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Conceiving the Empire China and Rome Compared

Edited by

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Imagining the Empire?

Concepts of 'Primeval Unity' in Pre-imperial Historiographic Tradition

Yuri Pines (Jerusalem)

In the year 221 BC, the state of Qin eliminated the last of its rivals, thereby unifying the 'Chinese'¹ world after centuries of endless wars. Proudly, the king of Qin assembled his officials to discuss administrative and ritual adjustments appropriate to commemorate his achievements. The officials in response praised the king:

In antiquity, the lands of the Five Thearchs² were one thousand *li* squared, beyond which was the overlords' domain and the aliens' domain. The overlords sometimes came to the court and sometimes did not, and the Son of Heaven was unable to regulate this. Now, your Majesty has raised a righteous army, punishing the savage criminals, has pacified and stabilized All-under-Heaven, turning the territory between the seas into commanderies and counties; and laws and ordinances have a single source. From antiquity it has never been so; the Five Thearchs could not reach this!³

This declaration, echoed elsewhere in Qin's propaganda, proclaims the superiority of the First Emperor of Qin (Qin Shihuangdi, literally, the First August Thearch, r. 246–221–210 BC) over the former paragons, such as the legendary Five Thearchs (*wu di*) or the semi-legendary founders of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou, c. 2000–256 BC).⁴ It sets a good framework

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¹ The term 'Chinese' is certainly anachronistic with regard to pre-imperial 'China' and is used here only as a scholarly convention.

² Five Thearchs (*wu di*) are legendary pre-dynastic rulers of 'China'; I adopt the term 'Thearch' for *di*, since this neologism aptly conveys both the divine and the mundane aspects of *di*'s power.

³ *Shi ji* 6/236.

⁴ For a similar statement, see e.g. the Langye inscription (*Shi ji* 6/245; Kern 2000, 31–4).

for comparing Chinese and Roman imperial experience. The difference between both empires is twofold, with the Chinese being both newer and older than the Roman. The Roman *imperium* was an outcome of a long process of Rome's expansion, and its birth date cannot be clearly agreed upon. The Chinese empire was ostensibly a new creation of 221 BC: by adopting a new title and establishing a new political and ritual system, the First Emperor consciously distanced himself from his predecessors, the territorial scope and effectiveness of whose rule were incomparably smaller than those of Qin. However, the mere existence of earlier examples of the supposedly unified rule is another source of difference between Rome and China. The Roman unification of the Mediterranean world, or more precisely, of its western part, lacked historical or mythical precedents,⁵ while the case of Qin was markedly different. The notion of a single omnipotent ruler who should preside over 'All-under-Heaven' (*tianxia*) was allegedly pronounced in Chinese political tradition ever since the establishment of the Zhou rule, if not earlier, and it was not impossible for the First Emperor to claim that he merely restores the normative situation of the past.

That the emperor did not proclaim inheritance from former rulers is a point of bewilderment. Presenting himself as a restorer rather than a founder of a new entity could very well serve his dynastic legitimacy and probably diminish hatred from the people of the conquered states toward Qin. Why then did the emperor—who did not hesitate to appropriate earlier cultural traditions in many other aspects of his rule—discard this option? Was it merely a manifestation of his *hubris*, or did this rejection of the past models reflect deeper tendencies in pre-imperial historiography and thought?

To answer this question I shall focus on views of primeval unity in the texts dating from the Western Zhou (c.1046–771 BC), Chunqiu (Springs and Autumns, 771–453 BC), and Zhanguo (Warring States, 453–221 BC) periods. When did the tradition of presenting dynastic founders or pre-dynastic rulers as omnipotent universal monarchs begin? To what extent did such presentations of the past influence the drive toward unification during the centuries of disunion prior to the establishment of the Qin empire? And why did the First Emperor discard those historical precedents? I hope that the answers will help to elucidate complex interrelations between political thought and historiography in pre-imperial China going beyond the common view that Chinese thinkers uniformly 'used the past to serve the present' (*yi gu shi jin*).

⁵ See Mutschler's and Huang Yang's paper in this volume for the gradual comprehension of Rome's exceptionality by its historians. It is not surprising perhaps, that the first historian who placed Rome into imperial sequence was Polybius, an oriental outsider. In the Western Mediterranean the universal rule of Rome was entirely unprecedented.

1. THE BACKGROUND: RULER'S OMNIPOTENCE IN WESTERN ZHOU TEXTS

The replacement of the Shang by the Zhou dynasty around 1046 BC was the single most important event in the first millennium of China's written history. Although details of this replacement are marred by later legends and biased accounts, it is clear that shortly after its victory Zhou emerged as an unrivaled superpower in the middle and lower Yellow River basin and beyond. The power of the new dynasty was manifested in its first years when the dynastic founders, King Wu (d. c.1043 BC) and his de facto heir, the Duke of Zhou (d. c.1035 BC), ordered their kin and allies to establish numerous fiefs at strategic sites in the newly occupied areas. The imposition of the conquering elite on local population, just as concomitant massive relocation of the Shang subjects to the periphery, passed without massive acts of defiance, which suggests widespread compliance with the Zhou rule. The prestige of the new dynasty was extraordinarily high and for this early period we can definitely speak of the Zhou rule as both more effective and much more extensive territorially than that of the late Shang dynasty.⁶ As we shall see, this early dynastic potency later inspired those who attributed the Zhou founders and their predecessors with universal and unrivaled power in All-under-Heaven.

In the course of the Western Zhou history, the dynastic power began declining, as nominal fiefs became increasingly autonomous, and erstwhile allies turned against the kings. Nonetheless, religious and cultural prestige of the Zhou remained largely intact allowing the kings to continue their powerful presence throughout most of the original realm. Religiously, the kings monopolized the position as the sole representatives of the supreme deity, Heaven (*tian*), as exemplified in their exclusive honorific title of 'Sons of Heaven' (*tianzi*).⁷ Being a sort of *pontifices maximi*, the kings (or their aides) dictated changes in ritual practices and norms throughout their realm; hence, long after their power had declined they were able to initiate series of profound ritual changes (the so-called Western Zhou ritual reform), which were promptly adopted throughout the Zhou world. The metropolitan

⁶ For the territorial extent of the Shang power, see Keightley 1982; for the early Zhou, see Shaughnessy 1999, 307–13.

⁷ From the very beginning of their dynasty the Zhou kings claimed that they acted in Heaven's name, see e.g., the *He zun*, cast in 1036 BC, at the very beginning of Zhou rule (discussed by Shaughnessy 1997, 77–8). The title of 'Sons of Heaven' was appropriated later, but by the middle of the Western Zhou period it was already firmly associated with the kings (Takeuchi 1999). Throughout the Zhou history this title remained restricted to the Zhou monarchs.

area remained moreover the unrivaled cultural center of the realm, dictating norms regarding aesthetical tastes and especially written culture.⁸ This ongoing prestige of the royal house preserved much of its influence even when its economic and military prowess had significantly declined.

This background allows us to understand the appearance of nascent pro-unity sentiments in the Western Zhou texts. While most of the extant Zhou portions of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*) and *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing*) were prone to manipulations by later scribes and thinkers and may not be entirely reliable, we have also plenty of contemporaneous bronze inscriptions that are useful in restoring aspects of the Zhou official ideology.⁹ From the inscriptions, as well as from the received texts we can discern many ideas which would later be incorporated into the official imperial lexicon of the unified rule, in particular frequent hails of dynastic founders as rulers of the Four Directions (*sifang*) and pacifiers of the 'myriad states' (*wanbang*); such references are particularly visible in late Western Zhou texts.¹⁰ We should be cautious, however, in projecting later interpretations of these statements backward into the early Zhou time. While understandably territorial expansion under the dynastic founders was lauded by late Western Zhou statesmen, these laudations do not necessarily imply that the royal power was considered truly universal. First, it is clear from early texts that broad as it is, the Zhou realm was not all inclusive; aliens living beyond the Zhou cultural sphere were not supposed to heed the king's orders and clashes with them were treated as foreign invasions and not as internal 'rebellions'.¹¹ Second and more importantly, there is no evidence in the Zhou texts that

⁸ For the ritual reform initiated in the second half of the Western Zhou, see Falkenhausen 2000; 2006, 29–73. For the importance of the metropolitan area for the Zhou bronze production and especially the written culture, see Li Feng 2002.

⁹ The dating of many supposedly early Zhou documents, particularly those assembled in the *Shujing*, is highly problematic, as many of them might have been modified (or even invented) centuries after the alleged date of their compilation. See Jiang Shanguo 1988; cf. Vogelsang 2002. My discussion, therefore, focuses on those aspects of the early Zhou ideology which have inscriptional corroboration.

¹⁰ See e.g. *Shangshu*, 'Luo gao': 15/216b; *Mao Shi*, 177 'Liu yue' 10/425b; 235 'Wen Wang' 16/505c; 294 'Huan' 19/604c. For bronze inscriptions, see Xing-zhong and Shi Qiang-pan (Shirakawa, vol. 1, add. Nos. 15, 335–70 and 387–93); Yu-ding (Shirakawa, vol. xxvii, Nos. 162, 442–63); and the recently discovered Qiu-pan discussed by Li Xueqin 2003, 66–7; all these inscriptions date from the second half of the Western Zhou.

¹¹ Zhou inscriptions clearly distinguish between external and internal rivals. Thus, the Jinhou Su-bianzhong inscription (discussed by Shim 1997) differentiates between the states that are considered subordinate to the Zhou, and which the king 'inspects', and the alien Suyi tribesmen whom the king 'invades'; similarly, the Xi Jia-pan inscription distinguishes between the alien enemies, the Xianyun, and the internal 'rebels', the Huaiyi (Shaughnessy 1999, 346; Shirakawa, vol. xxxiii, No. 191).

the kings were supposed to exercise effective authority in their nominal fiefs, the rulers of which, while being ritually subordinate to the kings, were apparently considered entirely autonomous within their borders.¹² It seems, therefore, that references to the royal prowess in Western Zhou texts do not necessarily imply that the monarch's power was envisioned as imperial-like universal and omnipotent rule.

Similar caution should be exercised with regard to another important contribution of the early Zhou texts to the later imperial historiographic tradition, namely projection of the unified dynastic rule back into the pre-Shang past. The supposedly early Zhou documents clearly state that the Xia dynasty preceded the Shang and was replaced by the latter much like the Shang itself was later replaced by the Zhou. Other texts mention a legendary hero Yu, who overcame the primeval flood and later ordered the Earth. Since Yu is clearly a universal godlike hero, and since he had been later identified as the founder of the Xia dynasty, it may be inferred that already in the Western Zhou the notion of the universal Xia rule (followed by the Shang and by the Zhou itself) was firmly established. The problem of this inference is the lack of clear Western Zhou evidence which connects Yu with the Xia dynasty, and if so, there are no clear indications that the Xia should be considered a universal power.¹³ In the Western Zhou we may therefore discern certain seeds of the future perception of All-under-Heaven eternally ruled by a single dynasty, but there is no firm evidence to conclude that such a view of the past was indeed promulgated by the Zhou elites.

Another early Zhou idea that would enormously influence the future imperial rhetoric is a statement made in the late Western Zhou 'Bei shan' Ode of the *Shijing*: 'Everywhere under Heaven is the King's land, each of those who live on the land is the King's servant.'¹⁴ In later periods this line was repeatedly evoked to justify limitless authority of the monarch, but once again it would be wrong to jump to far-reaching conclusions, particularly if we

¹² The superiority of the kings over the fiefs' rulers is unquestioned: e.g. the Jinhou Su-bianzhong inscription mentioned above clearly shows that the king could 'inspect' the fiefs and order their rulers to support him militarily. It is much less clear, however, whether or not the royal intervention in the fiefs' internal affairs was legitimate. Occasionally, for instance, the kings could intervene in the succession struggles within the fief (see e.g. Shaughnessy 1999, 347), but such interventions were apparently considered as overstretching the royal authority and were accordingly criticized (see e.g. *Guoyu*, 1.7 'Zhou yu, shang': 1/22–3).

¹³ The earliest notice of Yu's merits in subduing the flood is the recently published *Bin gong xu* inscription, dated to the reign of King Gong of Zhou (c.922–900); see Xing Wen 2003. However, neither this inscription, nor any other reliably datable Western Zhou text, identifies Yu as a progenitor of the Xia dynasty.

¹⁴ *Mao Shi*, 205 'Bei shan': 13/463.

read the Ode in the context of contemporary realities. The 'Bei shan' Ode deals exclusively with the royal domain, its author lamenting the decline of the royal authority in the vicinity of the capital. The reference to 'All-under-Heaven'—which by itself is extraordinarily rare in early Zhou texts—does not necessarily imply universality either. As I noted elsewhere in the Western Zhou period the term *tianxia* could refer occasionally to the area under the direct rule of the Son of Heaven—i.e. the royal domain—and not to the universe, as happens in later texts.¹⁵

To summarize, during the Western Zhou period we may discern foundations of the later ideas of unity, such as the notion of universal ritual supremacy of the Zhou kings, their supposedly limitless authority within their domain, if not within the entire realm, laudation of territorial expansion and possible emergence of a view of the eternally present single locus of worldly authority. Nonetheless, all these do not suffice to conclude that a kind of 'quasi-imperial' outlook emerged already during the early Zhou period. By the end of the Western Zhou period, as the dynastic rule disintegrated, we may discern voices of nostalgia for the past glory, but not proposals of the renewed unification in the present. The idea of the universal empire did not emerge yet, although sprouts of the future pro-unification sentiments are observable already in this early stage of Chinese political tradition.

2. WORLD FALLS APART: MEMORIES OF UNITY AT THE AGE OF DISINTEGRATION

The shaky unity of the Zhou world was dealt a mortal blow in 771 BC, when the coalition of dissenting overlords and the alien tribesmen, the Quanrong, had overrun the royal capital, killed King You (r. 781–771 BC) and caused his heir to relocate the capital from the Wei river valley to the east. At their new location, near the modern Luoyang, Sons of Heaven lacked the resources of the former domain, and were militarily and economically powerless in comparison with powerful overlords (*zhuhou*). While the kings tried initially to maintain their leading position, soon they faced numerous challenges, beginning with an open attack by one of their closest allies, Lord Zhuang of Zheng (r. 743–701 BC) in 707 BC, and ending with series of internal rebellions within the royal family, which turned the kings into hapless protégés of their nominal subordinates, rulers of Qi and Jin. As the kings could no longer exercise their role as guarantors of order 'within the Four Directions' (*sifang*),

¹⁵ See Pines 2002b, 101–4.

the Zhou world sank in endless wars which were to continue, almost uninterrupted, for five centuries.

The period of political disintegration that began shortly after the capital relocation did not imply, however, that the royal authority had completely evaporated. At least one crucial aspect of the king's power—his position at the head of ritual hierarchy—remained intact. Since the aristocratic Chunqiu society was based on strict adherence to the hierarchical ritual norms inherited from the Western Zhou period, overall sidelining of the Sons of Heaven would be unthinkable. Thus, while many of the royal ritual prerogatives were 'usurped' by the haughty overlords, the latter still dared not overstep the limits of acceptable ritual behavior. In particular the exclusive position of the kings as 'Sons of Heaven' remained unshaken, and it would remain so even into the subsequent Zhanguo period when the overlords adopted the royal title. The king's unabated ritual superiority contrasted sharply with their actual weakness, resulting in an increasing gap between ritual and political reality, which is duly reflected in contemporary historical writings as well.

The increasing tension between the actual state of events and ritual considerations is evident from the book which the name of the Chunqiu period is derived from—the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*; hereafter: *Annals*) from the state of Lu. This short text comprising succinct records of major activities of the Lu court and of the allied states during the period of 722 to 481 BC (or 479 BC), was eventually elevated to the position of the quasi-sacred revelation of the wisdom of Confucius (551–479 BC). For centuries this misinterpretation hindered scholarly analysis of the *Annals*. Elsewhere I have tried to show that the *Annals* might have originated in ritual records apparently made to inform the ancestors of the Lu lords of their descendants' major activities. Read from this perspective, the text provides a useful viewpoint of political and ritual ideas of the eponymous epoch.¹⁶

The *Annals* are extraordinarily strict in their observance of ritual norms. Thus, the overlords are referred to exclusively according to their original ranks determined at the dawn of the Zhou era, notwithstanding their usurpation of higher titles; hence, leaders of such important polities as the southern superpowers, Chu, Wu, and Yue, whose rulers proclaimed themselves kings, are named in the *Annals* merely as 'barons' (*zi*). The *Annals* continuously emphasize the superiority of the Zhou house: the kings are respectfully referred to as 'Heavenly kings' (*tianwang*), and their envoys are invariably presented as presiding over the interstate alliances, which preserves the ritual illusion of international royal leadership. The reality reflected in the *Annals* is thus that of unshakeable royal superiority. The *Annals*, to a certain extent,

¹⁶ For my analysis of the *Annals*, see Pines 2002a.

substitute political reality with ritual one, and this substitution will be, as we shall see, of significant importance in Zhanguo and later historiography.

Important as they are, the *Annals*, however, do not represent Chunqiu historiographic tradition in its entirety. An alternative, and no less influential view of Chunqiu history comes from the *Zuo zhuan* (hereafter: *Zuo*), a text which comments upon the *Annals*, but may be read also as an entirely independent historical writing. Unlike the *Annals*, which reflect a ritualistic thread in ancient Chinese history writing, the *Zuo* reflects what may be called 'secular tradition'. Elsewhere I identified its major sources as narrative histories prepared by the scribes at the courts of major Chunqiu states. These histories were probably conceived of as political education materials for contemporary statesmen, providing them with useful information about the past events plus allowing the readers to draw proper lessons from successes and failures of earlier leaders. Being the product of this historiographic tradition, the *Zuo* provides its readers with much richer information than the terse *Annals*, and although the reliability of many of its accounts is disputable, in my opinion the bulk of the *Zuo* narrative does reflect actual conditions of the Chunqiu period and beliefs of contemporary statesmen.¹⁷ The immense richness of the *Zuo* turns it into an invaluable source for reconstruction of Chunqiu attitudes toward the idea of unified rule.

A reader of the *Zuo* will not fail to notice the striking lack of references to the issue of unity in the past or in the present, which contrasts the *Zuo* sharply with almost any major later historical text. The *Zuo* author and his protagonists do not consider the multi-state system of the Chunqiu age as an aberration but rather as a normal, though not an ideal state of events. The *Zuo* pays little if any attention to the ritual superiority of the Zhou monarchs; thus it often neglects proper ritual terminology and refers to rulers of southern states as 'kings' (*wang*)—a designation that would be unthinkable in the *Annals*. Nor does the *Zuo* conceal the gloomy situation of the royal house, narrating in great detail the kings' ongoing humiliations, their weakness and their ever-decreasing impact on the interstate dynamics. Moreover, the *Zuo* does not express any particular opposition to this state of events, evidently taking the decline of the Zhou as *fait accompli*. The *Zuo* protagonists are preoccupied neither with the restoration of the Zhou glory nor with political unification of the realm, but rather with achieving viable modes of coexistence between rival superpowers.¹⁸ The *Zuo* thus appears in retrospect

¹⁷ For different views of the nature of the *Zuo*, see Pines 2002a and Schaberg 2001.

¹⁸ Actually, the only statesmen in the *Zuo* who express explicit interest in 'obtaining All-under-Heaven' (*de tianxia*) are the haughty leaders of the southern superpower, Chu, particularly its notorious King Ling (r. 540–529), which hardly turns unification into a legitimate goal (*Zuo*, Zhao 13: 1350; see also Zhao 19: 1402; Zhao 26: 1474–5). For more of the views of interstate order in the *Zuo*, see Pines 2002a, 105–35.

as distinctively neglectful of the unification perspective, accepting the multi-state world as normal state of events.

When we turn to the historical outlook of the *Zuo* protagonists we find that it similarly lends no support to the idea of unified rule. The age of dynastic founders is occasionally mentioned in the text, but never is referred to as a model of political unity. To the contrary, most protagonists invoke early Zhou regulations to support the legitimacy of the current multi-state system (which was indeed rooted in massive enfeoffments at the beginning of the Zhou rule) and not to call for the restoration of political unity.¹⁹ The universality of the early Zhou rule is never mentioned in the *Zuo* and such terms as 'myriad states' or 'All-under-Heaven' as a politically unified realm rarely if at all appear on its pages.

Two examples from the *Zuo* narrative will clarify the absence of the unification agenda from this text. The first is one of the ideologically most important speeches in the entire *Zuo*, namely a panegyric to the rule by ritual pronounced by the prominent Qi statesman, Yan Ying (c.580–520 BC). As many of his contemporaries—but with a higher degree of analytical clarity—Yan Ying came to the conviction that only comprehensive implementation of the Zhou ritual norms can save the society from complete disintegration, the seeds of which were apparent in his home state. I have analyzed this speech in greater detail elsewhere,²⁰ and shall deal here only with the part of it which focuses on the efficiency of ritual norms as a means to preserve the extant sociopolitical order intact:

According to ritual, the family's favors do not exceed those of the state; the people do not drift; peasants do not move (to new lands), artisans and merchants do not change (their occupation), *shi* do not overflow (the nobles), officials do not exceed (their responsibilities), and the nobles dare not seize the lord's profits.²¹

Yan Ying proposed his vision of ritual-governed society as the only effective means to restore social order in general and to prevent the descent of power in the state of Qi to the hands of the powerful ministerial lineage, the Chen (Tian), in particular. His recipe for curing the turmoil was simple: if everybody preserves ritual norms there will be no transgressions of social hierarchy. The order proposed by Yan Ying refers to every major segment of contemporary society, from the lord to his ministers, ordinary nobles, members of the lower nobility (the *shi*), and the commoners. It is striking therefore that the Son of Heaven is conspicuously absent from this account. The major reason for this omission may be contextual: Yan Ying's patron and

¹⁹ See e.g. *Zuo*, Xi 24: 419–25; Xi 28: 474; Ding 4: 2535–42.

²⁰ See Pines 2000a, 15–17.

²¹ *Zuo*, Zhao 26: 1480.

the addressee of the speech, Lord Jing of Qi (r. 547–490 BC), would not like being reminded of the ritual superiority of the Zhou monarch, since this would imply that the lord himself must cede his sovereignty to the king. But there is more behind Yan Ying's omission: this astute statesman might have realized that the power of the royal house had deteriorated beyond the point of possible recovery, and preferred then to focus on solving social turmoil in a single state leaving the affairs of All-under-Heaven beyond his immediate concern.

This local focus is evident in many other Chunqiu speeches scattered in the *Zuo*. It may be demonstrated from the roughly contemporary account about the events in the state of Chu. King Ling (r. 540–529 BC) sheltered fugitives in his newly built palace, apparently enrolling them as possible supporters against the unruly nobles. He was reprimanded by one of his chief aides, Shen Wuyu, who said among others:

According to the ancient system, the Son of Heaven arranges territorial divisions, while the overlords order their fiefs. Within the fief's territory which land is not that of the lord? Among those who enjoy the land's harvest, who is not the lord's servant? Hence, the Ode says: 'Everywhere under Heaven is the King's land, each of those who live on the land is the King's servant.'²²

The king was reprimanded for indirect recognition of his vassals' autonomy: indeed, if he considered the nobles' subjects as his own servants, he should not have sheltered them but rather pardoned them altogether. Shen Wuyu's support of centralization, akin to later Zhanguo approaches, contrasts sharply however with his view of the authority of the Zhou king. The task of the dynastic founders was that of conferring the fiefs to the overlords; after the fiefs had been conferred the kings were no longer considered masters of the fief's land, which should be henceforth ruled exclusively by the overlord. The 'Bei shan' Ode's reference to the royal authority is reinterpreted by Shen Wuyu as supporting the authority of the overlord rather than of the Zhou king. While Shen Wuyu traces the origins of the current multi-state world to the foundations of the Zhou dynasty, he clearly rejects a notion of his ruler's possible allegiance to the Zhou house.

That both Qi and Chu ministers considered the multi-state world as a normative state of affairs is symptomatic of the *Zuo* approach toward the idea of unity. The authors of this text and of its original sources neither deny ritual superiority of the Zhou king, nor neglect the past importance of the Zhou; but this respect to the royal past is not translated into the call for the restoration of the unified rule in the present. Neither the author(s), nor

²² *Zuo*, Zhao 7: 1283–4.

their protagonists had envisioned the empire. This lack of unification perspective contrasts the *Zuo* with later texts and makes it an unparalleled monument to the non-monistic view of China's past.

3. FUTURE IN THE PAST: EARLY ZHANGUO VISIONS OF UNITY

Two centuries of efforts by Chunqiu statesmen to stabilize the multi-state system ended in fiasco. By the late sixth century, the system of alliances that dominated interstate relations during most of the Chunqiu period collapsed, and the Zhou world entered into a protracted period of war of all against all. Concomitantly, military changes brought about a sharp increase both in the scope of military conflicts and the degree of devastation inflicted upon participants. The endemic and ever-escalating warfare of the 'Warring States' period became a major source of concern for contemporary statesmen and thinkers. As it became evident that no diplomatic solutions would ensure peace among the rivals, thinkers became increasingly receptive to the idea of political unification of 'All-under-Heaven' as the only feasible way to universal peace.

Elsewhere, I discussed in detail the formation and evolution of the 'Great Unity' paradigm which had the most profound impact on China's history; there I tried to show that the notion of 'stability is in unity' was endorsed by almost any known thinker, with differences focusing on the ways to achieve unity rather than on the goal.²³ Here I shall focus on the importance of the past precedents of unity—imagined or real—in shaping the thinkers' argumentation in favor of future unification. Was the unified empire envisioned as a novel solution, or was it supposed to be merely a restoration of the Zhou—or earlier—rule?

The answer to this question is not simple. On one hand, we can discern a yearning for the Golden Age of the early Zhou already in the late Chunqiu period. Thus, for instance, the inscription on the Jingong-*dian* probably dating from the late sixth or early fifth century, records the following statement by a lord of Jin:

My august ancestor Lord Tang (the founder of Jin), received the Great Mandate, supported King Wu of Zhou, harmonized and transformed the hundred Man [aliens], broadly ruled the Four Directions, arriving at the royal court, so that nobody did not come to the King.²⁴

²³ See Pines 2000b. For the saying 'stability is in unity', see n. 51 below.

²⁴ Shirakawa, vol. xxxv, No. 202; for the dating of the inscription, see Shirakawa's discussion, *ibid.*, 110–22; cf. Li Xueqin 1985.

The inscription was made on a vessel placed in the ancestral temple of the Jin lords, and it naturally embellishes the achievements of the vessel's addressees, the meritorious ancestors. Aside from the inevitable flattery, however, the inscription may reflect current discourse at the court of Jin. For almost two centuries, rulers of this powerful state tried to pose as protectors of the Zhou kings who should pacify the realm on the king's behalf. Apparently, the inflated image of the founder of the state of Jin, Tangshu, as the pillar of the early Zhou order reflects a kind of self-legitimation by Tangshu's successors, the lords of Jin, one of whom explicitly promises further in the inscription to emulate his ancestor's achievements. But the inscription also discloses deeper sentiments: its explicit statement that 'nobody did not serve the King' at the beginning of the Zhou is indicative of the dream of universal peace under the aegis of a powerful king—a dream which became increasingly unattainable by the time this inscription was cast.²⁵ Perhaps, speaking of the past, the Jin rulers were dreaming of the present—of the possibility to restore unified rule and put an end to the lasting bloodshed.

Yearning for the orderly rule at the beginning of the Zhou period, when 'rites, music, and punitive expeditions' were issued exclusively by Sons of Heaven, is discernible in the *Lunyu*, a book that supposedly represents the views of Confucius, the first major thinker of the so-called age of the 'Hundred Schools' of thought.²⁶ The *Lunyu* presents not only longing for the Zhou but another important development in legitimation of the unified rule: it is the first text to routinely invoke the past sage rulers, each of whom allegedly presided over the unified realm, bringing peace and tranquility to his subjects. In sharp distinction from the *Zuo* where pre-Zhou rulers were mentioned only in passing if at all, in the *Lunyu* the importance of these monarchs rapidly increases, and each of them, such as the legendary monarchs Shun and Yu, or Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty, are credited with possession (*you*) of All-under-Heaven.²⁷ This attribution of universal rule to the former paragons may be indicative of Confucius' support for legitimacy of unification in the present.

Mozi (c.460–390 BC), a second major pre-imperial thinker, similarly sought in the past legitimation for unity in the present. In the *Mozi*, the emphasis on the universal rule of the former sage kings is much more pronounced than in the *Lunyu*, and it directly leads to political conclusions regarding current affairs. Not only does the text routinely praise the sage kings of antiquity for

²⁵ Interestingly, the inclusive language of the Jingong-*dian* which twice uses the compound *mo bu* ('none... is not') reminds us of that of the First Emperor of Qin in his steles (see Kern's article in this volume).

²⁶ See *Lunyu* 16.2: 174.

²⁷ See *ibid.* 8.18: 83, and 8.20: 84; 12.22: 131; 4.5: 146.

their abilities to unify All-under-Heaven and 'correct the overlords',²⁸ but it is also the first to create a historical narrative of the unification in the past. According to this narrative, humankind originally suffered from a bestial life of war of all against all, until the worthiest and the most able [man] in All-under-Heaven was selected and established as the Son of Heaven. The Son of Heaven created a centralized state based on the imposition of the uniform concepts of 'justice' (*yi*) on the populace and overall surveillance of the power-holders. This ideal monarchy of the past should serve, in Mozi's eyes, as a blueprint for the present.²⁹

It is significant for our discussion that Mozi had placed his primeval centralized 'empire' in the unspecified past, dissociating it from the sage kings of the past. The loose unity of the Western Zhou could no longer satisfy those thinkers who sought effective unification. Mozi's creation of a new fictional 'imperial' precedent shows the limits of the past models for radical proponents of the unified rule. The past was a source of inspiration—but it could easily become a burden for innovative thinkers, and its traps should be avoided. As we shall see, most of the later proponents of unification had disassociated their vision from references to the past. One aspect of Mozi's (and Confucius') legacy, however, was adopted by almost all Zhanguo thinkers and their successors: namely, the assertion that a line of sage monarchs presided over the unified realm from time immemorial. While details of the sages' rule were ardently debated, the idea of the eternal existence of the universal monarchy had never been rejected. Henceforth the existence of a single legitimate locus of authority from the very beginnings of Chinese civilization was taken for granted by thinkers and historians alike.

4. RITUALIZED HISTORY: SHIFTING AWAY FROM THE PAST

Mozi's departure from the Western Zhou model in his quest for true unity foreshadowed a similar trend among major Zhanguo thinkers who preferred to seek unity in the future rather than in the past. Intriguingly, this trend influenced even those thinkers whose call for unity was based on staunch support for the implementation of the norms of ritual hierarchy. Although these norms largely derived from early Zhou regulations, many Zhanguo

²⁸ *Mozi*, 'Shang xian zhong': 9/75; 'Jie yong zhong': 21/254.

²⁹ For Mozi's narrative, see *Mozi*, 'Shang tong, shang': 11/109–10. See further discussion of his views in Pines 2000b, 302–4.

ritualists preferred to de-emphasize these links, distancing themselves from the Western Zhou model. Being ostensibly tradition oriented, these thinkers actually proposed novel ways of achieving unity under Heaven.

This well-disguised novelty is characteristic of the *Gongyang zhuan* (hereafter: *Gongyang*), a late Zhanguo commentary attached to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. While the *Gongyang* covers the same period and deals with the same events as the *Zuo*, both commentaries differ enormously in their approach to the *Annals*. Unlike the *Zuo*, which focuses on providing historical background for the *Annals*' entries, the *Gongyang* is focused on 'the hidden meaning' allegedly inserted into the *Annals* by their editor and publisher, Confucius. Thus, while closely following the *Annals*' ritualistic mode of history writing, the *Gongyang* authors imbue it with a novel meaning, turning the terse text into a blueprint for the ideal political system.³⁰

The notion of political unification figures prominently in the *Gongyang*, and may be considered the single most important message of the text. Its pivotal role is clarified at the very beginning of the commentary, which deals with the first entry of the *Annals*: 'The first year. Spring, the king's first month [i.e. the first month according to the king's calendar]':³¹

Why is it 'the first year'?—The first year of the lord's reign [in Lu].—Why 'spring'?—It is the beginning of the year.—Who is called 'the king'?—King Wen [of Zhou] is called so.—Why is it first written 'the king's' and then 'the first month'?—It is the king's (calendar's) first month.—Why does the text begin with 'the king's first month'?—To magnify the unified rule.³²

Thus, according to the *Gongyang* the *Annals* were compiled (or edited) by Confucius in order 'to magnify the unified rule'. This notion is ubiquitous throughout the text: the *Gongyang* authors clarify that nothing is external to the rule of the True King (*wangzhe*) and that the reigning Son of Heaven forever is the master of the overlords.³³ The text furthermore emphasizes universal inclusiveness of the royal rule: the 'barbarian' periphery even if temporarily unruly will be incorporated into the unified realm immediately when the True King appears. This notion is clarified in an entry that comments upon a meeting of the northern states' representatives with the 'barbarian' envoys of Wu in 576 BC:

³⁰ For a comprehensive study of the *Gongyang*, see Gentz 2001.

³¹ *Gongyang*, Yin 1: 2196. In the Chunqiu period three calendars coexisted in different states, the so-called Xia, Shang, and Zhou systems, each of which fixed the new year in a different month. The Zhou year began in the month that contained winter solstice, the Shang—one month later, and the Xia—two months later than the Zhou.

³² *Gongyang*, Yin 1: 2196; italics are mine.

³³ See respectively *Gongyang*, Yin 1: 2199; Xi 24: 2259; Cheng 12: 2295; and Yin 3: 2204; Ding 4: 2336.

Why do (the *Annals*) particularly emphasize meeting with Wu (envoys)?—They consider Wu as external. What does 'external' mean?—The *Annals* consider their state [Lu] as internal, and All the Xia ['Chinese'] as external, consider All the Xia as internal, and Yi and Di ['barbarians'] as external,—(But) the True King wants to unify All under Heaven, so why talk of internal and external?—This means that he must begin with those who are close.³⁴

It is clear that the *Gongyang* authors consider the unification of All-under-Heaven—including 'Chinese' and 'barbarian' parts—as the ultimate goal of the True King. But who is the 'True King'? Evidently, this respected epithet does not refer to the reigning Zhou rulers, who are revered in the text, but whose achievements are denigrated, as is clear from the authors' frequent lamentations about the 'lack of the Son of Heaven above'.³⁵ Nor does the text necessarily consider the dynastic founders (or earlier rulers) as True Kings. Rather, the *Gongyang* expectations of the True King are projected into the future, and Confucius' moral-ritual blueprint in the *Annals* should serve this ultimate ruler. The past itself—whether the immediate background of Chunqiu events, or earlier ages of sage kings—is of marginal importance when compared with what Joachim Gentz aptly names the 'ritual reality' as presented by the text.³⁶

The *Gongyang* is the most radical representative of the bunch of ritual texts which are preoccupied with the issue of unity. Its counterparts, like the 'Qu li' chapter of the *Li ji*, disperse historical connections altogether and discuss the ritually mandated unifying rule of Son of Heaven as devoid of any historical context.³⁷ This overt ahistorical stand is revealing. It may well reflect the authors' dissatisfaction with the actual Zhou model, which brought about eventual disintegration and the war of all against all. By distancing themselves from the Zhou legacy, the authors turn ritual into a timeless functioning mode of the proper rule, which can—and should—be implemented in order to ensure proper functioning of the universe. By de-historicizing their blueprint for the ideal rule the *Gongyang* and 'Qu li' authors furthermore avoided the thorny questions of how the ritual unity would be achieved in the

³⁴ *Gongyang*, Cheng 15: 2297. See also Xi 4: 2249 for the eventual incorporation of the 'barbarian' periphery under the True King.

³⁵ *Shang wu tianzi*. *Gongyang*, Zhuang 4: 2226; Xi 1: 2246; Xi 2: 2247; Xi 14: 2254; Xuan 11: 2248.

³⁶ Gentz 2005, 235.

³⁷ The 'Qu li' chapter presents a carefully constructed ritual pyramid with the Son of Heaven who 'rules All-under-Heaven' and 'makes the overlords to arrive at his court' at its apex (*Li ji*, 'Qu li, xia': 5/126). The 'Qu li' chapter belongs to an early layer of the *Li ji* and was probably compiled by the mid-fourth century BC (see Yoshimoto 1995). Another important representative of the texts which consider political unity as manifestation of timeless ritual regulations is the *Xunzi* discussed below.

fragmented world of the Warring States or why the supposedly ritually blameless Zhou dynasty had eventually collapsed. Their textual empire was created as a kind of escape from dealing with the matters of an actual empire—in the past or in the future.³⁸

5. TRUE OR IMPAIRED UNITY? PAST AGAINST THE PRESENT

The second half of the Zhanguo period can be characterized as a protracted battle for unification of the realm. Series of military, economic, and administrative innovations allowed the contending states to allocate huge resources for the ongoing warfare, turning the unification of All-under-Heaven from an idle dream into a practical political goal. Many statesmen and thinkers realized that the conditions of their age differed markedly from that of the past, and were increasingly prone to openly advocate new departures and to reject the legacy of the former kings. Shang Yang (d. 338 BC), the architect of the reforms in the state of Qin, under whose aegis this state rapidly turned into a major superpower, ridiculed the adherents of the past:

Nowadays, powerful states are engaged in annexations, while the weak are devoted to forceful defense. Above, they do not reach the times of Yu (i.e. Shun) and Xia, below—do not follow [kings] Tang and Wu. The ways of Tang and Wu are blocked; hence, none of the ten-thousand-chariot states does not fight; none of the one-thousand-chariot states does not defend [itself]. These ways are blocked for a long time, but the rulers of our age are unable to dismiss them. Hence, the Three Dynasties lack the fourth.³⁹

For Shang Yang, and for many of those who shared his perspective, the past was no longer relevant.⁴⁰ The establishment of the 'fourth dynasty'—i.e. the unification of the realm under a new ruler—should be achieved by addressing current conditions rather than by restoring the legacy of earlier rulers. The appeal of this approach may explain the relative paucity of references to past unifications in late Zhanguo texts. Stories of the universal rule of the past paragons in these texts appear almost exclusively in the context of idealizations of the ancients' rule, but not necessarily as a justification for

³⁸ For more of the idea of the 'empire of writing' as an alternative to actual empire, see Lewis 1999, 337–62.

³⁹ *Shang jun shu*, 7 'Kai sai': 54–5.

⁴⁰ For similar rejection of the adherence to the past, see e.g. *Han Feizi*, 49 'Wu du': 442–5; 50 'Xian xue': 457; *Lüshi chunqiu*, 15.8 'Cha jin': 934–6.

future unification. For instance, in a recently discovered text, *Rong Cheng shi*, ancient monarchs are repeatedly hailed for their ability to attain universal unity. Not only did those 'from within the Four Seas' (i.e. from the known world) submit, but also the outsiders, and even 'birds and beasts arrived at court; fish and turtles submitted [tribute]'.⁴¹ Universal rule appears to be an indispensable feature of ideal political order, which explains why it is routinely mentioned in the texts that deal with reigns of the revered paragons, such as Yu, the Yellow Thearch (Huangdi), and others.⁴²

Attribution of universal power to the sage kings of antiquity continued throughout the Zhanguo period, but my impression is that this *topos* is much less pronounced in the Zhanguo texts than in those dating from the Han (206 BC–AD 220) dynasty onwards.⁴³ What is more remarkable is that it is almost impossible to find a thinker who bases his advocacy of political unification on the example of the former paragons. Such abandonment of historical argumentation, despite its pervasive commonality in other fields of Zhanguo political discourse, is revealing. Most thinkers appear to be aware of the inadequacy of past unifications, which eventually deteriorated into the chaos of the Warring States. Thus, among late Zhanguo texts we find references to dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of former unifications⁴⁴—and this dissatisfaction must have been fairly widespread to prompt angry reply by Xunzi (c.310–218 BC), one of the major pre-imperial thinkers and a staunch supporter of emulating the past:

The vulgar (people) of (our) age claim: 'Tang and Wu [i.e. the founding kings of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, respectively] were unable to make their orders restrictive.' Why? They say: '[The two states] Chu and Yue did not accept (royal) regulations.' This is not true! Tang and Wu were the best under Heaven to make their orders restrictive. Tang resided in Bo, King Wu resided in Hao, each of which was only one hundred *li* squared; (but) All-under-Heaven was united, the overlords became subjects, and wherever their (influence) reached there was none who did not greet

⁴¹ See *Rong Cheng shi*, 254–5.

⁴² Yu's merits are discussed extensively in the (supposedly late Zhanguo) 'Yu gong' chapter of the *Book of Documents*, which deals exclusively with the all-encompassing scope of Yu's rule. Huangdi stands at the center of the so-called Huang-Lao texts that were unearthed in Mawangdui (Hunan) in 1973. The first of the Mawangdui 'Ten Great Canons' (*shi da jing*) begins with the Huangdi's following statement: 'I received the mandate from Heaven, established my position on Earth and gained my reputation from men. Only I, the one man ... match Heaven, establish kings and the Three Dukes, establish states and set up their lords and three high ministers' (cited with slight modifications from Yates 1997, 104–5).

⁴³ For the early Han texts which stress the universality of the former paragons' rule, see e.g. Lu Jia's (d. 178 BC) *Xin yu*, 4 'Wu wei': 59; Jia Yi's (c.200–168 BC) *Xin shu*, 'Wei bu xin': 3/131; *Da-Dai Li ji*, 'Wu di de': 7/117–25, and, of course, the *Shi ji*, chaps. 1–4, *passim*.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, *Lüshi chunqiu*, 16.2 'Wu da': 1706; 17.5 'Zhi du': 1093.

them with joined hands and submitted to be transformed compliantly. Why then do they say that Chu and Yue did not accept the regulations?⁴⁵

Xunzi continues with a lengthy explanation of proper ritual regulations mandated by the former kings who fixed sacrificial obligations of every polity, Chinese and alien alike. He further explains then that while the rites performed by Chu and Yue might have been different from those of the 'Chinese' states, the southerners were, in the final account, firmly incorporated into the sphere of the universal monarchs' rule. Xunzi argues that the ritual dominance of the Zhou (and supposedly Shang) house over the remote polities meant political dominance as well. However, this claim was not convincing for many supporters of unification. For them, ancient monarchs lacked effective political power—and their ritual superiority was of minor importance, insofar as they were unable to impose uniform order on their nominal underlings.

These 'vulgar' views of Xunzi's opponents allow us to address anew the issue raised at the beginning of this paper, namely, why the First Emperor and his entourage had chosen to ignore former unifications of the realm and claimed that their achievement is unprecedented. By doing so, the emperor distinguished himself from earlier 'unifiers' whose rule was primarily a ritual fiction, and who were never able to fully impose their will on the remote parts of 'All-under-Heaven'. While conservative-minded statesmen in the court of Qin had repeatedly pledged the emperor to emulate Shang and Zhou founders and to adopt their model of establishing autonomous fiefs at the outskirts of the empire, their view, based on invocation of the past models, was rejected by the emperor's major aide, the architect of the empire, Li Si (d. 208 BC). In one of the best-known episodes in the short history of the Qin dynasty, while arguing against the proposal to re-establish the fiefs, Li Si explained why the Zhou model was of no value for the Qin:

Kings Wen and Wu of the Zhou enfeoffed many of their sons, younger brothers, and clan members, but later those became estranged and attacked each other like sworn enemies. As the overlords were intermittently attacking each other, the Zhou Son of Heaven was unable to forbid it. Now, the territory within the seas, relying on the spiritual might of Your Majesty, had been uniformly ruled, everything was turned into commanderies and counties . . . None under Heaven has a second thought: this is the art of ensuring peace. Establishing the overlords is not expedient.⁴⁶

The Emperor endorsed Li Si's views:

All-under-Heaven suffered endlessly from bitter strife and warfare because of kings and overlords. Now, with the help of my ancestral temple, All-under-Heaven has been

⁴⁵ Xunzi, 18 'Zheng lun': 12/328–9.

⁴⁶ Shi ji 6/239.

pacified at last. To re-establish states means to sow weapons; and will it not be difficult to demand peace thereby? The view of the Commandant of Justice [Li Si] is correct.⁴⁷

This exchange of views epitomizes Qin's approach. Precedents of unification in the past existed, but they were not precedents of true unification. The unity of the Zhou was an impaired one; it was ephemeral and weak from the very beginning. By adopting new ritual norms, including the title of 'the August Thearch' (*huangdi*, 'the emperor'), by avoiding the old Zhou title of 'the Son of Heaven' and by avoiding all references to Heaven from official announcements, the First Emperor unequivocally distinguished himself from the past.⁴⁸ The imagined unity created by historians and thinkers and attributed to former sages could not match the success of his actual unification of the realm. The past paled in comparison with the present; it had to be abandoned and no longer adopted for current political choices. The real empire, upon its establishment, had no need in the empire of the texts; and those were eventually destroyed to allow for real power to triumph over the imagined one.⁴⁹

EPILOGUE: DISCARDING THE PAST TO SERVE THE PRESENT. ZHANGUO HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

The above discussion leads to some surprising conclusions. It is commonly assumed that Chinese political thought was firmly embedded within a quasi-historical tradition of attributing one's political ideals to the former paragons and creating a fictitious pedigree for one's radical ideas.⁵⁰ While it is well known that some innovative thinkers, such as Shang Yang, Han Feizi (d. 233 BC), and Li Si disdained 'using the past to serve the present', even they were frequently compelled to justify their views through resort to historical narratives; and such resort was even more common among their intellectual rivals.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ This self-proclaimed novelty of the First Emperor's rule did not prevent him simultaneously from borrowing and modifying aspects of the Zhou cultural traditions; see e.g. Kern 2000 and Kern's article in this volume.

⁴⁹ For the relation between the text burning of the year 213 BC and the attempt to suppress subversive historical narratives, see Petersen 1995.

⁵⁰ This assertion stood at the foundation of Gu Jiegang's famous assertion that early sages were invented by the contending thinkers to create a fictitious pedigree to their ideas (see Gu Jiegang 1988).

And yet, the historical genre seems to be relatively insignificant in supporting the notion of unified rule.

Careful reading of Zhanguo texts and their pro-unification discussions indicates remarkable lack of interest in the past precedents of political unity. While Confucius' notion of ritually based unity can be ultimately traced to the Zhou model, Mozi had already discarded this model in favor of a novel creation, which was not attributed to the past sages but placed in the primeval society of the most remote antiquity. Later thinkers did not require even this disguise; hence, Confucius' major follower, Mengzi (c.379–304 BC) merely proclaimed that 'stability is in unity'⁵¹ and felt no need to further justify his statement through references to the former sage kings. In the *Laozi* and the *Laozi*-related works, such as portions of the *Guanzi*, *Han Feizi*, and the *Lüshi chunqiu* political unity is often stipulated metaphysically, being considered a natural manifestation of the cosmic unity of *Dao*, and not a creation of former sages. In the ritual-oriented texts, such as the *Gongyang*, portions of the *Li ji* and the *Xunzi*, political unification under the supreme ruler is embedded in strict implementation of the eternal ritual norms, which are largely dissociated from the early Zhou rule and are considered timeless attributes of the ordered human society. But more importantly, aside from philosophical and ritual stipulations, most of the above texts seem to agree that political unification is primarily a practical necessity, being the only remedy to endless wars; and this common conviction does not require further debates. Thus, past unifications are invoked, if at all, only in the context of searching for proper ways to attain and to preserve the unity, and not in the context of justifying future unification as such.⁵²

This conclusion allows reappraisal of the common view regarding the place of historical narratives in ancient Chinese political thought. The past was invoked to serve the present not uniformly but selectively—and its usage increased in direct proportion to the controversiality of the idea under discussion. Past precedents could serve well to promote controversial ideas such as support of non-hereditary transmission of power or radical modification of the extant social order;⁵³ but they were unnecessary insofar as the topic concerned was less debatable or insofar as the advantages of the proposed policy were easily demonstrable in the present.

In light of the above conclusion we may briefly assess the resurrection of the interest in the past unifications at the beginning of the Han dynasty as a

⁵¹ *Mengzi* 1.6: 17–18.

⁵² For the detailed discussion of the above examples, see Pines 2000b.

⁵³ For the importance of historical models in promoting controversial ideas, see e.g. Pines and Shelach 2005.

direct response to the sudden uncertainty regarding the imperial model after the swift collapse of the Qin dynasty. In the early Han, such issues as the degree of centralization and the territorial scope of imperial expansion became debatable again, as resurrection of semi-independent fiefs threatened the very survival of Qin's model.⁵⁴ Moreover, the Han leaders had also abandoned pretensions for universal empire, preferring nominal (ritual) superiority abroad over costly attempts to impose effective rule of the imperial house beyond the boundaries. The issues of imperial unity, its territorial and administrative scope, were raised anew, and the thinkers responded by searching in the past for convenient precedents for the Han monarchs. The subsequent 'rehabilitation' of the Zhou model and its reincorporation into a renewed imperial historical narrative come, therefore, as no surprise.

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⁵⁴ Recently discovered Zhangjiashan legal documents suggest that the degree of decentralization in the early Han was so high that the 'fiefs' were treated just like alien states. See Zang Zhifei 2003.

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