

Chapter 1

Toward a Zeal for Classicism

Intellectual Transitions from 74 BC to AD 9 China

Sometimes we assume that we are more normal than we actually are, especially when it comes to beliefs. Words like orthodox, heterodox, conservative, radical, and hater imply a spectrum in which we sit in the sweet middle spot and others fall on the less normal, and hence less correct, range. Words like pagan, Pharisee, and zealot from biblical traditions embody this spectrum. Was Judas a good or bad person? The New Testament Gospels and the Gospel of Judas would give you opposite answers.¹ Nevertheless, both seek to convince you that their ideas are the norm; both compete over the middle spot in the spectrum.

At the end of the first century BC in China, Liu Xin railed against his colleagues and insisted on adding several texts to the canon of the Five Classics. While his colleagues were still outraged by this extreme move, an incident added more fuel to the controversy: Liu's enemy Li Xun 李尋 (fl. 15–5 BC) convinced the emperor to depart from the classics in general. A similar spectrum seems to have formed: Liu Xin and Li Xun fell on two poles of the spectrum, and the others sat in the middle as the normal ones. But from the perspective of Li, was not everyone conservative, and from that of Liu, was not Li too radical and others too conservative? If so, how do we make sense of the different spectra in their minds?

This chapter tells the story of radicals and conservatives in first century BC China, except they are more than radicals or conservatives. I see them as intellectual contenders who reacted to concerns of their contemporaries in the way that they thought was the best approach. Simply put: they lived to prove that their ideas were better than others'. This perspective emancipates us from the two notorious spectra, that of Confucianism and that of old script / new script texts. The first spectrum puts the original teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi in the middle and judges the

literati by how faithfully they conformed to the middle point. The second divides the literati in two segregated, mutually hostile parties, one promoting a version of the classics written in contemporary script and the other supporting those in the ancient script. These kinds of views highlight the conformity to certain beliefs but obscure the driving concerns of and the agency of individuals. Moreover, our perspective reveals layers of thought as well as social connections invisible in these spectra.²

Therefore, this chapter tells the story in a more label-free way. Up to the first century BC, the classics started out as merely one of the weapons in the intellectual arsenal of literati. However, in the beginning of the first century AD, they became the paramount canon, disrespect for which could cost a person's life. This turn paralleled a political turn: the Han empire was facing the consequences of overexpansion and needed a less aggressive state policy.³ Most literati during that time believed that the previously failed policies endangered the imperial house's heavenly granted right to rule and put the empire at the edge of a precipice.⁴ A new policy might well be the last chance for the imperial house before Heaven shifted its mandate to someone else, so the court needed to choose this policy wisely.⁵ Since, to most of them, Heaven was the ultimate agent that would decide the fate of the Han dynasty, the literati extensively elaborated on Heaven's will.

The imagination of an ideal society, namely, the Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), emerged from this context. If Heaven evaluated human rulers based on their subjects' welfare, the best policy to keep Heaven satisfied was the one that could bring the maximal degree of welfare to the people. Therefore, generations of scholars competed with each other to set out the right or the ideal way to rule. Most of them gradually turned their attention to following the steps of the ancient sage kings. And the classics became the focus as the records of these sage kings' speeches and deeds.

In this chapter, we will focus on the imagination of the Great Peace and examine the competing voices around it, which eventually led to the rise of classicism. From hindsight, classicism stood out in history, and classicists were certain to win the favor of the emperors. But after closely examining the debates between the literati, we can see that the promoters of the classics barely dominated, and they were constantly faced with challenges from rivals. Even the promoters themselves starkly disagreed with each other. This chapter thus not only introduces how devotion to the classics became a good idea to most of the literati, but also how seemingly opposite or outlandish ideas could result from the same context. Behind these ideas, we will see the patterns of intellectual innovation in first century BC China.

We will start with the intellectual atmosphere in Emperor Xuan's court (r. 73–49 BC), for it disclosed a concern, namely, anxiety about Heaven's will, which shaped the changes of literati thought on the classics for the rest of the Western Han dynasty. The literati and the emperor openly expressed their anxiety about Heaven's will and sought means of dealing with it. Dominant literati like Wei Xiang 魏相 (?–59 BC) and Bing Ji 丙吉 (?–55 BC) brought the classics, or chunks of classics, into this conversation not as manuals for moral cultivation but as one expeditious way of fulfilling the urgent need to restore the disturbed cosmological order.

The next generation of dominant scholars, including Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BC) and several disciples of Hou Cang 后蒼 (fl. 72 BC), searched for a way to relieve the intensified anxiety. The government of the ancient sage kings, or the Kingly Way, became the paragon for the Han dynasty to follow, for it was in harmony with Heaven. The classics, putatively written by the sage kings to record the ideal government of the Golden Age, became the media for the literati to imagine and realize sagely rule in their own troubled times.

The latent sparks of the two preceding generations fueled the dramatic changes in the last years of the Western Han. The desire to harmonize with Heaven was the foundation for further intellectual innovations, which had an impact throughout the first two centuries AD. Building on the focus on the classics, two different paths of innovation cast doubts on the existing transmission lines of the classics. Liu Xin, on the one hand, suspected that the received versions of the classics were not the complete, original classics of the sage kings. Accordingly, he combined obscure and ignored versions of classics and commentarial traditions to restore the classics. Li Xun 李尋 (fl. 15–5 BC) and Xia Heliang 夏賀良 (?–5 BC), on the other hand, emphasized Heaven's will in an effort to depart from the sages and overrode the classics with the revealed text, the *Scripture of the Great Peace*. These two ways of innovation—combination in order to complete the old material and a shift to new material—marked the last years of the Western Han dynasty. They also prepared the ground for the apocrypha, a corpus of commentaries that reveal heavenly secrets hidden in the classics.

The Search for Heaven's Will in Emperor Xuan's Period

In 78 BC, a bizarre incident attracted the court's attention: a dead willow tree in the imperial garden revived itself with words on its leaves: "Gongsun

Bingyi 公孫病已 will be established.”⁶ A scholar called Sui Hong 眭弘 (?–78 BC) reported to the court about the implication of this omen:

漢家堯後，有傳國之運。漢帝宜誰差天下，求索賢人，禮以帝位而退。自封百里，如殷周二王後，以承順天命。⁷

The Han house is a descendant of Yao, and it has the fate to pass down the throne. Now the Han emperor should search in the world to seek out a worthy and abdicate the throne to him. Then he should retreat and grant himself a fief of a hundred square *li* like the descendants of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, in order to conform to the mandate of Heaven.

The court was outraged by this blunt claim: the mandate of Heaven had moved away from the Han dynasty. This speech was particularly disturbing because the dynasty was suffering from the policy of overexpansion from the previous emperor, Emperor Wu, and the current ruler was a young boy being manipulated by Huo Guang 霍光 (?–68 BC). During this troubling time, the mandate of Heaven was a sensitive issue; for people in the first century BC, a dynasty’s destiny desperately hung on the favor of Heaven.⁸ The current difficulties of the empire inevitably aroused literati’s anxiety about the mandate.

Four years later, when Emperor Xuan succeeded the throne, his announcements and policies continuously reflected this anxiety. After the political instability and the backfiring of Emperor Wu’s previous aggressive policies, Emperor Xuan needed to turn the empire in another direction.⁹ However, no one knew what this transition would bring to the empire. The uncertainty of the future overlapped with the uncertainty of Heaven’s will. What if the Han dynasty had already lost Heaven’s favor and the new direction only worsened the situation? As a successor to the Han throne, our new emperor was also anxious about his position. He was a grandson of a crown prince whose princely status was terminated by Emperor Wu. In the early years of his reign, he behaved as a figurehead overshadowed by Huo Guang.¹⁰ It was crucial for him to live up to what others expected of a legitimate emperor.

Emperor Xuan’s concern for Heaven’s will was revealed in his sensitivity to omens, auspicious and inauspicious. His predecessors had already mentioned omens and Heaven’s will, but he brought the significance of omens to another level. Taking them as Heaven’s constant evaluation of his rule, he actively

responded to them. When auspicious omens such as phoenixes (*fenghuang* 鳳凰) or sweet dew (*ganlu* 甘露) were reported, he sent out edicts modestly pointing out his careful work as well as his respect for Heaven. When earthquakes or other disasters took place, he took them as warnings about his faults. In a case where an earthquake damaged an ancestral temple of the Han, Emperor Xuan linked the warning particularly with the fate of the dynasty.¹¹

Since Emperor Xuan believed Heaven constantly evaluated his government, we might ask what he thought Heaven's standards were. In explaining his faults, he stated that he failed to "harmonize the living" (*he qun sheng* 和群生), and he "did not brightly lead the people" (*dao min bu ming* 導民不明). What did he think he was supposed to do? He put it in a confessional form: "I have not been able to carry forward the magnificence of the previous emperors, harmonize and pacify the people, follow Heaven and Earth, and regulate [according to] the four seasons."¹² He did not stress moral cultivation but emphasized regulating the human order in accordance with Heaven and Earth.

The emperor's anxiety resonated in his successors and became one of the driving concerns in the intellectual world of the first century BC. Generations of scholars sought to alleviate this anxiety in their own ways. The first generation was in line with Emperor Xuan and used the cosmological order as a tool of governance.

CURING THE STATE: COSMOLOGY AS A POLITICAL WEAPON

Since the fourth century BC, generations of scholars emphasized the importance of an orderly cosmos in ruling a state.¹³ During the mid-first century BC, officials brought this issue into the center of state policy. In Emperor Xuan's court, high officials such as Bing Ji 丙吉 (?–55 BC) and Wei Xiang 魏相 (?–59 BC) stressed that the human realm was part of the cosmos, and they turned to the balance of *yin* and *yang* as well as the harmony of *qi*.¹⁴ Bing Ji's famous story illuminates this point. During a trip, Bing Ji witnessed two events: several people fighting, and a cow sticking out its tongue and gasping for breath. As an imperial chancellor, he did not take care of the melee, an apparent illegal activity. Instead, he was worried about the cow's bizarre behavior, for it was an omen that indicated irregular activity in the cosmos. For Bing Ji, keeping *yin* and *yang* in balance was the job of the highest Han officials.¹⁵ He did not diminish the importance of laws and regulations, but he unprecedentedly prioritized the cosmological order before laws and regulations for running the empire.¹⁶

Wei Xiang drew a more specific blueprint in presenting principles of *yin* and *yang*:

陰陽未和，災害未息，咎在臣等。臣聞《易》曰：『天地以順動，故日月不過，四時不忒；聖王以順動，故刑罰清而民服。』天地變化，必繇陰陽。¹⁷

Now *yin* and *yang* do not harmonize with each other, and disasters have not stopped. The guilt [for these] lies in us. I have heard from the *Changes* that “Heaven and Earth act based on smooth [progress]. Therefore the sun and moon do not behave excessively, and the four seasons are free from error. When the sage kings act based on smooth [progress], the penalty is fair and the populace is thus convinced.” The changes of Heaven and Earth always follow *yin* and *yang*.

Like Emperor Xuan, Wei Xiang points out that under his administration, *yin* and *yang* have not harmonized with each other. Quoting from the *Changes*, he argues that *yin* and *yang* are the foundation of the changes of Heaven and Earth. He goes on to explain the fundamental role of *yin* and *yang* for the empire and the human realm: “I think *yin* and *yang* are the base of the kingly undertaking, and the mandate of the myriad creatures. Since antiquity none of the sages or the worthies have failed to follow it. Purely following Heaven and Earth and observing the previous sages are the duties of the Son of Heaven.”¹⁸ Echoing Emperor Xuan’s speech, this claim holds that *yin* and *yang* are the foundation of the empire and it is the emperor’s job to maintain their relationship.

Yin and *yang* and *qi* in Bing Ji and Wei Xiang’s cases are two oft-repeated concepts in cosmology from the late Warring States period on. In their understandings of the cosmos, *qi*, a fluid but materialistic substance, permeates the universe. *Yin* and *yang*, the oppositional aspects of *qi*, form the basic generational process of the cosmos. Human society, the political state, and even the human body as microcosms are linked to Heaven and Earth by *qi*. Correspondingly, they are not only subject to but also influence the overall cosmological process.¹⁹ Based on this cosmology then, if a state, as an intermediary between Heaven and individuals, intends to function well, it needs to keep the various microcosms and the cosmos as a whole functioning regularly.²⁰

This cosmology was hardly limited to Wei Xiang and Bing Ji's time.²¹ Neither was forming it into a political philosophy of his invention. Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BC), for example, had already mentioned similar ideas: "When the legal penalty does not hit the target, deviant *qi* (*xie qi* 邪氣) is created. When deviant *qi* accumulates below, resentment and hatred are stored above. If what is above and below do not get along, *yin* and *yang* will be in disorder, and bizarreness and disasters will occur."²² In this case, Dong Zhongshu warns that the imbalance of *yin* and *yang* will cause catastrophes that are portents. The "deviant *qi*," shaped by the royal abuse of punishment, accumulates and brings hatred to the empire.²³ We can see that Wei Xiang's theory of *qi* echoed that of Dong Zhongshu. The link between earthquakes and an inharmonious populace mentioned in Emperor Xuan's early edict also reflects, though inexplicitly, a similar cosmology.

However, for Dong Zhongshu, the emperor's virtue is the essential factor that affects the cosmological processes; the ruler needs to constantly rectify his mind. Dong argues that achieving the balance of the cosmological order starts with the emperor's moral reflection. In order to solve the problem of deviant *qi* and the imbalance of *yin* and *yang*, he does not emphasize the need to understand the cosmos. Instead, he considers virtue the solution. In Dong's case, the balance of the cosmos and the harmony of *qi* are the result of the ruler's moral perfection.²⁴ Although harmony with the cosmological process is crucial for the welfare of the state, the means of adjusting and maintaining it is the moral rectification of the ruler. That is to say, for Dong Zhongshu, morality commands cosmos.

In contrast, in Wei Xiang's statement, the ruler's virtue is no longer the crux of adjusting the cosmological order. Instead, a better understanding of the cosmos and the tools to manage it are essential. Wei Xiang attaches certain trigrams, namely, Zhen 震, Li 離, Dui 兌, and Kan 坎, to East, South, West, and North, respectively, a relationship found in the "Explicating the Trigrams" ("Shuo gua" 說卦) commentary of the *Changes*.²⁵ The four trigrams also symbolize winter, spring, summer, and autumn.²⁶ People need to use the trigrams in a timely order, otherwise natural disasters will occur.²⁷ He argues that the ruler should respect Heaven and follow *yin* and *yang*. When the cosmological process is normal, natural disasters will disappear. In this condition, people can prosper. Then there will be no hatred or dissatisfaction.²⁸ In Wei's theory, inharmonious *qi* is caused by the ruler's failure to follow the correct cosmological order, not by his lack of virtue. He then gives his proposal for recruiting officials:

願陛下選明經通知陰陽者四人，各主一時，時至明言所職，以和陰陽，天下幸甚！²⁹

I hope your majesty selects four people who are enlightened in the classics and comprehensively know *yin* and *yang* and puts each of them in charge of one of the four seasons. When the season comes, the one responsible for it should announce what trigram should be in charge, in order to harmonize *yin* and *yang*. All-under-Heaven will be very fortunate.

In other words, the welfare of the state does not depend on the ruler's moral rectification but on officials with experience in dealing with *yin* and *yang*.

Wei Xiang's proposal was accepted by Emperor Xuan. In fact, Wei Xiang and his successor Bing Ji had taken the path to the highest position in Emperor Xuan's court, from Grandee Secretary (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫) to Grand Chancellor (*chengxiang* 丞相), two of the three most privileged official positions, known as the Three Ducal Ministers (*san gong* 三公).³⁰ They had training both in Han law and in the classics: the *Book of Changes*, the *Rites* classics, and the *Classic of Poetry*.³¹

In solving the problem of ill-omened earthquakes and a dissatisfied, restless populace posed by Emperor Xuan, Bing Ji and Wei Xiang did not give any suggestion that could radically change the legal and administrative foundation of the Han dynasty. Instead, they added the cosmological order on top of this foundation. For them, to be in tune with the cosmic order, the ruler must give the populace an environment in which to prosper and employ the people in a timely manner. Only then can the cosmos function well, and the empire last. It was in this context that the *Book of Changes* came to interest the literati in the court.

THE *BOOK OF CHANGES* AS A MEANS OF SEARCHING FOR HEAVEN'S WILL

There are, explicitly or implicitly, several allusions to the *Changes* in Wei Xiang's proposal. How, then, was the *Changes* relevant to Wei Xiang's points? What kind of text did Wei Xiang and his contemporaries perceive the *Changes* to be? It is well accepted that the hexagrams found in the received

version of the *Book of Changes* were originally used for divination in the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC).³² The received version contains strata of commentaries on prognostication. Among these strata, a “Commentary on the Attached Statements,” or “Xici zhuan” 繫辭傳,³³ already circulated in the early Western Han dynasty. And it explains how humans can penetrate Heaven’s will:³⁴ Heaven and Earth change over time, and Heaven produces images to show what is auspicious and inauspicious in this constantly changing world; the sage follows the changes of Heaven and Earth and imitates Heaven’s image in order to understand the way of Heaven.³⁵ As Willard J. Peterson mentions, in dealing with the changing world, the “Commentary” “is an attempt to persuade the audience that they can best do so by accepting the guidance of the *Changes*.”³⁶ The “Commentary on the Attached Statements” points out that by using the *Changes*, cosmological processes are intelligible. Human beings can thus adjust to these processes in accordance with the cosmos.³⁷

During Emperor Xuan’s time, when Heaven’s approval of government became a central intellectual issue, the *Changes* became an essential tool.³⁸ Its unique usefulness derived from the intimate relationship between its images, especially hexagrams, and heavenly omens and other signs from Heaven. According to the commentaries, thanks to the ancient sages, people were able not only to translate Heaven’s language into something they could understand but to also make Heaven’s regulation of the cosmos intelligible. For this reason, the literati increasingly used the *Changes* to understand the functioning of Heaven during Emperor Xuan’s reign.³⁹

It was in this context that experts on the *Changes* became important figures among literati in the court. Particularly, Shi Chou 施讎 (fl. 51 BC), Liangqiu He 梁丘賀 (fl. 59–48 BC), and Meng Xi 孟喜 (fl. 73–49 BC), taught by the same teacher, Tian Wangsun 田王孫, monopolized the transmission lines of the *Changes* there. Shi Chou took the Academician position (*boshi* 博士) for the *Changes* in Emperor Xuan’s reign.⁴⁰ Liangqiu He received Emperor Xuan’s favor for his interpretation of omens and later became the Chamberlain for the Palace Revenues (*shaofu* 少府) from 59 to 48 BC. Around 51 BC, his teaching was established as an official tradition after an imperial conference about the classics at Shiqu 石渠 Hall.⁴¹ Although Meng Xi was not appointed as Academician, due to his reputation for changing his master’s teaching, his reading of the *Changes* was well recognized by his contemporaries, and some of his students took the position of Academician.⁴²

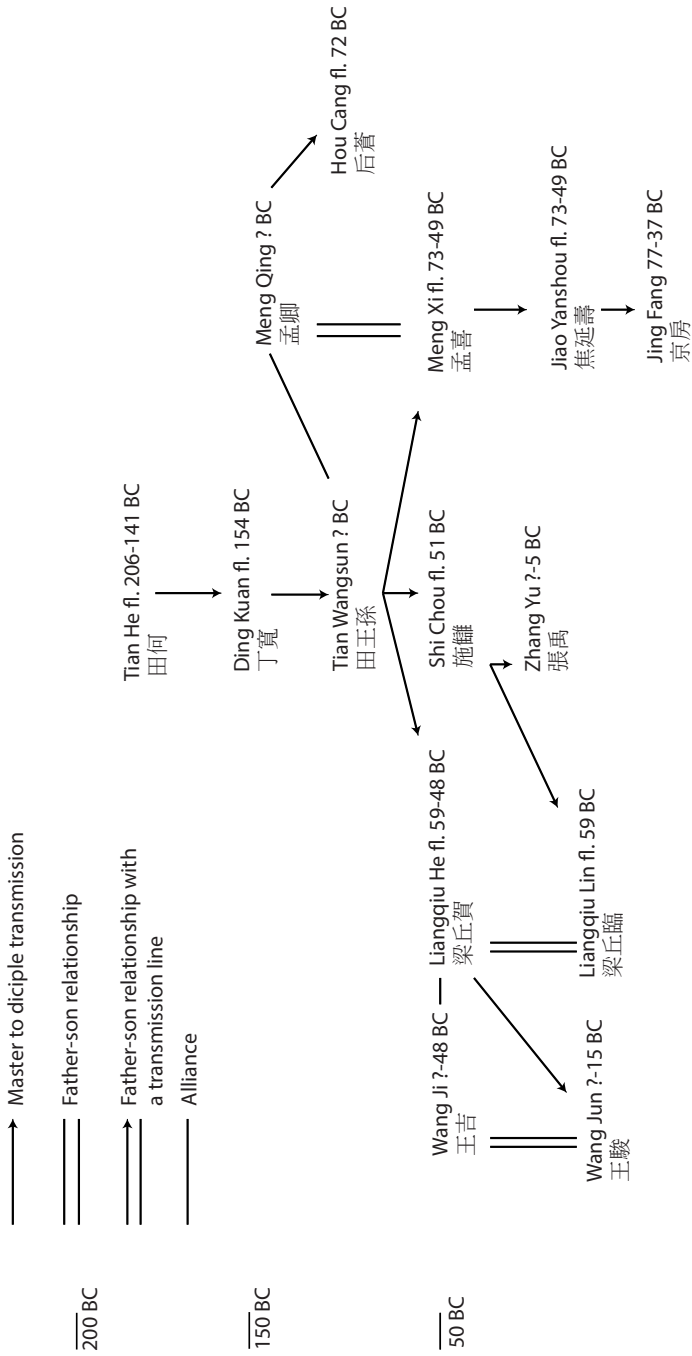


Chart 1. The Transmission Line of the *Changes*

Although the three masters' works are lost, surviving fragments from Meng Xi's work can still give us a rough impression of their scholarship.⁴³ In a manner similar to Wei Xiang, Meng Xi uses Kan, Zhen, Li, and Dui as the four major trigrams that explain the changes of the seasons. Like Wei and others, he matches them with the timely fluctuation of *yin* and *yang qi*.⁴⁴ We can infer that based on Meng's reading, the *Book of Changes* appears to be a guide for understanding the cosmological process as well. The trigrams of the text, the ebb and flow of *yin* and *yang*, and the changes of the seasons correspond with each other. Therefore, for many of Wei's contemporaries, commanding the first implies mastery of the other two.

An example reveals the unique position of the *Changes* at the time in contrast with the other classics. Meng Xi's father Meng Qing 孟卿 was a transmitter of the *Rites* and *Annals*. However, instead of teaching his son based on his own expertise, Meng Qing sent his son to Tian Wangsun for the *Changes*. He reasoned that the *Rites* was overwhelmingly voluminous, and the material in the *Annals* was varied and haphazardly combined.⁴⁵ Meng Qing did not feel the need to master all the knowledge of the Five Classics to make a synoptic teaching as later generations did. For him, his son only needed to master one classic, definitely not one that contained too much irrelevant information.⁴⁶

To survive and expand their social lives, members of an intellectual community need to be involved in the shared concerns of their group. If a member wants to succeed, however, this is not enough. In an intellectual community in particular, one needs to convince others that his own ideas are plausible. What criteria establish plausibility? Among others, one's idea should solve in a new way intellectual problems shared within the community with tools familiar to members of that community.

In the case of the *Changes*, we can clearly see this innovative process. Literati like Wei Xiang and Bing Ji shared Emperor Xuan's anxiety over understanding Heaven's will. In order to resolve the anxiety, they turned to existing knowledge, in this case the *Book of Changes*, because it had been a text in accordance with the "heart of Heaven and Earth."⁴⁷ But they modified it with other contemporary, well-accepted theories, such as the cosmology of *qi*. In this way, their interpretations would be more suitable to address the anxieties or concerns of their contemporaries. In the case of Wei Xiang and Meng Xi, concepts such as *qi* and *yin* and *yang* moved to the center of their interpretations, and the *Changes* transformed from a divinatory guide to an expedient manual for regulating seasonal changes.

At this moment, Emperor Xuan and many literati around him did not see the need to rely on the Five Classics, or to closely follow the ancient kings' government. They only wanted to quickly alleviate Heaven's discontent. This attitude soon changed. In the following sections, we will see that later generations still built their arguments on Heaven's will, but instead of using the *Changes*, they adopted the whole ancient classical legacy. Their restoration of an ancient ideal, the Great Peace, was a Heaven-approved enterprise, given precedence by the ancient sage kings as recorded in the Five Classics.

Toward the Great Peace: Emperor Yuan and the Restoration of the Kingly Way

Indeed, Emperor Xuan was not interested in looking back in history or cultivating his virtues to save the empire. His successor Emperor Yuan differed. A conversation between Emperor Xuan and Emperor Yuan when the latter was Crown Prince reveals these two emperors' differences toward government:

嘗侍燕從容言：「陛下持刑太深，宜用儒生。」宣帝作色曰：「漢家自有制度，本以霸王道雜之，奈何純任德教，用周政乎！」⁴⁸

Once when he was waiting upon [Emperor Xuan] at a banquet, [the Crown Prince] said, with a composed bearing, "Your Majesty is too severe in applying the laws. It would be proper to employ Ru masters [in your government]." Emperor Xuan changed color and said, "The Han dynasty has its own institutes and laws, which mix the way of the hegemony and the Kingly Way. How could I trust purely in moral instruction and use [the kind of] government [exercised by] the Zhou [dynasty]?"⁴⁹

Despite his anxiety about Heaven's will, Emperor Xuan did not think that he needed to significantly change the dynasty's political tradition in order to win over Heaven. In other words, for him, a complete restoration of the Zhou polity was not what Heaven wanted. Moral cultivation and Zhou institutions thus seemed impractical and would harm the dynasty.

However, the future Emperor Yuan had his reasons. The conflict between him and his father was more than a clash of different personalities or beliefs. It resulted from their different understandings and solutions to

the same problem: the Han dynasty's reception of the heavenly mandate. What if fixing the cosmological order was not enough? What if Heaven was demanding a better society than this current mixture could provide? The new emperor had reasons to think so; as in his father's reign, in the early years of Emperor Yuan's reign, earthquakes and eclipses continued to trouble policymakers. If Emperor Xuan's policies were not enough, what else did Heaven want the new emperor to do? This question urged the literati to look deeper into history and the classics for Heaven's will. The concept of Great Peace (*taiping* 太平) thus became the center of the literati's attention.

THE GREAT PEACE AS AN INCREASING NEED FOR GOVERNANCE

The term "Great Peace" was present since the beginning of the Han dynasty, and it indicated the peaceful state of a society.⁵⁰ One of the earliest examples is from Lu Jia's 陸賈 (ca. 240–170 BC) *New Speeches* (*Xin yu* 新語):

聖人因變而立功，由異而致太平，堯、舜承蚩尤之失，而思欽明之道，君子見惡於外，則知變於內矣。⁵¹

Sages establish their accomplishments by change. They transform bizarreness into the Great Peace. Yao and Shun adopted Chiyou's errors, and they thought about the way of respect and brightness. When gentlemen see the evilness outside, they then know the changes inside.

Lu Jia is describing how sages transform the currently bad government into a good one. Judging from the context, the word "bizarreness" (*yi* 異) indicates bizarre omens caused by bad governance. Sages are the ones who can fix the chaos and help the realm revert to an orderly state. Accordingly, the Great Peace indicates a state free from natural disasters and bizarre phenomena.

During Emperor Wu's time, Gongsun Hong brought up the Great Peace in the context of recruiting Academicians:

故教化之行也，建首善自京師始，由內及外。今陛下昭至德，開大明，配天地，本人倫，勸學修禮，崇化厲賢，以風四方，太平之原也。⁵²

Therefore, in practicing the teachings and transformation, from inside to outside, one should start with establishing the primary good in the capital and work outward. Now your majesty

illuminates the ultimate virtue, spreads the great brightness, matches Heaven and Earth, and takes human relations as essential. You advocate learning, fix the rites, promote transformation, and encourage the worthies in order to cultivate the Four Directions. This is the source of the Great Peace.

Gongsun Hong argues for a top to bottom process of cultivation. With good officials in the court, cultivation can be extended to the whole empire.

The Great Peace was also increasingly connected to the ancient sage kings. Dong Zhongshu also mentions a means of achieving the Great Peace in answering this query from Emperor Wu: “The teachings of the three kings derive from different sources, but they all have shortcomings; others say that the Way is something that lasts and does not change. Are these two sayings different?”⁵³ Dong Zhongshu answers: “The Greatness of the Way originated from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does the Way” (道之大原出於天，天不變，道亦不變). For Dong, the ancient kings’ Way is in accord with each other and Heaven. However, the Han empire, as successor to the Qin, is suffering from a bad ethos, and the Kingly Way is lost. Although the Way is unchangeably one, rulers need to practice it differently based on different situations. Dong then points out that the recruitment of worthy and righteous people is the way to illuminate the Kingly Way and thus establish the Great Peace. The ideal society thus finds its precedence in the ancient Kingly Way.⁵⁴

What, then, is the three kings’ government or the Way of the Great Peace like? Dong Zhongshu elaborates:

古亦大治，上下和睦，習俗美盛，不令而行，不禁而止，吏亡姦邪，民亡盜賊，囹圄空虛，德潤草木，澤被四海，鳳皇來集，麒麟來游，以古準今，壹何不相逮之遠也！安所繆斲而陵夷若是？意者有所失於古之道與？有所詭於天之理與？試跡之古，返之於天，黨可得見乎？⁵⁵

It was in great order in antiquity. The above and below were in harmony. The customs were beautiful and flourishing. People acted before they were commanded; they stopped before they were forbidden. There were no evil or deviant officials. There were no robbers or thieves. Prisons were empty. Virtue even reached plants. The bounties covered the Four Seas. *Fenghuang* came to assemble, and *qilin* came to travel. Using antiquity as a

standard to see today, aren't they too far away from each other? How could they differ and deviate from each other like this? Maybe there is some way we failed in the Way of antiquity and there is something we departed in the principle of Heaven? If we try to follow the traces of antiquity and return to Heaven, could we see it?

There were no evil behaviors in the world of the ancients. People were in harmony and knew what was good and evil. Even plants benefited from good governance, and auspicious animals abounded. For Dong, the ideal state of a society happened in the past. It did not emphasize the pursuit of advanced technology to raise the standard of living, nor did it depend on the people's right to express different opinions about the government. In fact, in this ideal realm, people did not have different opinions at all because they are all cultivated by the ultimate Way. Dong Zhongshu points out that this is not a utopian illusion but something achievable even in the present. If this is true, then why has the Han still not achieved it? Dong Zhongshu gives his reasons: the Han empire fails to follow the ancient path and Heaven's will. Without understanding the rationale of Heaven, people will deviate from the Way; without examining the ancient kings' government, people will not have any model to follow.

None of these appeals for the Great Peace received much attention from the court before Emperor Yuan. When Wang Ji 王吉 (?–48 BC), a Grandee Remonstrant (*jian dafu* 諫大夫) during Emperor Xuan's time, proposed to reemphasize moral cultivation and the ancient sages' way in order to establish the "foundation of the Great Peace" (*taiping zhi ji* 太平之基), Emperor Xuan disapproved of this proposal for being eccentric (*yukuo* 迂闊).⁵⁶

During Emperor Yuan's reign, the situation changed. Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BC), a great erudite and a relative of the imperial family, explained to the emperor why the dynasty had to have the Great Peace.⁵⁷ In a proposal in 43 BC, he started by depicting the ideal society governed by the sage kings. He argued that since the worthies were in the court, the whole country was in a harmonious state during the rule of the ancient sage kings, namely, Huangdi 黃帝, Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, King Wen 文王, and King Wu 武王. There were no struggles or litigation, and people showed respect and humility to each other. Liu Xiang claims that this state also affected other states and even the animal world. What is more, the harmony in the human realm influenced Heaven, and Heaven accordingly sent auspicious omens to human society.⁵⁸

However, Liu Xiang continues, as the Zhou dynasty reached King You and Li's time, the continuum of the Golden Age was broken. Harmony was absent in the court, and the worthies were not in power. As reflected in the *Poetry*, many inauspicious omens such as solar eclipses appeared. Liu Xiang points out, according to the *Annals*, it was even more so in the period of Spring and Autumn, an era scarred by regicide.⁵⁹ Based on this observation, Liu Xiang gives a general principle of the development of history:

由此觀之，和氣致祥，乖氣致異；祥多者其國安，異眾者其國危，天地之常經，古今之通義也。⁶⁰

Based on this, harmonious *qi* leads to auspiciousness, and deviant *qi* leads to bizarreness. The state of one who has much auspiciousness will be safe, and the state of one who has much bizarreness will be in danger. This is the regularity of Heaven and Earth, and a principle throughout history.

Like Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong, Liu Xiang takes those “above,” or the court, as the center responsible for the welfare of the whole state and even the entirety of human society. As with Lu Jia and Dong Zhongshu's theory, omens derive from the human realm. Liu Xiang's theory of *qi* also resembles that of Lu Jia and Dong Zhongshu, in the sense that human beings are the primary agents that affect the formation and circulation of *qi*.⁶¹ Harmony and discord in the court could generate *qi* that leads to auspicious or inauspicious omens, respectively. What is even more crucial for a state is that the omens reveal whether it is on the road to prosperity or extinction.

Liu's idea of the Great Peace resembles Lu Jia's and Dong Zhongshu's in many ways. First, the Great Peace appears in an ordered society characterized by harmony. Hatred, dissatisfaction, and the irregular *qi* they provoke are absent. Second, this order is in accord with Heaven, as auspicious omens demonstrate. Third, starkly unlike Emperor Xuan's attitude, Liu believed that the sages of antiquity once achieved this state or could have achieved it. Therefore, emulating them is the way to achieve the Great Peace.

Liu Xiang then went further than his predecessors to point out the necessity of achieving the Great Peace. He saw deterioration over time, and at his time the Han dynasty was at the most abysmal point in history:

是以日月無光，雪霜夏隕，海水沸出，陵谷易處，列星失行，皆怨氣之所致也。夫遵衰周之軌跡，循詩人之所刺，而欲以成太平，致雅頌，猶

卻行而求及前人也。初元以來六年矣，案《春秋》，六年之中，災異未有稠如今者也。夫有《春秋》之異，無孔子之救，猶不能解紛，況甚於春秋乎？⁶²

Therefore, the sun and moon lacking light, snow and frost falling in summer, water boiling out of the sea, hills and abysses moving around, and the planets failing to move regularly are all caused by *qi* due to resentment. If one follows the declining path of the Zhou and adopts what is criticized by the authors of the *Book of Poetry*, but desires to achieve thereby the Great Peace and produce Elegantiae and Hymns, it is like walking backward but seeking to catch up with someone. It has been six years since the reign period of Chuyuan (48 BC). In these six years, disasters and bizarreness were more frequent than any given six years in the *Annals*. With bizarreness as described in the *Annals* but without Confucius's rescue, this crisis cannot be resolved. How about a situation that is [even] worse than in the *Annals*?

In the most recent six years (48–43 BC), the Han dynasty had received inauspicious omens more frequently than any given six years of the Spring and Autumn period, which signaled the imminent revocation of the mandate of Heaven. Yet it still practiced the opposite of any remedy, the hegemonic rule that leads to dynastic decline. Moreover, at the moment, the dynasty did not have any sage like Confucius, who could not even save the less degenerate time, the Spring and Autumn period. Liu Xiang diagnosed the Han to be in a much more critical condition than the previous generation did.

To Liu Xiang, achieving the Great Peace was not the icing on the cake but a life or death matter for the dynasty. The Han ruler would either manage to follow the path of the ancient sages or not, and in the latter case the dynasty would perish like the Qin. In a letter to Emperor Cheng 成, Liu Xiang mentions, “The heavenly mandate is broadly bestowed, and it is not bestowed on just one surname.” With this rationale, he retells the story of the Han's establishment: Gaozu 高祖 thought his virtue was worse than that of the Zhou but better than the Qin. He picked Guanzhong 關中 as the capital so he could rely on the Zhou's virtue and the Qin's geographical advantage. He further points out that “the length of a dynasty takes virtue as its measure.”⁶³ That is to say, Gaozu, as the founder of the Han dynasty,

relied on both the Qin and the Zhou, a “mixture of hegemonic and kingly ways.”⁶⁴ However, the longevity of a dynasty is determined by the latter, not the former. Therefore, prolonging the Han’s grip on Heaven’s mandate is dependent upon virtuous rule, and that, Liu Xiang points out, is exactly the responsibility of Gaozu’s successors.

In Liu Xiang’s narrative, the already condemned Qin dynasty became the exterminator of the Golden Age. Not only did they not govern righteously, but they even broke the continuum of the Kingly Way from the Three Dynasties, leaving the newly established Han dynasty in a difficult position.⁶⁵ Like many others, Liu Xiang believed the ancient sages’ path was the Kingly Way. The evil Qin dynasty, however, destroyed all the practices of the Kingly Way so that later generations had no model to follow.⁶⁶

Thirty years after Sui Hong’s incident, Liu Xiang evoked a *fin de siècle* sentiment again, and thus introduced the sage kings to the core of Han policy. Before alleviating the anxiety, he intensified it: the Han dynasty was about to collapse. The ancient sage kings’ government and the Great Peace became the only remedy for the troubled empire. Liu Xiang reminded his contemporaries that they should not compare the contemporary reign to reigns in the Han dynasty but to the reigns of the Golden Age, when the Great Peace prevailed and the skies proclaimed the human realm’s harmony with Heaven. Adopting his predecessors’ theory of omens and the Great Peace, Liu Xiang used Heaven’s mandate to tie the Han dynasty and the Kingly Way together.

Liu Xiang was not alone; he belonged to a network of scholars connected by friendship and master-disciple relationships. At Emperor Yuan’s court, he was recommended by Xiao Wangzhi 蕭望之 (114–47 BC), one of the emperor’s former teachers. The emperor relied on them together with another former teacher of his, Zhou Kan 周堪 (?–ca. 43 BC) (see chart 4, page 41). Xiao and Zhou also received teachings from the same master, Xiahou Sheng 夏侯勝 (fl. 72–51 BC) (see chart 2). Through this chapter, we will see increasingly more people connected to their intellectual community.

Liu Xiang answered this vexing question: If Emperor Xuan’s policy was not enough for Heaven, what else should one do? The Han turned to the ancient Kingly Way. Now the concern focused on where the Han dynasty could find the Kingly Way and how they could imitate it, especially when most of them believed that the Qin eliminated the practices of the Zhou government. This context eventually caused the classics to reach the heart of imperial China for the first time and triggered further intellectual innovations in understanding the classics.

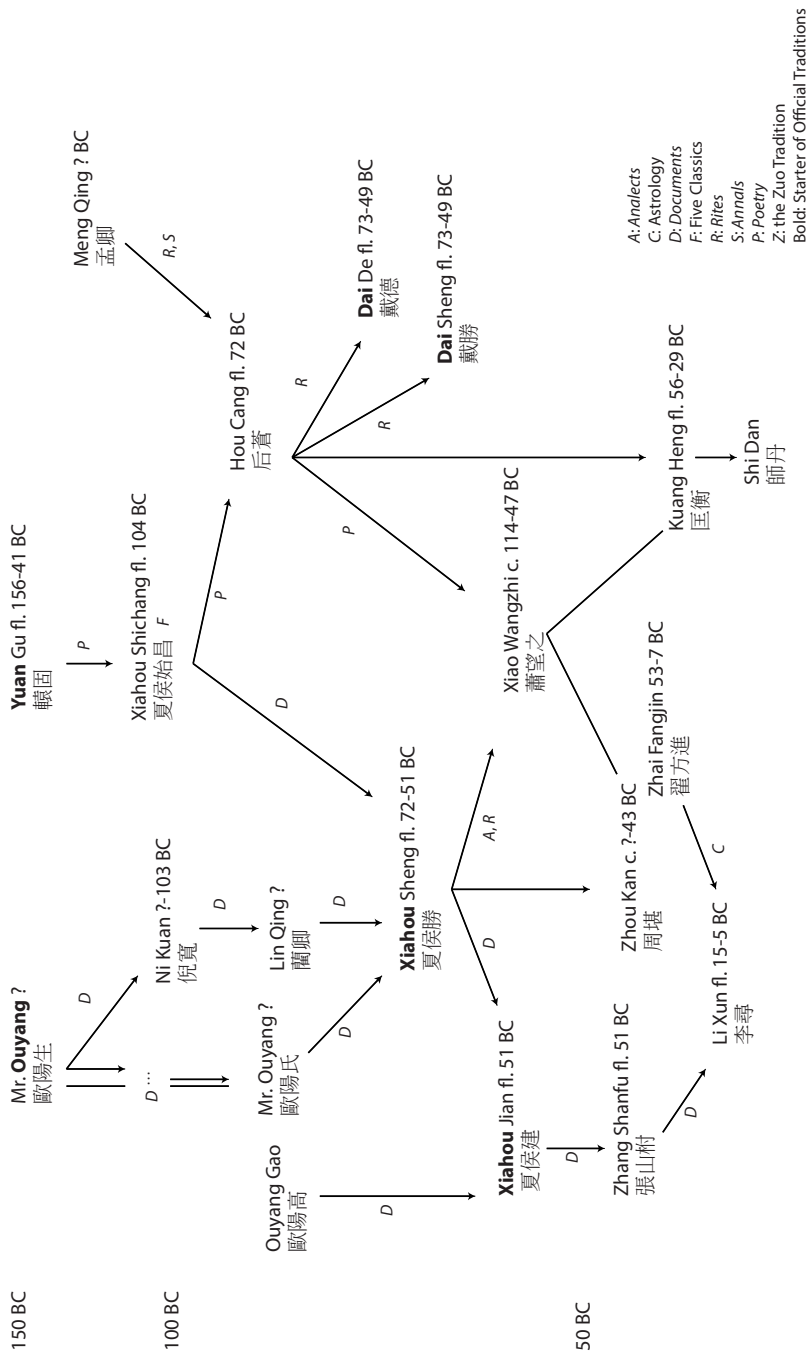


Chart 2. Hou Cang and His Disciples

The Six Classics: Complete and Fundamental

In the previous sections, we have seen that the anxiety about the heavenly mandate increased during Emperor Xuan and Emperor Yuan's times. Meanwhile, court literati, especially students of Xiahou Shichang and his affiliates (chart 2), intensified the anxiety. As the problem worsened, its solution grew more complex. An expeditious solution (such as appointing officials to regulate the cosmic order) was no longer enough. Instead, the ancient sage kings' rule became the exclusive remedy for the problem. Now it was the literati's responsibility to find the government of the sage kings. From this section on, focusing on virtually the same communities of Han scholars introduced earlier, we will see how the classics became the only window to the Golden Age and thus moved to the center of scholarly debates. The increasingly intense attention to this corpus of texts thus accelerated related innovations and brewed more dramatic actions among the literati, as we will see in the last section of this chapter.⁶⁷

XUNZI, LU JIA, AND HOU CANG: FROM HUMANITY TO HEAVEN

If the Kingly Way of antiquity was destroyed by the Qin, how were the people of the Han supposed to know what it was? According to Yang Xiong (揚雄 (53 BC–AD 18), an influential scholar in his time, the answer was in the sages' written words:

曰：聖人之言，天也。天妄乎？繼周者未欲太平也。如欲太平也，舍之而用他道，亦無由至矣。⁶⁸

I said, "The sages' words are Heaven. Is Heaven spurious? The successor of the Zhou did not desire the Great Peace. If one desires the Great Peace and he abandons the sages' words in favor of other Ways, there will be no way to achieve it."

Not all the written texts with accounts of the sage kings were of equal value; the classics were the sources most useful to literati. Of course this was not new, nor was the content of the "classics" arbitrarily decided during the Han dynasty. The *Book of Changes*, *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, *Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals* had come together since the Warring States period. The earliest document in which the six texts' names are mentioned together is found in a fourth century BC text, excavated from a tomb in