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POLITICAL THOUGHT

*Yuri Pines**

The three centuries that preceded the establishment of the Chinese empire in 221 BCE were an age of exceptional intellectual flourishing. No other period in the history of Chinese thought can rival these centuries in creativity, boldness, ideological diversity, and long-term impact. Values, perceptions, and ideals shaped amid intense intellectual debates before the imperial unification contributed decisively to the formation of the political, social, and ethical orientations that we identify today with traditional Chinese culture. More broadly, the ideas of rival thinkers formed an ideological framework within which the Chinese empire functioned from its inception until its very last decades. These ideas stand at the focus of the present chapter.

The centuries under discussion are often dubbed the age of the "Hundred Schools of Thought." The school designations were developed primarily by the Han (206/202 BCE–220 CE) literati (Smith 2003; Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003) as a classificatory device for the variety of pre-imperial texts. This classification, even if belated, may be heuristically convenient insofar as it groups the texts according to their distinct ideological emphases, distinct vocabulary, and distinct argumentative practices. For instance, followers of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Mozi 墨子 (ca. 460–390 BCE) were prone to prioritize morality over pure political considerations, in distinction from those thinkers who are – quite confusingly (Goldin 2011a) – dubbed Legalists (*fa jia* 法家). Confucians (*Ru* 儒) and Legalists also differed markedly with regard to the nature of elite belonging (see later). This said, it is fairly misleading to imagine "schools" as coherent ideological camps, as was often done through the twentieth century and beyond. Their ubiquity notwithstanding, the school designations cannot serve as a proper analytical unit. Rather than addressing the intellectual dynamics of the pre-imperial age through the prism of competing schools, it is more useful to identify a broad perspective of a common discourse in which most contemporary thinkers and statesmen took active part. This perspective will allow us both to highlight common ideas and perceptions of rival thinkers and to outline with greater precision fields of disagreement and foci of acute debates.

Background: why politics?

Among the major world intellectual traditions that took shape during what Karl Jaspers (1965) dubbed "the Axial Age" (*Achsenzeit*, eighth–third centuries BCE), Chinese thought appears as the most politically oriented. One will have a hard time finding either a philosophical or historical

text from the pre-imperial or early imperial period that does not discuss such issues as the nature of rulership, ruler-minister relations, an intellectual's political involvement, ways of controlling the people, and the like. It would not be an exaggeration to say that questions of power, authority, and proper methods of maintaining sociopolitical relations – what can be broadly defined as political thought – dominate the texts that survived the vicissitudes of history.

The preponderance of political discussions in pre-imperial texts is not surprising, given their historical context. The outburst of intellectual creativity from the age of Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) and his disciples onward took place against the backdrop of a severe systemic crisis. The end of the Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu, 770–453 BCE) was marked by the progressive disintegration of political structures in the Zhou realm. First, the Zhou dynasty's (ca. 1046–255 BCE) kings, the proud "Sons of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), lost their power to their nominal subordinates, the regional lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯); then the latter were eclipsed by powerful ministerial lineages within their domains; and soon enough heads of these lineages were challenged by their rebellious kin or even by their stewards. In the wake of this devolution of the ruler's power, the Zhou world became entangled in a web of debilitating struggles among rival polities, between powerful nobles and the lords, and among aristocratic lineages within each polity. By the fourth century BCE, a degree of recentralization in individual polities was achieved, but interstate warfare further intensified, giving, in retrospect, the new era an ominous name: the age of the Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE). How to "stabilize All-under-Heaven" became the central concern addressed by competing thinkers.

Crises and bloodshed aside, the Warring States period was also an age rife with opportunities for intellectually active individuals. It was an exceptionally dynamic period, marked by novel departures and profound changes in all walks of life. Politically, the loose aristocratic entities of the Spring and Autumn period were replaced by centralized and bureaucratized territorial states (Lewis 1999a: 597–616). Economically, the introduction of iron tools (Wagner 1993) revolutionized agriculture, allowing higher yields, prompting the development of wastelands, and bringing about demographic growth, as well as accelerating urbanization and a commercialization of the economy. Militarily, new technologies, such as the crossbow, as well as new forms of military organization brought about the replacement of aristocratic, chariot-led armies by mass infantry armies staffed by peasant conscripts, resulting in a radical increase in warfare's scale and complexity (Lewis 1990: 53–96, 1999a: 620–632; Yates 1999: 25–30). And socially, the hereditary aristocracy that dominated the Zhou world during much of the Bronze Age (ca. 1500–400 BCE) was eclipsed by a much broader stratum of *shi* 士 (sometimes translated as "men-of-service"), the men who owed their positions primarily to their abilities rather than their pedigree (see later). These profound changes required new approaches to a variety of administrative, economic, military, social, and ethical issues: old truths had to be reconsidered or reinterpreted. For intellectuals eager to tackle a variety of new questions, this was the golden age.[1]

The magnitude of challenges and opportunities was by itself conducive to the flowering of political thought during the Warring States period. In addition, this flowering benefited from the relatively relaxed intellectual atmosphere. In the fragmented world of that age, no government could impose effective political orthodoxy; nor was there any institution on a par with religious establishments elsewhere able to impose – or even just to define – orthodoxy in the intellectual realm. This resulted in most remarkable intellectual pluralism. Even upon a cursory reading of the texts by different thinkers, the sheer variety of approaches impresses. Some ascertained the divinity of Heaven and deities, while others rejected it; some advocated the political involvement of the intellectuals, while others ridiculed it; blatant militarists debated with staunch pacifists; supporters of state activism rivaled advocates of laissez-faire policy. The evident

absence of politically "forbidden zones" during that age contrasts sharply with a much chillier atmosphere under the unified empire.

Yet remarkable as it is, intellectual pluralism of the Warring States period should not obscure the common set of problems faced by competing thinkers and, more importantly, the similarities in their proposed solutions. The common goal of these thinkers was attaining peace, stability, and orderly rule for the entire subcelestial realm. There was also a broad agreement about the basic parameters of the due-to-be stabilized world. The joint commitment of the majority of thinkers to political unity of All-under-Heaven, to the monarchic principle of rule, to the concept of meritocracy, to the dictum of intellectual's political involvement, and to the need to maintain a decent livelihood for the commoners formed a common intellectual framework within which the future imperial Chinese political culture evolved. But how should these goals be attained, and how exactly should the future unified realm be maintained? These questions generated bitter polemics which made the intellectual life of that age so fascinatingly rich.

Stability is in unity

Perhaps the single most pronounced point of consensus among the thinkers of the Warring States period is their unanimous insistence on political unity as the only way out of the turmoil of perennial war. At the age of profound political fragmentation, the age when the competing Warring States attempted to strengthen their domestic cohesiveness and separate their subjects from those of the foreign states (Shelach and Pines 2006: 219–222), intellectually active members of the *shi* stratum acted contrarily to this trend. These intellectuals, who frequently crossed the borders in search of new appointments, developed a "universal" outlook: they concerned themselves not with a fate of an individual state but with the entire subcelestial realm. And, given the woeful failure of the efforts to attain a viable inter-state order (Pines 2000a: 282–297), it became clear to all: peace is possible only under the aegis of a single ruler who will impose his will on All-under-Heaven.

Thinkers proposed different rationales for unification. For Confucius, for instance, it meant primarily restoring the functioning mode of the Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) polity, in which "ritual, music, and punitive expeditions" are administered by the Son of Heaven alone and not by regional lords (*Lunyu* 16.2). Mozi, in distinction, created a different model, which he placed in the remote past: "when the people just arose." Back then there was a beast-like war of all against all, which ended only when "the worthiest and the most able [man] in All-under-Heaven" was established as Son of Heaven, creating thereafter a perfectly centralized and uniformly ruled universal state (*Mozi* III.11:109–110 ["Shang tong shang"]). Mozi's audience might have well understood that this narrative invokes the past to serve the present: the political myth aimed to demonstrate that unification is the only way out of current disorder and devastating mutual strife. Other thinkers, such as the author(s) of an exceptionally influential fourth-century BCE text, the *Laozi* 老子, dispensed with the past altogether. Their justification for political unification was metaphysical: just as the universe is ruled by the uniform and all-penetrating force of the Way (*Dao*), so should the society be unified under a single Monarch whose position will match that of Heaven, Earth, and the Way (*Laozi* 25). Yet the most compelling rationale for unification was provided by one of Confucius's most eminent followers, Mengzi 孟子 (aka Mencius, ca. 380–304 BCE). When asked by a regional ruler "how to stabilize All-under-Heaven," Mengzi plainly replied: "Stability is in unity" (*Mengzi* 1.6).

Mengzi's reply reflects the common belief of competing thinkers. The texts from the second half of the Warring States period seem no longer to be preoccupied with justifications for the future unification, since the need to unify the entire subcelestial realm became the

unquestionable common desideratum. Henceforth, debates revolved primarily not about why the world should be unified but about how the unity should be achieved. Many thinkers hoped that this could be done through non-violent means. Mengzi, for instance, ridiculed those who wanted to subjugate All-under-Heaven militarily as daydreamers who "look for fish by climbing a tree" (*Mengzi* 1.7); elsewhere he stated that only he who has "no proclivity to kill, will be able to unify" the world (*Mengzi* 1.6). However, laudable as it was, Mengzi's and like-minded thinkers' vision of peaceful unification under a morally upright sovereign was impractical. Mengzi himself lamented that the True Monarch – the ultimate unifier – comes once in five hundred years, and his coming is long overdue (*Mengzi* 4.13). Other thinkers preferred not to wait for a savior but to hasten unification practically. The most notorious – and most successful of these – Shang Yang 商鞅 (d. 338 BCE), plainly stated that the True Monarch is the one who commits himself to resolute war, in which he will subjugate his rivals and bring about the long-desired peace and tranquility (*Shangjunshu* 7.2). The difference in means between Mengzi and Shang Yang could not be greater, but the bottom line remained all the same: "stability is in unity."

Thinkers of the Warring States period disagreed not only about the proper ways to attain unity but also about the nature of future unification. Would it be restoration of a loose Western Zhou-type of polity under the ritual supremacy of the Son of Heaven, as implied by Confucius in his aforementioned saying? Or would it be a more tightly organized and centralized polity, as implied by Mozi? And what should be the limits of the due-to-be-unified All-under-Heaven? Should it include the Zhou *oikouménē* alone, namely the areas of shared elite culture (written language, mortuary rites, ritual gradations), or should it encompass the alien periphery as well? A conservative vision, represented for instance in the Warring States period document "The tribute of Yu" ("Yu gong" 禹貢), now a chapter in the canonical *Classic of Documents*, was that of limited unification. The text explains how the legendary demiurge Yu, having subdued the flood, arranged the world into Nine Provinces (*jiu zhou* 九州). The Nine Provinces (the precise location and names of which vary from one text to another) are fundamentally congruent with the territories of China proper, i.e., with the Zhou realm. This terrestrial organization implies that the entire known world is a complete and closed system, organized in a 3-by-3 grid, which cannot be meaningfully altered (Dorofeeva-Lichtman 2009). The immutability of this scheme becomes even clearer from a parallel "field-allocation" (*fen ye* 分野) astrological system, which divides the sky into nine partitions associated with each of the provinces below. As noticed by Paul R. Goldin, this association meant that "no tenth region [to the Nine Provinces] could ever have been added. There would simply have been no tenth part of the sky to identify with it" (Goldin 2015: 44).

The Nine Provinces scheme (the origins of which may well precede the Warring States period) is purely Sino-centric, as it glosses over the areas associated with alien tribes. An alternative Sino-centric vision, which is also present in "The Tribute of Yu" as well in several other texts, is more attentive to the aliens' presence. It divides the world into five (elsewhere nine) concentric zones: the internal ones are ruled directly by the Son of Heaven and his regional lords, while the external ones are inhabited by the barbarian tribesmen and banished Chinese criminals (*Shangshu* 3: 202–206). Here the alien periphery is incorporated in the realm under the control of the Son of Heaven, but this incorporation is primarily symbolic. Both the Nine Provinces and the Five Zones models represent therefore a particularistic and partly or fully exclusivist vision of the future unification. Yet this approach was challenged by other texts which emphasized the true universality of the ancient paragons' deeds and implied that the coming unification as well should include both the Central States and the alien periphery (e.g., *Mozi* IV.15:160 ["Jian ai zhong"]). The inclusive vision is clearly pronounced, for instance in the *Gongyang* commentary 公羊傳 on the canonical *Springs and Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋)

(on which see Gentz 2015). Since "the True Monarch wants to unify All under Heaven," the divisions between the "internal" (Chinese) and the "external" (alien lands) are just temporary (*Gongyang zhuan*, 417 [Cheng 15]). The future unity should be truly universal.

The emphasis on absolute universality of unification, which eventually became the cornerstone of the imperial propaganda under the unifying Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE; Kern 2000: 151–153), reflected a peculiar optimism of the Warring States period thinkers, who considered the alien tribesmen as only temporarily "barbarian"; in due time they can be educated and incorporated into a civilized community (Pines 2005b). It was only after the Qin-Han unification and the encounter with the steppe nomads that Chinese thinkers had to profoundly re-evaluate their views of the Other and recognize the limits of imperial expansion (Di Cosmo 2002; Goldin 2011b). Yet in the pre-imperial period the aliens remained, overall, insignificant in discussions of unification or otherwise (*pace* Bünger 1987: 321–322). What mattered for thinkers and statesmen of that age is how to subjugate rival Sinitic states, which were the major source of disorder and war under Heaven. The primary goal of unification was attaining peace in the Central Plains; other issues were secondary.

It is worth mentioning that aside from explicit calls for unity, the philosophical discourse of the Warring States period facilitated future imperial unification in a variety of other ways. For instance, the political mythology of that age backdated the notion of unity to the remote past, implying thereby that political fragmentation is an aberration and not an acceptable state of affairs (Pines 2008a, 2010). Ritual compendia postulated the existence of a universal sociopolitical pyramid headed by the Son of Heaven as the singularly appropriate arrangement, de-legitimating thereby the current situation of competing *loci* of authority (Pines 2009: 28–30). The very language of political discourse, with its repeated postulates of the superiority of universality to particularity (Lewis 2006), was conducive to the goal of unification. Yet perhaps the most interesting aspect of pro-unification discourse is not in what was said but in what the thinkers did not say. That not a single individual or text is known ever to have endorsed a goal of a regional state's independence is most remarkable. Even in the texts unearthed from the supposedly culturally distinctive state of Chu we find a clear commitment to the "universal" perspective which postulates the superiority of "All-under-Heaven" over its component parts (Pines, 2018). Thus, denied ideological legitimacy, separate polities became intrinsically unsustainable in the long term. It was this common quest for unity that the eventual unifier, the Qin dynasty, utilized to bolster its legitimacy (Pines 2012: 19–22). And while the Qin experiment of excessive centralization failed (Shelach 2014), the idea of political unity as a singularly acceptable way of maintaining political life remained the most recognizable feature of Chinese political culture well until the end of Imperial China and even beyond (Pines 2012: 11–43).

The Monarch's power

The principle of monarchic rule can be considered the second major pillar of the Warring States period political thought. It is closely related to the principle of political unity; like the latter, it emerged as the thinkers' preferred solution to the aggravating sociopolitical crisis. The process of political disintegration of the preceding Spring -and Autumn period was intrinsically linked to the devolution of the ruler's power: first from the Son of Heaven to regional lords and then from regional lords to heads of powerful ministerial lineages in each polity. Political reforms of the Warring States period were aimed primarily at stemming this disintegration by restoring the ruler's power and creating what Mark E. Lewis aptly names the "ruler-centered state" (Lewis 1999a: 597). The ideology of monarchism evolved parallel to the practical strengthening of the ruler's authority; it both reflected this strengthening and greatly contributed to it.

Thinkers of the Warring States period provided multiple justifications for the ruler's exalted-ness. Ritual masters, starting from Confucius himself, emphasized the ritual superiority of the monarch, whose exclusive sumptuary privileges should sharply distinguish him from his under-lings. Other thinkers emphasized the ruler's importance as a moral exemplar to his subjects. In an idealized Mozi's model, the ruler was supposed to be "the worthiest and the most able" person (*Mozi* III.11: 109–110 ["Shang tong shang"]). Mengzi plainly claimed: "When the ruler is benevolent – everybody is benevolent; when the ruler is righteous – everybody is righteous; when the ruler is correct – everybody is correct" (*Mengzi* 7.20 and 8.5). *Laozi*, as mentioned earlier, elevated the Monarch to the position of the counterpart of Heaven, Earth, and the Way; many later texts developed this equation further, providing metaphysical stipulations for the ruler's supremacy (Pines 2009: 36–44). Yet all these approaches pale in their importance in comparison to the most practical consideration: the ruler is simply essential for the proper func-tioning of the political apparatus and of society in general. The society and the state will be torn apart by conflicting private interests (*si* 私) unless there is a single person who represents the common good (*gong* 公, meaning both "common" and "the lord"; cf. Goldin 2013: 3–4). The ruler's unifying presence is the only means to ensure social and political health.

The emphasis on the ruler's sociopolitical importance permeates the texts of the Warring States period. Xunzi 荀子 (d. after 238 BCE), arguably the single most sophisticated political thinker of that age, explains that only due to the ruler's presence would the human beings be able to form a collective, which is essential for attaining supremacy over nature (*Xunzi* V.9: 165 ["Wang zhi"]). Shen Dao 慎到 (fl. late fourth century BCE) explains that without "the single esteemed [person], there is no way to carry out the principles [of orderly government, *li* 理]" (*Shenzi*, 16 ["Wei de"]). The authors of the major pre-imperial compendium, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (composed ca. 240 BCE), summarize:

> The True Monarch upholds oneness and becomes the rectifier of the myriad things. The army needs the general: thereby it is unified. The state needs the ruler: thereby it is unified. All under Heaven needs the Son of Heaven: thereby it is unified. The Son of Heaven upholds oneness, thereby unifying it [the realm]. Oneness brings orderly rule; doubleness brings chaos.
>
> (*Lüshi chunqiu* 17.8: 1132)

This brief statement, which embeds references to the *Laozi* (par. 39) and to Shen Dao, is a con-venient summary of the ideology of monarchism of the Warring States period. The unity of the Way (viz. the "oneness") should be logically matched by administrative unity of decision mak-ing. Any dispersal of authority means inevitable struggle and turmoil. Just as the army cannot act without a clearly defined chain of command with a supreme commander at its top, so, too, the state requires a unified command as the only way to survive in the violent competition with its neighbors. Moreover, since political unification is the only reasonable solution to ongoing warfare, it should logically culminate in the unification of power in the hands of a single person. Any alternative to this strict monarchism will have devastating effects on the entire realm.

The almost unanimous consensus in favor of a strictly monarchic form of rule achieved during the most pluralistic and innovative period in the history of Chinese political thought explains the hegemonic power of the ideology of monarchism throughout the subsequent imperial millennia (Pines 2012: 44–75). Yet it should be immediately noted that thinkers of the Warring States period were by no means sycophants of the current rulers. To the contrary, they were bitterly critical of the rulers' inadequacies and were ready to criticize contemporary sovereigns as benighted mediocrities. Many thinkers considered themselves intellectually and

morally superior to the rulers, as the teachers and not just subjects of the monarchs (see later). Yet none of the rulers' critics – not even the authors of iconoclastic *Zhuangzi* 莊子, who derided all the rulers, past and present, as bloodthirsty tyrants (*Zhuangzi*, 778–779 ["Dao Zhi"]; 252–256 ["Qu qie"]; see also Yu Youqian 1982) – posed any alternative to the monarchic form of rule. Nor did any of them propose institutional limitations to monarchic power. An individual ruler could – and should – be criticized; he was encouraged to consult his meritorious aides and heed their opinion; yet his was the final say on any matter of importance. A remonstrator and a dissenter could possess a high moral ground, but they had no administrative means of annulling the ruler's order. "Exclusive decision-making" (*du duan* 獨斷) remained the singular prerogative of the sovereign.

   If the principle of monarchism is inviolable, then how should one deal with an inept sovereign? This was not an idle question. Thinkers of the Warring States period were fully aware of the pitfalls of the system of individual rule. The major problem, *pace* common views of modern opponents of authoritarianism, was not necessarily the emergence of monstrous despots: first, because their appearance was infrequent, and, second, because ever since the early Zhou age it was legitimate to overthrow a tyrant (Pines 2008b). The real problem was not with monsters but with mediocrities. It was tacitly understood that the prevailing dynastic principle of rule was prone to produce less than brilliant individuals. In the age of the Warring States, in particular, as a meritocratic system of entry into officialdom replaced the pedigree-based aristocratic order (see later), the rulers remained the only executives who owed their position exclusively to their rights of birth and not to their abilities. In the middle Warring States period attempts were made to circumvent this problem by proposing non-hereditary power transfer, specifically by encouraging the ruler to abdicate in favor of a meritorious minister (Pines 2005a; cf. Allan 2015 and Allan 2016). These attempts failed, however, and the hereditary succession remained the rule. Practically, this meant that officials who served the ruler were frequently intellectually and morally superior to their master.

   The contradiction between political and intellectual authority, between the ruler and his aides, was the major pitfall of the monarchic form of rule. It generated persistent tensions, which are readily palpable even in the writings of the staunchest supporter of the ruler's undisputed authority, Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) (Graziani 2015). How to resolve these tensions became the most challenging task. The solution can be divided into an overt and ideal one, and a more covert and practical one. Ideally, thinkers hoped for the coming of the True Monarch, a semi-divinized sage (Puett 2002) who would stand at the apex of the moral and intellectual and not just political pyramid. Like the paragon monarchs of the past, the future True Monarch will unify All-under-Heaven under his rule; he will impose perfect social order, imbue his subjects with pure morality, and attain universal compliance. Xunzi summarizes:

> The [True] Son of Heaven is the most respectable in terms of his power and position and has no rivals under Heaven. . . . His morality is pure; his knowledge and kindness are extremely clear. He faces southwards and makes All-under-Heaven obedient. Among all the people, there is none who does not politely hold his hands following him, thereby being compliantly transformed. There are no recluses under Heaven, nobody's goodness is neglected. He who unites with him is right, he who differs from him is wrong.
>
>   (*Xunzi* XII.18: 331 ["Zheng lun"])

The expectation that a sage ruler will, by the sheer power of his intellect and morality, order All-under-Heaven was a lofty ideal, but it was not easily realizable. Mengzi acknowledged that

the True Monarch is an exceptional personality, one who arrives "once in five hundred years" (*Mengzi* 4.13). In the meanwhile, insofar as the True Monarch does not materialize, the problem of inept sovereigns should be solved otherwise. The solution, outlined with greatest clarity by Xunzi, was that the sovereign should retain absolute ritual power, maintain his right of the final say, but not intervene in everyday policy making. In Xunzi's view, the ruler should relegate his everyday tasks to a chancellor and confine himself to annual checks of the latter's performance (*Xunzi*, "Wang ba" VII.11: 223–224; more in Pines 2009: 90–97).

Not all thinkers accepted Xunzi's specific solution: Han Fei for instance insisted that a chancellor may be a malevolent plotter, and relegating power to him will pave the way to usurpation. Yet to protect himself against usurpation, Han Fei recommended the ruler to preserve stillness and non-action, to remain secretive and dispel with any manifestations of his personal inclinations to the point of complete self-nullification. The argumentation differs markedly from that of Xunzi, but the bottom line remains the same: the monarch should minimize his intervention in everyday affairs (Pines 2013a). This bottom line is shared by the texts from all sides of the political spectrum of the Warring States period. Rationalizations for the nullification of the ruler's personality and for his adherence to non-action differ: either the need to comply with the cosmic Way, or the advantages of following impersonal human law; either moral imperatives, or the need to preserve power against scheming ministers. Yet differences aside, the practical result of all these recommendations is an inactive ruler who refrains from everyday administrative tasks and who relegates de facto power to his ministers.

The tension between the thinkers' commitment to empowerment of the monarchic institution and their fear of malfunctioning monarchs was never adequately resolved. From the Qin's First Emperor (emp. 221–210 BCE) on, China's monarchs routinely proclaimed themselves sages, implying thereby that they deserve utmost intellectual and not just political authority (Liu Zehua 2014, 2015). Some of them (most notably the First Emperor himself) took these claims quite literally, overpowering their courtiers and intervening actively in the realm's life. Many others acquiesced – either willingly or grudgingly – to the conditions outlined by Xunzi, namely retaining symbolic supremeness but relegating everyday tasks to meritorious officials. Neither solution worked neatly. Not a few thinkers throughout the imperial period expressed their frustration with the persistent inadequacy of the throne's occupants. Yet none of these thinkers – even such radical critics of the dynastic rule as Deng Mu 鄧牧 (1247–1306 CE) and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695 CE) – had ever departed from the ideological framework established during the Warring States period.[2] The belief that common good can be attained only under the rule of a morally impeccable and selfless monarch remained unshakeable throughout the imperial millennia. Only the painful encounter with the West in the nineteenth century caused Chinese thinkers to start searching for alternatives to the monarchic system of rule (Pines 2017c; cf. Zarrow 2012).

Social structure: meritocracy, mobility, and hierarchy

The Warring States period witnessed the demise of the aristocratic form of rule. An epochal event by itself, this decline of hereditary aristocracy became doubly important because of its intellectual implications. The proliferation of meritocratic discourse, the idea that an individual (more precisely a male individual) can transcend his social origins and advance the social ladder, and reconceptualization of the nature of social hierarchy – all these developments of the Warring States period exercised a lasting impact on Chinese political culture.

The preceding Spring and Autumn period was the golden age of China's hereditary aristocracy. Members of this stratum monopolized political, social, and military power in every

polity (Zhu Fenghan 1990: 525–593). Elaborate ritual system developed in the latter half of the Western Zhou period assigned every noble duties and privileges according to his birthright (Falkenhausen 2006: 29–73). That system aimed to solidify the hereditary social order and perpetuate it indefinitely. Moreover, back then the aristocrats enjoyed intellectual authority as well. Insofar as we can judge from the major historical work that deals with this age, *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, it was nobles and only nobles who defined rights and wrongs in the political and ethical realm (Pines 2002; cf. Schaberg 2001; Li Wai-yee 2007). By the sixth century BCE the aristocrats' power reached its apogee. It became all but impossible for outsiders to enter high echelons of power, and even the rulers could no longer effectively challenge leading nobles. In not a few states (e.g., Lu 魯, Jin 晉, and Zheng 鄭) the coalition of a few aristocratic lineages established a de facto ruling oligarchy which completely eclipsed local lords.

Yet it was precisely then that the crisis of aristocracy began. As aristocratic lineages destroyed each other in internecine struggles, the lords (some of whom were former ministers who usurped power in their home states) found it expedient to appoint members of the lower nobility – the *shi* – to positions of power. Parallel to this, the ritual system, which was eroded due to persistent transgressions of ritual norms by powerful nobles, lost its stabilizing impact as well, especially as members of the sub-elite, the *shi*, began appropriating sumptuary rights of their superiors, blurring the dividing line between high and petty nobility (Falkenhausen 2003 and 2006: 370–399). Even earlier, back in the second half of the Spring and Autumn period, the belief in the importance of pedigree had been shaken already, as increasing number of noble scions proved to be intemperate, inept, or otherwise inadequate, causing their lineage's downfall. It was then that some of the nobles started revaluing the prestigious designation "noble men" (*junzi* 君子). Henceforth, it was not automatically applied to every person of noble birth, but only to those who excelled intellectually and morally. Nobles who misbehaved were treated as "petty men" (*xiao ren* 小人). This ethical interpretation of status belonging had its limits: an inept noble could be recognized as a petty man, but a *shi* would never be called a noble man, at least not in *Zuo zhuan* (Pines 2002: 165–171). Yet the seeds of change were already sown.

It is against this backdrop that the *shi* revolution began. The first known thinker who belonged to the *shi* stratum, Confucius, lived at the heyday of the aristocratic age and dared not openly challenge the pedigree-based social order. Yet his major contribution to the demise of this order was reconceptualization of the term *junzi* as an overwhelmingly ethical term: a designation of a moral and self-cultivated person, including – primarily – the *shi* (cf. Gassman 2007; Brindley 2009; Pines 2017b). By shifting an emphasis from pedigree to self-cultivation as the way to attain the "noble man" status, Confucius undermined the very foundations of the aristocratic order. A century later, Mozi was much more resolute in rejecting this order altogether. Mozi put forward the slogan of "elevating the worthy" (*shang xian* 尚賢): the country should be governed by the most able people, whatever their social origins are. According to Mozi, when the former sage kings implemented this policy,

> neither the officials were perpetually esteemed, nor the people forever base. . . . At that time, even among those ministers who enjoyed rich emoluments and respected position, none was irreverent and reckless, and each behaved accordingly; even among peasants and artisans, each was encouraged to enhance his aspirations.
> (*Mozi* II.8: 67–68 ["Shang xian shang"])

Mozi is unequivocal: even among the low strata of peasants and artisans, some people may contribute to the state's well-being; accordingly, there should be no limitations at all on social mobility, and one's position should reflect exclusively one's worthiness and righteousness. What

is amazing is that this radical assault on centuries-old hereditary rights apparently went unopposed, without traceable attempts to defend the pedigree-based social order. Soon enough, the idea that one's career should be determined by abilities alone and not by birthrights became a consensus. Even thinkers who came from high aristocratic families, such as Shang Yang (a scion of the Wei 衛 ruling house) and Han Fei (a scion of the Han 韓 ruling house), did not protect the pedigree-based order but rather dismissed it entirely. Shang Yang was particularly renowned as a promoter of radical social restructuring in theory and practice. The new system of ranks of merit designed by him radically reshaped the Qin society, introducing an unprecedented degree of social mobility (Pines et al. 2014: 24–26). Similar, even if less radical, transformations occurred throughout the rest of the Warring States.

That heredity should not determine the elite belonging was acceptable to most if not all thinkers; but how this belonging should be determined was a matter of bitter controversy. For Confucius and his followers the answer was clear: the noble men's status should be determined primarily by his education and moral qualities. A noble man is he who is able to either refine his innate goodness (Mengzi) or overcome his innate greediness and selfishness (Xunzi). But how to distinguish between real and fraudulent "noble men"? How to ensure that moralizing discourse would not be manipulated by unscrupulous career-seekers? This issue preoccupied the Confucians throughout the period under discussion and much beyond. Some optimistically expected that a superior would immediately recognize the noble man's true worth (Henry 1987). Others in distinction proposed to diagnose a man's character through a series of observances and tests that would explore his sincerity, his will, external expressions of his feelings, his countenance, his hidden motivations, and the matching between his words and deeds (Richter 2005 and 2017). Answers varied, but fundamentally the Confucians' desire was that the noble man's true value would be determined by his peers, i.e., ideally by Confucian Masters themselves.

Thinkers whom we now call Legalists could not disagree more. For them, the very idea that elite members will determine themselves who deserves the elite status meant weakening the ruler's authority and empowering self-serving talkative intellectuals. The Legalists dismissed the core Confucian belief in the possibility that a cultivated "noble man" transforms himself into a moral political actor. Rather, the political system should be based on the premise that everybody seeks his own interest only. The properly functioning state should not try to better the subjects but rather to channel their quest for riches and social prestige toward desirable social and political ends (cf. Pines 2017a: 59–99 for Shang Yang; Harris 2016: 11–62 for Shen Dao; Goldin 2013 for Han Fei). Accordingly, it is up to the rulers to staff the elite with those deemed useful, be they valiant fighters (*Shangjunshu* 17.2) or skilled civilian and military officials who started with a low-level bureaucratic or military job and were promoted according to their performance (*Han Feizi* XX.50: 1137 ["Xian xue"]). The nature of "merits" as understood by Confucians and Legalists was bitterly contested, but the principle of meritocracy as superior to hereditary rights was accepted overwhelmingly, notwithstanding a few dissenting voices (e.g. *Mengzi* 2.7; see more in Pines 2013b).

Justification of social mobility in the Warring States period thought was potentially detrimental to the idea of social hierarchy which was so powerfully embedded in the Zhou ritual system. The very openness of the *shi* stratum to ambitious newcomers from below was conducive to reduction of social barriers. By the late Warring States period *shi* proudly adopted self-designation as "plain-clothed" (*buyi* 布衣), emphasizing thereby that they came up from the bottom of society. The anecdotes of that age tell of have-nots who by diligent learning succeeded to overcome negative circumstances and make an illustrious career (Pines 2009: 141–145). These anecdotes should be read *cum grano salis*, but the degree of social mobility in the third century BCE was indeed remarkable, as testified for instance from Qin documents (Pines et al. 2014:

24–26). How to reconcile this mobility and the breakdown of hereditary order with the need to preserve social hierarchy was a formidable task.

Of many thinkers who proposed solutions to this challenge, Xunzi appears as most significant. Xunzi resurrected the by then semi-abandoned notion of ritual (*li* 禮) as a universal social regulator (Pines 2000b). Yet in distinction from earlier texts, such as *Zuo zhuan*, ritual in *Xunzi* is predicated not on the maintenance of hereditary distinctions but on regulating a society in which everybody can advance. Xunzi clarifies:

> Although a man is the descendant of kings, lords, *shi* and nobles, if he does not observe the norms of ritual and propriety, he must be relegated to the status of the commoner; although he is a descendant of a commoner, if he accumulates learning of the texts, rectifies his behavior, and is able to observe the norms of ritual and propriety – then he must be elevated to the rank of high ministers, *shi* and nobles.
>
> (*Xunzi* V.9: 148–149 ["Wang zhi"])

The statement is unequivocal: rather than utilizing ritual as an impediment to social mobility, Xunzi employs ritual behavior as a substitute to pedigree, turning it into the primary criterion of attaining appropriate social status. The thinker explains elsewhere why the pedigree cannot serve as an adequate determinant of one's position: it is because everybody – from the most revered paragons to the despicable "petty men" – possesses the same inborn qualities. Only through learning and self-cultivation can one transform himself into a "noble man" (*Xunzi* II.4:61 ["Rong ru"]). Yet once one made a choice, he must accept its consequences: he should work hard to overcome his innate greediness and selfishness. If successful, the "noble man" deserves a position at the top of society and manifold social, economic, and political privileges. In distinction, the "petty men" deserve only protection of their basic economic interests but should forever remain at the society's bottom. To a certain extent Xunzi's combination of rigid social hierarchy with considerable meritocratic mobility outlined China's social desideratum (even if not necessarily social practice) for millennia to come.

An intellectual and the state

The rise of the *shi* was not just a political and social phenomenon: it was accompanied by profound reconceptualization of the nature of intellectual authority. In the Spring and Autumn period, the rulers' courts served as a locus of intellectual activity. From the time of Confucius, Mozi, and their disciples, this locus shifted from the rulers to the *shi* Masters (*zi* 子). The Masters' intellectual authority derived not from their position of power, which they often lacked, but rather from their superior understanding of the Way (Dao), i.e., of the guiding moral, sociopolitical, or cosmic principles essential to the well-being of the state and a single person. "Possessing the Way" was the prerogative of outstanding intellectuals, not of the rulers or their courtiers. To put it differently, the *shi* combined the roles of political and intellectual elite. This double role had greatly bolstered their self-confidence. The *Lüshi chunqiu*, composed on the eve of imperial unification by a group of *shi* eager to promote their stratum, reflects this:

> *Shi* are the men who, when acting in accord with [proper] patterns, do not escape the difficulties; when facing the troubles, forget the profits; they cast aside life to follow righteousness and consider death as returning home. If there are such men, the ruler of a state will not be able to befriend them, the Son of Heaven will not be able to make them servants. At best, stabilization of All-under-Heaven, or, second to it, stabilization

of a single state must come from these men. Hence a ruler who wants to attain great achievements and fame cannot but devote himself to searching for these men. A worthy sovereign works hard looking for [proper] men and rests maintaining affairs.

(*Lüshi chunqiu* 12.2: 622–623)

This passage is plain and unsophisticated. First, it hails the high morality of the *shi*, who prefer righteousness to gains and even to life. Second, it hails their loftiness: the mere ruler of a state would be unable to befriend them, and the Son of Heaven would fail to turn them into servants. Then the authors go to the most important part of their message: they advise the ruler to acquire the services of these lofty *shi* as the one necessary precondition for overall success. With these servants, the ruler will rest – presumably because the worthy aides will maintain affairs in his stead.

The passage's message contains therefore as an overt contradiction. The *shi* simultaneously proclaim their aloofness of the rulers, whom they treat as inferiors, but also seek employment by these very rulers. These contradictory messages reflect the complex social and political standing of *shi* in general and of their Masters in particular. On the one hand, they remained forever economically and socially dependent on the throne; besides, for many of them government service was the only way for realization of their lofty ideals. On the other hand, proud in their perceived intellectual and moral superiority over the rulers, these *shi* intellectuals refused to acquiesce to the position of the ruler's servitors. This generated persistent tension between the *shi* desire to serve the rulers and their hope to maintain personal dignity and self-respect in the monarchic political order that they themselves helped to design.

This tension between the desire to serve and the insistence on doing it on one's own terms permeates the writings of Confucius and his disciples. For them service was a means of moral self-realization: the noble mission through which their deepest aspirations could be fulfilled. Confucius promised: "[O]ne who would employ me will attain results within a year, and [the tasks] will be completed within three years," and he was willing to serve even politically dubious figures insofar as this could allow revival of the "Zhou in the east" (*Lunyu* 13.10, 17.5, 17.9). Mengzi claimed that through rectifying the ruler's heart he would be able to impose universal morality (*Mengzi* 7.20). He further argued that government service is an essential occupation of a *shi*, just like tilling is for the peasants; a *shi* who remains without an office for three months should be consoled (*Mengzi* 6.2).

This dedication to service notwithstanding, neither Confucius nor Mengzi succeeded in holding an office for long; their life was a series of appointments and subsequent resignations, or unsuccessful appointments. The major reason for their career failure, if we judge from their disciples' accounts, was the Masters' insistence on preserving their integrity and their unwillingness to compromise lofty principles in exchange for successful careers. Confucius' loyalty to a ruler was secondary to his commitment to the Way; hence he stated that the Great Minister is the one who "serves the ruler according to the Way, and when it is impossible, stops [serving]" (*Lunyu* 11.24). Elsewhere Confucius clarifies:

Riches and honors are what every man desires; but if they cannot be attained in accordance with the Way, do not accept them. Poverty and base status are what every man detests. But if they cannot be avoided in accordance with the Way, do not avoid them.

(*Lunyu* 4.5)

Confucius recognizes legitimate aspirations of his fellow *shi* for riches and honor; these by themselves are not shameful. Yet fulfilling these aspirations requires commitment to the supremeness

of one's moral Way; whenever this Way is compromised, one should avoid service, even if this means poverty and social debasement. Drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate employment – a topic discussed at length by Mengzi as well (e.g., *Mengzi* 12.14) – meant distinguishing oneself from despicable petty man, who served only for the sake of self-enrichment. Mengzi equates these latter yes-men to concubines who lack personal integrity. His ideal is different: it is a Great Man whom "wealth and high status cannot tempt, poverty and low status cannot move, awesomeness and military might cannot subdue" (*Mengzi* 6.3).

Confucius' and Mengzi's frustration with the rulers who invariably failed to live up to the Masters' expectations was shared by other lofty *shi*, some of whom took it to the extreme. These purists considered any service as a filthy task and preferred to shun the courts altogether (Vervoorn 1990). A few thinkers, such as contributors to the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, criticized the mere idea that political service should be a means of self-realization. In the eyes of these critics the service was first, futile; second, dangerous; and third, potentially immoral: after all, lofty proclamations aside, too many *shi* (Confucians included) sought only riches and honor, not the Way (see, e.g., *Zhuangzi*, "Dao Zhi"). Whatever the immediate impact of this criticism of political involvement, eventually it did fuel the concept of lofty reclusion which proliferated in the early imperial period, allowing its adherents to hold high moral ground (Berkowitz 2000).

Facing this criticism of their integrity, some of the followers of Confucius, most notably Mengzi, adopted an uncompromisingly critical stance toward the rulers. This strong criticism was a means to demonstrate to fellow *shi* (and possibly to the ruler as well) that one serves him only to promote the Way and is not concerned with personal career. Mengzi's haughty, even confrontational tone adopted in conversations with the monarchs is at times truly astonishing (Pines 2013c: 80–89). If these repeated affronts to the thinker's employers really took place and were not fabricated by Mengzi's followers, then we should admit that the rulers of the age were remarkably tolerant. Even when Mengzi raised an issue of an interlocutor's inadequacy and the possible need to replace the malfunctioning sovereign, the latter just "turned to his attendants and changed the subject" (*Mengzi* 2.6). Perhaps the fear that persecuting an outspoken advisor will cause massive exodus of gifted *shi* from the oppressive court and the resultant brain drain moderated the rulers' response. Yet the confrontational attitude adopted by Mengzi and his like was not a proper way of maintaining relation with the monarchs. It not just alienated the rulers, but, more importantly, it undermined the overarching principle of monarchism, to which Mengzi, as well as other followers of Confucius, adhered.

This contradiction was duly noticed by those thinkers who advocated unequivocal monarch-oriented political ethics. Shang Yang, Han Fei, and their like conceived of ruler-minister relations as purely political: the ruler was to command, the minister had to obey. The minister could be morally and intellectually superior to the ruler, but this gave him no extra rights. A chapter from a multi-authored text, the *Guanzi* 管子, says:

> Hence when one respectfully implements the ruler's orders, even if he is hurt and defeated, he is not to be punished; while if one implements what the ruler did not order, even if he succeeds he must be punished by death. Thereby the inferiors will serve the superiors as an echo responds to a sound, and ministers will serve the sovereign as a shadow follows the body . . . . This is the Way of orderly rule.
>
> (*Guanzi* XV.45: 912–913 ["Ren fa"])

This strictly authoritarian view which reduced a minister to the ruler's tool might have fit well the ideology of monarchism, but it was incompatible with the ministerial self-confidence and pride of the Warring States period. It was up for another follower of Confucius, Xunzi, to find a

middle ground. Xunzi did assert the minister's right to defy the ruler's orders, but put clear limits to this defiance: it is legitimate only insofar as the results are beneficent to the ruler and the state: "he who contradicts the orders and benefits the ruler is called loyal." Echoing Confucius, Xunzi promulgated the ideal of "Follow the Way, do not follow the ruler" (*Xunzi* XI.13: 250 ["Chen Dao"]), but he was cautious to prevent this dictum from jeopardizing ruler-minister relations. Hence, Xunzi renounced the provocative rhetoric employed by Mengzi (Pines 2013c: 89–94) and also deemphasized the possibility of shifting allegiance to another court whenever a thinker felt himself offended (Pines 2009: 177–180). Xunzi's reinterpretation of a minister's obligations to the ruler anticipated the dominant situation under the unified empire. The minister should retain a degree of autonomy and self-respect: but he must be a ruler's critical servant, neither his friend nor his teacher.

The commoners: "People as a root"

One of Mengzi's most famous statements proclaims:

> The people are the most esteemed; the altars of soil and grain follow them, and the ruler is the lightest. Hence one who attains [the support of] the multitudes, becomes Son of Heaven; one who attains [the support of] the Son of Heaven, becomes a regional lord; one who attains [the support of] the regional lord, becomes a noble.
>
> (*Mengzi* 14.4)

This statement, which read out of context may well resemble a proclamation of the people's sovereignty, exemplifies the so-called "people as a root" (*minben* 民本) ideology in early China. This ideology attracted the attention of Chinese thinkers and foreign observers since the early twentieth century as part of debates about the compatibility of Confucianism with Western democratic ideals.[3] Yet before its modern implications can be considered, one should first understand this people-oriented ideology in the context of the Warring States-period thought.

The notion that the people are the polity's "root" appeared very early: it can be traced already to the texts associated with the Western Zhou period, and it is fully present in the Spring and Autumn period speeches cited in *Zuo zhuan* (Pines 2009: 187–197). In the Warring States period, this tendency of emphasizing the people's importance continued. I shall not focus here on ubiquitous calls for the rulers to address the people's needs, most prominently their welfare and personal security, because these ideas are a commonplace in political thought worldwide and do not require further discussion. Yet two points deserve our attention: first is conceptualization of "the people" – referring primarily, albeit not exclusively, to the commoners – as the raison d'être of the polity, and second is the emphasis on their role as kingmakers, i.e., as a potentially active political force.

The idea that "the people" are the singularly important component of the polity is pronounced in many texts, including those which advocate overtly oppressive policies toward them. For instance, the *Book of Lord Shang*, attributed to Shang Yang, is notorious for its appalling pronouncements against traditional morality and culture and in favor of blatant militarism; and the authors at the time delight in presenting themselves as people-bashers and supporters of excessively restrictive control (e.g., *Shangjunshu* 18.2). Yet the authors also remind the ruler that the goal of their policies is to benefit the people and not to benefit the ruler personally. "When [the ancient paragons] Yao and Shun were established in All under Heaven, this was not to benefit privately from All-under-Heaven: they were established for the sake of All-under-Heaven" (*Shangjunshu* 14.4). War, oppression, and harsh punishments are just the means to attain peace

and tranquility, demonstrating thereby the ruler's love of the people. Other texts disagree with the *Book of Lord Shang* as to the proper means of benefitting the people but share the understanding that their needs should top the ruler's concern. This view is neatly summarized in a saying from the *Lüshi chunqiu*: "All under Heaven does not [belong to] a single man, it [belongs] to All under Heaven" (*Lüshi chunqiu* 1.4: 44). Xunzi reiterates: "Heaven does not give birth to the people for the ruler's sake; it establishes the ruler for the people's sake" (*Xunzi* XIX.27: 504 ["Da lue"]).

Proclamations about the people's ultimate importance for the polity are matched by the assertion that they can influence the outcome of political struggles. Mengzi declared that the ancient tyrants

> Jie and Zhou[xin] lost All under Heaven through losing the people. They lost the people through losing their hearts. There is a way to attain All under Heaven: when you attain the people, you attain All under Heaven. There is a way to attain the people: when you attain their hearts, you attain the people.
>
> (*Mengzi* 7.9)

This emphasis on attaining the people's hearts, i.e., on making the policies acceptable to them, can be encountered in many other texts. Even the *Book of Lord Shang* demands of the ruler to pay attention to the people's internalization of laws and regulations: without this broad approval, the efficiency of laws will decline (*Shangjunshu* 5.9). The *Lüshi chunqiu* declares that the success of the former paragons derived primarily from their ability to "be compliant with the people's hearts" (*Lüshi chunqiu* 9.2: 478). Xunzi summarizes: "The ruler is a boat; commoners are the water. The water can carry the boat; the water can capsize the boat" (*Xunzi* V.9: 152 ["Wang zhi"]).

Xunzi's latter saying is often read in the context of legitimating popular rebellion, and similar interpretations are often given to Mengzi's pronouncements, but this should not be the case (Tiwald 2008). Popular rebellions, which became ubiquitous since the downfall of the first imperial dynasty, the Qin, did not happen in the Warring States or earlier periods. The leverage of the commoners was different: the rulers had to take into consideration that disgruntled people may vote with their feet. If unsatisfied with the ruler, peasants would flee to a neighboring state and deplete the sovereign of human resources, while the conscripts would abscond from the battlefield (see, e.g., *Mengzi* 1.3). It was primarily to prevent this outcome that the ruler was recommended to be attentive to popular sentiments.

Repeated pronouncements in favor of the commoners' importance and in favor of being attentive to their opinions may create an impression of nascent ideas of popular sovereignty in early Chinese thought, but this is a debatable conclusion. Actually, thinkers who propagated the importance of "attaining the people's heart" did not advance any mechanism of consulting the people or even verifying their ideas. Only in the *Mozi* can we distinguish a nascent idea of routinely consulting the commoners and even allowing them to supervise low-level power holders (e.g., *Mozi* III.12: 116–118 ["Shang tong zhong"]). These ideas are exceptional, though. The other thinkers' neglect of institutionalizing the people's political input is not incidental. After all, the very same thinkers who proclaimed the people's importance appear to have a very low esteem of the people's mental abilities and morality. Confucius argues straightforwardly: "You can let the people follow [the Way], but not understand it" (*Lunyu* 8.9). Mengzi adds: "Slight is the difference between men and beasts and birds. Commoners abandon it; noble men preserve it" (*Mengzi* 8.19). Clearly, intellectually and morally impaired commoners should not be expected to actively participate in decision making. Mengzi is explicit: "Some toil with their

hearts, some toil with their force. Heart-toilers rule men; force-toilers are ruled by men. Those who are ruled by men, feed men; those who rule men, are fed by men – this is the common propriety of All under Heaven" (*Mengzi* 5.4). Xunzi echoes these views (*Xunzi* VI.10: 182 ["Fu guo"]).

How can we reconcile, then, the thinkers' insistence on the people as "the most esteemed" with their disdain toward commoners and rejection of their political participation? A possible answer would be a sinister one, proposed by Han Fei: should the ruler be able to govern simply by reliance on "the people's heart," he would have no use of worthy advisors from among men-of-service (*Han Feizi* XX.50: 446 ["Xian xue"]). Indeed, for intellectuals it was advantageous to appropriate the position of the people's representatives and to voice the people's grievances to the ruler, which would grant them additional leverage vis-à-vis the sovereigns. This appropriation of what Tu Wei-ming aptly defines as "the most generalisable social relevance (the sentiments of the people)" (Tu Wei-ming 1993: 20) was too important an asset to be yielded to the uneducated masses. It was in the best interest of the self-proclaimed champions of the people from among the educated elite to keep commoners precluded from political processes.

Alternatively, a less sinister explanation is possible. In the highly mobile society of the Warring States period, ambitious commoners were able to join the ranks of the elite and become legitimate political players. Those who remained behind evidently lacked either sufficient ambitions, or talents, or both – or so, at least, most *shi* wanted to believe. As commoners were no longer hermetically excluded from the ruling elite, and as some of them were routinely co-opted into the *shi* stratum, this may have created a kind of "popular representation" from above, which eliminated the need for active political participation from below. It was only with the cessation of this mobility after the imperial unification that alternative modes of political participation from below emerged, namely popular unrest and popular rebellion (Pines 2012: 134–161).

Summary: intellectual legacy of the warring states

The imperial unification of 221 BCE may be viewed as partial fulfillment of the aspirations of the Warring States period thinkers. Even though the first imperial dynasty, the Qin, was short-lived, its heir, the Han dynasty, brought about a relatively long period of peace, stability, and prosperity to large parts of the East Asian subcontinent. And, while China still had to suffer from longer or shorter periods of fragmentation, rebellions, foreign conquests, and domestic wars, the imperial model proved to be viable enough to remain unchallenged well until the end of the nineteenth century.

Among many factors that contributed to the empire's durability was its unparalleled ideological preparedness. Its fundamental premises were shaped long before the actual imperial unification and retained their appeal for the subsequent two odd millennia. The emperor should be omnipotent and his rule should be universal; the bureaucracy should be staffed by men of proven talent and merit; and the commoners deserve utmost concern but should remain outside policy making. These ideas guided political actors in China from the beginning to the end of the imperial enterprise, from the Qin dynasty to the Qing (1636/1644–1912). They were shared not only by the political and intellectual establishment but even by foreign conquerors and domestic rebels. The fact that no alternative to these fundamental premises was posed throughout more than twenty-one centuries of the imperial rule testifies to the exceptional viability of the ideas shaped prior to the imperial unification. Perhaps the reason for their appeal is that broad consensus in favor of these ideas was formed during the freest period in China's intellectual history and they were not artificially imposed from above. Later, the empire's political and intellectual establishment further reinforced the hegemonic status of the imperial ideology, making it the

glue that held the imperial enterprise intact even during the periods of most profound domestic crises.

Taken from this perspective, the intellectual enterprise of the Warring States period thinkers should be considered an exceptional success. Yet this success came at a price. The imperial unification brought an end to the inter-state market of talent which ensured considerable freedom of thought and freedom of expression to men-of-service. With the establishment of the imperial monopoly on power and prestige, first steps were made to subjugate scholars to the state. In the Qin this was done crudely through outright suppression of "private learning" in the wake of the infamous biblioclasm of 213 BCE (for which see Petersen 1995; Kern 2000: 183–196; Pines 2009: 180–183). Han rulers preferred cooptation to coercion: by establishing a state-sponsored curriculum based on the Five Classics (Nylan 2001), they brought about elevation of these texts above those of the "Hundred Schools of Thought" (Lewis 1999b: 337–360). In due time, as intellectual orthodoxy came into existence; freedom of thought and expression was significantly curtailed. While intellectual debates continued throughout the imperial millennia, their scope and boldness reduced in comparison to an earlier age. To express themselves more freely, the imperial literati employed other genres than composing political essays. The latter continued to be produced, to be sure, but their intellectual appeal could rarely match that of pre-imperial Masters.

Yet the Warring States period legacy of proud and self-confident intellectuals did not disappear entirely. The throne never succeeded to turn all the literati into its obedient tools; nor did it succeed in the long term to determine unilaterally norms of orthodoxy. The ongoing appeal of the Warring States-period texts, especially those that were incorporated into the expanding corpus of Classics (e.g., the *Analects* and *Mengzi*), fueled the intellectuals' self-esteem. Their conviction that in the final account their stratum – rather than the occupants of the throne – represented the Way made them more confident, more willing to criticize the emperors, and more able to influence the government's policies. This belief of acting on behalf of the Way generated repeated collisions between lofty intellectuals and the throne, but it also greatly benefitted the imperial enterprise. It provided the empire with an extraordinary powerful, confident, and self-aware stratum of scholar-officials who were able to navigate its course even under most inadequate rulers (Pines 2012: 76–103). The persistence of this stratum is one of the major legacies of the Warring States-period intellectual culture, which contributed in the final account to exceptional durability of the imperial enterprise.

Notes

1 Note a significant semantic overlap between the Western term "intellectual" and the Chinese *shi* (Yu Yingshi 1987: 1–3).
2 For views of rulership during the imperial millennia, see Liu Zehua 1996, vols. 2–3 (specifically for Deng Mu and Huang Zongxi, see 3: 412–416 and 600–618). For Huang Zongxi, cf. de Bary 1993 and Jiang Yonglin 2008.
3 For early explorations of the potential relevance of the *minben* idea to modern democracy, see Liang Qichao 1919 [1996]: 35–44 and 228–234; for modern debates among Western scholars, see, e.g., Murthy 2000; Tan 2003: 132–156.

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