendary sage-kings, but the classicists after several centuries of unified rule boast of impossibly precise knowledge on the same subject.¹¹ The very few recent finds that permit us to check the accuracy of sweeping assertions made in the received records suggest that the records contain as many instances of exaggerations or outright lies as of corroboration,¹² though it is the latter that garners publicity in the popular press. The old sources, for example, credit Liu Bang 劉邦, the Han founder, with promulgating a revised version of the Qin penal code that drastically reduced the types of punishable offenses, yet a comparison of excavated manuscripts from Shuihudi (*terminus ad quem* 217 BC) and Zhangjashan (ca. 186 BC) shows just how closely early Han laws mirror those of Qin in phrasing and

9 Here I part company with David Schaberg, “The Logic of Signs in Early Chinese Rhetoric,” 180, who has the Ru arguing always for a real past, “to demonstrate the continuing validity of lessons inherited from the Western and early Eastern Zhou.” See Lothar von Falkenhausen, “On the Historiographical Orientation of Chinese Archaeology,” *Antiquity* 67.257 (1993), 839–849; “The Regionalist Paradigm in Chinese Archaeology,” *Nationalism, Politics, and the Practice of Archaeology*, Philip Kohl and Clare Fawcett, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 198–217; Robert Bagley, “Shang Archaeology,” in CHAC, 124 notes: “It becomes increasingly evident that the centrality and cultural unity that are the essence of the traditional model are nowhere to be seen in the archaeological record [of Shang] (...) evidence for civilized societies geographically remote and culturally different [from Shang] is now abundant. Rationalizations that would attach the whole of a large and diverse archaeological record to a [single] royal house (...) have come to look arbitrary and improbable.” But those rationalizations figure largely in the popular press. For one example, see *Dalu ximwen* 大陸新聞 (Monday, May 2, 2005), A15, for the treatment of a Western Zhou site as the “earliest historical trace” (in the attempt to tie the site with the Duke of Zhou).

10 Martin Kern, drawing upon the arguments of David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001). For further talk of *kongyan* 空言, see the words ascribed to Dong Zhongshu in *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (Sibu beiyao ed.), *pian* 17, 63a-b, which quote Confucius as saying, “I have used the facts of the past and added to them the mind of a king; I believe that in illustrating ‘empty words,’ nothing is as good as the depth and clarity to be gained from a review of past affairs.” For further information, see Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch’ien. Grand Historian of China* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1958), 87–89.

11 For numerous examples where the classicists show themselves to be unable to speak about institutions of the past, see *Shiji* 28, on the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices. [All references to the *Shiji*, hereafter SJ, are to the standard Beijing: Zhonghua shuju edition of 1965.] A parallel can be found in Tang and Song: in Tang, the commentators on the Five Classics emphasized how distant and unknowable the pre-Qin era was, but the Song classicists boasted that they could “dance and sing with the Ancients.” For further information, see Christian De Pee, *The Writing of Weddings in Middle-Period China: Text and Ritual Practice in Middle-Period China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

12 Robert Bagley, personal communication.

comprehensiveness.¹³ Admittedly, scattered references before and after unification in 221 BC shed some light on general trends in the growth and application of legal, economic, and political institutions, but the very piecemeal nature of such references to institutions indicates the gap separating the preoccupations of the classical authors from those of modern historians. The classical polemics focused far less on the institutions of empire than on the character and decorum of the ruler and the quality of his representatives.

Then, too, nearly every document relating to the pre-Qin, Qin, and early Western Han histories underwent editing after 26 BC at the hands of Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC), a member of the Han ruling house entrusted with preparing a preliminary catalogue for the holdings of the imperial libraries in the capital, Chang’an.¹⁴ “Texts are always changed in the course of transmission, by accident or design,”¹⁵ and the evidence concerning the scope of Liu Xiang’s editorial activities, though scant, points to such substantial editing of the received corpus that the date of 26 BC is probably no less crucial to our notions of the Chinese past than the dates 221 BC, when unified rule under Qin was achieved, or 134 BC, the approximate date when Wudi (r. 140–87 BC) supposedly decided to reserve the post of state-sponsored Academician for experts in the Five Classics.¹⁶ To ignore the possible “flattening effect” of 26 BC on post-Han perceptions of the classical era is merely to compound the errors of scholars convinced that the received traditions about the past, to the degree that they are “coherent” and “cohesive,” adequately convey the totality of the recorded past, so long as they receive a minor assist from regional archaeology.¹⁷

Larger anxieties underlie these remarks. Modern historians are apt to imagine the early empires as exercising the same degree of “thick” rule and inspiring the same kind of political loyalty as the late empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Helena* describes Roman Gaul as a vast tract of land held together by a series of forts

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- 13 The memorials of Dong Zhongshu (dated to ca. 134 BC) make it clear that the Han followed the Qin in legal matters. See Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960) [hereafter HS], 56.2495–2523, which is summarized below.
- 14 Of the excavated materials, none except for the *Bamboo Annals* (excavated AD 281), directly present the ideologies of empire, though some, like the legal manuscripts from Shuihudi and Zhangjianshan (see below) and the treatises against abdication certainly relate to rulership.
- 15 Susan Cherniack, “Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 53:1 (1994), 5.
- 16 No firm date is available for the decision by Han Wudi to restrict the post of Academician to specialists in one or more of the Five Classics. Dates ranging from 140 to 134 BC are proposed in the sources, and most scholars, halving the difference, give 136 BC as the correct date. Aside from excavated materials (including, possibly, the *Bamboo Annals*), nearly all the “pre-Qin” literary texts in the received tradition were edited during Han, and we cannot be certain, in consequence, that they represent contemporary accounts of historical events. For Liu Xiang’s editing, one may cite one relevant effect: over 300 *juan* (silk rolls) of materials attributed to the pre-Qin master Xun Qing 荀卿 [i.e. Xunzi] were reduced to 32 *pian* (inscribed bamboo bundles) by Liu Xiang. Liu Xiang, in Kalinowski’s view (op. cit.), was part of the small minority advocating the adoption of archaic (or pseudo-archaic?) rituals, whose efforts were carefully preserved down through the centuries, as writings of equal influence failed to be reproduced. On Wudi’s deed, see Fukui Shigemasa, *Kandai Jukyo no shiteki kenkyu: Jukyo no kangakuka o meguru teisetsu no saikentō* 漢代儒教の史的研究: 儒教の官学化をめぐる定説の再検討 (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2005); Nylan, “Canons without Canonization: the case of Han classicism,” *Rituals, Pantheons and Techniques: A History of Chinese Religion Before the Tang*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (forthcoming).
- 17 See *New Perspectives on China’s Past. Chinese archaeology in the twentieth century*, ed. Xiaoneng Yang, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), esp. the preface by Sarah Allan.

tenuously linked by narrow palisaded corridors of transportation and communication. That description would probably fit many places under the nominal control of Qin and Han outside of the old Central States region. The so-called “barbarous coin” excavated from a region under Han control in the second century AD may indicate the superficiality of Central States influence on areas at some distance from the capital. (see below) To those eager to ascribe to early rule the same degree of central control that became technologically possible only in the modern era, a more flexible and multi-faceted model that tallies better with the archaeological evidence has been built for the early Assyrian empire by Bradley Parker.¹⁸



“barbarian coin”¹⁹

When all is said and done, there were no real precedents for the Qin and Han realms.²⁰ Even if we suppose that a certain number of city-states or small polities came together briefly in early Western Zhou, for one or more reasons (e.g., extraordinary leadership or a preponder-

18 Bradley J. Parker, *The Mechanics of Empire. The Northern Frontier of Assyria as a Case Study in Imperial Dynamics* (Helsinki, Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001). Parker takes on the models of Luttwak and Liverani for the Roman empire and shows that the archaeological evidence supports a different, more nuanced view. The same archaeological evidence which is now construed as firm “proof” of the Shang and Zhou empires (not to mention the mythical Xia) is liable to different constructions, given how unusual the Anyang archaeological finds are for their era, and how speedy the apparent collapse of the Western Zhou cultural horizon reflected in the extant archaeological record.

19 So-called “barbarian coin,” of lead, possibly an ingot (or seal?) or a specially produced grave good, instead of a coin once in circulation. Diam. 5.52 cm.; height 1.23 cm.; weight 116 gm. (approx. 1/2 a Han unit). Excavated in 1976 from Lingtai, Gansu Province, this example, decorated with coiling dragons on one side and Greek and “barbarous” Greek on the other, is now in the possession of the Lingtai County Museum. Many other examples have now been found in China and the British Museum owns several examples, as well. Most scholars equate these with the “white-metal” (i.e., silver-tin alloy) issued under Wudi (140–87 BCE), but there are two objections to that identification: first, most examples of such coins are of lead, with only a few made of copper, the most typical metal used under Wudi; and second, the inscriptional style of the Greek examples that this ingot seems to mimic, with the cursive inscription mentioning “the kings” (*basileō*, presumably from the formula *basileōs basileōn*, “of the king of kings”), date generally from the first century CE, though the same formula appears in other styles of writing on Greek coins in Afghanistan and Pakistan by the first century BCE. Information courtesy of Joe Cribb, British Museum.

20 SJ 6.254 is one example of rhetoric that acknowledges this.

ance of new technologies in one of them), and that the existence of that confederation exerted a powerful influence upon the collective memories of those in the Central States, no formidable barrier prevented the rise of strong regional powers afterwards; neither did the existence of a Hellenic League at Marathon alter many sociopolitical realities in the half-century leading up to the Athenian empire and the Peloponnesian War. For at least two centuries before 221 BC the master-persuaders residing in the Central States territories may have registered their intense longing for a single realm spanning the entire territory along the Yellow River and Yangzi valleys.²¹ Still, one cannot help but notice the obstacles these thinkers faced in the fourth and third centuries BC as they sought to devise the precise mechanisms of a system of rule that their world had never known. Unified rule was unmistakably "new," even if itinerant advisers were busily inventing a host of hallowed precedents for it. And one must not underestimate the strength of local resistance to domination by rival powers.²²

Given the different possible scenarios for ancient and early China, a salutary experiment would be to write the history of the classical period without any use of terms like "empire" or "state,"²³ since those terms virtually preclude the raising of many questions needing further research. This essay therefore employs "unified rule" (*yi tong* 一統) or "realm" in preference to "empire" and "state," though unified rule was far more an ideal and an experiment than an actuality throughout most of the classical era after 221 BC.²⁴ Eventually, the fascination with the idea

- 21 See Gu Jiegang 顧詒剛 (1893–1980), "Qin Han tongyi youlai he Zhanguo ren duiyu shijie de xiangxiang" 秦漢統一由來和戰國人對於世界的想像, *Gushi bian* 古史辨 (Disputes on Ancient History), vol. 2 (Beiping: Pushu, 1927), 1–16. Of course, it is possible that a longing for unified rule may have been felt for much longer (if only because unified rule meant peace), thought not written down until a later age, when textual practices had changed. The last Zhou king (also called "Son of Heaven") was killed in 256 BC, and it is doubtful whether the Qin ruler had proclaimed himself First Sovereign (Shihuang) by the time that Xunzi's 荀子 (310?–220? BC) essay, "Li lun" 禮論 (On Ritual) was composed; nonetheless that essay launches into an elaborate description of the operations of the Son of Heaven's court.
- 22 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 74, reminds us that the states in danger of conquest mobilized their whole populations ("adult and teenager, male and female") "to fight to the bloody end in the final wars of unification." It was these regional powers that developed many of the "basic institutions" we now associate with empire: (a) detailed law codes; (b) well-defined bureaucratic ranks and recruitment, (c) near-universal conscription; (d) registration of the population; (e) poll and income taxes; (f) the increased use of cavalry and other military innovations; (g) massive irrigation works; and (h) increased trade and the tools to promote it. For further information, see Mark Edward Lewis, in CHAC, 615. SJ 6 reminds us that the Qin victory seemed likely only in the last decades of Warring States. However, Yang Kuan, *Zhanguo shi* 戰國史 (Taipei: Gufeng chubanshe, 1986), esp. 466, is one of many Chinese scholars who presume that China was preordained to be unified; Pines also presumes a single Zhou cultural elite as well as a single archaeological horizon in material culture. Pines probably goes too far in an unpublished book manuscript on the Qin empire, believing it to be not only the most sophisticated administrative machine of its time, but the most sophisticated of any imperial times. For a contemporary portrait of the powers of empire at their height, see SJ 129.3260. Cf. Gideon Shelach and Yuri Pines, "Secondary State Formation and the Development of Local Identity: Change and Continuity in the State of Qin (770=221 BC)," in *The Archaeology of Asia*, ed. Miriam T. Stark (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 202–229.
- 23 Contributors to *China's Early Empires: supplement to The Cambridge History of China* (forthcoming) have usually tried to employ this more personalistic language. As Maureen C. Miller, *Power and the Holy in the Age of the Investiture Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), says of the term "state," "This term suggests a degree of organization that would have been unimaginable in the central Middle Ages."
- 24 Michael Loewe, unpublished paper, "Questions at Issue," 2: "Early in Han, the idea of empire was still experimental; by 220, it was seen as the norm." For the phrase *yitong*, see SJ 16.759.

of a vast bureaucratic apparatus emanating from the capital and embracing far-flung territories – the very apparatus that would be attested by the extraordinarily rich Yinwan and Weiyang Palace finds, *if* administrative documents reliably matched sociopolitical realities – may give way, as it has already done in related fields of history, to a more intense study of the ways in which those around the throne established power and authority through their physical presences and personal relationships, through astute alliances, diverse cultural practices, massive civic projects, and the careful proliferation and propagation of royal imagery and symbolism.²⁵

Complicating matters further, modern histories routinely translate as “empire” two binomes – *tianxia* 天下 (“all-under-heaven”) and *junxian* 郡縣 (“commandery/county”) – since both imply sovereign rule over extensive territories. But special care must be used to ascertain the precise connotations of the Chinese terms in context.²⁶ Neither term connotes military power (unlike the Latin *imperium*), and the two compounds rarely appear together in the same essay or treatise.²⁷ *Tianxia* initially referred to the lands and activities under the beneficent supervision of the ancestors of the ruling house. By a fairly easy extension, the term later suggested the imagined community that depended upon the ruler’s exemplary consciousness that he held his lands in trust for the ancestors above and the people below.²⁸ Thus, employment of the term *tianxia* always signals the author’s concern with the moral dimension of the central authority conjured by the title “Son of Heaven” and a concomitant decision to underplay the relative importance to the throne of military and administrative superiority.²⁹ No supreme ruler of the Central States, however, was ever hailed as a living god within his own lifetime or after his death, as happened in Rome.³⁰ *Junxian*, by contrast, emphasizes the uniform applica-

25 For Yinwan, see Michael Loewe, *The Men who Governed Han China. Companion to a Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods* (Leiden: Brill, 2004) [hereafter: *Governed*], chap. 2 (38–88); for the Weiyang Palace, see *Han Chang’an cheng Weiyang gong. 1980–1989 nian kaogu fajue baogao* 漢長安城未陽宮: 1980–1989年考古發掘報告, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan, Kaogu yanjiusuo bianzhu (Beijing: Zhongguo da baike quanshu chubanshe, 1996); and for the new fashions in the treatment of Roman history, see Miller, *Power and the Holy*, 7. Brian McKnight’s work on the Song period (960–1279) shows that the “verdict” rendered by a judge was liable to arbitration by the power-holders in the local community. We would expect that to be all the more true of Han.

26 Of course, the Latin term originally referred to a *temporary* military rule over an area. The term *ba* or hegemon, which corresponds loosely with the Greek term *tyrannos*, implies a temporary and expedient military presence in an area. No sovereign of Qin and Han was ever said to be a “hegemon,” however. Indeed, from at least the time of Xunzi on, the explicit goal was to install a sovereign whose line would reign generation after generation, thus insuring the peace of the realm.

27 One exception that proves the rule is SJ 6.235–236, where the Qin court, immediately after unification, contrasts the failures of the system of vassalage under the Son of Heaven, which supposedly “was incapable of regulating society,” with the manifest advantages of the *junxian* system.

28 During the Han, *tianxia* did not refer to the “world,” as the modern translation of the compound suggests, but to the “realm” actually and potentially under the protection of the High Lord worshipped by the Han rulers as quasi-ancestor.

29 Similarly, the term “Tianzi” (“Son of Heaven”) indicates the ruler’s charisma and dignity (*de* 德). See, e.g., *Bobu tong* 白虎通 [hereafter BHT] (SBCK) 1.1a-b, where this is clearly spelled out. All references to the BHT will be to the translation by Tjan Tjoe Som, *Po hu tung. The Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall* (Leiden: Brill, 1949) [hereafter Tjan], I, 218. A completely neutral term for the supreme ruler is *shang* 上 (“the one above”), as in SJ 107.2844. Only a few texts, such as the *Yi Zhou shu* 逸周書, focus on the transition from military conquest to unified and transformative rule under an ideal ruler.

30 On the divinity of Augustus, see *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (The Achievements of the Deified Augustus), in Ronald Mellor, *The Historians of Ancient Rome* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 322–329. Cf. Albrecht Dihle, “City

tion of legal, economic, and administrative measures, in a pyramidal hierarchy of capital-commandery-county, in lands initially wrested by military conquest. At no time under Qin or Han did the uneven expansion of this *junxian* system, which looks in retrospect so deceptively modern, entirely obliterate the institutional forms inherited from the time before unified rule, as casual references to the Qin nobility after unification attest.³¹

The classical period inherited the terms *tianxia* and *junxian* from the period before 221 BC. But as soon as the territorial possessions under the supervision of the ruling house were alleged to belong to *yi jia* 一家 ("one family"), furious debates were triggered about the relation of ruler to ruled, debates that continued over the course of Qin and Han.³² Was the ruler, as the most important head of household in the entire land "under Heaven," free to dispose of his belongings in any way he chose, so long as it did not hamper his ability to discharge his filial debt to the ancestors? Or did the participation of the One Man, the ruler, in the larger "family" of mankind mightily constrain the ruler's freedom of operations, insofar as the phrase *yi jia* implied the need for cooperation with imperial subjects in a joint enterprise for safety and profit (*an li* 安利)?³³ Did the rulers' safety and security not rest on the will of the people, just as boats float on water?³⁴ And if the realm was truly all one family, why were different groups in society liable to different punishments and rewards under the law? Why were such great disparities in wealth allowed to exist? And what was the relation of the "dependent kingdoms" (*shuguo* 屬國) in the outlying regions to the center?³⁵ Many polemics centered on an equally

and Empire," keynote speech, given at the conference "Conceiving the Empire: Ancient China and Rome – An Intercultural Comparison in Dialogue," April 20-23, at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (Essen), ms., 6, on the relation between the emergence of the early empires, war and conquest, and the empire's "special relationship with the divine."

- 31 SJ 6.141, explicitly mentions *liehou* 列侯 accompanying the ruler after unification, suggesting that the Qin system was not the total departure from earlier Central States traditions that most have assumed, when they mistake Han propaganda for Qin reality. For further information, see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang. Text and ritual in early Chinese imperial representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000). And the terms *guo* 國 ("kingdom") and *bang* 邦 ("state") functioned as neutral terms not favored by the adherents of any line, so far as we can tell.
- 32 See Hsing I-t'ien 邢義田 [pinyin: Xing Yitian], *Qin Han shi lunqao* 秦漢史論稿 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1987), 55–59, for further information. Hsing points out that the term *guojia* sometimes refers in Han texts to the ruling family and sometimes to the whole state.
- 33 HS 1B.71 uses the phrases *yi jia*, *Tianxia*, and *gong an li* 共安利 together. Cf. *Houhan shu* [hereafter HHS] 7.299. The *heqin* 和親 policy was designed to extend this notion of "one family" to carefully selected allies among the nomadic tribes. For further information, see Ying-shih Yü, *Trade and Expansion in Han China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), esp. 10–11, 36–37; Tamara Chin, "Savage Exchange: Figuring the Foreign in the Early Han Empire" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 2005).
- 34 This is a popular metaphor, cited in numerous texts from the Warring States on, including "Eastern Metropolis Rhapsody," in Knechtges, *Wen xuan, or, Selections of refined literature by Xiao Tong* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), vol. 1, 307. All subsequent references to Knechtges refer to vols. 1 (1982), vol. 2 (1986), or vol. 3 (1987) of this translation.
- 35 One thinks, for example, of the "Eight Deliberations" by which the severity of a sentence was to be adjusted, or of the noble ranks and social distinctions examined by Michael Loewe in *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 1. The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) [hereafter CHC 1], 484ff.; cf. Michael Loewe, "The Orders of Aristocratic Rank of Han China," *T'oung pao* 48.1 (1960), 97–174. For a sketch of the disparities in wealth, see HS 24A.1137.

irresolvable question, whether the ruler's presence lent dignity to the Central States or whether he gained dignity by exemplifying its highest values.

The willingness to pose such basic questions over the four centuries of Qin and Han rule, not to mention the very ambiguity of the terms *gong* 公 (“in the public interest”) and *si* 私 (“family, personal, or selfish”), continually employed in official and unofficial writings, is striking. Only until the reign of Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BC) was the term *gong* applied unthinkingly to acts by the ruler or his appointed representatives that claimed to serve “the common good,” and so took priority over other considerations. All too often, the term *gong* had been hijacked by persons claiming to embody a source of moral legitimacy beyond the throne.³⁶ To the degree, then, that modern historians believe the meaning of “public” to be self-evident, they fail to discern the underlying disagreements on the precise form that personalistic rule by a central figure or group of figures must take if “each is to attain his proper place” (*ge de qi suo* 各得其所).

Historians may note the precise phrases that tend to occur in conjunction with a particular line of reasoning, but knowledge of the specific setting for each set of remarks is crucial to their ultimate decoding. The histories use much the same phrasing to describe the rulers' consultations with their ministers, for example, but their vastly different import would have been evident to contemporaries. The Han founder's frequent consultation with his ministers constituted proof of his remarkable talent for hearing and evaluating information and advice from his subordinates, while later emperors are portrayed as overly dependent upon a small circle of supporters.³⁷ With so many disparate traditions advising members of the ruling elite to give up power in order to gain moral authority,³⁸ ideas of absolutism seem considerably weaker than they would be in late imperial China.³⁹

36 Thucydides in fifth-century Athens makes it very clear that caring for one's own person and family is not worthy of commemoration (Hobbes, 11). In writings in the earliest sample, *gong* is applied to the centralizing state and “greater good,” in contrast to *si*, which describes family or personal affairs; by the third core, however, to benefit one's own family, if that family has performed public service, is said to deserve commendation as “in the public interest.” The range of activities deemed to be *gong* broadened over time, while more activities outside government service were said to be “in the public interest.”

37 Contrast the picture of Han Gaozu (r. 206–195), whom the *Shiji* credits with singular merit, with the portrait of the Eastern Han founder, who seems beholden to his general, Ma Yuan 馬援. Early portrayals of the good ruler seem to reflect upon the Chunqiu rulers' willingness to ignore the advice of the Supreme Sage, Confucius; they presume a sophisticated rhetoric developed over several centuries in the classical era. SY, chaps. 9–11 are entirely devoted to anecdotes illustrating exemplary giving and taking of advice, in many of which Kongzi is the hero whose final aim is “converting defeat into success.” For examples of acquiring authority by abandoning power, see, Nylan, “Boundaries of the Body and Body Politics in Early Confucian Thought,” *Boundaries and Justice*, ed. David Miller and Sohail Hashmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 112–135. For reclusion, see Alan Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement. The practice and portrayal of reclusion in early medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

38 See, for example, Liu An's postface to the *Huainanzǐ*; Dong Zhongshu's three memorials in HS 56; and the writings of Gan Zhongke in HS 75.3192.

39 Cf. Enno Giele, *Imperial Decision-Making and Communication in Early China: A Study of Cai Yong's Duduan*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006). As Giele says, “Many, if not most decisions were reached only after routine consultation with (...) top-ranking officials and (...) close advisors in the emperor's entourage or (...) even larger groups of socially diverse participants” (p. 46). Policy rulings could be framed by an emperor, after consultation with advisors, or they could originate with members of the bureaucracy (pp. 236–237); precedent was hardly binding, but it did have some force (pp. 240, 242). Giele also reminds us that there were venues for use by the populace in memorializing the emperor, though such petitions were screened by bureaucrats of the court before passing them on (p. 73).

Given the foregoing observations, modern historians may well wonder whether they can ever hope to extract “objective” accounts from the early sources. But freed from inherently impossible undertakings, historians interested in cross-cultural comparisons can begin to consider the ways in which literary and visual motifs in the Central States were used to construct notions akin to “empire.” Therefore this essay, after describing three sample cores, turns to consider a conundrum raised immediately by such comparisons: why did the Han court never choose to reproduce the imperial image on coins and statues, when it surely knew of the Roman images whose dissemination was purportedly so vital to the health and cohesion of the Roman empire?⁴⁰

Sample core 1: the decades before 221 BC

Jia Yi’s (200–167 BC) famous essay “Faulting Qin” (Guo Qin lun 過秦論), written decades after the collapse of the first attempt at unified rule, illustrates just how much even loyal subjects of the Han appreciated the stupendous achievement of unification in 221 BC. By Jia Yi’s account, people were so eager to see an end to war that they “craned their necks and stood on tiptoe,” to catch a glimpse of the victorious Qin troops, in the hopes that total victory by Qin would bring peace to the Central States after centuries of conflict.⁴¹

Even a cursory review of three major compilations that can be roughly dated to the final decades prior to unification – two collections of essays ascribed to Xunzi and his pupil Han Feizi 韓非子, and the *Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳 (Great Commentary on the *Documents*) attributed to Fu Sheng 伏勝 – suggests the level of excitement that the most sober thinkers experienced when considering the prospect of unified rule.⁴² These three compilations, explicitly addressed to rulers intent upon vanquishing their rivals in a time (the late third and early second century BC) and place (the Central States) when a nomadic league was gathering strength along the northern frontier, juxtapose the dominant theory of Realpolitik and the moralistic alternatives to it. Han Feizi, as proponent of Realpolitik, argued from the simple premises that military strength is the paramount desideratum of the state, that such strength is underpinned by the “primary occupation” of agriculture, that “might makes right,” and that “the ends justify the means.” For Han Fei, only the fiercest drive to compete, fueled by bloodshed and deception, can culminate in unity and peace. Like Machiavelli, Han Feizi insists that the ideal ruler is he who continuously intervenes to mediate the conflicting interests of his ministers and subjects, in order not only to preserve his supremacy but also to enhance it. To this end, the ideal ruler sees that rewards and punishments are doled out in such a way as to bind “those

40 See A.F.P. Hulswé, *China in Central Asia. The early stage, 125 B.C.–A.D. 23. An annotated translation of chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han dynasty* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 106, 115–116, for references to HS 96 on coins.

41 SJ 6.283.

42 As all three extant works contain interpolations and heavily reworked passages, to identify the book with its author is a matter of convention only. Fu Sheng, who held the position of Academician at the court of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–210 BC), lived to be more than 90 years old; he saw the collapse of Qin rule and the stabilization of Han rule; most probably he died sometime during the reign of Wendi (r. 179–157 BC). The dates for Xunzi are debated, but most would have him dying shortly before or after unification; Han Fei is said to have died in 233 BC. Readers should consult *Early Chinese Texts. A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993) for further information.

below” to him through the twin emotions of greed and fear, these being the primary motivations for all human activities.

Ever mindful of the precariousness of his weighty position, Han Fei’s ideal ruler takes extreme care not to indicate, by even the smallest phrase or gesture, his thinking on major policy issues before his pronouncements become law. Hidden within his palaces, he acts upon information provided by his spies, for duty to his line, no less than self-preservation, requires that he sound out his subjects’ views at every opportunity. And while he conscientiously adheres to the laws that he and his forebears have promulgated, the ruler does his best to distance himself from the execution of those laws by his subordinates, lest his Draconian measures reflect badly on him. For only by such judicious moves and counter-moves can the ideal ruler fend off plots by members of his inner circle and forestall peasant rebellions in the provinces. The good ruler in this vision has no time or inclination for valor in the field, which would only expose him to danger. With a combination of luck, cunning, and skill, however, the ruler who understands the advantages of strategy and stealth can triumph over the multitude of his potential enemies, and impose an order upon the most recalcitrant of subjects.⁴³

In this ideology, the unifier is compared to an unseen natural force that draws no undue attention to itself. The ruler is likened to “the most subtle essence that does not act,” a “true lord” who “understands nothing, is capable of nothing, and does nothing.” One description says,

He lives in a void, holds fast to the void, and appears to understand nothing; therefore he is able to employ the knowledge of many. He is able to hold fast to [the principle of] doing nothing; therefore he is able to employ the actions of many. Understanding nothing, being able at nothing, and doing nothing are principles to which a lord holds firm.⁴⁴

Like the cosmic Way itself, the ideal ruler in this vision “does nothing, yet he sees that there is nothing left undone.”⁴⁵ Withdrawn from the hurly-burly of everyday life, the ideal ruler could afford to adopt a lofty, detached view of unfolding events, functioning as a distant star that in some mysterious fashion keeps the lesser luminaries in thrall.⁴⁶ Thus the ruler executes Heaven’s will or the natural course of events in an efficient bureaucracy whose administration is designed to make the pursuit of profit and the interest of the prince coincide.⁴⁷ Proponents of this view

43 The edition I used for the *Han Feizi* is *Han Feizi jiji* 韓非子集解, annot. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974), 2 vols. See Lu Jia’s famous dictum, as recorded in HS 43.2113.

44 LSCQ 25/4.1 (modified from John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: a complete translation and study* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 49).

45 *Laozi* 老子, *zhang* 章 48.

46 The comparison of the ruler to the North Star is especially popular; it appears everywhere, as in the “Fu on the Sacred Field” by Pan Anren, trans. by David R. Knechtges, in *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 2, 43 [hereafter Knechtges for vols. 1–3]: there the titled lords are shown “Gazing at the imperial carriage, they quake with awe./ They are as the soaking dew dried by the morning sun,/ Like the panoply of stars paying homage to the northern polestar.” Such a comparison not only reminded listeners of the divine origins of the imperial house, but also of the palpable rewards of hierarchy.

47 For the first point, see *Chunqiu fanlu*, *pian* 43, 11/5a-5b; for the second, see the *Xunzi* essay, On Ritual” (Lilun 禮論). For the Lord as “balance,” see Griet Vankeerberghen, “Choosing Balance: Weighing (*quan* 權) as a Metaphor for Action in Early Chinese Texts,” *Early China* 30 (2005–2006), 52–89. The main edition consulted for the *Xunzi* was *Xunzi jiji* 荀子集解, ed. Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, n.d.); for the sake of readers, however, references to the Xunzi are first to *Xunzi yinde* 荀子引得 (A Concordance to Hsun Tzu), Supplement no. 22 of the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series),

did not dare advise the ruler to yield to his ministers, for it was the ruler who upheld the very cosmic order. And agency unseen was imbued with additional mystery that enhanced power.

An alternative vision of unified rule, represented in the sample by the *Xunzi* and *Shangshu dazhuan* texts, proved more compelling to many. This second vision, equally consumed with the prospect of standardized learning, road works, and weights and measures, located fatal flaws in the arguments of Realpolitik: the ruler who motivates his populace primarily through fear and greed paradoxically helps to create the very conditions that will undermine his supremacy, sooner or later.⁴⁸ Trickery and force, albeit tempting strategies in the short term, almost inevitably damage the ruler's interests over the long term. It was not only that "in general, as soon as men acting for the sake of rewards and commendations perceive the possibility of harm or injury, they stop short" of giving their all.⁴⁹ It was moreover that those motivated primarily by the negative emotions of fear and greed and schooled in habits of deception knew how to lash out effectively against the powers-that-be whenever they felt themselves insecure or inadequately compensated. Furthermore, they had no sense of honor or loyalty to restrain them. Accordingly, even in a state with abundant natural resources in men and material, neither luck nor strategy nor a knowledge of topography and situation prove as instrumental to success as concerted attempts to "gain adherents among the people" (*fu min* 附民); supporters who see the ruler's interests as their own then work hard to promote his interests in their capacities as ministers, generals, and fighting men.⁵⁰ If subordinates of sufficient merit can be found and employed, then those below ministerial rank will, under good ministerial influence, take up "the place which is proper to them" of their own accord.⁵¹ Unity and order will henceforth follow, as day follows night, with all "obeying the orders and commissions for the benefit of their lord and ruler."⁵²

Alleging the internal contradictions of Realpolitik, the moralistic counter-theory sought to embrace an explicit system of rewards and punishments with a coherent ritual system designed to motivate the ruler's subjects to lend him their unqualified support.⁵³ In such a system, sumptuary regulations, as well as conferrals of rank and gifts, reinforce the value of those whose conduct is worthy of emulation. Far more successful than the ruler whom the people fear and envy is the ruler whom the people come to love (*ai* 愛) as a father or mother.⁵⁴ And, the moralizing texts insist, it is not so very difficult for the ruler to win the love of his subjects. The ruler need only (1) instruct his generals that the armies under their command should not kill the young and old, nor trample the crops in summer and fall, nor take prisoners from

(Taipei, 1949; rpt., Cheng-wen, 1966) [hereafter XZ]; and then to John Knoblock, *Xunzi. A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–1994).

48 See, e.g., XZ 15, "On [the Proper Use of] Troops" (*yibing* 議兵). For this argumentation, see Knoblock, esp. II, 219, 301–302. Nearly every translation from Knoblock has been modified to some degree, however.

49 XZ 57/15/91; Knoblock, II, 231.

50 XZ 53/15/4; XZ2, chap. 15 *passim*, but esp. 267; Knoblock, II, 219.

51 XZ 50/13/20; Knoblock, II, 198.

52 XZ 50/13/10; Knoblock, II, 199.

53 XZ 57/15/92–93; Knoblock, II, 285: "Therefore, rewards and favors, punishments and fines, strategies and deceit are not sufficient to get people to exert their utmost, and to bring others to face death [with a willing heart]."

54 See XZ 56/15/66–68; Knoblock, II, 227. Cf. XZ 56/15/74: "If they love their ruler, they will think nothing of dying for him" 樂其君，而輕為之死。 Cf. Knoblock, II, 229.

among the commoners, nor slay the commoners who have fled before his advancing armies;⁵⁵ (2) employ his troops sparingly, with a view to replacing tyrannical rulers with better administrators; (3) realize that spears, lances, bows, and arrows are less effective in building a population of loyal adherents than the “newer methods” of digging massive irrigation works and preparing the city-dwellers to withstand prolonged sieges;⁵⁶ and (4) organize his administration in such a way that “events accord with the time, and he lightens the burdens of the people in order to harmonize and regulate them, raising them to maturity, like children in swaddling clothes.”⁵⁷ As the moralistic ruler – unlike the ruler envisioned by Han Fei – would insure the stability of the state he holds in trust for his forebears, his descendants, and his subjects, his subordinates and successors delight in emulating his virtues, and assent to undertake the arduous course of cultivation to the degree that their station in life permits.⁵⁸

The ultimate aim of the ruler, in the moralistic vision, is to have the lower orders not only “fall in line with their ruler’s will” but also, more importantly, “find their security and pleasure in it.”⁵⁹ Because the greatest talents must be induced to align their interests with those of the would-be unifier, the ideal ruler displays his own virtues. Dutiful, broadly learned, and judicious, he eschews the pursuit of his own short-term desires and submits his person to a demanding ritual schedule that regularly produces edifying spectacles designed to induce the most profound admiration of his populace.⁶⁰ Ritual, in this vision of governance, is conceived as the perfect medium to reveal the ruler’s equitable inner state, in addition to being a most convenient tool for maintaining social distinctions. “Rites, the highest expression of [personal] order and discrimination,” are therefore also the “root of strength in the realm.”⁶¹ If the ideal ruler is to remain unshakeable as he exerts his will upon ever greater areas and populations, he must be seen to move and speak in highly ritualized settings with supreme authority; as ritual demonstrates that the insightful and empathetic ruler⁶² will not be indifferent to his people’s livelihood, the ruler’s dignity will then sustain the entire enterprise of the ruling house.

To achieve this perception of balanced majesty and humanity, the ideal ruler works hard to build consensus within society; hence his determination to consult widely with his aides before

55 XZ 56/15/64–65; Knoblock, II, 227.

56 XZ 57/15/86; Knoblock, II, 230, where the new methods of conducting competition are explicitly contrasted with the “old.”

57 XZ 62/17/7–9; Knoblock, III, 13–15. Robin McNeal (ms., 150) says, the classical theorists considered how best to incorporate defeated enemies into one’s own administrative and economic system, “primarily by ensuring that the process of conquest does not destroy the enemy’s existing infrastructure or alienate its population,” while hastening the transition from martial rule to civil policies.

58 XZ 62/16/78; Knoblock, II, 248: “The superior is model for those below, who ought to follow him as an echo follows a sound or a shadow the form.”

59 XZ 57/15/99; Knoblock, II, 232. Cf. Yang Bing’an 楊炳安, *Shiyi jiazhu Sunzi jiaoshi* 十一家註孫子校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2–3, where the Way is defined as that which “causes the people and their superiors to be one in their intentions.”

60 The ideal ruler acts as “father” (chastising his subordinates when necessary) and “mother” (supplying the needs of the people, including psychological support). This equation between the ruler and the parents is made repeatedly in the *Xunzi*, in XZ 75/19/109, for example. Cf. XZ 62/16/78; Knoblock, II, 248: “It is impossible to act as a superior to others and not be obedient to the dictates of morality and justice.”

61 XZ 56/15/78; Knoblock, II, 229.

62 See Eric Henry, “A New Take on Ren 仁” (unpublished paper presented at AAS, March 2004), for the definition of *ren*. For the “benevolent man,” see XZ 53/15/7; Knoblock, II, 219.

undertaking new initiatives. In none of the moralistic writings is there any hint that such consultations are for the purpose of ferreting out inclinations toward disloyalty. The ideal ruler has been sufficiently discerning in selecting his officials that they seek to actualize the imperial purposes in court councils and to implement them in their administration of the realm. The ideal ruler has grasped a basic principle: the laws and a well-regulated economy may facilitate the process of civilization, but they possess no educative function in and of themselves.⁶³ But by allowing his people a measure of dignified access to the civilizing “rites, music, and education” (*lijue jiaohua* 禮樂教化) that the ruler himself has mastered, the ruler encourages his people to “reform and improve” on their own, with the result that they, without the imposition of harsh laws or the lure of rich rewards, eagerly “cultivate their persons, rectify their comments, accumulate [merit/achievements] in rites and duties, and honor the Way and virtue.”⁶⁴ Through the propagation of ritual, then, the ruler’s subjects may advance from the bestial state to that of free men inherently worthy of just rule. Thus is an enviable – and eminently enforceable – peace and prosperity brought to all the lands under the ruler’s supervision. By contrast with the Roman empire, which advocated “divinely authorised rule,” on the one hand, and “municipal self-government on the basis of civic freedom,”⁶⁵ on the other, the moralistic construction of unified rule devised for the Central States was predicated on the link between the ruler’s self-mastery, his rule over others, and his subjects’ self-mastery that obviated the need for either municipal self-government or civic freedom. Full mastery of others presupposed, in other words, prior mastery of the self.⁶⁶

To follow a sage-ruler may be to live in the best of all possible worlds,⁶⁷ but the sage-ruler, as the moralists defined him, did not necessarily supervise the greatest single expanse of territory at any given time. Rather the sage-ruler is defined by his good character, which makes him particularly receptive to admonitions by those officials who are ready to “follow the Way and not the lord.”⁶⁸ It is enough, then, that the enviable order of the sage’s realm will attract families to populate his state.⁶⁹ The *Xunzi* concedes that the coercive methods used by the contemporary Qin state have allowed it to build up impressive strength “over four generations”;

63 Contrast Dihle, ms., 5, which says, “Neither did they abandon the idea that the law had to be not only a ruler but also an educator.” Dihle there speaks of Plato’s dialogue “On the Statesman” and the writings of Aristotle, which discuss whether the legal system itself or the statesmanship of leading figures have a greater impact on the condition of the political community. This question was raised during the classical era in China but not settled.

64 XZ 54/15/38; Knoblock, II, 224. Cf. many of the arguments of the *Mencius*, Book I, which are predicated on “sharing one’s pleasures with the people.” On these arguments, see Nylan and Harrison Huang, “Mencius on Pleasure,” *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosmont*, ed. Marthe Chandler and Ronnie Littlejohn (Association of Chinese Philosophers of America and Open Court, Nov., 2007), 1–26

65 Dihle, ms., 16.

66 XZ 56/15/72ff.; Knoblock, II, 223–224.

67 XZ 62/17/9; Knoblock, III, 15. Contra Puett’s most recent arguments in *To Become a God*, the language of godhood was not often meant literally.

68 XZ 50/13/19; Knoblock, II, 200.

69 XZ 52/14/9–10; Knoblock, II, 207: “If there is no territory, then the people will have no secure households (*anjū* 安居). If there are no [loyal] people, then the territory will not be guarded. If there is no way and no model, then the people will not come.” For further information, see David N. Keightley, “Peasant Migration, Politics, and Philosophical Response in Chou and Ch’in China” (unpublished paper, November, 1977).

nonetheless, the *Xunzi* predicts that the Qin will never succeed in unifying the Central States unless it figures out how to inspire the other “powerful and aggressive states (...) to hasten to its service.” Perfection in moral leadership reverses some priorities in governing, stressing the long-term consequences of actions over the shorter-term.

The *Shangshu dazhuan* is far more specific than the *Xunzi* about the precise form of government that is to appear after unification.⁷⁰ It urges a mixed system, partly hereditary and partly meritocratic, designed to retain the chief advantages of the older system of indirect rule through vassals (necessitated by the slow pace of transport and communication between center and periphery), while introducing the supervisory mechanisms associated with the direct-rule *junxian* 郡縣 system. The local lords, as representatives of the center, were to be entrusted with limited powers to wage punitive campaigns against pockets of resistance and to adjudicate local disputes (including capital cases), but the throne was to rate the performance of those lords every three years, so that it retained the final authority to exile its vassals and extinguish their lines. (The Romans would have appreciated this mixed system, for they knew that the success of empire ultimately rested on disturbing the regional power structures as little as possible.)⁷¹ Interestingly enough, in no writings ascribed to the last decades before unification in 221 BC do we see extended references to the necessity for the ideal ruler to enlist the help of the gods in his endeavors,⁷² though we know that regular sacrifices were offered in all the courts of the Central States and the workings of fate and timing were regularly discussed as possible agents in historical change. Shrewd men in astute administrations sought to calculate the rational factors making for good rule, though they acknowledged that there would be events, such as natural disasters, whose outcomes even the most farsighted planners could not predict or control.⁷³

Sample core 2: ca. 100 BC

In some twenty-five years on the throne, the man known to history as the First Emperor or Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (r. 247–210 BC) managed to conquer all the rival Central States powers and so proclaim an end to violence, despite his enforcement of a harsh penal code deplored by thinkers such as Xunzi. Within a year of Qin Shihuang’s death in 210 BC, however, allegiance to the seemingly invincible house of Qin began to unravel quickly. The speed of that unraveling, along with the unprecedented rise of a commoner to the rank of Son of Heaven, could not but focus men’s attentions on patterns of political change. Those surveying recent events

70 See, for example, SJ 6.237.

71 For this reason, I wonder whether the Qin Shihuangdi – who is never accused of stupidity in Han propaganda – would immediately have instituted direct rule over the entire realm, as he is said in Han documents to have done. In advertisements of his rule, Qin Shihuang certainly emphasized his advocacy of the conventional virtues, as can be seen from the steles he had inscribed. For further information, see Kern, *Stele Inscriptions*, op. cit. Note that SJ 6.141, explicitly mentions *liehou* 列侯 accompanying Qin Shihuang after unification; this suggests that the Qin system was not a total departure from those in the other Central States, contrary to some of the stereotypes advanced by less critical historians, who have mistaken Han rhetoric for Qin reality. Presumably grants of income rather than land and people supported these *liehou*.

72 Of course, the court issues the calendar and performs sacrifices to the ancestors and other deities. This the three compilations take for granted, and the necessity for the unifier to align himself with cosmic forces, so that his people prosper.

73 Cf. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), x.

saw that nearly a century of Han rule would elapse before the Han could claim a comparable degree of direct rule over its territory.⁷⁴ As readers will recall, it was only under Jingdi (r. 157–141 BC) and Wudi (r. 140–87) that the last significant opposition to centralized power was quashed, with the defeat of the rebel forces under the Seven Kingdoms in 154 BC and of Liu An, King of Huainan, in 122 BC.⁷⁵ At about the same time, the threat posed by the Xiongnu confederation on the northern frontier was significantly reduced as well, thanks to diplomatic and military initiatives. How luck, timing, wisdom, and virtue had converged in history to produce this admirable state of affairs – this such massive compilations as Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 (Archivists’ Records, ca. 100 BC) sought to determine.⁷⁶

Not surprisingly, in a sample of discussions ca. 100 BC on unified rule, many of which were addressed to the Han ruling house, nearly all the official and unofficial writings celebrated the enhanced capacity of the centralized state to marshal huge forces to undertake exploration, irrigation, defense, and road works; to enforce the commercial and penal codes; to organize famine and flood relief, and to sponsor the rudiments of a statewide school and postal system. By convention, such celebrations traced the relevant Qin and Han institutions back to a halcyon time several millennia before, as in Sima Qian’s “Basic Annals,” describing the reign of the legendary Yellow Lord.⁷⁷ At the same time, some of the most influential writings of mid-Western Han expressed grave concerns lest the steady expansion of the Han dominion prove to be its undoing in the end.

As a young man, Wudi chafed under the tutelage of senior advisors related to him through marriage.⁷⁸ An older, if no wiser Wudi – encouraged by another set of imperial relatives by marriage (*waiqi* 外戚) and their cronies – squandered through four disastrous moves the precious cultural and political capital his predecessors had so painstakingly built. First, Wudi – like Qin Shihuangdi – sought personal immortality from a group of magicians and quacks who gravitated to his court.⁷⁹ Second, Wudi, with the large appetites and musical and literary gifts of a Chinese Henry the Eighth, immersed himself in the production of ever more lavish spectacles for himself and his guests, built new palaces in Chang’an, enlarged his hunting parks and residences near the capital, and multiplied the numbers of his palace staff employed for musical entertainments.⁸⁰ Third, Wudi sought to extend military control deep into present-day Central Asia, Vietnam, and Korea, with the result that some twenty-five commanderies were added to his realm, though four had to be quickly withdrawn. By one account, the throne

74 Only under Jingdi (r. 157–141) and Wudi (r. 140–87) did the Han finally impose direct rule over the extensive territories of the Seven Kingdoms and Huainan in the south.

75 See Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzǐ and Liu An’s Claim to Moral Authority* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

76 These questions are raised in the context of the history of King Wu, the Zhou founder, in SJ 61, the chapter on “Bo Yi and Shu Qi,” which has been translated in Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch’ien. Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 187–90.

77 SJ 1.1–8.

78 See the *Shiji* passage cited below, where Wudi tartly asks his maternal relative if he can name a few appointments himself.

79 The parallels between Qin Shihuang and Wudi are so close that historians have long suspected that the *Shiji* account of the First Emperor may well represent indirect remonstrance in “coded language” levelled against Han Wudi, the first ruler of Great Han to rule over as vast a territory as that of Qin.

80 See Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), chap. 8.

boasted, “In accord with the cosmic cycles of the Way of Heaven, / I slaughter and slay.”⁸¹ To defend the frontiers, additional soldiers and supplies were requisitioned and great numbers of luxury items produced for diplomatic exchanges and outright bribes; evidently, the border commanderies bore the brunt of increased demands by the throne.⁸² Fourth, to finance these efforts, advisors in Wudi’s inner circle persuaded him as early as 119 BC to raise money through state monopolies on the basic necessities, including salt, iron, coins, and wine (the last needed for ritual libations), inducing an inflationary spiral.

The final decades of Wudi’s reign saw mounting protests against the aging ruler’s profligacy. Banditry followed as soon as the reserves of cash and grain were exhausted, and the breakdown of communications with the eastern part of the realm, where a great many of the nobles resided, was serious enough that the gates to the capital were closed on at least two occasions, in 100 and in 91 BC. Widespread disaffection may explain the decisions by Wudi, who had taken no part in any campaigns fought during his reign, to set out in his declining years upon hastily arranged imperial progresses (“tours of inspection” in the rhetoric of the time) to destinations far to the north, west, south, and east of the capital. No fewer than eight such “tours” were conducted in the last years of his reign, in 110, 107, 106, 104, 102, 94, 93, and 89 BC.⁸³ Whatever the effects of his progresses, harsh critiques of Wudi’s political choices became the starting point of many heated discussions by the closing years of his grandson’s reign (r. 74–48 BC). Obviously, the One Man endangered all the more people when he as ruler over vast territories failed to exercise self-restraint. Hence, the calls for retrenchment that accelerated in the last decades of the Western Han, providing inspiration and vocabulary for a broad intellectual movement espousing a neoclassical “return” to the moderation attributed to the legendary and semi-legendary rulers of the distant past.

A summary of two sources from Wudi’s era – Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 three memorials outlining the duties of the Son of Heaven (dated to between 140 and 134 BC) and Sima Qian’s treatises in the *Shiji* – suffice to provide a context of Wudi’s extravagances here. Both Dong and Sima Qian, as it happens, had paid dearly for remonstrating with Wudi: Sima Qian, accused of the capital crime of “defaming the Lord,” was castrated, and Dong was once condemned to death (though he was later pardoned). That both authors, who were the butt of cruel jokes during their own lives, had become tragic heroes by Eastern Han (AD 25–220) speaks to the shifting perspectives over some two centuries of Han rule.

Sometime early in Wudi’s reign, Dong Zhongshu, an expert in the *Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) ascribed to Confucius, was invited in his capacity as court Academician to pronounce upon a matter of great interest to Wudi’s court, “the essentials of the Great Way” of kingly rule. If the ruling house hoped to procure Heaven’s blessing, the young Wudi demanded to know, how far was it feasible and right to embrace models of governance derived from the distant past, given that rulers for the last five hundred years, at least, had found it impossible to restore the

81 See Sima Xiangru’s version of a speech ascribed to the Son of Heaven, in Knechtges, vol. 2, 53–113.

82 The protests made by representatives of the residents of Shandong at a later time, under Xuandi (r. 74–49 BC), are supposedly recorded verbatim in the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (Debates on Salt and Iron), attributed to Huan Kuan 桓寬, though it seems obvious that this work was composed some decades after 81 BC. See *Early Chinese Texts*, 477–483. Readers are encouraged to consult “Empires and their Size,” in Mark Elvin, *The Patterns of the Chinese Past* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), 17–22.

83 See, e.g., SJ 30.1438, in trans. Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) [hereafter Watson], vol. II, 99.

Way of the Ancients?⁸⁴ On the one hand, Wudi professed to be “terrified” lest prodigies and omens of late had been provoked by his apparent lapses; he welcomed criticism, or so he said. On the other hand, the specific wording used by Wudi in his invitation to speak out on such weighty matters made it well nigh impossible for members of his administration not to frame their replies in Wudi’s own terms. Wudi had prefaced his remarks with the assertion that heaven’s favor could only be experienced by all lesser living things through the mediation of the imperial person;⁸⁵ not surprisingly his advisors followed suit. Wudi wanted also to inquire if the state sacrifices to the supreme deities might not be of some use in promoting his pursuit of long life or immortality.

Dong’s responses are recorded in three memorials in his *Hanshu* biography,⁸⁶ in which Dong was careful to adopt and even elaborate Wudi’s rhetoric about the Son of Heaven’s pivotal role in sustaining cosmic order. Given the parameters of “the realm of interactions between Heaven and Man” (*Tianren xiangyu zhibi ji* 天人相與之際), Dong argued, high Heaven, in company with the animating energies of yin and yang *qi*, required the Son of Heaven to set a moral example for all his subjects.⁸⁷ In Dong’s characterization, an anthropomorphic Heaven reliably operated “in its heart” out of a sense of profound love and sympathy for the ruler of men,⁸⁸ seeing the rectification of the ruler’s behavior as the precondition for attempts to promote higher standards of conduct among the subjects of the realm. As the proverb put it, the ruler’s unseen effect on his many subordinates was as certain as that of the wind blowing over the grasses.⁸⁹ And just as Heaven places mild spring before harsh winter, the ruler must give priority to less coercive methods of governance; thus “Heaven relies on suasive example, rather than on punishments.”⁹⁰

Therefore, the Son of Heaven must reject the old ways of governance inherited from Qin, insofar as these placed undue reliance on legal rights and contractual duties. That the Qin empire had imploded a mere ten-odd years after unification should be sign enough of the folly of continuing its ill-conceived policies,⁹¹ and since “rotten wood cannot be carved,” amending the Qin policies in piecemeal fashion would never work.⁹² Instead, the ruler should show himself to be the true “father and mother” of the people, replacing legalistic impositions with

84 HS 56.2495–2496 gives the text of Wudi’s invitation to speak. Wudi was sixteen upon his accession.

85 HS 56.2497.

86 HS 56.2495. For Dong’s position at this time, see Anne Cheng who in her “Review Article of Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon*,” *Early China* 23–24 (1998–1999), 353–366, esp. 354, notes that Dong Zhongshu receives only a brief biographical notice in the *Shiji*, and no more than four additional passages in that work mention his name. In the *Hanshu*, by contrast, Dong is given an extensive biography. Portions of the *Chunqiu fanlu* attributed to Dong most probably postdate the Han, so the text is not considered here.

87 HS 56.2497. Wudi’s speech here outlines his goals, to which Dong responds. HS 56.2505 urges the ruler to cultivate the moral way epitomized in the “Five Constants” of 仁誼禮知信, so that he will receive Heaven’s blessings and extend his favor to all living creatures.

88 HS 56.2498.

89 HS 56.2501. See *Lunyu* 12.19, for the comparison of personal rule and the wind over grasses. The immense effect of the ruler and his councillors upon the “people below” is reiterated in HS 56.2521.

90 HS 56.2502.

91 HS 56.2504.

92 HS 56.2504.

a less defined but equally strong sense of mutual obligation and commonweal.⁹³ If scions of the ruling house refused to reform their own conduct, Heaven would surely respond by issuing harmless prodigies first and full-scale disasters afterward, so as to make it harder for even the worst ruler to persist in foolhardy conduct likely to incur the loss of Heaven's Mandate.⁹⁴ As the main propellant in a dynasty's rise and fall was its subjects' attitude toward the ruler,⁹⁵ the single most important precept for rulers is that they bear the chief responsibility for the success or failure of their ruling house. In Wudi's own case, "it lay in his hands." For, lacking a suitable model, the common people would pursue profit at the expense not only of one another but also of the court itself.⁹⁶

Sounding a much more positive note in one memorial, Dong proposed the establishment of schools in the commandery and county seats that would facilitate the dissemination of the ruler's exemplary model of cultivation and the transmission of the "old" hallowed rites and music of Zhou.⁹⁷ Music was particularly efficacious in inducing a moral transformation among the unlettered.⁹⁸ The tax burden on the commoners should also be reduced, so that Wudi's subjects would not abandon the "basic occupations" of ploughing and weaving on which the dynasty depended.⁹⁹ Dong never fully explained the inexplicable, of course: how the realm would find the money to fund these new initiatives, if taxes were reduced on the scale that Dong suggested. He did promise that if Wudi followed his policy proposals, he would be able to align himself with the One and forge a great union whose like the world had never seen.¹⁰⁰ Such moral leadership would surely prolong Wudi's life no less than the health of the dynasty. The techniques to inspire subjects to love and emulate the ruler had hardly changed from Xunzi's day; the association between "unity" and "greatness" was never challenged. Threading through Dong's three memorials was the assertion that a single realm spanning "all-under-heaven" was the single form of government most apt to produce a "right and proper" (*zheng* 正) transformation (*jiaobua*) in even the humblest subjects. In Dong's reckoning, the implementation of his new policies would enable denizens of the farthest-flung regions – places like Yelang 夜郎 in the far west and Kangju 康居 (Bactria?) – to rejoice in the unparalleled benefits conferred by the *pax Sinica*, or Great Peace (*taiping* 太平).¹⁰¹

In light of Xunzi's strenuous denials of extra-human intervention in human societies, Dong's insistence that the Son of Heaven had it within his power to affect, for good or for ill, the entire range of cosmic operations is striking, though it may well have been settled convention once a ruler of the Central States also ruled most of the known world.¹⁰² What is interest-

93 HS 56.2497, 2502, etc.

94 HS 56.2498.

95 HS 56.2500.

96 HS 56.2503.

97 HS 56.2503, 2512–2513. The academies were set up to train the right sort of advisors for the Han court, as "worthy and unworthy" officials were in Dong's time said to be "mixed up," meaning that both sorts of men were occupying prominent positions in the government (esp. 2513).

98 HS 56.2499.

99 HS 56.2511.

100 HS 56.2502–2503.

101 HS 56.2511.

102 HS 56.2502.

ing is the way in which Wudi’s propensity for self-absorption and self-aggrandizement was accommodated in Dong’s rhetoric. Perhaps Dong was merely a good persuader, for was it not the rhetorician’s job to “rely on what delights his lord in order to induce him to enter upon the Way”?¹⁰³ Still, Dong’s assertion that the exalted status of the “One Man” was on a par with the totality of “heaven-and-earth” (i.e., phenomenal existence) precluded serious attention to the unfortunate consequences of Wudi’s enormous appetites for lavish display and for foreign exotics.¹⁰⁴ Once Dong had painted the Han throne as exalted in every possible way, it became harder for the classicist to explain why the sought-after signs of Heaven’s favor had failed to arrive.¹⁰⁵ If, as Dong Zhongshu alleged, “even a child five *chi* 尺 tall,” “presenting himself at the gate of Confucius” as a would-be student of classical learning, was ashamed to speak of hegemony whose “lesser Way” utilized deception and force,¹⁰⁶ then many aspects of the Han regime a century after the conquest could never be assessed with any degree of honesty. At best, Dong by his deft use of proverbs and classical citations could only defend the canonical texts against the charge that they provided mainly vague and contradictory prescriptions for good governance, neatly skirt the two substantive issues to which Wudi’s inquiries had specifically alluded (whether the throne should adopt a less activist stance and also avoid lavish displays),¹⁰⁷ and conclude, rather lamely, that it would take a long time – perhaps as much as a generation or two – for Heaven’s movements to register the good rule whose secular effects would be apparent to mere mortals appreciably sooner.

Other thinkers around Dong’s time preferred to counter Wudi’s expansionist impulses with solemn injunctions that the throne’s administration should “leave no traces,” since the prevailing system of laws, customs, and rites functioned as a fully sufficient and equitable expression of cultural priorities. The rhetoric of *wuwei* 無為 (“non-interventionist government”) was first articulated shortly after the Han founding in 206 BC, when the realm was weary from decades of war and the coffers of the ruling family were empty. It was now adapted for a court whose powers were the greatest that the world had ever seen, a court that felt itself capable of embarking upon any and all foreign wars and forms of cultural experimentation and display. Wudi, after all, had added three new palaces – the Mingguang 明光, the Cassia 桂, and the Northern – to the inherited Weiyang and Changle Palace complexes in the capital city; he had also constructed a fourth palace in the western suburbs, linking it to the others by overhead passages (*judao* 復道); and he had greatly expanded the Shanglin Park as well. In this new context, it was no longer clear how much the sage-ruler needed to rely on worthy ministers as he set about “modelling himself upon Heaven and establishing the

103 XZ 51/13/29–30; Knoblock, II, 201 (mod.).

104 On Wudi’s penchant for exotica, see Tamara Ch’in, *op. cit.*

105 For one implied comparison between Wudi and Confucius, see HS 56.2503.

106 HS 56.2524.

107 See HS 56.2510, which argues that some luxuries are necessary to establish and maintain social distinctions and to encourage the development of virtues; Dong explicitly rejects those who would advocate restraint in spending, disassociating such restraint from the Middle Way of Confucius. Dong did, however, slip in a comment that since the Han had succeeded to the chaos of the Qin, its manner of ruling ought to downplay the elaboration of the Zhou and stress the “loyalty” of the Xia, said to epitomize an admirable simplicity. See HS 56.2519.

Way.”¹⁰⁸ The rhetoric of the ruler’s near-divinity seems to have hamstrung the very classicists who most deftly deployed it.

Then, too, even the harshest critics of specific policies executed by individual rulers were undeniably proud of the very fact that the Central States boasted of unified rule over vast territories, as shown by Sima Qian’s *Shiji*. Sima Qian might rail against Wudi’s delusions about immortality but he took for granted the positive impact of centrally directed efforts to organize water control.¹⁰⁹ Nor did Sima Qian’s distaste for the foreign wars of expansion keep him from praising the public-spiritedness of the rich shepherd Bu Shi 卜式, who offered, during the campaigns of 124–121 BC, to donate half of his immense fortune to aid Wudi’s forces in extinguishing the Xiongnu.¹¹⁰ Sima Qian never doubts the superiority of the Central States civilization over other ways of life of the border peoples, though, like several authors of an earlier era, he occasionally portrays the noble savage in order to shame his compatriots into better behavior. A passage from the *Shiji* illustrates the material and psychic benefits associated with unified rule:

By the time the present ruler had been on the throne a few years, over seventy years had passed since the founding of the Han. During that time, the nation had met with no major disturbances, so that, except in times of flood or drought, every person was well supplied and every family had enough to get along on. The granaries in the cities and countryside were full and the government treasures were running over with wealth. In the capital, the strings of cash had been stacked up by the hundreds of millions until the cords binding them had rotted away and they could no longer be counted. (...) The grain overflowed and piled up outside, where it spoiled and became unfit to eat. Horses were to be seen even in the streets and lanes of the common people or plodding in great numbers alone the paths between the fields. Anyone so poor as to ride a mare was disdained by his neighbors. (...) The local officials remained at the same posts long enough to see their sons and grandsons grow to maturity. (...) As a result, men had a sense of self-respect and regarded law-breaking as a serious matter.¹¹¹

The sense of security and order engendered by strong centralized rule, in turn, sparked confidence in the people that their “unflagging efforts” would yet improve daily life.¹¹² According to Sima Qian’s account, the trouble in paradise only began when some were allowed to accumulate huge fortunes and exploit others. “There was no limit to how far each went in aping the houses, carriages, and dress of his social superiors,” nor in “forcing the poor into their hire.” Meanwhile the rich “bought up surplus commodities in the villages and hoarded them.”¹¹³ Ironically, it was Wudi’s own “offices for equalization” that escalated the corruption by pushing the wealthy to purchase offices, so that wealth became synonymous with influence.¹¹⁴ The rich bought offices that allowed the office-holders to further enrich themselves. From Sima Qian’s perspective, the

108 HS 56.2515.

109 Contrast SJ 28 and 29.

110 SJ 30.1431, 1440 (Watson, II, 92–93).

111 SJ 30.1420; Watson, II, 81. Michael Loewe, “Ideals, Practices, and Problems of Han China,” forthcoming in a symposium volume edited by Cary Liu for Princeton University Art Museum (2008), 2, says, “Han officials and writers saw themselves as upholding a type of government that was infinitely superior to that of their predecessors.”

112 This is the picture that Sima Qian draws from his early sources on Yu of Xia, King Tang of Shang, and King Wu of Zhou.

113 SJ 30.1420, 1425 (Watson, II, 82, 87).

114 SJ 30.1428, 1433 (Watson, II, 95).

“laws of change” mandated that a time of flourishing be succeeded by an era of decline,¹¹⁵ but it was Wudi’s flagrant disregard for equity that left few of his subjects, rich or poor, feeling obliged to render the services they owed the realm by virtue of their stations.¹¹⁶ Thus the Han throne, which, in its early years, had single-mindedly used a combination of guile and ruthlessness to crush the power of the nobility, found itself at the apex of its power beholden to the money-makers. Blinded by his own extravagant ambitions, Wudi had simply failed to see the wisdom of “pulling up” or “reining in” the lawbreakers – “before they had a chance to spoil the flock.”¹¹⁷ Due restraint in accumulation and consumption therefore became the rallying call of the critics at the courts of Wudi’s immediate successors.

Sample core 3: ca. 40 BC to AD 100

Up to the time of Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BC), supporters of the realm had been largely defined by their unremitting efforts to concentrate power and authority at the Western Han capital of Chang’an, on the assumption that the larger the territory under the direct control of the center, the more rational the distribution of resources in the realm. Han Wudi inherited unprecedented power, and with the defeat of the rebel Liu An in 122 BC, he and his advisors commanded greater power still – perhaps more power than any single ruling group in China – or elsewhere, for that matter – knew until early modern times.¹¹⁸ But by the time Wudi died, the resources – in men and materiel, no less than in cultural capital – to which the Han sovereigns laid claim had shrunk once again. Any thoughtful person reviewing the reign of Han Wudi might be led to wonder, in private or aloud, If all governmental powers are concentrated in a single court, will not the evil or inept ruler’s misplaced priorities simply visit greater ruin upon more people? Whether it should be the realm’s first priority to extend its reach as far as possible and whether more wealth always made for more ethical living – these questions were no longer easily answered, even when the undisputed sway of the Central States to the very edges of the known world was conceivable.¹¹⁹

In this context, a third sample of materials, drawn from the last decades of Western Han and the first seventy-five years or so of Eastern Han rule, evince yet another rhetoric, that of the ideal ruler who eschews all expansionist ventures, adheres strictly to the moral guidelines enunciated in the Five Classics (with an emphasis on modesty and filial duty); and adopts the stance of *primus inter pares* among the scholars and officials in his administration.¹²⁰ Parts of this

115 SJ 30.1420 (Watson, II, 82).

116 SJ 30.1430 (Watson, II, 89) speaks of the exemptions from government service bought by the rich.

117 SJ 30.1431 (Watson, II, 94), citing the advice of Bu Shi (see above).

118 For the acknowledgement of this, see HS 6.173. Just as we speak of the “Nixon White House” as a catchphrase signifying all agents of any branch of government nominally working for Richard Nixon, so, too, to speak of Han Wudi is to speak of all those serving in that ruler’s administration. Michael Loewe and Michael Nylan have both argued that Han Wudi seems, for most of his reign, to have been the pawn of one or another *waizi* family, including the Dou, the Wei, and the Li.

119 On the second question, see *Yantie lun*, chap. 3.

120 BHT 1.10b; section 14 (Tjan, I, 232) equates the term *jūnzǐ* 君子 (“gentleman”) with that of Son of Heaven. I focus here on the first seventy-five years of the Eastern Han for two reasons: first, the *Hanshu* 漢書 compiled by Ban Gu 班固 and Ban Zhao 班昭 was completed ca. AD 100, and it provides unparalleled access into the thinking of the first century of Eastern Han; and second, surprisingly little is known of the last cen-

rhetoric have been familiar enough to students of Warring States history. The rhetoric of moderation, after all, can be traced back to the Mohist classics of the pre-Qin era. Still, it is doubtful that the constituent strands of this rhetoric had ever before been united. Probably the image of the ruler as student of the Classics, to take one example, was honed first during the court conferences held at the Shiqu Pavilion in 51 BC and at the White Tiger Hall in AD 79, which were expressly convened to determine the “correct” interpretations of difficult passages found in the Classics and commentaries. Before that, certainly, the Son of Heaven had observed debates between rival classicists, but he reportedly bothered to intervene only when those debates touched upon matters relating to the throne’s legitimacy.¹²¹

Few moderns have noted the singularity of such events designed to place the Son of Heaven at the helm not only of public policy, but also of all classical learning. (It would be as if George W. Bush or Jacques Chirac were asked to decide the finer points of Biblical scholarship.) Custom dictated the format of these debates: one scholar began by posing a question to scholars of opposing views; a second scholar recorded the content of the debates; and the ruler in attendance, presumably after consultation, pronounced the final verdict on each issue before the assembly. Such events lend plausibility to passages in the *Han History*, compiled around AD 100, that lovingly detail the ruler’s performance as ritual master and as teacher of the Classics.¹²² Scholasticism, the rhetoric of moderation, and office-holding tended to complement each other, since excessive displays of wealth outside the court almost always implied fiscal corruption or collusion by disloyal administrators of the realm. To balance the portrait of the ruler as *primus inter pares*, the case was also built in late Western and early Eastern Han texts that the ruler was made of qualitatively different stuff than other men; hence his anointment, by the gods themselves, to a position of unparalleled authority. According to the latter accounts, no individual, regardless of merit, could found his own dynasty without divine sanction or an especially fortuitous situation within the cyclical cosmic phases.

Understandably, it was no longer politic to emphasize the relative “newness” of the Han ruling house. Liu Bang’s unprecedented rise from commoner to Son of Heaven was mentioned, but not dwelt upon, lest the ruling clan be despised by upstart members of the new elites. The undeniable growth in the numbers of great magnates had some bearing on this: whereas the Qin and early Western Han rulers had viewed small farmers in a self-sufficient economy as their chief allies in the constant struggle to centralize power at the expense of the nobility, the Han court soon after Wudi abandoned efforts to limit the size of landholdings

tury of Eastern Han, apart from the Proscriptions of 166–167, and 168–184, the Yellow Turban Rebellion begun in AD 184, and the ensuing unravelling of Han authority. Aside from CHC 1, the works of Rafe de Crespigny and Etienne Balasz still provide the best guides in English to the period. See also the dissertations of Mark Asselin, “A Significant Season: Literature in a time of endings, Cai Yong and a few contemporaries (Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington, 1997); Miranda Brown, “Men in Mourning: Ritual, human nature, and politics in Warring States and Han China, 453 BC – AD 220” (Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 2002); Kenneth Brashier, “Evoking the Ancestor: The stele hymns of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)” (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1997), and his (forthcoming) ms. entitled “The ancestral cults in early imperial China.”

121 See the event recorded in SJ 121.3122, in which two classical scholars debated the principles by which the legendary Kings Tang and Wu, as loyal subjects, became regicides. The Han ruler wisely put a stop to such potentially treasonous discussions. On the ideological background of this debate, see Carine Defoort, “Can Words Produce Order? Regicide in the Confucian Tradition,” *Cultural Dynamics* 12.1 (2000), 85–86.

122 See, e.g., the opening passage in HHS 79A.

allowed commoners. In consequence, neither the Eastern Han founder nor his successor, Mingdi (r. 57–75), was able to carry out the cadastral surveys that the ruling house needed to determine its tax base and to redistribute resources fairly. Naturally, it proved harder for the Han throne to pry troops and taxes from great magnates in possession of vast estates and armies of retainers – magnates who, in their arrogance, imagined themselves to be the de facto heirs of the old aristocracy that ruled the Central States before 221 BC.¹²³ Presumably, the throne’s weakness in the real world – exacerbated by frontier raids by nomadic bands – pushed its inner circle of advisors to devise better methods to preempt questions about legitimacy.¹²⁴ While the pre-Qin criterion for judging the ruler’s mettle had been the “appropriateness” of the particular policies he espoused, now the sanction of unseen forces was invoked with growing insistence, perhaps because such forces were hardly liable to the rational tests for good rule proposed by Xunzi and likeminded thinkers prior to unification.

This elevated rhetoric disguised a number of unsavoury realities. The last rulers of Western Han had been notorious for neglecting their duties. One ruler, Chengdi (r. 33–7 BC), reportedly was so besotted with two sister-consorts that he murdered his infant heir at their request. Chengdi’s sudden demise, by poison, said the rumors, paved the way to displace the Liu ruling house by the most prominent member of a *waiqi* clan, Wang Mang 王莽; Wang was head of state for over twenty years (2 BC to AD 23)¹²⁵ before the founder of a “restored” Han, Guangwu 光武 (r. 25–57), ascended the throne. Unfortunately, for some reason Guangwu, a scion of a lateral branch of the Lius, did not, as Liu Bang had done in Western Han, systematically destroy the staunch comrades-in-arms who brought him to power. In consequence, for generations the descendants of Guangwu’s allies determined the succession via the selection of “suitable candidates” for empress; though it is doubtful if fewer women were introduced into the palace than before, the empresses and dowager empresses bore the illustrious names of remarkably few families. Meanwhile, the pool from which high officials came was reduced also, as the powerful families in the capital and countryside controlled appointments, asserting the prerogatives they associated with their inherited status. As the occasion demanded, then, the Eastern Han rulers tried to stake superior claims to extraordinary virtue, in the face of widespread lapses from the norms of civilized behavior laid down in the Five Classics to which all paid lip service.¹²⁶

123 The classic essay on this subject is that by Yang Lien-sheng, “Great Families of the Eastern Han,” *Chinese Social History*, eds. E-tu Zen Sun and John De Francis (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1956), 103–134. Ying Shao’s 應劭 *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 repeatedly attests to the aristocratic pretensions of the Eastern Han magnates. This probably explains why the changes in court protocol devised by Cao Bao 曹褒 in AD 86 were eventually shelved. See HHS 35.1203.

124 For a summary of these events, see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jinsbu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1967), 26.781. One sign of the lack of respect for the imperial presence was the desecration of Shundi’s tomb in AD 144. See HHS 6.276.

125 Chengdi’s obsession with the Zhao sisters is detailed in HS 12.347. Wang Mang ruled first as Marshal of State, then as regent, and finally as founder of the Xin dynasty (9–23). For further information, see Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods (221 BC–AD 24)* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 536–545, on Wang Mang (2).

126 The widespread disaffection is catalogued in, e.g., Wang Fu 王符 (90–165), *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 and Ying Shao 應劭, *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (comp. ca. AD 203), esp. chaps. 2–5, which review events of late Western and early Eastern Han. For the importance of filial duty in Eastern Han, see Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China. A case study of the Po-ling Ts’ui family* (Cambridge; Cambridge University

Absent this precipitous decline in the real power and authority of the late Western Han and Eastern Han rulers, the key arguments in Ban Biao's 班彪 (3–54) famous essay, "On the Mandate of Kings" (Wang ming lun 王命論), make little sense.¹²⁷ Long before Ban Biao, the Han ruling house had already proclaimed that the Liu had secured the throne, seemingly against all odds, thanks to their descent from the antique culture-hero Yao 堯.¹²⁸ But Ban Biao's essay on legitimacy was the most tightly argued polemic to take aim at the many "who do not understand that this sacred vessel, the rule of the realm, is transmitted by mandate, with the result that it cannot be won either by craft or by force." As Ban Biao put it, "The masses of people see that the First Ancestor 高祖 (i.e., Liu Bang) arose from among the commoners and they fail to comprehend the reasons for his rise." They believed that, happening upon a time of violence and disorder, Liu Bang secured the throne because he was able to "wield his sword" in the desperate free-for-all in which "success went to the luckiest and swiftest."

To counter such potentially treasonous views, Ban Biao offered several proofs of the validity of the extraordinary hereditary claims of the Han ruling house, the most important being a canonical tradition associated with the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (*Annals*) that supplied a genealogy tracing Yao's 堯 descendants in an unbroken line from antiquity to the founder of Western Han.¹²⁹ Building on this genealogy, Ban Biao's essay offered five supplementary claims: (1) Destiny plays a huge role in all lives, which becomes obvious when poverty and misery afflict good men, so something as important as the receipt of Heaven's mandate to rule over "all-under-heaven" certainly requires "the blessings of the gods"; (2) Truly extraordinary individuals, such as Xiang Yu 項羽 and Wang Mang 王莽, managed only briefly to wrest power and authority away from the Liu ruling family; that all rivals of the Han perished in the end, as if by divine providence, shows that lesser men will inevitably fail in the pursuit of supreme power (as even women have understood);¹³⁰ (3) The external proofs of the First Ancestor's election, including physiognomic traits and heavenly signs heralding the major stages in his life, were visible to all who came in contact with him; (4) Portents also accompanied the birth and early career of the founder of Eastern Han, marking him as the preordained choice to lead all-under-heaven; and (5) In every generation, the rightful heirs to the Han throne have succeeded

Press, 1978); and Michael Nylan, "Confucian Piety and Individualism in Han China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116:1 (Jan-Mar 1996), 1–27.

127 Ban's essay has been translated in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), I, 177–180, which translation has been modified here.

128 Like Michael Loewe, I do not think that these claims were made in early Western Han, when the very "newness" of the empire seems to have been celebrated more than its archaic prototypes.

129 According to Loewe, *Governed*, 480, Sui Hong 眭弘 (fl. 78 BC) may well have been the first to assert that the house of Han was descended from Yao. While this view eventually was adopted, it was initially considered to be subversive; hence Sui Hong's execution in 78 BC. The view was supported by the *Zuo Traditions* for the seventeenth year of the reign of Duke Zhao of Lu, rather than by the *Chunqiu* text itself; the *Zuo zhuan* passage then became the basis for HHS 36.1237. That this claim was not made in the main text of the *Chunqiu*, but in a commentary to it, is yet another proof, if one were needed, of the conflation of canon and commentary in Han times.

130 The mothers of Chen Ying 陳嬰 and Wang Ling 王陵 dissuaded them from trying to seize power for themselves or serving any opponent of the Liu clan. Both are identified for this reason as "exemplary women" in Liu Xiang's 劉向 *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳. Liu, of course, was a member of the imperial house. Ban Biao was related by marriage to the Liu clan.

to the throne, so that the line of inheritance has never been altered.¹³¹ (This last claim was especially interesting, given Ban's membership in the very sort of prominent *waiqi* clan liable to be charged with interfering in the succession.)

Ban Biao's essay is obviously a work of theology, not logic, judged by the more hardheaded analyses still circulating in Ban's time; it offers no rational support to the legitimacy of the Eastern Han throne.¹³² We must ask, then: What in the essay might have impressed its early readers? Of course, each of its arguments may have been addressed to a different audience, and perhaps skeptics were to be dazzled by the sheer number of arguments on view. Still, it is apparent that by this time no single ideological basis could possibly have assured the legitimacy of the Han house. One can only suppose that, given the mediocrity of many descendants of the Han ruling house, asserting Heaven's blessing might have been preferable to discussion of recent historical events and policy decisions. Particularly striking are Ban Biao's assertions that "common sense" is no competent judge when it comes to questions of legitimacy but that even "ordinary women" can understand how dangerous it is to seek to elevate one's status.¹³³ By late Western and Eastern Han, in order to shore up support for the claims of the Liu clan, regular appeals were made to the cosmological concepts subsumed under the rubric of the Five Phases,¹³⁴ as well as to the figure of Confucius as patron saint of the Great Han.

Over the course of the Han, no fewer than three competing cosmological schema had been advanced on behalf of the court. In the first, the Han ruled by virtue of the power of Black (and Water), either because Qin, its predecessor, had failed to receive Heaven's Mandate or because its tenure had been too short for its reign to be reflected in the regular cosmic cycles. By a second theory, the Han ruled by the virtue of Yellow Earth, symbolizing the center, and by a third, the patron Phase for the Han was Red Fire.¹³⁵ In his most recent book, *The*

131 By late Western Han and Eastern Han, the lines of succession had become hopelessly tangled and the generations mixed. See Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict*, esp. chaps. 2 (17–36), and 8–9 (252–305), for examples of succession struggles.

132 E.g., those of Xunzi and Jia Yi cited earlier.

133 SY 11/21–24, assertions put into the mouths of the disciples and friends of Confucius (Kongzi).

134 Yin/yang and the Five Phases are usually regarded as one system, but in no case are Yin or Yang conceived as cosmic forces that can propel a clan to dynastic power. The *Lishi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 attributed to Lü Buwei 吕不韋 (d. 235 BC) may be the earliest extant attempt to apply the Five Phases to dynastic sequences. It is not certain, as noted by Kamada Shigeo 鎌田重雄, *Shin Kan seiji seido no kenkyū* 秦漢政治制度の研究 (Tokyo: Nihon gakujutsu shinkōkai, 1962), and Kurihara Tomonobu 栗原朋信, *Shin Kan shi no kenkyū* 秦漢史の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1960), 45–55, that the Qin actually adopted Water as its patron Phase; it is only certain that the Han claimed that Qin had done so. It is in 36 BC, with Chancellor Kuang Heng 匡衡, however, that the first memorial equates the Five Phases with the order of Heaven (HS 73.3122). Under Eastern Han, all accounts claim that the Liu clan ruled by the Fire and Red Phase.

135 In addition to the three mentioned here, several other schema were devised to account for cosmic transformation. See Michael Nylan, *The Shifting Center: The "Great Plan" and Later Readings* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 1992). For the notion of cosmic Phases (sometimes called Agents or – quite erroneously – Elements), see Nathan Sivin, "State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C.," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55, no. 1 (Jun 1995), 5–37. The Kings of Qin had supposedly paid cult to four powers, Green, Yellow, Red, and White, long before unification under Qin Shihuang. One wonders if black was chosen as the sum of all the other colors, for the Qin continually sought to demonstrate its superior power by bringing together in the capital all the emblems of the former regional powers. Qin rule by Water and Black was later traced to the capture of a black dragon by Duke Wen of Qin (r. 765–716 BC), as in SJ

Men who Governed China, Michael Loewe has detailed the various proposals submitted to the Han throne in favor of one dynastic patron Phase or another.¹³⁶ The arguments are complex, but their underlying motivation is simple enough to understand: No matter whether the Han ruled by Water, Earth, or by Fire (i.e., as successor or as conqueror of Zhou or Qin), its rule had been established through a process characterized as “natural,” “organic,” and “inevitable.”¹³⁷ The work of Michel Foucault is entirely relevant here:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish “true” and “false” statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; and the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹³⁸

There is little doubt that in the general politics of the Han dynasty, the essay of Ban Biao, like the treatises and apocrypha predicated on the Five Phases, was designed to render certain types of questions unthinkable, chief among them: Why was it Liu Bang, a figure not manifestly more capable than many of his early rivals, who finally managed to consolidate all authority in his commoner family? and, Why did the Han house, long after it had sunk into corruption, debauchery, and inefficiency, continue to exercise its sway over far-flung regions?

By correlative theory, the Han house secured the throne because the appointed time for the ascendancy of its patron Phase and color had arrived, and the Han would continue to prevail – regardless of its merits – until such time as its patron Phase declined of its own accord, as had happened with all preceding dynasties.¹³⁹ Only “When the dynasty’s fortunes entered the disaster cycle,/ Han’s net would snap its cords.”¹⁴⁰ Among the faithful servants of the Liu house, the hope was simply to prolong the beneficent phase of the allied cosmic cycle for as long as possible – and a great deal *was* possible, if the ruler increased the legitimacy of his line by acts of virtue that might cause Heaven to overrule the Phases.¹⁴¹ For Heaven’s

28:1366. For Jia Yi’s suggestion that the Han rule by Earth and Yellow, “because twenty years had passed” since its founding, see SJ 84:2492; HS 48:2222.

136 Loewe, *Governed*, chaps. 14–15 (457–516).

137 Loewe, *Governed*, chaps. 14–15 (474–521); Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000). For some of these debates, which thread through the standard histories of Han, see HS 25B:1270–1271; HSBZ 25B/23b, and Loewe, *Governed*, chap. 15; cf. Shen Yue 沈約, *Songshu* 宋書 (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 12:259. Loewe, *Governed*, chaps. 14, 15, emphasizes that the “marked attention to the Five Phases” in official treatises was “relatively short-lived, perhaps from 50 BCE to 50 CE.”

138 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 131.

139 Hence, the need for the dynasty to move quickly against such figures as the scholar Gan Zhongke 甘忠可, who had only suggested that the powers of the Han dynasty stood in some need of revival; for this assertion, Gan was charged with treason. Note that the Five Phases concepts implied that every dynasty would inevitably decline at some point, in the regular course of things:

140 Zuo Si, “Wei Capital Rhapsody,” in Knechtges, vol. 1, 433.

141 Loewe, *Governed*, chap. 13 (421–456). For centuries, if not millennia, tradition has held that the concept of Tianming was invoked by the sage-rulers of antiquity. It is quite possible, however, that the term “Tianming” was borrowed from the Qin pre-dynastic state, rather than from the Zhou (ca. 1050–256 BC). The first appeal to the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven appears in the three memorials composed by Dong Zhongshu, but we do not know how often such appeals were made prior to Eastern Han.

power could conceivably surpass that of any individual Power, and so the Han hegemony might even manage to outlast its preordained days in the cycle of reigning Phases. The Han rulers must see to it that their sacrifices and their conduct allowed them to continue to enjoy the divine sanction of Heaven’s highest deity, variously identified by different titles, including Tian 天 and Taiyi 泰一, the Grand Unity.¹⁴² Notably, the Mandate of Heaven – unlike the medieval European divine right of kings – never gave the ruler carte blanche, for the ruling house was deemed *ipso facto* to have “lost the Mandate” as soon as the reigning Son of Heaven was defeated in the field or forced to abdicate. Reference to the Mandate’s sway, in consequence, was as apt to prompt debate as stifle it on such diverse topics as taxation, the balances of power among regions and distinct social groups, or the frontier defenses.¹⁴³ Meanwhile, the Eastern Han rhetoric of moderation, consistently invoked because of ruling house’s lack of resources, admitted the need to scale back the potential scope of the sovereign’s civilizing potential; it was impractical to try to bring many outlying groups into the fold of “the king’s subjects,” under any circumstances.¹⁴⁴

The sample cores extracted above suggest that the conventions of unified rule may well have differed over time. No justifications were ever explicitly rejected, so far as I know. Instead, the battery of justifications summoned on any given occasion grew like Topsy. In that the same justifications, as recorded in our literary sources, were brought to bear upon new historical contexts, they were protean in nature and potentially infinite in number. All we know is that ambivalence toward unified rule was felt as soon as unification was certain. It may therefore prove enlightening to push our inquiry into another area, that of the visual record, where we find a curious lacuna in the stock repertoire of Han visual political imagery, a lacuna that presents a striking contrast with that of Rome under Augustus.

A conundrum and some preliminary answers

If, as stated earlier in this essay, historians of China will likely soon turn to intensive study of the careful propagation of imperial imagery, they will immediately confront a conundrum. Perhaps the most obvious difference between the Roman and Han visual worlds is the absence of Han images of rulers on Han coins, an absence repeated, so far as we know, in public spaces and in household cults.¹⁴⁵ Why, then, did the Han courts, which were certainly mindful of the importance of many sorts of public display, choose to have its rulers remain compara-

142 Never mind that some Han rulers of notably few virtues had overseen exceptionally long periods of peace and prosperity. For example, Huidi (r. 207–195 BC) had left the exercise of power to his mother, who was ruthless to her enemies, yet the empire prospered under him. See HS 3:104. This helps to explain why the standard histories and essays of the period debate the place of *wuwei* 無為 in good rule. Yang Xiong’s *Fuyan*, chap. 4, is not alone in equating *wuwei* with shirking duties and with indolence. The supposed distinction between rule by laws and rule by ritual has proven to be a red herring, as every state used penal law and ritual as the two “handles” of governance. For further information on rule by ritual, see below, on public display.

143 Nicola di Cosmo, *China and its Ancient Enemies; The rise of nomadic power in East Asian history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 171.

144 BHT 6.1b–2a; section 143 (Tjan, II, 516).

145 Wu Pei-yi, “Memories of K’ai-feng,” *New Literary History. A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, vol. 25:1 (1994), 47–60. Wu Hung argued in his award-winning *The Wu Family Shrine. The ideology of early Chinese pictorial art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) that the imperial image appeared in the prefectural-level cults and also in household cults, but he cited no evidence to support his assertion.

tively invisible to their own subjects? For it seems to have been a choice, given that the Han court knew of Roman coins, even if it was ignorant of the layout of the archetypal Roman forum and domestic shrine. Since “a sense of hierarchy and a striving towards centrality” were “important elements” in the Central States’ conception of their place in “all-under-heaven,”¹⁴⁶ why did they not employ every medium that could celebrate the superiority of the ruler and his pivotal role in the whole known world?¹⁴⁷ After all, the Han rulers absolutely dominate the extant literary records, making their absence from the visual record all the more striking.

This is the conundrum for which historians of China must seek provisional answers, for such answers might alert us to other differences among early societies operating at similar levels of sophistication. For nearly a century, as readers will recall, historians of the Roman empire have argued that the faces on coins, as well as images in the public forums and temples, constituted vital props for the powers of the Roman *imperium*, first construed as a temporary military command over a given geographic territory and later as the guarantor of a more long-lasting *pax Romana* for a multi-ethnic citizenry.¹⁴⁸ By standard accounts, the ubiquity of Roman honorific inscriptions on stone and metal, in company with the images of emperors, consuls, and tribunes, helped to reinforce structures of dependence between center and periphery, even as the justifications for empire shifted abruptly from tropes of moral exemplarity to those of outright domination.¹⁴⁹ Images are presumed to have been necessary in view of low literacy rates in the Mediterranean world. Literacy rates, we presume, would have been about the same for the two Han dynasties as for the Roman empire, and standards of living roughly comparable in the two great realms on either side of the globe, so why was visual imagery less potent or more taboo in the Han empire?

Images on other objects besides coins and sculptures may have conveyed the unparalleled authority of the Son of Heaven. To take one example, the TLV bronze mirrors (ILLUS) displaying a square superimposed on a circle with a raised boss at the center are thought to represent square earth and the domed vault of the sky. Perhaps the boss, apart from its obvious function, marks the position of the One Man residing in the center, his capital.¹⁵⁰ But if this is the case, it is curious that such powerful symbols do not refer to the individual rulers, given the insistent focus on the suasive example of the Son of Heaven. One could speculate that there may have been no pressing need for ubiquitous imagery to advertise the scope and depth of rule by Qin and Han. As far as the eye could see, those dynasties were in control of nearly all the areas suited to sedentary agriculture, a way of life that supported a higher and more

146 Loewe, “China’s Sense of Unity,” 14.

147 For the ruler as central, see Nylan, “Boundaries of the Body and Body Politic in Early Confucian Thought,” in *Boundaries and Justice. Diverse Ethical Perspectives*, ed. David Miller and Sohail H. Hashmi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 112–135.

148 Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

149 Carlos Federico Norena, “The Civic Ideology of the Roman Emperor: Representation and communication” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2001).

150 For the TLV, see Michael Loewe and Carmen Blacker, *Ways to Paradise. The Chinese quest for immortality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), chap. 3 (60–85). Cf. Colin MacKenzie, “Liubo: The Five Hundred Year Craze,” in *Asian Games: The art of contest*, ed. Colin MacKenzie and Irving Finkel (New York: Asia Society, 2004), chap. 10 (112–125). Lillian Tseng (Yale University, Art History) claims in her Website to have successfully broken the “code” of the related *liubo* game that is said, in turn, to be related to the TLV mirrors.

secure material standard of living than the semi-nomadic or nomadic. Moreover, by the end of the first century or so of Han rule, the threat posed by the Xiongnu, the only major power to rival the Han, had been contained by the tributary and *heqin* 和親 (marriage alliance) systems, and, in the period under consideration, no other nomadic group effectively challenged the Central States on an equal footing, however much damage its raiding parties did to the purse and prestige of the Han rulers whose armies were called to defend the frontiers.

As we have seen, one type of rhetoric portrays the ideal ruler choosing to hide, so that he may deftly mediate among the collective wills and competing claims of his many subjects. One could therefore theorize that images of the ruler were rarely, if ever seen in public because this rhetoric supposes the ruler to be invisible so that he can be all things to all his subjects. But one wonders if “the hidden ruler” motif was not itself devised to screen from view the everyday realities of the Han court, which was most typically ruled not by a strong adult male but by women in the back palace and by the male heads of household for the *waiqi* 外戚 clans related by marriage to the ruling Liu clan.¹⁵¹ Of the fifteen persons who ascended the throne during Qin and Western Han, only one – Jingdi – appears to have inherited the throne without a succession struggle. The Eastern Han record was worse, if possible, for only the first three Eastern Han rulers had reached adulthood (i.e., age 19) at the time of their accession to the throne.¹⁵² This fact gains added significance when we consider the number of adult rulers in Western and Eastern Han who were reportedly engaged in the single-minded pursuit of immortality, conceivably because they were shut out of decision-making by the real powers behind the throne or because they feared for their lives.¹⁵³ One passage that drives home the real power of the *waiqi* appears in the *Shiji*, after commenting on the extraordinary powers invested in two maternal relatives of the young Wudi who acted as regents for the throne, the *Shiji* records the following interchange between Tian Fen, one of those regents, and Wudi:

151 Taking Empress Lü to be the model of the first method; and Huandi and Shundi, the models for the second. The signal importance of the institutions of empress and dowager empress is signified by the immediate rebuilding of the Changle Palace by the Han founder; this became the palace of the dowager empress by 198 BC. The power of dowagers was evident for much of the Six Dynasties, long periods in Tang and Song (e.g., under the Song empress Xiang); and roughly fifty years under the Liao.

152 For the first time since the days of Empress Lü, a child of 8 *sui* acceded to the throne as Zhaodi (87–74 BC); Xuandi (74–48 BC) was perhaps 18 *sui* at the time of accession, but he had grown up as a commoner, and he was definitely under the thumb of the Huo family *waiqi* until 68 BC. Yuandi (r. 48–33 BC), while an adult, was clearly under the particular influence of three men who had been named to “assist him” in the task of government. Chengdi (r. 33–7 BC) left the day-to-day running of the government largely to the Wang family, whose members exercised control until the fall of Western Han and the transfer of power to Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23). For further information, see the relevant entries in Loewe, *Dictionary*, esp. 823. In Eastern Han, as I have noted in earlier works, the majority of those who held the rank of Son of Heaven were also underage. As Loewe, *Dictionary*, 558, n. 48, has it, “Of the fourteen emperors of Eastern Han, only the first three, Guangwudi, Mingdi, and Zhangdi, were aged nineteen or more when they acceded to the throne.” For long periods of time in the Eastern Han, the *waiqi* families of Ma, Dou, Deng, Yan, and Liang contended for power.

153 See the sarcastic comments on the pursuit of immortality recorded in Zhang Heng’s “Western Metropolis Rhapsody,” on Wudi: “He accepted the ‘absolute truth’ of Shaojun, / Placed great hope in Luan Da’s ‘firm reliability’. / He erected immortals’ palms on tall stalks to receive pure dew from beyond the clouds. / He pulverized camelian stamens for his morning repast, / Certain that life could be prolonged.” (trans. Knechtges, vol. 1, 201).

Tian Fen conducted himself with a very lordly air. (...) At this time, whenever he entered the palace to report on some affair connected with his duties as chancellor, he would sit for days on end in conference with his superior [Wudi]. Whatever suggestions Tian made were always adopted. In recommending people for office, it sometimes happened that a particular family was promoted in one fell swoop to an office of the two thousand picul rank. Thus Tian's position outweighed that of the ruler, in point of fact. Wudi then asked, "Are you finished, my lord, with making your appointments? I might like to appoint a few officials, too." Another time, Tian Fen requested a loan of the imperial artisans to work on his estates, to which the ruler replied angrily, "Why yes! And while you're about it, why don't you then take my arsenal as well?"¹⁵⁴

It was years before Wudi felt confident enough to resist his regent's influence, and when he brought instances of Tian's misconduct before the court for discussion, Wudi's mother protested so vociferously that Wudi was forced to offer the most abject apologies in which he called himself her "humble servant" (*chen* 臣). Many of the most important generals assigned to frontier duty were drawn from the *waiqi* families also, rather than from external clans.¹⁵⁵ (Extraordinary *waiqi* power is the proper context in which to place the frequent strictures recorded in the dynastic histories and para-canonical texts against female intrigue, though such strictures have been and still are routinely [mis]read as generalized "anti-female rhetoric.")¹⁵⁶ Since the occupants of the Han throne, aside from the founders of the dynasty and their adult sons, hardly figured in the records as conquering heroes, to display the images of either the Han sovereigns or their generals might well have undermined rather than magnified the power and prestige of the reigning Liu clan. Even now, in the supposedly liberated twenty-first century, it is hard for us to realize that the supreme power in Han rested largely with women, supported by their male relatives and by eunuchs of the palace, rather than with the often underage, incompetent, or disinterested Sons of Heaven who assume center stage in the "Basic Annals" chapters in the standard histories for the period. The force of Han rhetoric, when combined with the absence of rulers' portraits,¹⁵⁷ has worked surprisingly well up to the present day to screen our view of the actual wielders of Han power – those operating behind the screen.

154 SJ 107.2844.

155 Contrast the case in many early empires, including the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian, and Roman, where the emperor had to demonstrate his own military prowess. See Dihle, ms., 6. It is notable – though few have noted it – that the Han courts chose to label the succession patterns of the Xiongnu, whereby the mother of the man chosen to be heir was purportedly killed, as "barbaric," no doubt in part because of the power of the *waiqi* in Han times. See J. Holmgren, *Marriage, Kinship, and Power in Northern China* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995).

156 HS 36.1957. The tales of exemplary women found in Liu Xiang's 劉向 *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, to cite but one well-known instance, barely ever leave the political realm; the standard histories themselves say that the *Lienü zhuan* was written to teach Chengdi (r. 32–7 BC), who was childless, the lessons to be learnt about palace women. If, in the modern world, "men are seen and women are looked at," as Susan Sontag once observed, it is understandable that such texts have been (mis)read in modern times as "books about women" instead of "books about men's choices" or "books about political realities and theories."

157 It is likely, despite the lack of archaeological and literary evidence, that the images of paragons of earlier eras were portrayed in "private" locations, including the palace and the ancestral temples.

In light of the foregoing, it is incumbent upon us to reconsider the evidence we have for Han public spectacles.¹⁵⁸ Apparently, in China certain forms of public display in highly ritualized settings fulfilled much the same sort of function as the imperial images on Roman coins and on Roman statues. (The display was always “public” in one of two senses: either it took place outside the palace complexes or, if inside, word of the display was meant to be relayed to much larger groups.) Ultimately, of course, the objective behind all such display was control over not only the political narratives of unfolding events, but also over political memory. As Pierre Nora has said, “History binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progression and to relations between things,” whereas memory “takes root in things, in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects.”¹⁵⁹ It was crucial, then, to transform intangible “ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like” into material realities through ceremonial events, symbolic objects, and public monuments, in which form they could impress the viewing public. Presumably, these material realities were especially crucial in eras when relatively low rates of literacy limited the utility of propaganda in writing.¹⁶⁰ However much the rhetoricians and persuaders might parry and thrust in court battles over the choice of ideological props for the Han throne, spectacle alone had the capacity to convince participants and onlookers alike of the invincible authority of the throne. Spectacle – “unique and unusual, wondrous and strange, glittering and glistening, bright and sparkling” – could fix the idea of rulership in subjects’ minds, making the ruler’s person or his office the main subject of reverent contemplation. Thus the importance of public display was reiterated continually in Han writings: “The Lord fully observes imperial etiquette, / And displays a regal demeanor,”¹⁶¹ with the result that gifts and tributes flooded the court, which then distributed the fruits of this bounty to those deemed worthy or important.¹⁶²

Somewhat to the surprise of those inclined to take the aforementioned rhetoric of moderation seriously, the funds devoted to public display in late Western Han and Eastern Han courts were often enough thought to be insufficient. Take the following passage from Liu Xiang’s 劉向 *Shuïyuan* 說苑 (Garden of Persuasions), a compilation presented to the throne in 17 BC, shortly before the collapse of Western Han:

Jiu Fan [an official] stretched out his index finger [to rebuke his sovereign] and said, “This finger means that the places where your lordship goes on excursions may be full of colorful designs, but the city walls and gates [in your realm] are not made to look imposing *enough* (...).”¹⁶³

158 This essay considers spectacles to be “public” if they are (1) seen; or (2) meant to be the stuff of legend. See Nylan, “Toward an Archaeology of Writing, Ritual, and Public Display in the Classical Era,” in *Text and Ritual in Early China* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2005), 3–49.

159 Nora, cited in Patricia Ebrey, 22, footnote 16.

160 E. De Marrais, L.J. Castillo, and T. Earle, “Ideology, Materialization, and Power Strategies,” *Current Anthropology* 37:1, 15–32.

161 The first quotation comes from Zhang Heng, “Eastern Metropolis Rhapsody,” in Knechtges, vol. 1, 261; the second, from Ban Gu, “Eastern Capital Rhapsody,” in Knechtges, vol. 1, 167.

162 For one example of the Son of Heaven as central subject, see Zhang Heng, “Eastern Metropolis Rhapsody,” in Knechtges, vol. 1, 269.

163 SY, 9/4. Interestingly enough, a portrait of imperial restraint in Ban Gu’s “Eastern Capital Rhapsody” leads, in circular fashion, right back to scenes of feasting and dancing. See Knechtges, vol. 1, 171. Zhang Heng, “Eastern Metropolis Rhapsody,” vol. 1, 247, claims that many of the rulers “insisted on viewing unrestrained prodigality as worthy behavior.” This confirms the impression given in HHS 10A.411, where the

Rulers worthy of commendation were expected to be “arrayed in gorgeous robes with checkered patterns in bright colors,” and “the boats they travelled in to be black, with engraved images of birds, adorned with tapestries and meshwork curtains, topped with azure-blue canopies, with pennants festooned with rhinoceros tails.”¹⁶⁴

The Han throne spent most of its privy purse in rituals requiring public display: by one account, one-third of the purse went annually to gift clients and retainers; one-third, to the upkeep of the ancestral shrines; and one-third, to the building of impressive mausolea for members of the ruling house.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the adult Han rulers’ intent upon building up their own authority invested in three sorts of spectacles that could be employed on their behalf: (1) new palace liturgies designed to impress members of the court; (2) semi-public rituals locating the ruler as ritual head of the officials; and (3) rituals designed to impart to commoners a sense of belonging to an “imagined community” of supremely civilized subjects of the realm. Many passages detailing the palace liturgies could be cited, but perhaps the two best known appear in the biography of Shusun Tong 叔孫通 and the “Forest of Classicists” 儒林 chapter of the *Hou Hanshu*. Shusun was asked to devise a liturgy “that would be easy to perform,” precisely because the followers of the Han founder, Liu Bang, were failing to pay him proper respect; they were “given to drinking and brawling, drawing their swords and hacking away at the pillars of the palace,” according to Liu Bang. Shusun Tong originally employed the classicists of Lu to draw up a program of impressive rituals, but before long Shusun Tong had to dismiss them. The classicists as a group were too tradition-bound to articulate the old forms or invent useful departures from them, so Shusun Tong decided to make the new imperial rituals up by himself. In the process he freely borrowed the usages of the previous Qin dynasty, which was not then as thoroughly discredited as later historians have claimed. After several months of practice, the foot soldiers, guards, palace attendants, and ministers knew their parts in the new liturgy of the formal palace audience well enough so that even the Han founder had to sigh with admiration for himself: “Today, for the first time I realize how exalted a thing it is to be the sovereign lord!” he remarked. Liu Bang promptly awarded his Master of Ritual five hundred catties of gold.¹⁶⁶

A second glimpse of court life, as recorded in the *Hou Hanshu*, reveals the Liu ruling house, initially unfamiliar with the trappings of power, as quick studies when it came to wielding the credenza and miranda of authority.¹⁶⁷ The charismatic power of the model Son of Heaven came to be described by one member of the *waiqi* in this highly visual language:

declaration by the dowager empress Ma declared that she had seen the error of her extravagant ways can be dismissed as special pleading meant to deflect criticism, or in HHS 10A.428, where dowager empress Deng deplores the luxurious standard of living enjoyed by her near relations.

164 SJ 11/13.

165 *Jinshu* 60.1651, with specific reference to the division of resources for ritual purposes and the maintenance of clan and clients. Kato Shigeshi 加藤繁, *Zhongguo jingji shi kaozheng* 中國經濟史考証 (Beijing: Shangwu, 1962), 25–124, and Qian Mu 錢穆, *Qin Han shi* 秦漢史 (Taipei: Sanmin, 1969), 255–257, both emphasize the sharp distinction in Han times between the emperor’s own personal household and monies and that belonging to the administration of unified rule.

166 SJ 99.2722–2723.

167 HHS 79A.2545–2546, which draws heavily upon Han Ying’s 韓應, *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓氏外傳 [hereafter HSWZ], one of the four main canonical traditions in Han for the *Odes*. All citations to HSWZ are to James R. Hightower, *Han shih wai chuan. Han Ying’s Illustrations of the didactic application of the Classic of Songs* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1952). For further information, see Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade*

After he disbanded his army, the sovereign lord held archery practice in the suburbs. On the left they shot their arrows to the [tune (?) of the] “Lishou” (a lost Ode); and on the right, to the “Zouyu” (Ode 36). And so the realm knew that the Martial King would not again employ troops. When he sacrificed in the ancestral temple, the people learned about filial duty. He held open court and from the various lords learned about reverence. He seated the Three Aged in the Imperial University, where he, the Son of Heaven, respectfully served them with sauce and personally gave them the cups to rinse out their mouths. In this manner, he taught his vassal lords the behavior proper to a junior. These four acts constitute the great teachings of the realm. Now was it not fitting that this King sat long on the throne?¹⁶⁸

With the king’s every public action a didactic example of wisdom and virtue, displays were put on for ever large audiences in the capital. The funeral casket of deceased rulers, along with their effects, were paraded annually around the capital.¹⁶⁹ Formal excursions, “the grandest of the staged spectacles,” ritual hunts, and tours of inspection, were frequent in Han.¹⁷⁰ Public games (shades of bread and circuses?) marked major victories over the barbarians. In 105 BC, for example, after several diplomatic advances in the Western Regions, the public was invited to attend the *jiaodi* 角抵 games in the capital, to the delight of most and the consternation of a few prigs.¹⁷¹ Irregular donations of rank and of grain, silk, and other goods were meted out to those deemed eligible at intervals just often enough to keep subjects marveling at the munificence and largess of the center.¹⁷² On display were artful allusions to the main traditions to which the throne laid claim, as in one famous episode in which a bronze tripod “discovered” during the reign of Han Wudi was hailed as divine affirmation of the Liu clan’s claim to have inherited the Mandate from Zhou, signifying the Han’s own extraordinary merit.¹⁷³

The primary advantage of public display was that it could present related or even mutually contradictory ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like within a single ceremony. As is evident from another famous piece of rhetoric, Zhang Heng’s “Eastern Metropolis Rhapsody,” competing images of the ideal ruler were often incorporated into one ritual performance, as when the ruler, in the following selection from a long poem, presides in sublime and god-like silence over his bureaucrats before interjecting his persona into the gift-giving portion of the event:

and Silk. Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the Tang Dynasty (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chap. 1, esp. 7–8.

168 HSWZ 3/13 (modified from Hightower, 91).

169 For further information, see Loewe, “Funerals,” esp. 48–50.

170 Ban Gu, “Western Capital Rhapsody,” in Knechtges, vol. 1, 135.

171 See Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China. New Year and other annual observances during the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 206–209 (Note: *jiaodi* is also romanized as *judi*); Michael Loewe, *Divination, Monarchy and Mythology in Han China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 11; cf. MacKenzie, *Asian Games*, 19–36, 304–310.

172 In this, the Han rulers claimed to be following the model of the Duke of Zhou. See HSWZ 3/31 (113); 4/11 (135). See HSWZ 8/14 (Hightower, 268) for the classical precedents for the ruler giving presents to the worthy. The most important gifts bestowed on some few families were the fiefs which supported the ancestral sacrifices that insured perpetual life.

173 SY 11/6.

The ruler (...) dons the Sky-Piercing crown
 and fixes jade seals to his belt,
 With his imperial ribbons dangling,
 A Ganjiang sword at his waist,
 His back to the axe-screen,
 Seated on a bamboo mat with embroidered edging,
 And jade armrests on his left and right,
 He faces south and listens.
 Then, the various lords enter:
 The Director of Ceremonial divides them rank by rank:
 High and low they take their proper places.
 Gifts of jade discs, lambs, skins, and silk are laid out:
 Then, the Son of Heaven greets them according to the three-bow ritual.
 How majestic! How stately! How composed! How graceful!
 Truly the greatest spectacle of the empire!

By such means the Han court sought to inculcate and establish notions of pleasure that would unite its leadership to its populace, following the splendid theories of ritual display that Mencius and Xunzi in the pre-unification era had prescribed to redistribute wealth and foster a sense of cohesion throughout all sectors of the population. So long as the court knew how to use material splendor to entice its subjects and to parade its members as admirable models of good conduct for the entire realm, awe and emulation would conjoin to induce the fully socialized behavior that made for supreme stability in politics.¹⁷⁴ As one influential text put it,

In antiquity they [the rulers] understood the empire without going out of doors. This is not because their eyes could see a thousand miles ahead, nor because their ears could hear sounds a thousand miles away, but because they measured others by their own feelings. From their own dislike of hunger and cold they understood the people's desire for food and clothing; from their own dislike of toil and suffering they understood the people's desire for peace and ease; from their own dislike of decay and poverty they understood the people's desire for riches and abundance. Understanding these things was how the sage-kings put the empire in order without descending from the mats on which they sat. (...) Therefore, following the techniques of the former kings, the Son of Heaven personally tilled the soil, while his queen and the imperial concubines tended the silkworms, making themselves the first in the realm to express their concern over the food and clothing [of their subjects].

After multiple demonstrations of the ruler's fellow-feelings for the least of his subjects,¹⁷⁵ the people might well come to feel that members of the First Family indeed knew to assume their responsibilities to act as "parents" to all those who "got food" for a living.

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174 For further information, see Michael Nylan, "The Politics of Pleasure," *Asia Major* 3rd series, 14:1 (2001), 73–124; and Nylan, with Harrison Huang, "Mencius on Pleasure" (forthcoming in a *feestschrift* dedicated to Henry Rosemont).

175 HSWZ 3/38 (Hightower, 123–124). Note that pleasure theory is meant to check the insatiable appetites of the bad ruler, as in HSWZ 5/26 (Hightower, 184–185). For the ramifications for tax policies and legal cases, see, e.g., HSWZ 6/17 (Hightower, 206–207).

Historians of early China have their work cut out for them. Many of the standard interpretations of the received texts now require re-examination in light of new archaeological discoveries, changing fashions in historiography, and a growing awareness that models borrowed from late imperial China or from “the West” are generally unsuitable to explain the classical era in China. Of course, modern historians will probably never find the sort of evidence that would allow them to ascertain the degree to which the illiterate or barely literate understood or sympathized with conditions at court, let alone upheld the court’s conception of itself. Nor will they find precise theoretical formulations of political theory of the sort found in Plato and Aristotle.

Nevertheless, classical authors like Xunzi offered highly sophisticated analyses of the way that ritual, in the form of spectacle and sumptuary regulations, when supported by a hierarchy of hereditary ranks (*ju* 爵), could unite subjects and rulers alike in an orderly and mutually profitable imagined community.¹⁷⁶ The historian’s job is less to lament the sources that are lacking than to begin to assess the unimaginably rich imagery, literary and visual, that we confront, a task which is likely to occupy us for decades to come.

176 See the opening passages of Xunzi’s “Li lun” chapter, for example.