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Heaven Is Empty:  
A Cross-Cultural Approach to Religion and Human Agency in Early Imperial China  

By  
Filippo Marsili  

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
History  
in the  
Graduate Division  
of the  
University of California, Berkeley  

Committee in charge:  
Professor Michael Nylan, Chair  
Professor Patricia Berger  
Professor Carlos Noreña  

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A Cross-Cultural Approach to Religion and Human Agency in Early Imperial China
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by Filippo Marsili
Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Nylan, Chair

This dissertation is about the religious (extra-human) legitimation of political power during the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9CE). It reexamines the correlation between religious, cultural, and political unity, closely analyzing Sima Qian’s (ca. 145-86 BCE) Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), the first universal narrative of Chinese civilization from its origins through the first century of the Western Han empire. This text became the model for all dynastic histories until 1911, when the imperial age came to an abrupt end. The contrast between Sima Qian’s treatment of religious practices, official and unofficial, and accounts in the classical Greco-Roman historiography about imperial cults and propaganda provides an intriguing point of departure from which my thesis questions the applicability of paradigms imported and applied to the case of early China from the ancient Mediterranean world (e.g., “religion,” “metaphysics,” “divinity,” “sacred vs. secular,” “scripture,” “myth,” and “ritual”). This dissertation contributes to our understanding of the relationship between “religion,” “morality,” and “cultural identity” in China by calling into question those very categories. By adopting a comparative approach, it shows how the discourse on the sacred by historians and philosophers has been often informed by intellectual prejudices and pre-formed conceptions that have hindered the mutual understanding between East and West. To overcome these obstacles, this dissertation proposes a new trans-cultural attitude aimed both at the deconstruction of these ethnocentric biases and at the reconstruction of Sima Qian’s own analytical criteria and concerns.
Ai miei genitori, Beatrice e Chiara.
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Despite all the help I received, any shortcoming and error this dissertation might have are mine.

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Introduction

Do you have Chinese ghosts? Millions. Said Lee.
We have more ghosts than anything else.
I guess nothing in China ever dies. It's very crowded.
(John Steinbeck, East of Eden)

See, in these silences when things let themselves go and seem almost to reveal their final secret, we sometimes expect to discover a flaw in Nature, the world's dead point, the link that doesn't hold, the thread that, disentangled, might at last lead us to the center of a truth...
These are the silences where we see in each departing human shade some disturbed Divinity.
(Eugenio Montale, “The Lemon Trees”)

This dissertation is based mainly on an analysis of the work of Sima Qian (司馬遷 145-90 BCE), who was court archivist and astronomer during the reign of Han Wudi 漢武帝 (141-87 BCE). His Records of the Grand Historian, Shiji 史記, which was initiated by Sima’s father Tan 諧 (d. 110 BCE), represents the first attempt to compile a general history of those territories we now call “China,” from the mythical time of the Yellow Emperor to the Qin 秦 (221-210 BCE) and Western Han (221 BCE- 9 CE) dynasties. The struggles for the unification the Central States and for political supremacy over them did not end with the fall of the Qin capital in 210 BCE. After their victory, the Han rulers still confronted the fact that two-thirds of the empire remained in the hands of their allies, local powers and aristocratic groups that had played a fundamental role in the defeat of the Qin but were now deeply entrenched and resistant to direct control. The urgency of the situation, which could only be resolved by violence, made any consideration on the moral foundations of the new reign next to impossible for

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4 The Shiji chronicles Han Wudi’s reign until the beginning of the first century BCE. Some Scholars have argued that the records of the events following 104 BCE are the result of later interpolations: see Zhao Zhengqun 赵生群, "Shi ji" wenxianxue conggaoo 史记文献学丛稿 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2000).
the first decades of Han rule. It was finally under Wudi that the legitimacy of the dynasty could be celebrated without the risk of appearing as hubristic as the Qin.

The court’s lavish outlays, in the form of expensive military campaigns and grandiose rituals that characterized Han Wudi’s reign, make many modern historians presume that every contemporary of Wudi understood the dynasty’s authority and the degree to which power was centralized. A careful reading of the Shiji, however, shows that this was not the case. In a period when a “Confucian orthodoxy” was a millennium away from being formulated and Dong Zhongshu’s (179-104 BCE) moral-cosmological synthesis was not yet established, Sima Qian engaged freely in a dialogue with the past and present cultural traditions of the different regional realities of his age. In this dialogue, the court annalist seems constantly spurred by the need to locate exemplary models of behavior and to investigate the elusive relationship between historical necessity and human agency, especially the assumed connection between Tian (Heaven, never seen as an anthropomorphic god, but at the same time as chance, timing, and fate) and the men and the women who made possible the success of the Han.

Sima Qian’s narrative is so complex and multilayered that Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904-1982), after praising the court annalist’s superb analytic skills, laments Sima’s inability to elaborate and propound a new and overarching “philosophical” vision. As Li Wai-yee has pointed out, Sima Qian explicitly defines his own task as the investigation of human factors, whose interplay is complex enough to defy the acknowledgement of any single historical pattern. Nonetheless, already a few generations after Sima Qian’s age, Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE-18 CE), although extremely appreciative of Sima’s intellectual legacy, had noticed in the Shiji a surprising interest—albeit always expressed in negative terms—in the extraordinary, the odd, and the allegedly miraculous.

What has prevented many scholars so far from engaging in a thorough investigation of “metaphysics” in the Han dynasty through the Shiji is that Sima Qian clearly does not identify “the supernatural” with the moral. Spirits, ghosts, and miracles, whenever they occur in his narrative, are rather a cause of confusion and uncertainty than a clarifying and enlightening factor. Also, because the human and the non-human spheres are not ontologically differentiated in Shiji—for they share the same substantial

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10 Yang Xiong 揚雄, Fa yan 法言 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1939), 12:2b.
11 Very tellingly, the masterful work by Derk Bodde, Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances During the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C.-A.D. 220 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), almost does not rely on Sima Qian’s work. On Sima Qian’s relationship with pre-Han cultural traditions, see Chen Xi 陈曦, “Shi ji” yu Zhou Han wenhua tansuo “史記”与周汉文化探索 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007).
—any systemic approach to the question of Han religion that fails to problematize the categories established by studies of the complex encounter of the Greco-Roman traditions with Christianity will be fundamentally inadequate, unless a comparative approach aimed at disambiguating terminological questions is carried out. I would argue that Sima Qian’s analytic concern with a separation of the sphere of human action and metaphysical elements can be also interpreted as a critical reaction to integrative tendencies popular at his time. With the consolidation of the Han dynasty, the hereditary rule of the Liu family was connected to those metahistorical factors that we would categorize under the realm of “religion”: through an association with the supernatural the continuity of the ruling lineage found a formal legitimacy beyond the unpredictable contingency. Hence, since centralized and hereditary power was generally seen at the time as a key link between man and cosmic rhythms, an analysis of Sima Qian’s treatment of monarchy is a fundamental element of my dissertation. This thesis focuses on an age that, despite its multiplicity and change, has been too long canonized as the one of the establishment of a “classic tradition,” on themes that I provisionally label “divinity” and “metaphysics,” and on the role, both on an official and private level, each had in its specific political, cultural, and social context.

Chapter 1, “What the Master (allegedly) did not talk about: Religion and Metaphysics in Early China,” provides a cultural history of different attitudes to the problem of a “Chinese religion.” It recounts the first attempts to define a Chinese state religion at the end of the nineteenth century and tries to account for the complex interplay of cultural, political, and ideological factors that have made it difficult to investigate “the sacred” from a strictly historical point of view. By comparing Roman and Chinese imperial cults, this chapter analyzes the different ways in which the extra-human legitimation of political power was formalized, staged, and connected to the founding values of society. This chapter ultimately questions the applicability of a systemic approach based on analytical instruments specific to the ancient Mediterranean world to the context of Han China. It proposes a new understanding of the extra-human realm in Han China, based on the way Sima Qian categorized different ritual activities according to the possibility of tracing back their origins within the textual tradition, and of establishing (and controlling) their effects on human lives.

Chapter 2, “Readers of the Past, Readers of the Present: Intellectuals, Power, and Metaphysics in Sima Qian’s Narratives,” accounts for Sima Qian’s complex view on the function of historiography by analyzing his treatment of Confucius’s contribution and his cultural legacy. Then, in particular, through a study of the Shiji biographies of contemporary classicists who operated at court, this chapter reconstructs Sima Qian’s

12 Traditionally in China even spirits and ghosts are thought to be made of qi (material energy), so they share the same ontological realm with all the other creatures.

13 See Dario Sabbatucci, La prospettiva storico-religiosa (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1990); Fukui Shigemasa, 福井重雅, Kandai Jukyô no shi-teki kenkyû: Jukyô no kangakuka o meguru isetsu no saikento (Tokyo: Kyûko Shoin, 2005), 10-14. Both authors emphasize the role of the age of the Roman emperor Constantine (r. 306-337) and the Council of Nicaea (325) in the formalization of basic analytic categories concerning the relationship of human institutions with the supernatural (for example, dichotomies such as secular-sacred, orthodox-heterodox) that in their opinion are still uncritically used today in religious studies, regardless of different historical, cultural, and geographic contexts.
thought about the role of learned court advisors in justifying and supporting dynastic power and unified rule. The main point of this section is Sima Qian’s pessimistic approach to what he perceived as an unbridgeable disjunction between the cosmic, the political, and the moral realms. A further argument of this chapter is the refutation of the notion that the establishment of a unitary “Confucian” state doctrine characterized the Western Han Dynasty, and that this doctrine was based on the cosmic-moral synthesis attributed to Dong Zhongshu.

Chapter 3, “Metaphysics without God: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Sima Qian and Polybius,” carries out a comparative analysis of “Heaven” in Sima Qian and “Fortune” in Polybius (c. 203-120 BCE), as these concepts seem to represent the meta-historical element that justified the teleological trajectory of and the narrative about the necessity and the inevitability of a unified and universal rule. This section considers the concepts of “universal” and “super-ethnic” as applied to both the Greek-Roman and Chinese contexts. Following Rome’s triumph in the Third Punic War (149-146 BCE), Polybius (at the time a political hostage in Rome) in his ‘Histories’ had to explain to a mainly Greek readership the decline of Hellenic hegemony and justify the fact that cultural and political supremacy did no longer coincide.

By analyzing the circumstances of the temporary hegemony of the Persian, Macedonian, Athenian, and Roman empires, Polybius found the causes of Rome’s supremacy in the superiority of its mixed constitution, which combined several models previously implemented in Greece. Conversely, the only Other in the Shiji, is represented by the nomadic and uncivilized Xiongnu, who were genealogically connected to the Xia, the first “mythical” Chinese dynasty, but did not offer enviable or imitable traits. However, unlike Polybius, Sima Qian did not think individual behavior was influenced by ethnicity (which in the Shiji is not defined by a shared religion). Whereas Fortune in Polybius would more or less arbitrarily favor the military successes of the he less-civilized Romans, Heaven, in the Shiji does not play any active role. According to Sima Qian, Gaozu reunified the Central States despite his immorality, lack of intellectual sophistication, and political acumen. Hence the historian refers to Heaven ironically, as it embodied the hypocrisy of those who were eager to justify the prevailing of military strength and economic interests as the unfolding of a superior moralizing design.

Finally, Chapter 4, “Center and Periphery in Han Wudi’s Religious Activity,” analyses the “Fengshan shu” chapter of the Shiji and its accounts concerning Emperor Wu of the Han in relation to his “public” and “private” religious activity. It focuses on the emperor’s relationship with the magicians (fangshi) as they flock to court and enthuse the (apparently gullible) emperor with stories concerning the Yellow Emperor’s quest for immortality. The different renditions of the myths provided by the magicians are compared with the first chapter of the Shiji in which Sima Qian establishes his own authoritative version of the story of the Yellow Emperor as a mortal culture hero.

The chapter argues that by doing so, the Senior Archivist offers his indirect criticism to Han Wudi’s behavior. The main point of this chapter is that Han Wudi’s eccentric religious activity represented a counterpart to his centralizing economic and institutional reforms. I argue that the Son of Heaven, by seeking popular support through the state funding and state appropriation of local cults, hoped to bypass the internal opposition of those officials whose particular economic (and locally based) interests might have been hindered the enforcement of state monopolies and centralized economic
measures. Through a comparative analysis concerning the cult of immortality and its connection with aristocratic values in the ancient Mediterranean world (especially Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece), I argue that for Han Wudi the quest for immortality represented an indirect criticism to those familial links placed by the classicists—and to a certain extent by Sima Qian—at the center of the social and institutional system. I argue that Han Wudi envisioned for himself a much more politically independent sovereignty.
Chapter 1

What the Master (Allegedly) Did Not Talk about: Religion and Metaphysics in Early Imperial China

The subjects on which the Master did not talk were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spirits. (Analects 7, 20)

The Master said, “How abundantly do spirits display the power that belongs to them! We look for them but do not see them; we listen to but do not hear them; yet they enter into all things and there is nothing without them.” (Zhong Yong 16, 1-2)

Ji Kang asked: “What kind of man is Confucius?” [Ran Qiu, one of Confucius’s students] replied: “In acting, he is principled; in reaching out to the common people, he tries to value spirits and ghosts so that he would have no regrets. In carrying out his plans, even if he accumulated the wealth of one thousand villages, he would not regard it as a gain.” (Shiji, 47, 1934)

Prologue: Chinese Religion in the Early Imperial Period: Instrumentum Regni, Pax Deorum or Personal Escapism?

Although the feng 封 and shan 禪 sacrifices were said to be so ancient that no one could remember what they were actually about or how they were supposed to be performed, if successfully carried out on Mount Tai, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 140 – 86 BCE) states in his Shiji 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), they would have signified the full legitimization of the sovereign involved and of his dynasty. The classicists (ru 儒) at court had tried to dissuade Han Wudi 漢武帝 (141-87 BCE) from embarking upon the grandiose feng and shan, as they were not treated in the Classics (bu jing 不經). Nonetheless, in 110 BCE, the Western Han seemed stable and powerful enough that the Son of Heaven, in his thirty-first year of reign, could perform them without the risk of appearing hubristic.

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1 The citations from the Lun yü 論語 and from the Zhong Yong 中庸 are based on James Legge, Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean (New York: Dover, 1971), 201, 397. The translation of the passage from the Shiji is mine.

2 SJ 28, 1355.

3 SJ 28, 1398. It was under Han Wudi that advisers at court began to be appointed according to their specific expertise on one of the “Confucian” Classics. Before, at the Qin court, and under the first emperors of the Han, the terms boshi 博士 and ru 儒 might have referred to experts of disparate traditions and practices; see Nicolas Zufferey, “The ru under Emperor Wu’s Rule,” in To The Origins of Confucianism: The Ru in Pre-Qin Times and during the Early Han Dynasty (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 295-357.

4 After the Qin had taken “material wealth and strength as their object of rule,” the Han emperors before Wudi sought a different kind of legitimation. They did not have the means and the authority to display it in large-scale state ceremonies. On this topic see, Michael Loewe, “The Authority of the Emperors of Ch’in
Sima Qian’s father, the court historian and astronomer Tan (c. 165-110 BCE), had yearned to witness those sacrifices throughout his whole career, so much so that upon being informed that Han Wudi intended to exclude him from the performance of the feng and shan, he fell ill and eventually died. In the fifth month of the lunar year 110 BCE, Sima Qian was instead permitted to follow the emperor so long as he could report that the feng ended with Wudi burying a jade tablet with a mysterious message to a mysterious deity underneath a five-colored mound raised for the occasion. As for the shan sacrifice, unfortunately, Wu proceeded alone with his charioteer, who, as Sima Qian recounts, died shortly after under mysterious circumstances.

Roughly one century and four emperors before Han Wudi, Shihuangdi, founder of the Qin dynasty, had been the last ruler to attempt to perform the feng and shan sacrifices. Sima Qian writes that they probably ended in a complete failure, as the solemn procession on Mount Tai had met with bad weather. Nonetheless, Sima Qian warns the reader that the negative reports about Qin Shihuangdi’s feng and shan might have been due to the resentment of the Erudites (boshi), who were ultimately excluded from the final stages of the ceremony.

Whether or not, as Marc E. Lewis proposes, Han Wudi’s feng and shan were meant to represent a “cosmic mandala of the four directions,” their significance was not made “public” in the way the ancient rulers of the Mediterranean displayed their extra-human legitimation. If we look, for example, at the establishment and settlement of dynastic power in imperial Rome, we see that the spectacle of extra-human prerogatives played a fundamental role. Initially, Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) and Octavian (63 BCE-14 CE) were cautious about associating themselves with divine elements, for the exceptionality of their position needed to be legitimated both before their opponents in the Senate, whose members traditionally hostile to autocratic monarchs, and the people, whose alleged penchant for charismatic leaders could amount to religious worship. In the years following the battle of Actium of 31 BCE, which marked the beginning of Octavian’s undisputed supremacy, the ideology of the empire and its acceptance all over


6 SJ 28, 1398.

7 SJ 28, 1398. Wudi’s charioteer, in this circumstance, was the son of the general Huo Qubing, famous for his victories against the Xiongnu.

8 SJ 28, 1366.

the ruled territories would be also founded on the religious cult of Rome and of the emperor.  

It was with Caesar’s unprecedented achievements that the association of supreme power and divinity appeared again as a means of political legitimation. The Senate, after the battle of Thapsus in 46 BCE, bestowed on him a chariot and a statue with the inscription “demigod.” The following year, after the battle of Munda, the Senate moved the statue and chariot from the Capitol to the temple of Quirinus (which was connected to the origins of Rome). And a new inscription now declared Caesar an unconquered god (Deus Invictus). Finally, in the last months of his life, Caesar received from the Senate the paraphernalia that were associated with the main Roman gods: he was decreed a state divinity, which implied the attribution to Caesar of a cult name (Divus Iulius), a state priest (flamen), a state temple and a sacred couch (pulvinar) for his image. Octavian, in the wake of Caesar’s tragic end, could not afford blatantly to replicate the divine legitimation of absolute power at which his adoptive father seemed to aim. Instead Octavian, by always presenting himself as “first among equals,” managed to exploit his charisma so as to establish a durable connection between the rule of the Roman empire over the Mediterranean, the dynasty he had founded, and the sphere of the sacred. In doing so, he was able to employ different media and reach out to different social groups in such a diversified way that scholarship struggled for decades with the apparently contradictory evidence coming from archeological, epigraphic, and literary sources.

While Octavian appeared in official documents just as a consul with enhanced powers, poets and writers celebrated the emperor as a god on earth, common citizens, slaves, and freedmen in Rome associated him with the deities of the household, and people throughout the empire officially worshipped him as divinity himself or in association with a deified Rome. The wide diffusion of coins that portrayed rulers


11 Ittai Gradel, “Caesar’s Divine Honors,” in Emperor Worship and Roman Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4-72. Gradel also argues that to an extent the attributes of divinity associated to Caesar have to be interpreted in a relative way, as they were meant to emphasize Caesar’s godlike (and not yet absolutely divine) exceptionality. Also, on Julius Caesar, see Stefan Weinstock, Divus Julius (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Giuseppe Zecchini, “Cesare e il mos maiorum,” Historische Zeitschrift 278, part 2 (2004): 436.

with divine attributes, of private iconography among the aristocratic classes, of statues and temples in the capital, in Italy, and in the provinces all testify to the importance of images that promoted the identification of the Roman domain with the person of the ruler, and to the need of the elites in charge of the provincial worship to maintain and manifest their connection with the center of power.

Turning to the case of China, the lack of archaeological evidence does not allow us to establish whether the extra-human legitimation of the Son of Heaven during the Qin and the Western Han was based on a shared conceptual, iconographic, and ritual vocabulary. Also, it is difficult to ascertain from the historical sources what kind of public Qin Shihuangdi and Han Wudi meant to address with their feng and shan sacrifices, or if they were concerned with the public—as we would conceptualize it today—at all.

A fundamental problem in analyzing these circumstances is represented by the difficulty of ascertaining the social and cultural background of the court advisors during the Qin and the Former Han. The old paradigm that saw orthodox Confucians competing with Taoists, Legalists, Huang-Lao thinkers, and experts of esoteric formulas is no longer tenable. Hence, from a hermeneutical point of view, discrete attitudes toward the problem of the religious legitimation of power, for example, should not be interpreted as coherent expressions of a particular religious or philosophical view. Not only is it not possible to identify distinct schools with distinct sets of scriptural texts and ideologies in the fluid cultural environment of early China, but it is also clear that the classicist or Confucian bias that characterized Chinese annalists since the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE) conflated the process of political centralization carried out under the Western Han with the establishment of a more homogenous and integrated cultural identity. And the implications of such an idea transcend—and yet condition—the scope of merely historical researches.

Conventionally, Han Wudi’s reign has been associated with the “victory of Confucianism.” Undoubtedly, it was this emperor who founded the Imperial Academy and inaugurated the practice of appointing its members, the boshi, “Gentlemen

13 Although the contexts and the forms of status and wealth display in Early China have been extensively studied, to reconstruct a shared visual and cultural background concerning religion and afterlife is still difficult; see Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 73-103. It is noteworthy that the majority of the studies on the way the Han represented their moral, social, political, and cosmic orders focus on the Wu family shrine, a monument that was probably built or assembled after the fall of the Eastern Han and that surely did nor represent the cultural world described by Sima Qian; for an “orthodox view” on the ideology of early Chinese art and for its deconstruction, see respectively Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) and C. Liu, M. Nylan, A. Barbieri-Law, *Recarving China’s Past: Art, Archaeology, and Architecture of the “Wu Family Shrine”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). On the lack of representations of the Qin and Han emperors, see Michèle Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, “Imperial Aura and the Image of the Other in Han Art,” in *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared*, ed. F. Mutschler, A. Mittag (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 299-317.

of broad knowledge,” according to their expertise on one of the Classics, such as the Odes, the Spring and Autumn Annals, or the Documents for example. Nevertheless, the same boshi often lamented that Wudi, the patron of “Han Confucianism,” in carrying out his religious activities, preferred to heed the masters of esoteric formulas (fangshi) coming from the coastal regions of Qi and Yan because he was especially interested in achieving physical immortality.

Furthermore, students of early China have customarily assumed that “Han Confucianism” was characterized by the idea that Heaven (Nature, the cosmos) would reward morally virtuous lineages by bestowing upon them the mandate to rule. According to this theory, the succession of dynasties invariably matched a Five-Phase cosmic cycle in turn connected to the alternating influence of yin and yang. Hence, the shift to a different age, the rising or descending fortune of a given lineage, the intentions of Heaven would be readable and foreseeable through the analysis of omens and prodigies.16 All these concepts appears in the Chunqiu fanlu 春秋繁露, a text that provides a metaphysical interpretation of the Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals) ascribed to Confucius (551-479 BCE), and that is in turn attributed (very problematically) to Dong Zhongshu (?179-?104 BCE).17

Interestingly enough, Sima Qian in his Shiji does not credit Dong with the authorship of a Chunqiu fanlu or with the creation of the philosophical system associated with it. He does acknowledge Dong as one of his teachers and as a praiseworthy classicist, but contrary to what many Han specialists still hold, Sima in his Shiji never explains historical change by referring to the Five Phases or to yin and yang, nor does he recognize Heaven as a morally conscious entity that is concerned with human affairs.18 There is no evidence that the theories later attributed to Dong ever influenced Wudi’s religious activities or that he adopted them as state doctrine. Whereas in the Shiji Dong Zhongshu appears as a competent but relatively unsuccessful ru, who only held office in a peripheral district, it is with the Eastern Han and Ban Gu’s (32-92 CE) Hanshu 漢書 that Dong becomes the protagonist of a lengthy biography while being simultaneously hailed as a leading intellectual figure of the former Han.19

Sima Qian, we know, received an eclectic education that transcended the study of the Five Classics.20 He considered Confucius his model but he did not think it likely that any historical ruler could ever fully realize the Master’s moral view, because, for Sima Qian, politics was definitely not a field that necessarily rewarded virtuous and honest men with success. As for Sima Qian’s attitude towards the extra-human, I shall

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16 Michael Loewe, “Imperial Sovereignty: Dong Zhong-shu’s Contribution and his Predecessors,” in Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy, 121-140.
18 Recently, Michael Loewe has suggested that Master Dong mentioned by Sima Qian was not the same Dong who submitted the famous memorials to the throne and had a mediocre career; see Michael Loewe, Dong Zhongshu, a 'Confucian' Heritage and the Chunqiu Fanlu (Leyden: Brill, 2011). See also Chapter 2 below.
19 HS 56, 2495-526.
20 SJ 130, 3288-9.
argue below that Sima Qian shared Confucius’s alleged aversion against the sphere of the invisible, or in other words against rituals that were not centered on ancestors, family connections, and the state interpreted as a family. Surely, Sima Qian sought to demystify the shrewd exploitation of prodigies and omens by the classicists and fangshi at the court of Han Wudi and he never suggested that the intervention of spirits and ghosts in human affairs could exert a moralizing function. On the contrary, he instead associated the extra-human realm with chaos and moral uncertainty.

From a comparative point of view, Sima Qian’s approach does not differ radically, for example, from Livy’s (59 BCE - 17 CE) or Tacitus’ (56-117 CE) analyses of the ways myths, religion, and portents could be mate to serve political ends. But while in the ancient Mediterranean world, educated elites, including philosophers and historians, could safely show their skepticism about religion and its various aspects, very few would have questioned the importance of participating in public cults. In the city-states of the ancient Mediterranean, the tension between prescribed and proscribed cults, public and private religion could express the negotiation of identities and hierarchies within specific communities. We cannot affirm that all the citizens of Athens or Rome actually believed that their personal behavior towards a specific deity could affect the well-being of their community. Yet it is certain that in the Mediterranean world visible involvement in religious activities could be interpreted as an individual’s conscious acceptance of the basic values (either sacred or secular) on which the whole society was established.

By contrast, as the Han empire was being consolidated, China seemed to lack rituals in which both rulers and subjects could participate in order to celebrate shared values and simultaneously legitimate social hierarchies. It is sufficiently clear from the sources that moral values and social hierarchies were far from being clearly defined, while the coexistence of different regional traditions was not giving way yet (and probably would not for centuries) to the enforcement of a cultural orthodoxy. Nevertheless, long after Han Wudi’s death, educated elites—are whose social origin and composition requires close scrutiny—would look at his reign as the one in which the bases of Chinese civilization were laid.

Interestingly enough, the sinologist Derk Bodde relied very little on Sima Qian’s first-hand accounts in his seminal work on early Chinese festivals and religion. I argue

21 Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), by analyzing Livy’s treatment of the relationship between religion and institution in ancient Rome would develop his influential view concerning the cynical exploitation of the sacred by political power; see “Libro Primo” (Book One): XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV in Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio (Torino: UTET, 1999), 507-17.
24 Derk Bodde, Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – AD 220) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Lester J. Bilsky, (in The State Religion of Ancient China, [Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1975, vol 2], 287-330), provides a systematic analysis of Han Wudi’s religious activities. Bilsky acknowledges (p. 289) that “[g]overnment policies during the reign of Emperor Wu were not predicated on a single, coherent philosophical system,” yet, in the end he interprets Han cults in light of the synthetic approach associated with the Chun Qiu fanlu.
below that this is because Han Wudi’s realm presents a reality that can defy assumptions about a “Chineseness” founded on a holistic cosmology, on an integration of the moral and political spheres, or on the correspondence of macrocosm and microcosm. Richness and heterogeneity characterized ancient Mediterranean cults as well. But it is worthwhile to verify if the period of the Qin and Western Han can be defined by the coexistence of discrete, and perhaps mutually unintelligible, universes or by the attempt to establish or negotiate a common language about the extra-human.

a) The Ethnocentric Conundrum and the Premises of a Historical Comparative Approach

In pre-Han and Han sources there is no single term that can be translated by the English word “religion.” This has not prevented modern scholarship from exploring the relationship between the human and the extra-human spheres, or, in other words, the world of spirits and ghosts, *shen* 神 and *gui* 鬼, in the ancient Central States. In the last three decades, thanks to new archaeological and textual finds and to a renewed interest in fieldwork in China and Taiwan, the study of both elite and popular religion has seen significant advances. However, scholars have very seldom problematized the foreign origins of the concepts, approaches, and motivations at the heart of for the study of early Chinese religion. No new studies have systematically addressed the

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25 In this, I disagree with the view expressed by Grant Hardy, who argues that Sima Qian’s idiosyncratic historiography and lack of systematic historical view is compensated by his “organicistic” approach, or, in other words, by the fact that events narrated in the *Shiji* are consistent once they are read against the rules of an organic cosmos. See Grant Hardy, * Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian’s Conquest of History* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1999), 61-113.


issue of what aspects of early Chinese life should be studied under the category of religion. Furthermore, although numerous pieces of research have focused on the nature or on some specific elements of Chinese religion, very few of them have emphasized religious changes in cultural, social, or institutional terms, and proposed a comparative approach.  Many of these shortcomings may be connected to the fact fieldwork is obviously not possible in the case of early China. Therefore the scholarship has heavily relied on philology, without systematically keeping up with the theoretical progresses of the social sciences, especially ethnology, anthropology, sociology, and ritual studies.

Students of early China seem not only largely to accept the conventional analytical boundaries between fields such as religion, alchemy, magic, and superstition, but also to leave unquestioned the very applicability of the contemporary hermeneutical repertoire to the past. No one has raised yet the methodological issues addressed systematically by Moses Finley in his *Ancient Economy,* for example. Of course, a degree of ethnocentric bias can be expected in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and history, insofar as they are rooted in western—or not Chinese—concepts of society, humanity, and history. Whereas a comparative approach that analyzes institutional forms, economic structures and practices across Chinese and Roman civilizations has been inaugurated on solid bases, the study of cultural factors seems obviously much more difficult.

In the particular case of the discipline of the history of religions, extra-academic concerns can be very influential as well. Not only does the study of the sacred focus on elements that can elude a strict empirical analysis, but it is also touches upon sensitive issues such as national, ethnic, and cultural identity that are inevitably intertwined with pressing contemporary political questions. Post-cold war debates on the anticipated “clash of civilizations,” for example, in advocating the need to establish the conceptual basis for a cross-cultural dialogue, identified religion as a meta-cultural element that could represent simultaneously the cause of and the solution for ethnic, cultural, and political conflicts. At the same time, heirs of Émile Durkheim’s (1858-1917)

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sociological approach, such as Roy Rappaport, indicated that a new concept of religion founded on post-modern science might constitute a remedy to the contemporary hiatus between society and nature—which itself is a typically western problem.  

In the field of comparative historiography, many scholars still accept the very concept of history as an unproblematic paradigm that can be studied and applied beyond cultural contingency. Furthermore, the influence of the Abrahamic traditions can reinforce the notion that the progress of humankind must develop either through a constant dialogue with or by means of the rejection of a transcendental conscious entity. In other words, the personal god of Hebraism, Christianity, and Islam becomes—despite the absence of any supporting textual evidence—the more or less implicit protagonist even of early Chinese historical narratives, as otherwise compelling comparative works state: “in the works of Confucius and Sima Qian there were frequent references to the tian (Heaven), or the Chinese notion of God.” Such an approach seems to posit a specific conception of the sacred as a trans-cultural subject transcending the strictly empirical methods of historical research, as though the different religions of the world represented discrete epiphanies of the same supernatural truths, or psycho-linguistic archetypes.

In the case of China, the reasons for the methodological vagueness marking the study of the extra-human sphere are manifold and not all connected to Euro-American ethnocentrism. Among these reasons, the most noteworthy are: (a) Confucius’s alleged “aversion” to those manifestations of popular religiosity that were not validated by the hallowed textual tradition (a bias, which through the Ming and Qing governing elites and via the Jesuit fathers, who portrayed Confucius as a secular humanist, would deeply influence European views of the Central States); (b) the peculiar connection between textual tradition, philology, cultural legacy, intellectual conformism, and authority promoted by the Chinese imperial examination system, which still conditions the way in which the defining features of Chinese civilization are sought within the textual tradition; (c) the persistence in today’s China of the peculiar blend of positivistic and Marxist prejudice against the role of religion in hindering scientific and social progress. Not surprisingly, in the wake of today’s spectacular industrial and economic growth, the achievements of Chinese civilization seem often to acquire particular cultural relevance.

End of the War on Terror (New York: Random House, 2009).


Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, eds., A Global History of Modern Historiography (Pearson: Harlow, 2008), p. 48. The authors of this volume also assume cultural and functional continuity between the shamans of the Shang dynasty (1762-1122 BCE) and Sima Qian’s historiographical work (in pp. 46-68), whereas their treatment of later periods is less conjectural and more based on historical and textual evidence (see pp. 145-151, 213-216, 334-337).

Heiner Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking (Albany: State University on New York Press, 1993), 19. The influence of Mircea Eliade’s approach, which—in turn influenced by K. G. Jung’s research—interpreted the yearning for the divine as an a-priori psychological modality, still persists in contemporary scholarship. For a cogent critique to these approaches, see Dario Sabbatucci, La prospettiva storico-religiosa (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1990).

insofar as they appear to have stimulated Western-style economic competition and social development.\textsuperscript{38}

The search in the West for a distinctive Chinese religion has been characterized for centuries by a very strong ethnocentric bias, as theories and speculations about the extra-human in China have inevitably served specifically European cultural preoccupations. The Jesuits treated the Chinese as enlightened heathens capable of ethical concerns but lacking knowledge of the one true God; the Enlightenment thinkers looked to China as a model of a strong state without an established church; the German idealists bemoaned the supposed "lack of transcendental drive" in Chinese civilization, thinking that this "lack" prevented Chinese subjects from realizing the freedom of the individual spirit within a modern nation state.\textsuperscript{39} In recent times, the reaction to this pervasive ethnocentric bias has often taken the form of a search for a quintessential "Chineseness," which, although it has produced original and effective interpretive models, still tends to defy the specific aim of the historical research—the study of change in context.\textsuperscript{40} For example, even if it were legitimate to study the Shang (ca. 1600-1046 BCE), the Zhou (1046-256 BCE), and the subsequent periods under the assumption that they were just discrete moments in the linear advancement of the same civilization, continuity between different notions and practices concerning the extra-human should not be inferred in the absence of historical evidence. From a methodological point of view, the difficulty of reconstructing the writing and editing processes of the received textual tradition in a strictly chronological way should make researchers wary of implying clear historical connections between these very sources, the religious materials they present, and the cultural and political contexts to which they are conventionally related.\textsuperscript{41} At the same time, scholarly debates on the very possibility of associating any given age (let alone the totality) of Chinese civilization to well-definable and organic cultural attitudes routinely impinge on the sensitive domain of ideology and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{42} However, even a cursory glance at the \textit{Shiji} should make clear that the relationship between the human and extra-human realms, as narrated by Sima Qian, does not present the holistic and totalizing nature of the Abrahamic religions, nor the high level of integration within social and institutional structures that characterizes the classic Mediterranean world.\textsuperscript{43}


\textsuperscript{43} For the concept of religion interpreted as a totalizing endeavor of the individual, see Paul Tillich, \textit{Dynamics of Faith} (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). For overviews on ancient Greek and Roman
It should not be forgotten that the close association of cultural and religious identities, such as those promoted in the west after the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, did not represent a fundamental feature of the civilization of the Qin and the Han empires. The issue of a Chinese state religion does not predate the nineteenth century. It is especially associated with the Hundred Days reform movement of 1898. In the wake of the humiliating defeat suffered at the hands of Meiji Japan (1868-1912), after the end of the Sino-Japanese war and Treaty of Shimonoseki of 1895, Chinese intellectuals and politicians thought that the implementation of western concepts and technologies could strengthen the empire of the Qing (1644-1911) and save it from the foreign threat. It is in this context that the western models of an organic relation between political authority and the extra-human entered the agenda of late-Qing reformers. The attempt to enforce a more systematic institutional control over popular cults and the implementation of the “Build education with temple property” (miaochan xingxue 廟產興學) politics led to the acquisition from Japan of the western ideas of “divine right or power” (shenquan 神權) and of the conceptual dichotomy between religion (zongjiao 宗教) and superstition (mixin 迷信), ideas and frameworks absent from Chinese discourses before 1898.

The opposition of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, a relevant component of the western conception of religion since the reign of Constantine I (272-337), is not applicable to early imperial China. Such a distinction implies the centrality of the theoretical separation between rightful and wrongful opinions and the existence of an institution, such as the Catholic Church, that has the legal power to define and promote orthodoxy while condemning and persecuting heterodoxy. The Edict of Milan of 313 granted Christianity the status of tolerated cult. And after the council of Nicaea of 325 established what beliefs were consistent with the newly defined Christian orthodoxy, this orthodoxy became instrumental in recognizing which religious communities would be exempted from imperial taxation. As Theodosius (347-395) made Christianity the official religion of the empire, while outlawing all other cults in 380, orthodoxy coincided with full citizenship and civil rights. In the transition between “principate”

48 See, David Hunt, “Christianising the Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Code,” in The Theodosian Code, ed. Jill Harries and Ian Wood (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 143-158; see, from Book 16, 2: “It is Our will that all the people that are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that
and “dominate,” the divine investiture of the ruler had contributed to justify the progressive loss of power of the senate, which, until the end of the Severan dynasty (193-235 CE), was expected—at least formally—to produce the collegial appointment of the Roman emperor. The adoption of a state doctrine positing a universalistic and monotheistic religion allowed the empire to advertise its unified rule as sacred and necessary, so that it could claim a more pervasive control over the lives of all citizens. With the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the political and intellectual struggles around orthodoxy and heterodoxy also reflected the clash between the cultural and political dominance of the Roman Church and the claims of new socio-economic realities and cultural identities that were emerging all over Europe.⁴⁹

By contrast the social, political, and institutional aspects of religions in early imperial China are far less obvious. The Taiwanese scholar Mu-chou Poo, in a recent publication, has brilliantly characterized the relationship of the early Chinese with the extra-human realm by emphasizing their focus on personal welfare.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, it might be useful to establish—from a methodological point of view—whether the non-communal nature of Chinese religion should be regarded as the defining element of an organic system of beliefs and practices, or as just one of the diverging aspects in the comparative analysis of early China and the ancient Mediterranean world. In other words, to question the applicability of systemic and essentialist approaches to early China should be a pre-condition of any comparative analysis.

b) Religion and Philosophy in Early China

One way in which scholars have coped with the difficulty of looking at the realm of the invisible in ancient and early China was by establishing more or less arbitrary conceptual boundaries between religion and philosophy. Following the first translations of the Jesuit fathers, which tended to emphasize “Confucianism” as a secular humanistic doctrine, the moral teachings recognized in the so-called “Confucian” Classics provided western scholarship with the possibility of acknowledging in China the existence of religious orthodoxy, and the equivalent of a mainstream intellectual tradition.⁵¹ Historians of philosophy have appraised the cultural liveliness of China’s Warring States period (475-221 BCE) against the achievements of the Greek thought in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Hence, students have sought alternatives to the

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⁴⁹ Thomas Brady, German Histories in the Age of Reformations, 1400-1650 (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2009).
“official,” “Confucian” ideology in those cultural traditions (such as the Mohist, the Legalist, the Taoist, and the Yin-Yang) that seemed to present a degree of theoretical consistency in some way comparable to the one acknowledged in the philosophical schools of the ancient Mediterranean.\footnote{52}

It is especially due to Fung Yu-lan (1895-1990) that these traditions were elevated to the Chinese counterpart of the Western philosophical heritage. Fung, a student of the “pragmatist” philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952), founded a non-Marxist approach to Chinese intellectual history by separating a “philosophical” tradition from a “religious” one, through the exclusion and reduction of “non-rational” elements—even though such a conceptual distinction is not formalized in the early Chinese sources themselves. Fung justified the lack of intellectual coherence of Chinese “philosophical” systems by emphasizing their concentration on practice and individual development, rather than on theoretical speculation.\footnote{53} He also connected the origins of the Chinese philosophical schools to the social and cultural backgrounds of those professional advisors who were employed by the local lords of Warring States China and who were intent upon solving specific issues concerning political relations, economic administration, ritual, and warfare.\footnote{54}

Not surprisingly, the apologetic tone of Fung’s synthesis of ancient Chinese thought has never been completely overcome. As recently suggested by Angus C. Graham, those who are willing to engage Chinese thought from a philosophical point of view should “not scruple” to come to terms with the imperfection of Chinese syllogisms and accept the impossibility of fully disengaging analytic from correlative thinking.\footnote{55} As Graham states:

Taking Chinese thought seriously is not simply a matter of acknowledging the rationality of some of it (and perhaps denying the name ‘philosophy’ to the rest), nor of discovering something valuable to oneself in the poetry of Lao-tzu or the diagrams of the Yi. Its study constantly involves one in important contemporary issues in moral philosophy, the philosophy and history of science, the deconstruction of established intellectual


\footnote{53} Fung, \textit{A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy}, 1-15.

\footnote{54} Fung, \textit{A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy}, 16-37.

\footnote{55} Correlative thinking, has been often associated with primitive thinking. For a systematic treatment of the influence of such intellectual attitude on the study of Chinese thought, see the appendix of Michel Nylan, “Yin-yang, Five Phases, and Qi,” in \textit{China’s Early Empires—A Re-Assessment}, in ed. M. Nylan M. Loewe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 411-3. For a compelling analysis of the applicability of Joseph Needham’s “organicism” to the cultural context of the Former Han, see Benjamin J. Schwartz, “Correlative Cosmology and the Realm of Religion,” in \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China} (Cambridge [MA]: Belknap Press, 1985), 369-378. Schwartz, very interestingly, notices (on p. 375) how Han Wudi, in conceiving and carrying out his religious activities, was not confident that “the ‘system’ as expounded by Dong Zhongshu” was “necessarily on his side.”
schemes, the problems of relating thought to linguistic structures, and correlative thinking of logic.56

As similar approaches show, to study Chinese thought through the gauge of analytic and dialectic logic—which basically characterizes western philosophy since Ionic Naturalism—often results in educated justifications for Chinese difference, if not evolutionary delays. According to such an approach, if Chinese thought can be “taken seriously,” it is especially on the grounds of its moral focus, because of which China can be included without hesitation among the “great world civilizations.”

The analytical tendency represented by Graham is explicitly in keeping with the recent revival of the “Axial Age” theory associated with the German philosopher and psychologist, Karl Jaspers (1883-1969). Jaspers’ thesis reflects the tendency to seek the bases for a comparative approach beyond the specific boundaries of historical inquiry and postulates the involvement of all humankind in a religious and philosophical journey towards universal truths. As Jaspers writes: “In the years centering around 500 BC—from 800 to 200—the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid, simultaneously and independently, in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece.”57

According to Jaspers, Taoism and Confucianism, the Upanishad and Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Platonism and all other various religions and philosophies of the classic and Hellenistic ages would represent the “simultaneous” and polycentric epiphany of the same revelation. In other words, Jaspers suggests that discrete cultural achievements by men in different circumstances and places would serve the same (basically Western) ideas of progress and civilization. Such a theory clearly draws from German idealism, Jungian psychology, and Weberian sociological analysis, while, more or less implicitly, offering a philosophical justification for a kind of universalism typical of Christianity.

In addition, the Axial Age theory presents some major methodological problems that are especially evident once one tries to study ancient religions within a specific historical context. The Axial Age theory edits out all those aspects of religious life which are not seen as contributing to the rational development of the individual within society. It overlooks the function of those religious practices and beliefs which occupy an important position in the fabric of any society, and therefore takes “metaphysics” into consideration only insofar as it can be analyzed consistently by means of a systemic philosophical approach. Jaspers also assumes at the origins of all civilizations a notion of spirituality that is informed by a theoretical synthesis based on the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean world. Thus, he excludes the concept of religion typical of Abrahamic traditions from historical scrutiny and posits it as an a priori descriptive category, or—in Hegelian terms—as the metaphysical foundation of history.58

A further consequence of Jaspers’ intellectual approach is that universalism no longer represents just an ethical and political attitude but becomes an epistemological axiom that can seriously hamper a strictly historical approach.

56 Angus C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), ix-x.
With regard to the study of the extra-human in China, such a tendency has prompted scholars to analyze Chinese thought only to see whether it complies with or diverges from the common journey of humankind from the assumed “one single origin” to the assumed “common goal.” More specifically, when applied to the Han era, the Axial Age theory has led scholars to concentrate on the negative role exerted by the first unified rule of the Han. Heiner Roetz, for example has argued that the “rise of Confucianism to state orthodoxy,” its “ossification,” and the “monopoly on opinions” extinguished the cultural liveliness, richness, and variety of the (axial) Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) and Warring States (475-221 BCE) periods. However, Roetz’ claims are flatly contradicted by both historical and archaeological evidence.

During the first decades of the Han dynasty, and at least until the end of Han Wudi’s reign in 87 BCE, no literary, doctrinal, or cultural orthodoxy, let alone religious and philosophical schools existed on a well-defined and fixed set of texts, ideas, and practices. Moreover, it is impossible to read Wudi’s private and public ritual activity in the Shiji as an attempt to establish any religious or Confucian orthodoxy, as it appears there were few principles and behaviors which all classicists (ru) described by Sima Qian would have approved. Even when Wudi did employ classicists, it is beyond doubt that he did not prefer them to the masters of esoteric techniques of immortality (fangshi 方士) coming from the coastal regions of Qi 齐 and Yan 燕. And it is under these fangshi’s sway, according to Sima Qian, that Wudi performed new state cults, such as those to Houtu 后土 and Taiyi 太一, for example. Textual and archeological finds concerning elite burials all over the country confirm the cultural fluidity that Sima Qian describes.

As mentioned above, there is no evidence for the establishment during the Han of a moral-cosmological synthesis such as the one associated with Dong Zhongshu and the (later) Chunqiu fanlu. Also, as seen below, whereas Han Wudi and his chosen advisers were especially interested in enforcing administrative and economic uniformity, he

59 For a overview on the impact of the Axial Age theory on the scholarship on early China, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Readings in Han Chinese Thought (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), xx-xxiii; Heiner Roetz, Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 19, 45, 226. In Jaspers’ opinion, the liveliness of the Warring States corresponds to the one of the Greek city-states of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.


63 See Chapter 4 below.
tolerated and even exploited cultural and religious diversity in order to forestall opposition to his centralizing policies. Early China lacked not only a state-imposed religion and ideology but also a cultural tradition in which systemic approaches to the extra-human predominated.

My research suggests that the emphasis on the correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm that can be inferred through a reading of some Chinese philosophical texts (and which is mocked in the Zhuangzi, for example) could in fact represent an intellectual reaction to perceived cultural fragmentation and political instability. The historian of philosophy Roger Ames has argued that

The ‘organismic’ metaphysics which explicates the relationship between part and whole and constitutes the common ground on which the Confucian and the Taoist traditions have been erected, when fully appreciated, can be extended to virtually all areas of Chinese culture and used as a basis for understanding why the Chinese have traditionally chosen to construe human experience in the way they do.

Nonetheless, Sima Qian, in his Shiji, characterizes man’s activity in the world as a continuous struggle to understand the different principles regulating coexisting—but not coinciding—moral codes, political realms, and existential levels. According to the Grand Historian, rulers and subjects, leaders of different states, men and spirits all abided by different rules, were moved by different necessities. Although Sima Qian might have hoped, at first, that the political unification under the Han would finally facilitate the return to a mythical Golden Age, he did not equate the establishment of the Han empire with the re-establishment of the morals of yore. In fact, the Grand Historian believed that from the Zhou to the Han too many changes and losses had occurred to consider any cultural restoration feasible.

As for the relationship between the human and the extra-human spheres, although Sima Qian profusely accounted for beliefs, and practices concerning the invisible, he limited his inquiry only to those phenomena which were empirically observable. In general, the Grand Historian concentrated on the effects that beliefs and practices concerning the extra-human exert on human lives rather than on the very nature of the extra-human realm.

According to Xu Fuguan (1903-1982), Sima Qian’s analytical acumen makes readers feel disappointment that the Shiji lacks an explicit overarching philosophical view. I argue instead that Sima Qian’s exceptional skills in unraveling the complex realities he depicts in his Shiji, produce a comprehensive history that nonetheless defies a universalistic approach. The Grand Historian, in referring to past and contemporary traditions, concentrated more on cultural lineages, geographical origins, and specific competences than on intellectual stances. Whether the experts to whom Sima Qian refers were interested in merely human or in extra-human factors, none

64 For example, Zhuangzi, “Xiaoyao you 逍遥遊,” 1, 1-14.
66 See below.
of them showed the specific set of preoccupations that characterize western philosophical and religious traditions. If the current notions of religion are still prevalently informed by the ontological dualism of noumenon and phenomenon, by the analytic principles of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle, and are expressed in precise philosophical and juridical language, it is because they reflect some of the political and cultural features of the modern world that produced them.

Plato’s (428/427 BCE – 348/347 BCE) dialectic thought, Aristotle’s (384 BCE – 322 BCE) systemic approach and categories, and eventually the Judaic notion of a monotheistic God represent just some of the elements that in the formal framework of the Roman legal tradition and through the mediation of neo-Platonism, contributed to the modern formalization of ideological systems that had to match the institutions of an empire that was super-ethnic and whose rule was to spread potentially over the whole known civilized world. In such circumstances, the idea of systemic unity acquired a specific emphasis and translated into the dialectic of monotheism versus polytheism (the system of the heathens), oneness versus multiplicity, orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, absolute versus relative, secular versus sacred. The epistemological validity of these categories needs to be verified for the historiographical, cultural and political contexts in which Sima Qian was operating.

c) Myth and Ritual in Early China (An Introduction)

Catherine Bell, in analyzing the relationship between data and theory in the study of ritual, pointed out that scholars customarily seek and find evidence to support or challenge explicit theories and implicit assumptions, rather than systematically deriving analytical paradigms from empirical data. This is also partly true in the case of China, as the majority of attitudes and models employed in the recent study of its past and religion originated abroad or as a local reaction to a foreign stimulus or challenge.

The very myth/ritual dichotomy still plays a fundamental role in the field of history of religion because it reflects a “myth-oriented” ancient Greece and a “ritual-oriented” ancient Rome, whose civilizations provided the analytical paradigms for the modern social sciences. If we turn to early the Chinese literary sources, we notice that the Three Dynasties are all connected to foundation stories that, because of their blend of human and extra-human elements, are comparable to classical myths. Sima Qian, not differently from other Greco-Roman historians, treats mythology with the respectful attitude customarily reserved for ancient traditions. At the same time, he does not conceal his skepticism about the association of power and extra-human elements in the events of his time. The difference lies in the fact that whereas Livy or Tacitus, could clearly refer—critically or not—to an empire-wide shared repertoire of religious practices and beliefs that had been popularized for centuries in all the forms of poetry, in Sima Qian’s oeuvre, the mythical traditions appear as much less established in specific literary genres.

As for ritual, early imperial China deserves even a more a specific treatment because the English word “ritual” can both refer to the cardinal concepts of *li* articulated in the Five Classics and to practices and beliefs seen as in contradiction with the values these hallowed texts were believed to represent. For such reasons, I believe that stories about the extra-human in the *Shiji* can help understand some important cultural aspects of the Han civilization insofar as narratives concerning the extra-human can be appraised against a specific historical context and related to specific episodes, regardless whether it is possible to settle methodological question about the very categorization and structural comparability of Chinese myths and rituals.

**Comparative Religions and Comparative Mythologies**

The comparative study of ancient religions was born in Europe in the late nineteenth century on the assumption that civilizations belonging to same linguistic family (the Indo-European) shared psychological, cultural, and social structures as well. Philology was the specific field of those scholars who inaugurated the comparative approach to religions, such as Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) and Georges Dumézil (1898-1986). The belief that ancient myths contained basic narrative patterns that could in turn be associated with specific linguistic, psychological, and social structures provided the first students of comparative mythology with the will to assume the universality of certain attitudes towards the sacred. Since the main aim of these comparative scholars was the study of the origins of European civilizations, the extremely rich literary and mythological heritage of ancient India, Greece, and Rome provided the framework and the models for the future development of the field and often served as foils to the study of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Accordingly, the philological approach tended to emphasize the textual dimension and the narrative coherence of religion, by treating it as a well-structured linguistic system. In doing so, of course, the philosophical approach neglected the performative and practical aspects of cults, as well as elements dubbed “idiosyncratic.” Most importantly, because of its philological dimension, the study of mythology could be henceforth presented as a non-confessional, academic, and “more rational” approach to the question of the sacred.

In China, a literary education represented the almost exclusive way to scholastic authority and political power. Beginning with Northern Song (960-1127), public functionaries at all levels and ministers were chosen through a system of imperial examinations that tested their knowledge of the Classics. Furthermore, the Chinese script was (and still is) considered the defining element of China and Chinese antiquity.

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70 The Chinese examination system had been initiated under the Sui (581-618 CE). Candidates were evaluated on the basis of their skills in citing the Classics in order to resolve any theoretical or practical issues concerning the state and its administration. See John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
Because of its relative resistance to change and readability (regardless of pronunciation), the Chinese script was thought to unify the country, despite its extension, the presence of different ethnicities, local traditions, and dialects.

The Jesuit missionaries arriving in China at the beginning of the seventeenth century had acknowledged that the Chinese literary heritage already possessed a certain “scriptural” value, for it was strictly connected to institutional power and its mastery could allow even a foreigner to be accepted among Chinese elites. But only when James Legge (1815-1897) contributed to Max Müller’s monumental editorial project on the *Sacred Books of the East* by engaging in the translation of the so-called “Confucian” classics, did Chinese civilization seem finally to become integrated in the European comparative discourse on world religions and to obtain simultaneously its own corpus of scriptures and founding mythology. Legge did not take into account contemporary theories on the study of ancient mythology, a field just acquiring methodological independence in the mid-nineteenth century, probably because of both his own faith (he was a non-conformist Christian minister) and isolation from mainstream intellectual life. In his translations, Legge treated Chinese myths either as imperfect renditions of biblical truths or as fictionalized (or simply faulty) historical accounts. Interestingly enough, the same ambivalence shown by the Scottish sinologist still colors the two main trends characterizing the study of Chinese myths today. The first one is mainly philological and, more or less independently from international scholarly debates, is concerned with the possibility of proving the role of Chinese literary heritage in establishing the founding elements of Chinese civilization. The second one is openly comparative and, by adopting “foreign” interpretative approaches, usually strives to include the Chinese mythological tradition in the same intellectual discourse that involves the classical Mediterranean world.

The reactions to Gu Jiegang’s 兀頥剛 (1893-1980) scholarly legacy epitomizes the strengths and the limits of many modern “philological” approaches. Gu’s ideologically driven work concentrated on the connection between philology, mythology, and national identity. Gu, like the scholars associated with the Hundred

71 It was in the Jesuits’ interests not to present “Confucianism” as a proper religion, since otherwise the Roman Church might have condemned (as it eventually happened) commitment to “Confucian” rituals as idolatry.
73 Anne Birrell, “James Legge and the Chinese Mythological Tradition,” *History of Religions* 38, no. 4, (May 1999): 331-353. For an exhaustive overview of the history of the field, see Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1-22. One of the most authoritative figures in the field of Chinese mythology is Yuan Ke 袁珂 (1916-2001), one of Birrell’s teachers. Yuan Ke provided a “Marxist” legitimation to the study of ancient myths by referring to Maxim Gorky’s (1868-1936) literary theory according to which myths represented the creative effort of the common people to cope with the violence of natural forces and with the harshness of labor. See Yuan Ke, *Zhongguo gudai shenhua* 中国古代神话 (Beijing: Huaxia, 2006), 1-4.
Days reform movement, such as Kang Youwei 廖有為 (1858-1927) and Gu’s own teacher Hu Shih 胡適 (1891-1961), was interested in the possible reasons for China’s failure to modernize. In his monumental *Critiques of Ancient History* (*Gu shi bian 古史辨*), Gu took issue with the traditional role of Chinese educated elites, who, in his opinion, had served the interests of the ruling house by fabricating a myth of a golden age that justified conservative politics and reinforced the idea of Han cultural uniformity instead of pursuing historical truth. Of course, the very mention of Han cultural uniformity immediately touches upon sensitive issues such as Chinese political unity, national identity, and nationalism, which can hardly be confined in a merely academic debate free from ideological and emotional charge.

On the other hand, contemporary followers of a comparative method have the possibility to pass over those features that make China unique in order to concentrate on those elements that make China comparable with the rest of the world. Comparative scholars have finally abandoned the assumption that Chinese mythology either originated as the stray offspring of an original Indo-European source, or survived as the feeble echo of a universal Revelation. The scholar who had opened the path for modern sociological approach was the French sinologist Marcel Granet (1884-1940), a student of Émile Durkheim and a collaborator with Marcel Mauss (1872-1950). On the basis of his ethno graphic research, Granet argued that the myths described in Chinese literary tradition derived from folk festivals and reflected social dynamics and rituals. Hence, the theme of the relationship between elite and popular culture, ever since Granet’s groundbreaking work, has been central in sociological, anthropological, and historical studies focusing on Chinese religion and mythology.

Scholars who tackle such connections in terms of socio-economic factors and ideology rely on the Marxist tradition or on Max Weber’s continuing influence, which still searches for universal trends. Meanwhile, contemporary scholars who concentrate on linguistic and sociological structures draw from French sociology and anthropology. In the last decade, a series of systematic essays on Chinese mythology has also appeared. Yet, almost all of these separate approaches envision the field as an attempt to apply Mediterranean models to Chinese cultural history, as if it were feasible to disentangle the idea of a classical mythological corpus from the specific socio-political context and systemic mentality that created it. Paradoxically, the impossibility of addressing Chinese myths with the analytical rigor usually reserved for the classic Mediterranean tradition, according to Birrell, is due to the fact that “China lacked a Homer, or a Hesiod, a Herodotus or an Ovid, who recounted myth and shaped its content and style,” thus “early Chinese myth existed as an amorphous, untidy, congeries of archaic expression.”

The solution Birrell offers is an interdisciplinary method rooted in Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1884-1942) functional approach, and in Otto Rank’s and Lord Raglan’s comparative studies on Indo-European and Semitic heroic models, which were in turn

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76 Gu Jiegang, *Gu shi bian 古史辨* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji: 1926-41), 6 vols.
influenced by Jungian archetypes. Accordingly, Birrell organizes her work by adopting narrative themes such as “Origins,” “Culture Bearers,” “Saviors,” “Destroyers,” which present structural resemblances either with Indo-European and biblical models, or by focusing on typically Chinese traditions such as the ones concerning “Myths of Yü the Great,” or “Immortality.” Birrell is very careful to emphasize the connection between specific mythological themes, texts, and the dominant Chinese cultural traditions (which she characterizes as Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist).

Nevertheless, whereas Birrell’s programmatic adoption of structural categories proves extremely fruitful in constructing consistent hermeneutical criteria for the study of the literary sources, it proves less effective when the historian tries to establish a link between the cultural system recognizable within the text and the social and historical context outside it. In other words, Birrell does not demonstrate how cosmogonic and foundation myths of classical mythology relate to the cultural and ritual world of ancient and early China. And often happens in similar cases, non-contextualized mythological data lead to the adoption of general historical patterns that little have to do with the specific circumstances of early China.

Despite the archaeological and textual evidence attesting the richness and variety of the cultural and religious realm, scholars tend to stress uniformity and standardization, when discussing the decades of the long process of the establishment of the Han. Birrell, for example, accepts Rémi Mathieu’s thesis that “[O]ne direct result of the unification of feudal states into one empire during the Ch’in and early Han eras was that a process of homogenization of local mythological traditions occurred.”

In Sima Qian’s work, the first history of unified China, there is no evidence for any such standardization. As I will analyze in detail further on, whereas Han Wudi’s politics were undoubtedly aimed at imposing economic uniformity, from a religious and cultural point of view, they were characterized by the acceptance and exploitation of local diversity rather than by attempt to enforce homogeneity. For instance, Birrell considers Sima Qian’s mention of a “pentad of gods” as evidence for the Han establishment of a “new pantheon” that was supposed to differ “fundamentally from the older pantheons.” Yet, if we look at the passage in question, we see that the Grand Historian refers to the “pentad of gods,” just in passing and especially in order to discredit a particular cult by connecting it to the “impious” Qin dynasty. Most

81 For a structural approach, see also Sarah Allan, The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legends in Early China (San Francisco: Center for Chinese Materials, 1981).
82 For an assessment on methodological issues concerning the study of Han thought see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Readings in Han Chinese Thought (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), viii-xiii.
84 Birrell, Chinese Mythology, 19.
85 On the applicability of the concept of monotheism to early China, see Chapter 4 below. The Qin, according to Sima Qian, actually worshipped four Di (which were probably understood as dynastic ancestors) together with many others deities belonging to different local realities; see SJ 28, 1378.
importantly, there is no evidence about the establishment of a new pantheon during Han Wudi’s reign, also no proof that China had at that time any organic polytheistic system that was widely acknowledged or reflected political, social, and cultural stratification in the fashion of ancient Greek and Roman religions. Even if the Chunqiu fanlu was actually written by Dong Zhongshu (?179-?104 BCE) and its theories about the Five Phases and correspondence between moral and cosmic orders reflected Han mainstream beliefs, there is no evidence that they played an important role in Sima Qian’s historical approach or in Wudi’s religious politics.\(^{86}\) Arguably, Chinese educated elites did not embrace a cultural attitude that integrated the individual, the political, and the “religious” realms until the advent of Buddhism (and with it a typically Indo-European systemic concern) and Zhu Xi’s (1130-1200) theories became popular. Sima Qian, in his Shi ji, does not suggest the Chinese sovereign presided over a unitary natural, moral, and political order. At the earliest it was decades after Wudi’s death in 87 BCE that court officials began to concentrate on the creation of those state rituals and ideology designed to integrate the meritocratic element of the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming 天命) associated with Mencius (372-289 BCE), with the legitimating conception of the Son of Heaven as the keeper of universal harmony.\(^{87}\) As for Han Wudi, he sought and embraced a variety of cults and practices without ever attempting a synthesis. With regard to the emperor’s obsession with immortality, the sources describe it as an individualistic pursuit clearly in opposition to the familial values propounded in the literary tradition.

In any case, the impossibility of associating the “most glorious” period of the Western Han with the establishment of a holistic and synthetic mentality should not imply that the study of early Chinese thought is therefore less worthwhile. Nor need it mean that the study of Wudi’s reign should be carried out only to the degree to which it complies with the hermeneutical paradigms of the West.\(^{88}\) So far, scholars who have applied structural approaches have often addressed Chinese myths as evidence of “a way of thinking that need not have any relationship to history.”\(^{89}\) Instead, I argue that only the inductive method of historical inquiry can fruitfully account for the relevance of beliefs and practices to individual and groups in a specific, textual, cultural, and historical context. Only in this way can a comparative approach be the basis of a cross-cultural analysis that is relatively immune to ethnocentric and reductionist tendencies.

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88 The doctrines and the texts conventionally associated with Huang-Lao seem to present a “more organic” integration of the political and cosmological spheres in religious terms; see John S. Major, Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), Robin D. S. Yates, Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huang-Lao, and Yin-Yang in Han China (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).
d) Conclusion: Ritual and Society in the Shiji

The English word “ritual,” when employed in the context of early China, is obviously ambiguous. “Ritual” can be used to translate the “Confucian” li, which stands for social customs, propriety, courtesy, and etiquette or it can describe instead all those activities that involve spirits, ghosts, elemental transformations, and the quest for immortality, whether or not they are absent from the “canonical” literary tradition. Although these two groups of actions clearly pertain to extremely different ideas, practices, contexts, and social strategies, scholars routinely consider both of them under the category of “ritual.”

The li of the Five Classics, and in particular of texts such as the Liji (Records of Rites), the Zhouli (Rites of Zhou), and the Yili (Etiquette and Rites), referred originally to the specific actions, clothing, implements, and timing of elite conduct, especially in state ceremonies, ancestral sacrifices, weddings, funerals, and mourning. It is unclear whether these texts reflected aspects of the culture of the exemplary Zhou or concerns more specific to the ages of their later compilers and editors. It is also uncertain whether they served as descriptive or prescriptive texts, yet the mere compilation of their contents did reflect the formalization of a group of ideas that have come to be considered as foundational to Chinese culture and society: “Throughout pre-imperial and imperial times, li was a hallmark of Chinese civilization, a dividing line between Chinese and aliens, and often between elite and commoner.” Such a concept became so powerful that several scholars, in China and in the West, have projected this interpretation of li much further, before and beyond history. They have identified it with a psychological archetype that transcends discrete ritual practices and embodies the core of distinctively Chinese moral values based on family relations and status consciousness. Therefore, as it often happens, even to discuss early Chinese rituals—and in particular li—can bear on the sensitive issues of Chinese identity and the cultural and political role of China today.

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90 In early Chinese sources the verb usually employed to refer to the worship or sacrifice of shen and di, spirits and dynastic ancestors, is si 祀. See Zhan Yinxin 詹錫鑫 Shenling yu jisi: Zhongguo chuantong zongjiao zonglun 神靈與祭祀：中國傳統宗教綜論 (Nanking: Jiangau guji chubanshe, 1992).


A distinctive feature of the Confucian *li* of the pre-Song cultural tradition is that it is not founded on a theistic religion. Since it only involves ancestors and is impervious to the influence of meaningful extra-human factors, it has generated extremely influential intellectual formulations that emphasize the secular origin of the Chinese sense of morality and its focus on tradition. Accordingly, because of *li*’s independence from revealed, transcendental truths like those central to the Abrahamic traditions, several scholars deemed *li* to be compatible with western theories founded on rationality or scientific progress; hence *li* was cast as a fundamental asset for the foundation of a modern China as well. More recently, the cardinal position of the “Confucian” *li* within Chinese civilization and social structure has led scholars to reconsider it in terms of a distinctive blend of the Western categories of secular and sacred.

From a methodological point of view, *li* in many ways complies with some of the analytical benchmarks that Catherine Bell used to identify and describe ritual activities. Surely, Chinese *li* can be studied in terms of Bell’s categories of “formalism,” “traditionalism,” and “invariance,” and it definitely describes “behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive.” Nevertheless, *li* cannot be properly analyzed through the category of “Sacral Symbolism,” since, especially in its Confucian formulation, it clearly does not posit or refer to a further existential (i.e. religious or transcendental) or semiological level. *Li* creates the ideal society despite—and not because of—its connection with possibly extra-human origins and aims. Also, as seen below, the *li* described in the *Shiji* has lost its ties with its original ritual context and circumstances. It upstages discrete ritual actions and becomes the idea of perfect society that is historically not reproducible.

Much research has been devoted to *li*, through textual and literary analyses whose conclusions, when applied to archeological or material data, have produced in some cases essentialist interpretations that have concentrated more on the unique and constant attributes of Chinese civilization than on changes and historical contingency. In the

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96. The Jesuits fathers had read the Chinese classics especially through Zhu Xi’s “metaphysical” interpretation. In formalizing “Confucianism,” they presented to the West a highly sophisticated—albeit non-theistic—moral system that could represent a fertile ground for Christian proselytism. By describing Confucianism as a highly sophisticated—albeit secular—moral system, the Jesuit fathers in China could devote themselves to its study and project onto it the very preoccupation with systemic coherence that characterized the history of western philosophy and of the Catholic Church. As mentioned above, these concepts have been in turn projected onto early China.


last few decades non-Confucian rituals, on the other hand, have been the objects of numerous ethnographic, sociological, and anthropological inquiries.\textsuperscript{101} These rituals have become valuable and versatile means to explore the ways individuals and groups in different parts of China affirm, elaborate, negotiate, and challenge important elements of their individual and group identities. Very interestingly, by most analyses “non-Confucian” rituals and \textit{li} seem to inhabit parallel and unconnected worlds, separate and apparently irreconcilable semiotic systems.\textsuperscript{102}

Whereas during the Western Han the \textit{Huainanzi} or the Mawangdui corpus advocated for models of kingship whose extra-human legitimation was linked to non-traditional, non-Confucian rituals, after Wudi’s reign the dominant imperial ideology would be founded on \textit{li}, basically without interruptions until the end of the imperial era in 1911.\textsuperscript{103} It is not that individual Chinese rulers did not get involved in esoteric practices, but they seldom did so confidently, let alone advertise these behaviors in imperial propaganda. Whereas in the classical formulations of Confucian thinkers, \textit{li} coincides with the very civilization of the Central States, in the \textit{Zhuangzi}, \textit{li} arises when human beings lose contact with the cosmos and its rhythms. In the “Wisdom Travels North” section, which mocks and reverses typical Confucian reasoning—society and its moral underpinning are presented as the result of human inability to comprehend the Way and live in harmony with the cosmos:

Those who know [the Way] do not speak [of it], those who speak [of the Way] do not know [it]. Hence, the wise man practices the doctrine of silence. The Way cannot be conveyed, [perfect] virtue cannot be achieved, [whereas] benevolence can be practiced, and righteousness can be partially attained, as \textit{li} consists in deceiving one another. For these reasons, it is said that “Once the Way is lost, then virtue arises; once virtue is lost, then benevolence arises; once benevolence is lost, then righteousness \textit{(yi)} arises: once righteousness is lost, then \textit{li} arises. \textit{Li} is the domestication of the Way and the beginning of disorder.”\textsuperscript{104}

Such a contrast, which expresses a fiercely anti-conformist stance, did not produce a debate after the Western Han about reforming civilization and its institutions, but rather two almost independent discourses: one about the only conceivable socio-political order and one about the rejection of society as such. \textit{Li}, being at the center of the dominant ideology, embodies the core values of the moral-institutional system of an idealized past. The golden age of Yao and Shun, or of the Zhou which flourished thanks to the influence of filial, sage rulers, would be the only viable political model to be invoked through the study of the literary tradition associated with Confucius. Almost without exception, up to the Republican era, discussions on political, social, and

\textsuperscript{101} For a general overview of the state of the field see, Lagerway, Kawlinoski, \textit{Early Chinese Religion},

\textsuperscript{102} An exception to this tendency is represented by David Johnson, \textit{Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China} (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 2010) where “Confucian” and popular cults are analyzed jointly.

\textsuperscript{103} See Chapter 4 below.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Zhuangzi}, 12, 731: "夫知者不言，言者不知，故聖人行不言之教。道不可致，德不可至。仁可為也，義可與也，禮相偽也。故曰，‘失道而後德，失德而後仁，失仁而後義，失義而後禮。禮者，道之華而亂之首也。”}
economic reforms would routinely present the new within the vocabulary established by
the classical literary tradition, and only as an improved interpretation of Confucius’s
cardinal legacy.

As for the influence of this cultural tendency on the development of debates about
the extra-human in China, it is not that the emphasis on li necessarily inhibited the
development of different rituals and approaches, but certainly it made it difficult to talk
about them, as the language of power and the discourse on li merged in the required
cultural manifold of elites. That may explained why, the legitimacy of the Chinese
moral-institutional system, when compared to the ancient civilizations of the
Mediterranean, seemed able to do without a systematic connection with transcendental
factors immune to contingency and change.

The formalization of such a secular approach to the origin and development of
political power (as seen below) can be traced back to the work associated to Xunzi (ca.
312-230 BCE). The Shiji, on the other hand, presents a unique and extremely
interesting case, as it addresses the question of the relationship among tradition, society,
and political power precisely when the discourse about li was not yet established as the
only conceivable, legitimate, and viable one. Sima Qian did consider Confucius the
highest expression of Chinese civilization, but Sima Qian was in no way a Confucian.105
The Grand Historian considers the Master’s cultural and moral legacy fatally interrupted,
his lesson about li not applicable to the contingency of the current times, and the
contemporary classicists (ru) less than astute, honest, or efficacious political advisors.106

Nonetheless, from an analytical point of view, Sima Qian very clearly juxtaposed
the classical li to all the “other rituals.” In the first of the monographic essays in the
Shiji, the “Book on Li,” (“Li shu,”) considers li in Confucian terms as the basis of
civilization. The “Book of the feng and shan Sacrifices,” (“Fengshan shu”) by contrast,
catalogues a sampling of all those cults and practices that did not appear in the classical
literary traditions. A thorough reading of the Shiji shows that for Sima Qian the feng,
shan, and other rituals included in the same chapter were alike in several ways: their
textual origins were not clearly identifiable: there was uncertainty about how to perform
them correctly; their effects on human beings and society were dubious; and finally they
were capable of being manipulated for selfish personal or political gain. In other words,
the two categories that made sense for Sima Qian were the one including the foundation
of a moral, balanced, and prosperous society (namely, li), and the one regarding those
hardly controllable elements that could promote the successful and fair administration of
politics (namely, rituals epitomized by the feng and shan sacrifices).

The “Li shu” is one of the most problematic chapters of the Shiji. In its extant
form, two-thirds of the treatise reproduces passages from the Xunzi.107 Probably for this
reason, no major work on Sima Qian’s historiography has read the Shiji through the
theoretical syntheses developed in the “Li shu.” However, despite its complex
authorship, scholars now generally agree that the “Lishu” faithfully reflects Sima Qian’s

105 See Chen Xi 陈曦, Shi ji yu Zhou Han wenhua tansuo 史记与周汉文化探索 (Beijing: Zhonghua
shuju, 2007).
106 See Chapter 2 below.
107 A. F. P. Hulsewé, “Shih chih,” in Early Chinese Texts, 405-414, and Han Zhaoqi 韩兆琦, Shiji tiping
史 记题评 (Xi’an: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), 110-14.
thought on li, society and politics. Sima Qian’s ideas seem not at all incompatible with the approach taken in the Xunzi, as the rest of the Shiji shows. In light of the assessment it offers of the rule of the Qin and Han up to Wudi’s time, the first section of the “Li shu” must be directly attributed to Sima Qian. The “Lishu” begins thus:

The Grand Historian remarks: How vast Virtue is! It oversees all phenomena, and serves all beings. Is that not a human faculty? I visited the Master of Ceremonies and analyzed what has been emended and added during the Three Dynasties. I apprehended that it is by refining human feelings that li is created, it is by relying on human nature that decorum (yi 儀) is established. And the origin of this is so remote! 108

In the passage Sima Qian clearly defines the active force that regulates all phenomena, de 德, as a human faculty that is deeply connected to the establishment of visible social and individual standards, li and yi. The Grand Historian describes civilization as an ongoing process predicated on a critical look at the past. He regards antiquity as a legitimating factor, since as men are capable of gradual improvement through education and refinement.

The way of men is the warp and the woof of all things, there are no rules that it does not penetrate; it is kept close through benevolence and righteousness, it is controlled through penalties and punishments. Therefore those of profound virtue gain position and respect, while those with a large fortune gain favor and glory. And this is what keeps everything together within the four seas and governs and gives balance to the people.109

Man is the measure of all things and it is only by relying on human factors that social order can be maintained. Sima Qian emphasizes this so often that one wonders if in the passage above he was explicitly countering less secularly oriented contemporary theories. Be that as it may, according to Sima Qian, in an ideal situation, when men behave consistently with the highest moral standards, success and wealth reward the worthy. But circumstances are not always optimal. Historical memories can be lost and the ties with tradition severed:

When the Zhou fell li was abandoned, music corrupted, and the important and the petty became all mixed up. Master Guan had three wives in his house. Those who abide by the law and heed what is correct suffer the insult of their contemporaries. The extravagant and licentious and unworthy usurpers are regarded as famous and glorious. From Zixia, one of the most important disciples of Confucius, there was already this saying: “When I go out and I see refined elegance and abundant beauty I take pleasure; when I stay inside and listen to the teaching of the Master,

108 SJ 23, 1157: 太史公曰：洋洋美德乎！宰制萬物，役使群眾，豈人力也哉？余至大行禮官，觀三代損益，乃知緣人情而制禮，依人性而作儀，其所由來尚矣。
109 SJ 23, 1157-8:人道經緯萬端，規矩無所不貫，誘進以仁義，束縛以刑罰，故德厚者位尊，祿重者榮，所以治一海內而整齊萬民也.
I rejoice. My heart is conflicted between these two goods, and I am not able to decide.” And how much more could men of middling virtue and below not be drawn progressively toward the loss of the doctrine and the adoption of current customs? The Master said: “We must rectify names”. . . After Confucius passed away, the disciples who received his doctrine scattered, disappeared, and did not succeed. Some went to Qi and Chu, some crossed rivers and seas; is this not a disgrace?110

Noteworthy is the reference to Guanzi 官子 (725-645 BCE), a political adviser of the Spring and Autumn period who served under duke Huan 桓 of Qi. He is commonly associated with the doctrine of the bawang 霸王 (ruler-hegemon), meaning the idea that successful political leadership stems from pragmatism, administrative efficiency, and military superiority. Master Guan was a man of low status whose career did not at all correspond to the ideal path of a traditional sage. His biography in the Shiji immediately follows the first chapter of the liezhuan biographical chapter on Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who were so virtuous to shun riches, power, and honors altogether. Master Guan instead simply consented to work in the conditions he found and tried to make the most of them. Thus he succeeded despite his low status and questionable moral standards.111

According to the “Li shu” passage cited above, to realize the perfect society associated with Confucius’s teaching seems beyond reasonable expectations, in that the appeal of worldly pleasures, riches, and success makes even ethically superior men falter. In the real world, the power hierarchies do not match moral to social status. There is no hope that the Master’s cultural legacy can be revived in Sima Qian’s times. For these reasons, the treatise appears almost eager to put aside considerations about how the world should be, preferring to focus on the circumstances that, since the establishment of unified rule with the Qin, have led to the present conditions. Although li, by Confucius’s definition, did not triumph, an institutional apparatus continued to function in an acceptable fashion.

When the Qin gained control of the world, of all the social norms and customs of the six kingdoms they chose what they thought to be best. Although this did not conform to the rules established by the sages, they honored the previous political leaders and controlled the ministers, while the different offices of the court worked together since the past. When the reign passed to Gaozu, and his power shone over everything within the four seas, Shusun Tong made additions and subtractions that basically conformed to what the Qin had previously established. From the appropriate title of the Son of Heaven down to the official denominations of the various functionaries and offices, he made just a few changes.

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110 SJ 23, 1159: 周衰, 禮廢樂壞, 大小相踰, 管仲之家, 兼備三歸。循法守正者見侮於世, 奢溢僭差者謂之順榮。自子夏, 門人之高弟也, 猶云「出見紛華盛麗而說, 入聞夫子之道而樂, 二者心戰, 未能自決」, 而況中庸以下, 漸漸於失教, 被服於成俗乎? 孔子曰「必也正名」…仲尼沒後, 受業之徒沈湮而不舉, 或適齊、楚, 或入河海, 豈不痛哉!

111 On Guan Zhong in the Shiji, see SJ 62, 2131-4.
When Wendi took power, officials advanced some proposals concerning customs and rituals (li). Wendi was fond of the practices of the Dao, and since he considered li too complicated and the formalities of etiquette too ornate to be of any benefit for the government, he did not have anything to say about bodily appearance and dismissed the question. At the time of Jingdi, the Imperial Counselor Chao Cuo 晁錯 became famous because of the matter of punishments and li. Several times he intervened to admonish the emperor. He said: “The vassal states have to defend and assist; this rule was valid in the past as it is today. Now the big kingdoms have individual governments and different institutions. They do not report to the functionary of the capital, I am afraid that they will not be able to establish a line of legitimate power.” Jingdi followed this plan. The six states opposed it and revolted. They demanded Chao Cuo’s position and head, so the emperor executed him in order to get rid of the trouble. . . . Afterwards, officials began to take special care only in establishing good connections and in enjoying their posts peacefully. No one dared again to raise criticism.  

The Qin did not represent a despicable precedent. According to the treatise, their political settlement provided the foundation and the framework for Han power. Of the two reformers mentioned in the passage above, the most fortunate was Shusun Tong, a classicist (ru) whom Sima Qian characterized in the Shiji as a shrewd, even manipulative opportunist. As for centralization, filial piety, and political loyalty in the hierarchical structure, clearly the empire could survive as long as the Son of Heaven accepted to coexist with almost independent local polities. As Chao Cuo feared, the plan to establish a common and transmissible cultural tradition all over China turned out to be deluded. Contrary to the dominant historical narratives on Jingdi’s reign, the passage quoted above does not equate the eventual repression of the revolt of the Seven Kingdoms in 154 BCE with a definitive victory of the center over the periphery. Chao Cuo’s tragic demise looms as a somber admonishment for those idealist advisers who might challenge the status quo and seek to run the government as an enlightened father runs his family.

The following passage sounds like an explanation (or rather like an apology) of the political directives by which Sima Qian was compelled to abide. Moral and cultural relativism—represented in the passage above by the reference to Guanzi—seems the price to pay for the sake of political stability. The Han rule as a new dynasty, Sima Qian seems to say the Han, like the Qin, are not claiming a privileged bond with the

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112 SJ 25, 1159-69: 至秦有天下，悉內六國禮儀，采摭其善，雖不合聖制，其尊君抑臣，朝廷濟濟，依古以來。至于高祖，光有四海，叔孫通頗有所增益減損，大抵皆襲秦故。自天子稱號下至佐僚及宮室官名，少所變改。孝文即位，有司議欲定儀禮，孝文好道家之學，以為緣禮飾貌，無益於治，躬化謂何耳。[四]故罷去之。孝景時，御史大夫錢錯明於世務刑名，數干譴孝景曰：「諸侯藩屬，臣子一例，古今之制也。今大國專治異政，不棄京師，恐不可坐後。」孝景用其計，而六國畔逆，以錯首名，天子誅錯以解難。[六]事在袁盎語中。是後官著著安祿而已，莫敢復議。

113 See Chapter 2 below.

114 And one might wonder whether Sima Qian in this passage was also referring to the sensitiveness of his historical task.
celebrated tradition of the Zhou. Therefore they are free to establish and hand down a new standard.

After the current emperor took charge, he summoned experts in the Classics and arts and ordered them to decide about ceremonies, but in more than ten years they produced no results. Then someone said that in the ancient age of the Great Peace the people were in harmony and happiness, good omens appeared everywhere, so that rules and actions were established on the basis of popular mores. The emperor heard this and through the Imperial Secretary issued this decree: “I am ruling by mandate.\footnote{Very interestingly, when Sima Qian mentions the Mandate in connection to recent rulers, he does not relate it to Heaven.} Every sovereign flourishes on different bases, there are different ways but a common goal. To act by following the people is to study customs and then make rules. Those who criticize all exalt the ancient past, but what should the common people look up to? The Han dynasty is the enterprise of just one lineage, if standards and rules cannot be passed down, how could we talk about posterity? Those who realize grandiose deeds are eminent and far reaching. Those who govern in a shallow pond are petty and narrow minded. How could we not try?” Hence Wudi replaced the first day of the first month of the lunar year with the beginning of the Taichu age; he changed the colors of clothes, performed the feng sacrifice on Mount Tai, reorganized the ceremonial apparatus for ancestral shrines, sacrificial places, and public offices. By doing so he established a constant standard to be transmitted to posterity.\footnote{SJ 25.1160-61: 今上即位，招致儒術之士，令共定儀，十餘年不就。或言古者太平，萬民和喜，瑞應辨至，乃采風俗，定制作。上聞之，制詔御史曰：「蓋受命而王，各有所由興，殊路而同歸，謂因民而作，追俗為制也。議者咸稱太古，百姓何望？漢亦一家之事，典法不傳，謂子孫何？化隆者閎博，治淺者褊狹，可不勉與？」乃以太初之元改正朔，易服色，封太山，定宗廟百官之儀，以為典常，垂之於後云。} A renaissance of the Zhou times seemed impossible. To rule by trying to lead the people towards a model rooted either in the textual or in the oral tradition was not feasible either. The reference to the ideal age of the Great Peace, in which everyone just behaved as they pleased, in this context sounds almost like a mockery of the hallowed times of the Zhou, whose model is presented as too lofty or arcane to be imposed on the people. On the contrary, the “constant” standard Han Wudi would eventually establish and transmit was to paradoxically originate from the people themselves. Sovereigns would devise rules and laws through the observation of various traditions to be sought out in the different local realities of China. Once his political goals became clear, it would not matter how the emperor went about his task. A solemnly proclaimed New Beginning allowed him to legitimate Wudi’s flexible approach by continuously referring to the malleable evidence produced by empirical observation. So that, in other words, Wudi’s standard would be constant in the approach but not in the application. And as I shall show in the following chapters, Han Wudi’s programmatic statement would also be substantiated in Sima Qian’s detailed accounts of the emperor’s politics regarding popular and local cults.
A further interesting element in the first section of the “Li shu” is a statement attributed to Confucius. After the detailed description of the ways in which li tempers human senses and makes social life possible and harmonious, and just before the narrative section about ritual throughout the different Chinese dynasties, Sima Qian cites the Master on imperial sacrifices:

When men go around in chariots, they gild their seats and adorn their harness in order to make their appearance more sophisticated. The eye loves the five colors and so men make them vibrant and nuanced in order to manifest their potential. The ear enjoys bells and musical stones and men harmonize them with the eight instruments in order to excite their feelings. The mouth finds pleasure in the five flavors and men enrich them with condiments and spices in order to develop men’s taste. The sentiments are attracted to precious and valuable things, and men carve and polish jade objects in order to accord them with their own senses.

For these reasons the ceremonial carriage with grass mats, the leather caps with cotton cloths, the red strings with the hollow guitar, the great supper with simple water are used by men to curb their excesses and extravagances and try to correct their shortcomings. All this determines the order between ruler and minister, in the affairs of the court, between the honorable and the lowly, the noble and the poor, and reaches down to the common people in the distinction of different carriages, clothing, residences, drinking and eating, marriage rules for men and women, funerals and sacrifices so that all actions can be proper and suitable, all things controlled and refined. Confucius said: “In the imperial ancestral sacrifice, I do not want to know anything that happens after the libation.”

As if to say that all those ritual activities whose scope exceeds social interaction should not concern a wise man, since it seems that no relevant lessons can be drawn from them.

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117 SJ 25, 1158: 人體安駕乘，為之金與銅以榮其飾；目好五色，為之黼黻文章以表其能；耳樂鐘磬為之調諧八音以謔其心；口甘五味，為之庶羞酸鹹以致其美；情好珍善，為之琢磨圭璧以通其意。故大路越席，皮弁布裳，朱弦洞越，大羹玄酒，所以防其淫僣，救其弔蔽。是以君臣朝廷尊卑貴賤之序，下及黎庶車輦衣服宮室飲食嫁娶喪祭之分，事有宜適，物有節文。仲尼曰：「禘自既灌而往者，吾不欲觀之矣。」 Cf., Xunzi, 19, 417: “What is the origin of li? I reply: ‘Man is born with desires. If his desires are not satisfied, he is bound to pursue them. If in what he pursues there are no measure and limits, he is bound to contend with other men. Contention leads to disorder. Disorder leads to poverty. The ancient kings despised such disorder, and so established ritual righteousness to curb it, to nourish men’s desires, and to provide them with what they pursue. They made sure that desires would not fall short of their objects, and that the objects would not be beyond what is desired. In this way, desires and their objects sustained each other over time. This is the origin of li.”
Chapter 2
Readers of the Past, Readers of the Present: Court Advisors, Power, and Metaphysics in Sima Qian’s Narratives

Heaven wanted my death… My career is over… No one knows me.
[Yet] I am not angry at Heaven, I do not blame men.
I studied what is below and reached what is above.
Who knows me is Heaven indeed!
Confucius

The greatest directness seems roundabout, people say.
Even the Way itself twists and turns.
Is this perhaps what they mean?
Sima Qian

One who knows the mandate does not blame Heaven.
One who knows himself does not blame men.
Huainanzi; Liu Xiang

“Any structure is the ingenuous re-proposition of a hidden god; any systemic approach might actually constitute a crypto-theology.” In his attempt at formalizing a purely philosophical historicism that could emancipate the Hegelian idealistic tradition from any form of transcendence, Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)—with the reasoning paraphrased above—meant to attack Marxist materialism in general, and its Italian interpretation called philosophy of praxis in particular. Antonio Gramsci’s (1891-1937) passionate defense of such an intellectual approach can be considered an effective manifesto of his humanistic Marxism. In the Prison Notebooks, he argues that the concept of structure produces metaphysics only if it is approached theoretically, whereas in his own interpretation, it has to be seen historically as the whole of the social relations that constitute the living and working environment of real men. In Gramsci’s view, a structure refers also to those objective conditions that can and must be studied with the instrument of philology (i.e., language in context) and not of philosophical speculation. As he holds, subjective conceptions of reality produced by a given social group, once

1 In SJ 47, 1942: 天喪予!…吾道窮矣!…莫知我夫!不怨天，不尤人，下學而上達，知我者其天乎!
3 This citation (知命者不怨天，知己者不怨人) can be found both in the Huainanzi (“Miao Cheng Xun, 10”), which was edited and compiled under the prince of Huainan, Liu An 劉安 (179?-122 BCE) and in Liu Xiang 劉向 (77-6 BCE), Shuo Yuan 說苑, “Tan cong 談叢,” 16.
4 In the original text, the term “speculativo” refers to a kind of philosophical research that is purely theoretical and not aimed at any practical application.
explained historically, could be treated as real facts, as concrete acts instrumental to the
processes whereby communities provide themselves with a moral unity.  

Interestingly enough, Sima Qian, in his treatment of beliefs and practices
concerning the extra-human realm, seems likewise more interested in acknowledging the
role subjective beliefs had in the traditions that constituted the multifarious
cultural/ethical world in which he was living, than in analyzing and understanding them per
se. Events that happened in a remote past, or that, for being connected to the “divine
sphere,” were hardly verifiable, clearly interest Sima Qian as social-political forces,
especially to the extent to which they could represent a model or a source of legitimacy
for the influential intellectual traditions (or factions) of his own times, or a moral paragon
for a present crisis.  

On the other hand, in dealing with accounts of more recent events
(some of which he had directly witnessed), for Sima Qian “miraculous events” are often
the result of fraudulent attempts to exploit human gullibility and evidence that was
impossible to rule by virtue during the chaotic Han times. 

Ethical choices are what
undoubtedly matter for the Grand Historian. Therefore, he ultimately concentrates on
isolating human factors, and on defining the limits of human actions. The Grand
Historian, in doing so, realized a structurally complex and multifaceted literary enterprise,
in which the treatment of discrete cases, instead of leading through an inductive process
to the formulation of broader narrative patterns, seems rather aimed at refuting any
generalizing and abstracting analytical tendency. 

Unlike the conventional conception a pantheon entails in the ancient Greek-
Roman world, the whole of “spirits and ghosts” (shen 神 and gui 鬼) in the Shiji does
not constitute an organic cosmos, a system of deities that preside over different sectors of
reality and whose interaction could help to explain natural and historical events. 

Moreover, the “deities” of the Shiji do not inhabit heaven yet, the realm of light, of the

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7 For the notion of “factionalist” struggles at the Han court, see Marianne Bujard, “Le ‘Traité des
sacrifices’ du Hanshu et la mise en place de la religion d’état des Han.” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française de l’Extrême
Orient* 84 (1997): 111-27. For a “regionalist” interpretation of the cultural variety of the first Han, see
Wang Baoxuan 王葆然, “Cong Qi Qin ruxue yu Chu Lu ruxue zhi fen liu kan jingwun jingxue de
qiuyuan” from 秦儒学与楚鲁儒学之分流看今古经学的起源, in *Jin gu wenjingxue xinlun* 今古文经学新论
(Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1997), 19-27. On the relationship between “myth” and
“history” in Sima Qian, see Charles LeBlanc, “A Re-examination of the Myth of Huang ti,” *Journal of
8 Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE-18 CE) had already noticed, together with Sima Qian’s analytical acumen,
the historian’s penchant for the odd and extraordinary; see Fa yan 法言 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan,
1939), 12.2b.
9 Sima Qian, especially in the eight monographic chapters (shu) does provide organic views of the cosmic
and the human realms—views that he connects to the almost timeless tradition of the Central States.
However, the Grand Historian states that his age could not be understood by looking at the past or by
applying traditional wisdom; see SJ, 25, 1158-61; SJ, 18, 878: “居今之世，志古之道，所以自鏡也，未必盡
同。帝王者各殊禮而異務，要以成功為統紀，豈可徑乎？觀所以得尊龍及所以廢辱，亦當世得失之林也，何必
舊聞？於是譏其終始，表其文，頗有所不盡本末；著其明，疑者闢之。後有君子，欲推而列之，得以覽焉.
This is the topic of chapters 1 and 3 of my dissertation.
10 See Chapter 4, below.
visible, nor is their gaze felt as a ubiquitous witness and judge of human actions.\textsuperscript{11} Rather, spirits and ghosts are evoked by Sima Qian to expose the vulnerability of the human condition and the fragmentary nature of human experience. More importantly, Sima Qian is not only preoccupied with the complexity of phenomena and the interactions of different realms of the universe. He is equally preoccupied with the very possibility of preserving the memory of encounters with the extra-human and of producing an accurate record of them. Nonetheless, spirits and ghosts, in the chapters of the \textit{Shiji} that deal with recent events, almost never have a major impact on humans’ lives. If they in any way influence and affect what men feel, think, and do, it is indirectly through the suasive, threatening, or apotropaic power of the stories told about their alleged deeds. To the fascinating (and to Sima Qian hardly believable) tales narrated by magicians, charlatans, and experts of alchemy and occult arts associated with \textit{fangshi} 方士, Sima Qian often juxtaposes accounts of his visits to the relics connected to the cult or the tomb of extraordinary beings, as though he wanted to point out that what actually mattered was the extant traditions and the social practices in some way originated by or related to the putative intervention of the divine.

In other words, it seems that the space and the dialectic between the visible and the invisible provided Sima Qian with the possibility to posit unpredictability at the center of his narrative, emancipate the question of success and failure from any deterministic schemes, and finally concentrate on the verifiable circumstances of human actions, especially on agency and timeliness, even though such questions as agency and timeliness in the \textit{Shiji} must be deliberately left open to debate and negotiation.\textsuperscript{12}

In a historical period characterized by change, transformation, and variety, Sima Qian acknowledges the classicists successors of Confucius, the political advisors who had devoted their lives to the painstaking study of the extant cultural production of the only known civilization, as potentially the most apt at establishing a common tradition and a line of continuity with an idealized past.\textsuperscript{13} By recognizing a causal connection between human deeds and success, the Han classicists might have had the possibility of promoting narratives in which moral actions were rewarded. But the Grand Historian treats the question whether or not the classicists were effective in influencing in a positive way the new dynastic form of rulership, or at least in providing a morally acceptable explanation of its legitimacy, is treated by in a fashion that is ambiguous and problematic.

Previous scholarship has focused on the issue of the “contradiction” between Sima Tan’s supposed “Daoism” and Qian’s “Confucian” upbringing, for example, connecting it to the climate of cultural instability and fluidity that characterized the

second century BCE. However, it is misleading to expect in Sima Qian any kind of exclusive ideological allegiance, as the sources do not show us whether at his time there existed at all philosophical schools founded on the members’ commitment to a specific set of principles or rules of the kind that flourished in the sixth century BCE by the Ionian sea, such as the Pythagorean, for example. As already demonstrated, it was not uncommon at all for a scholar of the former Han age to study under different masters, whose cultural allegiances previous scholarship saw as in competition.

Sima Qian spent almost all his life in the capital city of Chang’an, and therefore probably developed an attitude that escaped the regional factionalism that characterized some of the cultural struggles of the period. Furthermore, the processes that would eventually lead to the “bureaucratization” of the governing elites and to the establishment of an authoritative corpus were still in the initial phases in those years. What is certain is that Sima Qian respected some of the classicists as individuals devoted to the study of specific texts; at the same time, he doubted that they knew how to apply their knowledge in service of the political power in an effective way. It seems that not even the exceptional contribution of Confucius himself and of his favorite disciple Yan Hui could change for the better what Sima Qian thought of the classicists as a group; hence the Grand Historian’s refusal to explicitly defend them as such. In Confucius’s biographies of the “Hereditary Houses” (Shijia), for example, there is an episode in which the master’s career as a political advisor is hindered by his association with the category of the classicists.

During a visit to Qi, Confucius, thanks to a famous riposte about the interconnection of political and familial relations, provokes an enthusiastic response in Duke Jing of Qi, who becomes persuaded to employ him for his government: “Indeed, if a gentleman does not act as a gentleman, a minister does not act as a minister, a father does not act as a father, and a son does not act as a son, how could I eat food, even if I had it?” But when Confucius is about to be rewarded with an estate, Yan Ying intervenes and reminds Duke Jing of the classicists’ reputation, in a that recalls critical remarks in the Mozi and in the Yanzi Chunqiu:

18 SJ, 1911-12.
19 Cfr. Lun Yu 論語, 12, 11: 齊景公問政於孔子. 孔子對曰. 君君. 臣臣. 父父. 子子. 公曰. 善哉. 信如君不君. 臣不臣. 父不父. 子不子. 雖有粟. 吾得而食諸．
The classicists use words in a confusing and deceptive way and cannot be taken as a model. They are arrogant and follow only their own opinions; it’s not possible to use them to lead the people. They attach enormous importance to funerals, abandon themselves to grief and break the bank for expensive burials; they cannot be used to regulate customs. They go from place to place talking about loans; they cannot be used to manage the government. Since the great saviors died and the court of Zhou fell into ruin, the rites and the music have been discontinued for a long time. Now Master Kong is emphasizing appearance and embellishments, complicating the rites for ascending and for descending. . . The following generations have not been able to completely comprehend his teachings; a whole life is not enough to master his rites. If the lord wants to employ him to reform the customs of Qi, it would not be possible to use him to lead the common people.20

The argument against the ru’s expensive and unpractical interpretation of mourning rituals had already been made in similar terms in Mozi.21 In the Yanzi Chunqiu, Confucius, during his visit to Duke Jing, accepts to formally meet Yang Ying only after Zigong’s 招 solicitation and a speech in which Yang Ying himself questions the classicists’ capacity of understanding that different people in different circumstances have different needs.22 Shiji 62, “Guan Yan Liejuan” 管晏列眷, pairs Yan Ying with Guang Zhong, as we have seen, the champion of a kind of rulership based on timeliness and expediency that, according to our historian, would have befitted the Han.23 Yan Ying is depicted as a minister who, after a childhood spent in hardship and poverty, became especially proficient in taking care of the economic aspects of government. The Grand Historian, in his concluding remarks, first acknowledges the positive reputation achieved by Yan Ying among his contemporaries, then wonders why Confucius did not think highly of him:

It is because, when the rule of Zhou was in decline and duke Xiang clearly an example of wisdom, [Yan Ying] did not encourage him to support the court, but instead assisted him in becoming hegemon (ba 霸)? There is a saying that goes: “Support his virtues, correct his shortcomings so that high and low can be close in harmony.” Is this not about Yan Ying?24

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20 SJ 47, 1911-2. [Chavannes, 307-309.] It was not only Sima Qian, in early Chinese cultural history, who maintained a critical attitude towards aspects of a tradition to which he was undoubtedly connected; see Michael Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue about Their Own Tradition,” Philosophy East and West 47, no. 2 (1997): 133-88.
21 Cf. Mozi, “Gong Meng 公孟” 12, 418.
23 See Chapter 1 above.
24 SJ 62, 2136. 舊為周道衰微，桓公既賢，而不勉之至王，乃稱霸哉？語曰「將順其美，匡救其惡，故上下能相親也」。豈管仲之謂乎？
It is clear, in light of these passages, first, that Sima Qian considered a good reputation (whether deserved or not) to be an important historical factor, second that Yan Ying’s criticism of the classicists was justifiable, and third, that Confucius was delusional in advocating the universal applicability of certain principles he claimed would lead to a better ruler/minister cooperation and to the prosperity of the country—at least not for the times in which the master was living. Despite Sima Qian’s admiration for Confucius, his declared model, he probably reported Yan Ying’s tirade against the classicists in this specific passage in order to stress the unfavorable attitude and circumstances that prevented the master from being a successful advisor. It is difficult not to conclude that the Grand Historian must have been at least frustrated and disappointed in how the classicists, when they had the chance to be very close to the center of power, often failed to influence their ruler in positive ways or provide him with unbiased readings of past and present events. Thus, if we look at the evolving relationship between men of culture and sovereigns in the Shi Ji, we often see manipulation as well as miscommunication, as though Sima Qian had ultimately become persuaded that political power and moral behavior were tragically irreconcilable.

In the crucial years between the fall of the Qin and the rise of the Han, for example, the controversial Shusun Tong 叔孫通 became the “father of the Han classicists” (Han jia ru zong 漢家儒宗) and was honored at both Qin and Han courts, thanks to what was deemed by his peers an opportunistic use of the concept of timeliness. Then, when Shusun was eventually called to create a new court ritual for the newly established Han, he won the trust of Gaozu 高祖 (206-195 BCE) through a cunning concoction of elements from disparate regional ceremonies and from the Qin rituals.

The founder of the Han had always openly dismissed the importance of classicists and of their hallowed texts: “All I possess I have won on horseback... Why should I care about the Documents and the Odes?” According to an anonymous cavalryman in Li Sheng’s 鬻生 biography, Gaozu also made sure that his aversion for classicists should not go unnoticed:

The Governor of Pei 沛 [i.e. Gaozu] does not care for classicists. Whenever a visitor wearing a classicist hat comes to see him, he immediately snatches the hat from the visitor’s head and pisses in it, and when he talks to other people he always curses them up and down. He will never consent to be lectured by a classicist! 

However, as the battles against Xiang Yu 項羽 (232-202 BCE) drew to an end, Gaozu finally conceded that classicists might prove useful after the dynasty was consolidated. At the sight of the fanciful choreographies and rituals organized by the

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25 SJ 99, 2726.
26 SJ 97, 2699.
27 SJ 97, 2692: 沛公不好儒，諸客冠儒冠來者，沛公輒解其冠，溲溺其中。與人言，常大罵，未可以儒生說也.
classicist Shusun Tong, Gaozu suddenly became aware of his new prerogatives: “Today for the first time I realize how exalted a thing it is to be an emperor!”

The readers of the Shiji must note that Sima Qian never concealed his opinion on Liu Bang’s poor judgment and morals. Shusun Tong’s biography makes it evident that, according to the Grand Historian, learned advisors—albeit of Shusun’s dubious kind—have the potential to “write” their narratives on the empty canvas of political power, especially as in the formative years of the Han, they could take advantage of Gaozu’s naïveté and obliviousness.

Yet, even when the Han rule has been consolidated, a wiser sovereign such as Jingdi (156-141 BCE) seems positively wary of any debate on the nature and origin of dynastic power. In an episode narrated in Shiji chapter 121, “Biographies of Ru Scholars, ‘Ru lin liezhuan’,” two learned advisors, the academician (boshi 博士) Yuan Gu 载 固 from Qi 齊, and Huang Sheng 黃生, (presumably not a classicist) engage in a passionate discussion on the legitimacy of the use of violence in overthrowing tyrannical rulers. Were founders of dynasties actually assassins, or does the fact that they eventually won popular support and achieved success mean that they had really received the Mandate? In other words, could their actions be judged according to different moral standards? When Huang Sheng provocatively suggests that even the Han founder, Liu Bang, might have been at fault in replacing the Qin ruler, Jingdi instead of defending the legitimacy of his own dynasty, simply invites the two debaters to move away from such a risky subject, and from that episode on, as Sima Qian remarks, the topic of dynastic change and violence was no longer discussed at court.

As Michael Loewe has already pointed out, at least until Han Wudi’s age (141-87 BCE), when the political and territorial control of the Han seemed somewhat more stable, the sovereigns of the Han dynasty did not consider it prudent to make a bold display of their metaphysical investiture to rule, as they were arguably mindful of the sudden and tragic end of the hubristic Qin. Whereas Wudi through the creation of monopolies and the construction of canals was clearly attempting to centralize taxation,
the question of the establishment of a state ideology seems much more complex. There is no incontrovertible textual evidence in the Shiji for the establishment of “Han Confucianism,” nor for the triumph of the conception of an integrated moral-cosmological system, such as the one conventionally ascribed to Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BCE), and expressed in the much later text of the Chunqiu Fanlu 春秋繁露. 34 On the contrary, as I shall show here, the Grand Historian never explicitly adopted the wuxing 五行 or Five Phases theory as an explanation for change, failure, and success. Nor did he in any way suggest that Wudi assumed it as “state ideology,” or he felt its fascination.

Sima Qian’s treatment of omens strengthens the sense of a disjunction between Heaven and men. However, one cannot establish whether, in the historian’s view, such apparent breaches were due simply to the momentary moral unworthiness of the men of his times, or whether they represented an epistemologically unsolvable conundrum indicating an unbridgeable ontological separation. What Sima Qian does clearly say is that rulers and ruled were extremely sensitive to the possibility that disasters and portents should be tied to the mishandling of monarchical power, as the rhetoric of omens could be exploited for political advantage.

If we go back to the Ru lin chapter, we read that Dong Zhongshu’s effort to record and study disasters and prodigies nearly cost him his life at the hands of Wudi. 35 After the mortuary altar to Gaozu in Liadong 遼東 was destroyed by fire in 139 BCE, an envious colleague of Dong’s, one Zhufu Yan 祖父偃, managed to present a copy of Dong’s aforementioned treatise to the Son of Heaven, who immediately summoned all the court advisors to give their opinions about it. The only judgment reported at this point by Sima Qian is that of Lü Bushu 酈歩舒, a disciple of Dong, who apparently did not recognize the work as his master’s, and judged it stupid and worthless. 36 Dong was then condemned to death, which he only escaped thanks to an imperial pardon. So, after that, the historian remarks, Dong Zhongshu no longer dared to express his theories about disasters and portents.

As in the anecdote about Jingdi and the dispute over legitimacy in the same chapter, this anecdote represents a further instance in which a ruler, in a self-conscious way, silences a debate that might end in a judgment on his own conduct and on his dynasty’s legitimacy. If we focus on the supernatural aspects of the episode, we see that Sima Qian does not provide the reader with any information to ascertain whether the fire was actually a portent, a fraud, or a mere accident. Nor can we know if the conduct of the current monarch was by implication under scrutiny, given that was unworthy of the standard the founder of the Han had established. Yet, by portraying the omen and the

35 SJ 121, 3128.
36 SJ 121, 3128.
fear elicited by political authority, the historian clearly manifests his disenchanted view of court politics and of the role and motivations of contemporary court advisors. Sima Qian perhaps could contemplate the possibility of Dong producing an undeserving work. Equally possible is that Lü Bushu’s judgment might be read as a comment on the relative isolation of the court advisors, who did not constitute a like-minded cultural faction. Therefore, how was it possible to establish any solid line of doctrinal transmission and moral unity? Provided that the cosmos was readable as an organic whole, was there a universally accepted theory to rely on, with trustworthy and unbiased interpreters?

The chapter devoted to Confucius in the Shiji ends in a tone of distress and despair, as the sage realizes that all his hopes to exert a positive influence on leaders and on common people of his times are lost. The famous capture of the lin 麟 unicorn in 481 BCE, the fourteenth year of duke Ai 季 of Lu 魯, narrated in the Chunqiu is interpreted by the Master as an epoch-changing sign. However, what afflicts Confucius is not just the close of an age and the approach of his own demise, but the lack of any interpretive system for reading the new cosmic order, and the interruption of his cultural lineage. Right after he acknowledges of the omen, the Master laments that the Yellow and the Luo 萌 rivers had not yielded any miraculous tools like the eight trigram system and the Great Plan (Hong Fan 宏範), with which in the past men could read the cosmos. Sima Qian immediately connects this passage with the death of Confucius’s favorite disciple Yan Hui 颜回, which provoked the master’s complete desperation: “Heaven wanted my death… my career is over… No one knows me. [But] I am not angry with Heaven, I do not blame men. I studied what is below and reached what is above; who knows me is Heaven indeed!”

The mention of Heaven, far from being a reference to any personal deity, does not celebrate the investiture of Confucius as a new king. It not only underscores Confucius’s exceptionality, but also his isolation from his contemporaries and the sages of the past. The master praises Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊, as the only ones who, having rejected power and deliberately lived in seclusion, did not surrender their will nor dishonor their bodies. Yet, Confucius could not be compared to them, he concluded, as in he did not follow a fixed behavioral norm. Therefore, if his way could not be codified for the future generations, the only solution was to embark upon the writing of

37 SJ 47, 1942.
38 See Li Wai-ye, “The Capture of the Lin and the Birth of Historiography,” in The Readability of the Past (Cambridge [MA]: Harvard University Press, 2007), 411-421. As I shall show in detail further on, Sima Qian will refer to this episode in several instances and often in a farcical context throughout Shiji 27, “Fengshan Shu” 封禅書.
40 SJ 47, 1942.
41 On Dong Zhongshu’s reading of the capture of the lin in the Chunqiu Fanzu (CQFL yizheng 義證 9), see Li, The Readability, 414.
42 The biography of Bo Yi and Shuqi, which opens the Liezhuan section in the Shiji (SJ, 61, 2121-2131) immediately presents the reader with the potential conflict between moral integrity and political responsibility. The “rebellious” ruler they want to stop would eventually become the founder of the Zhou dynasty and of the therefore of the civilization of the Central States.
43 SJ 47, 1943: “我則異於是，無可無不可。” See also Lun Yu 論語, “Weizi 微子” 18, 8.
the Chunqiu annals, in which, case by case, the Master could reveal or conceal a given the ruler’s deeds and misdeeds. By this method Confucius ensured that it would be up to posterity to judge whether one was at fault or not:

Therefore [the Master], by using historical records, composed the Chunqiu, which starts with duke Yin and goes until the fourteenth year of duke Ai (481 BCE), through the reign of twelve dukes. Having as a basis Lu, which was connected to Zhou, in turn preceded by Yin, he moved through three dynasties. He simplified his style but broadened the meaning. For this reason when the princes of Chu and Wu proclaimed themselves “kings”, the Chunqiu devalued them by using the term “viscount”. When at the time of the meeting of Jianfu, the Son of Heaven of Zhou was actually summoned, the Chunqiu dissimulated the fact by stating instead that the sovereign went “hunting at Heyang.” It is going back to those examples that we find a lesson for the present times. The principles of devaluation and dissimulation will be raised and explained at the appearing of true sovereigns. If the principles of the Chunqiu are carried out, unruly ministers and criminals of the all world will be scared. 44

Thus, if this was Sima Qian’s model, historiography does not constitute a tool for reading the past but rather for comprehending the political, social, and cultural circumstances of proper linguistic and moral choices, especially as they relate to the Confucian context of zheng ming 正名, Rectification of Names. These were a choice that might have been exploited only in the future since, after all, the Master’s exceptional existence had been the most untimely of all.

At stake in the linguistic decisions that historiography entails is the determination of proper rituals. However, Sima Qian is thinking of the li 禮 of the formalized social compromises by which the discrete and contingent interactions among men in a particular time and in a particular place are regulated, not the li of the universalistic and metaphysical interpretation of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) and Dao Xue 道學. 45 Clearly for Sima Qian, the very task of writing and compiling cannot fully replace experience. More importantly, from the point of view of cultural transmission, the assiduous and diversified interactions between the Master and his disciples can only be revealed through the writing of their experiences. Hence, the main aim of the historiographical approach of Shiji is not to present the past through a rational argumentation in order to make specific points, but rather to reveal the veiled rhetoric of the Annals’ language, since intellectual honesty and power could not be reconciled.

Sima Qian seems especially interested in allowing the reader to establish an emotional connection with the protagonists of his stories and with the cultural, social, and material circumstances of their lives, whose complexity is rather evoked, comprehended

44 SJ 47, 1943–44.
and accepted as such than unraveled. As is well known from the famous letter to Ren An, history-writing became for Sima Qian, especially after his clash with Emperor Wu and fall into disgrace, a sort of emotional compensation for the loss of direct impact on political life.\(^{47}\) Since castration made Sima Qian ritually improper, the historian could only hope to honor both his biological and cultural ancestors through the literary creation of memories.\(^{48}\)

Interestingly, the exemplary personalities in the *Shiji* are not treated as complete, separate, psychological universes; instead we see them through the interaction of various factors. Sima Qian’s work, as it is well known, defies any attempts at a conventional biographical reading, since the information on any given character or subject is scattered throughout different chapters and sections. The Grand Historian multiplies points of view and angles to such an extent that it is extremely difficult to single out in the *Shiji* any epistemic structures. Sima Qian employs neither a holistic approach to human experience, nor, as the historian Xu Fuguan lamented, an original and coherent “philosophical” vision.\(^{49}\) In Foucauldian terms, Sima Qian, instead of taking into consideration the “point of view of the rules,” or the “positive unconscious of knowledge” over time, focuses on the point of view of all the subjectivities involved in all sides of the process of writing history. This perspective defies any attempt to reduce the variety and fluidity of the material presented in the *Shiji* to structural paradigms.\(^{50}\)

As shown in current debates on received and excavated texts and on the controversial issues concerning the chronology, transmission, and editing processes of a “classic” textual tradition during the Han show, we cannot know to what extent Sima Qian’s approach was innovative or instead more or less in keeping with the different cultural trends and intellectual attitudes of his times.\(^{51}\) Like the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 chapter entitled “Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease” (*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊), the *Shiji* did not engage in a reading of the reality premised on the acknowledgment of a modular correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. Sima Qian does not attempt to interpret specific cases as coherent manifestations of an “organismic” cosmic/moral system, in which every aspect of reality is connected or coordinated to the whole.\(^{52}\)

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46 According to the “Book on Music” (*yueshu*) in the *Shiji*, the literary tradition and the possibility to establish and emotional connection with the men of the past were probably the elements of continuity that defined the civilization of the Central States.

47 *HS* 62, 2725-38


52 See Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), ix: “The ‘organismic’ metaphysics which explicates the relationship between part and whole and constitutes the common ground on which the Confucians and the Taoists traditions have been erected, when fully appreciated can be extended to virtually all areas of Chinese culture and used as a basis for understanding why the Chinese have traditionally chosen to construe human experience in the way they do.”
Sima Qian does not follow a comprehensive approach to human experience in the world. The extra-human, what is beyond the visible, whenever it is mentioned in the *Shiji*, does not have the traits of a coherent (not to mention moral) system.

In the *Rulin* chapter, just before the episode concerning the fire at Gaozu’s mortuary shrine, we learn that Dong’s assiduous study of disasters and portents in the *Chunqiu* led him to understand how to block and release *yin* and *yang* in order to control rainfall, a result that he never failed to achieve during his stint as prime minister in Jiangdu. As other works of his time, including the *Annals of Lü Buwei* (呂不韋, *Lu Shi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋), the *Shiji* treats *yin* and *yang* as meteorological aspects of reality. They do not yet constitute fundamental factors or principles of the cosmos. In fact, what Dong Zhongshu obtains by mastering them is not a superior and deeper insight into the laws of the cosmos, but merely a practical result, which, as Sima Qian reports, was not even enough to secure Dong’s local political position.

The lack of a “philosophical” concern in Sima Qian’s historiographical approach should not be surprising by now, as it would just represent the projection of his systemic frame of mind which is typical of European cultural history onto Han China. Nonetheless, the establishment of unified and centralized rule under the Han dynasty might conceivably have produced by itself a teleological trajectory in the all-embracing and “universal” narratives of the *Shiji*.

While ideal and idealized rule, according to the cultural expectations of the elites of Sima Qian’s times, entailed the integration of the political and moral realms, the Grand Historian did not equate his own age with a new golden age. Not only did his contemporaries fail to live up to the best examples in the hallowed tradition, but in times of turbulent change and uncertainty, it seems that human beings could not rely on a caring and omniscient deity, or even on the comforting notion of a consistent and intelligible metaphysical system. The various references to Heaven/Tian in the *Shiji* do not clarify the boundaries of human agency, leaving the issues of historical causality and necessity open.

Ancient civilizations in dealing with hereditary monarchy tended to conceive formulations that could salvage the continuity of institutional systems, despite the mortality and fallibility of human leaders, by linking that continuity to transcendental and immutable principles. Conceptions of kingship that connect the human and the divine realms, such as the Mesopotamian monarch-priests, the Egyptians pharaohs, the Roman divine emperors, or the “double-bodied” kings brilliantly analyzed by Kantorowicz, were also formulated in order to address such a conundrum. In the case of early imperial China, the philosophy customarily associated with Dong Zhongshu, or the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, *Tian Ming* 天命, in *Mencius’s* classic formulation, did not play an important role in Sima Qian’s treatment of the rise of the Han. Traditionally, it is believed that the conception of a Tian as an almost personal god who legitimized the

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54 See chapter 3 below.
56 *Mengzi* 孟子, 7, 7.
claim to power of a given lineage was elaborated during the Zhou (1027-771 BCE). Since this dynasty belonged to a different lineage, it could no longer refer to Shangdi 上帝, the supreme deity or dynastic ancestor(s) of the defeated Shang (1700-1027 BCE).  

 Nonetheless, when Heaven is invoked in the Shiji, it is more often to explain the inexplicable success of Liu Bang despite his dubious morals and behavior. In the cases in which ambition, manipulation, greed, violence, sheer economic and military power led to a favorable outcome, Sima Qian’s mention of Heaven may be interpreted as a reference to fate; when success seems to occur against all odds, or the balance of forces involved in a struggle, it may be read as mere chance. 

 This thesis argues that the apparent inconsistency and ambiguity of Sima Qian’s treatment of Tian is due to the fact that, whether or not our historian was willing to acknowledge its miraculous influence, he surely did not conceive the divine as an organic system. The Shiji often mentions Heaven while posing rhetorical questions about the ultimate helplessness of men, or as of the linguistic residue of a cultural tradition that no longer explains current events in a satisfactory way. For Sima Qian references to “extra-human interference” simply emphasize the complexity of human factors and the final impossibility of positing an absolute metaphysical system that rightfully dispensed justice. Wise men are isolated and divided among themselves and on the models to follow. The only Master or “saint” (sheng ren 聖人), Confucius, is tragically unrepeatable.

Chapter 3

Metaphysics without God: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Sima Qian and Polybius

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.
(Benedict Anderson)

The nation as the subject of History is never able to completely bridge the aporia between the past and the present.
(Prasenjit Duara)

a) Unity without Continuity: Sima Qian, the Chinese Cultural Tradition, and Han Rule.

The cultural legacy of the late “Christianized” Roman empires has made it customary to expect political and administrative centralization to entail not only ideological unity, but also a belief in the correspondence between the human and extra-human orders. Christian historiography spread the conviction that to read human events in light of a transcendent design, recognizable, for example, in the timely intervention of Divine Providence, represented the ultimate kind of history. This moral and ethical attitude characterized Hegel’s philosophical approach as well. And its influence still survives, more or less implicitly, in the assumption that historical works that posit the existence of a systematic plan or engine in history (i.e., Hegel’s Spirit and Marx’s class struggle) are in some way superior. Moreover, it is fairly evident that the propagandistic or apologetic purpose of imperial histories tends to produce teleological narratives.

In the case of China, modern scholarship has conventionally seen the Shiji as the historiographical trait d’union between the three canonical dynasties of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, on the one hand, and the purportedly continuous trajectory that began with the Qin Empire in 221 BCE and ended with the fall of the Qing in 1911, on the other.

4 For a cultural history of the relationship between national narratives and teleology (particularly with regard to China) and the problematization of the concept of national identity, see especially the introduction and chapter 1 (“Linear History and Nation State”) of Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 3-50.
5 Michael Puett has analyzed the theme of continuity in early China in anthropological terms through the nature/culture opposition. See his The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2001), 1-21. On the definition of Chinese civilization as not characterized by a separation from nature (unlike the European), see K. C. Chang,"
this reading, Sima Qian’s oeuvre would provide the history of the re-establishment of Chinese political and cultural unity after more than five centuries fragmentation and wars since the Western Zhou lost their paramount role in 771 BCE. However, a close reading of the Shiji shows—as I have pointed out above—that the Grand Historian did not believe it possible to recover and revive the cultural and ethical paragon of the Zhou. As Sima Qian clearly and repeatedly states, the Han succeeded thanks to expediency and pragmatic politics more than moral excellence. Also, in the Grand Historian’s opinion, the political achievements of the Han were unprecedented and not readable through examples from the past:

If the present generation knew and beheld itself through the mirror of the Way of the ancients, it would understand that the correspondence could not be complete. Kings and emperors had each unique customs and etiquette (li) and carried out different businesses. If one wanted to consider their meritorious achievements under the same principle, how would it be possible? If we consider what has produced honor and glory and what has produced disgrace and insult, we would see that our generation is in the forest of failure; how could we listen to the ancients?  

Although the Shiji recognizes disjunction and rupture, it never defines the unification entailed by the creation of the empire in negative terms. Sima Qian does not criticize the political goals of the Han rulers. Certainly he does manifest his disappointment in the ways unity was achieved—but what kind of unity? As modern scholarship has forcefully pointed out, ideological unity could not exist in early imperial China, while communication and transportation constraints did not favor the establishment of that kind of institutional and cultural integration that characterizes modern conceptions about nation states.

The Han thinker Yang Xiong referred to the practice of li as the element that defined the civilization of the people Central States and that would inevitably influence and transform even the foreigners traveling through them. This conception of li as highly formalized behavior is not strictly connected to ethnic and territorial boundaries. Since the sources do not associate it with a particular group, it can represent an unifying factor among the Central States. Thus, if Sima Qian lamented an interruption in traditional practices, what elements did he recognize as factors of cultural and historical continuity? Did he adopt any specific criteria of inclusion and exclusion in organizing the material of his narrative? And if so, which? Did Sima Qian identify Heaven or any other extra-human entity as a force that could determine change beyond contingency and

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6 This passage comes from on of the sixth (out of ten) Chronological Tables (biao 表) of the Shiji, the only section in which Sima Qian provides synoptic views of the periods he analyzes. See SJ 18, 878: 居今之世，志古之道，所以自鏡也，未必盡同。帝王者各殊禮而異務，要以成功為統紀，豈可統乎？觀所以得尊寵及所以廢辱，亦當世得失之林也，何必舊聞？ Puett has argued that Sima Qian sees the very creation of the Han empire in terms of traumatic rupture; see, The Ambivalence of Creation, 177-212.

8 Yang Xiong 楊雄, Fayan 法言 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1939), 12:2b.
the unpredictability of human behavior? Did he conceive the world as a self-regulating organism? And if so, what role did Sima Qian believe men could have in such a system? Also, beyond the possible recourse to explicit ordering elements such as Heaven, can we read the "Shiji"’s literary development itself as Sima Qian’s creation and imposition of an implicit explanatory principle?

In attempting to answer these questions, I shall compare Sima Qian’s "Shiji" with Polybius’s (203-120 BCE) "Histories" (Ἱστορίες), and especially his narration of the events that led to the supremacy of Rome over the Mediterranean, with the ultimate aim of complicating the categories and criteria that Sima Qian employed to organize and analyze his material. My aim is to ascertain the extent to which Sima Qian’s historiographical preoccupations are compatible with the analytical paradigms we have inherited from the classical tradition.

b) Cultural Identity and the Other in Sima Qian and in Polybius

At first glance, the element that Sima Qian and Polybius seem to share is the awareness that, as privileged observers, they had the chance to analyze and explain the exceptional convergence of events and outstanding personalities that had brought about the establishment of a single hegemonic power over the most relevant territories and peoples of their times. Setting them apart from each other are differing consciousnesses of the relative position of their cultures vis-à-vis foreign contemporary civilizations and socio-political systems. In other words, whereas in the Central States the discourse on civilization had been traditionally self-referential, Greco-Roman historians tended to approach their subjects in comparative terms.

Around and across the Mediterranean Sea, discrete ethnic and cultural identities had developed in the awareness of the coexistence of different civilizations that could represent not only a challenge and a threat, but also an example. Peoples, goods, practices, and ideas had traveled through trade, diplomacy, migrations, colonization, and warfare from time immemorial. The proximity and the relevance of the other, the foreign, the strange, and the hostile had been fundamental in the formalization of both

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9 On the relationship between Heaven and fate in early China see, Michael Puett, “Following the Commands of Heaven: The Notion of Ming in Early China,” in The Magnitude of Ming, ed. Michael Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 49-69. Puett shows how the tension between Heaven and fate that characterized early Chinese thought would be reconciled, also for the sake of a more organic imperial ideology, by Dong Zhongshu (ca. 179-104 BCE), whose theories became relevant with the Eastern Han (25-220 CE) and more visible in Ban Gu’s (32-92 CE) "Hanshu." On fate in Chinese culture, see also Fu Sinian, "Xingming gushun bianzheng" 性命古順辯證, in Fu Mengzhen ziansheng ji 傅孟真先生集, (Taipei: Taiwan National University, 1952). On a linguistic comparison between notions of fate in early China and ancient Greece, see Lisa Raphals, “Languages of Fate: Semantic Fields in Chinese and Greek,” in The Magnitude of Ming, 70-106.

10 For the “poetic,” creative function of the historian, see Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1975), ix-xii, 5-42.

group and individual consciousnesses. It would be impossible, for example, to follow the history of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel without considering their very composite natures, their mutual interaction, the importance of cultural diffusion, and the violent impact of external forces. If we look closely at classical historiography, we see that it was especially the menace and the example of the Persian Empire that prompted the Greek city-states to formalize and embrace a pan-Hellenic identity. In turn, the ancient Romans constructed the idea of a distinctive national character by engaging in a complex dialogue with the Greek influence emanating from the colonies in southern Italy, while re-elaborating their relationship with the Etruscans and the other peoples of the peninsula. The analytic approach of the historians writing in and about the ancient Mediterranean tended to be comparative both in methodology and in purpose, since they had to acknowledge the commensurable political and cultural relevance of other past and contemporary ethnic, cultural, and political realities. In early imperial China instead, the very idea of civilization coincided with the peoples and the customs of the Central States. Their distinctive traits were defined through a dialogue that involved different but not foreign cultural and political traditions. There were no civilized neighbors, as the inhabitants of the Central Plain customarily conceived of the Other as illiterate and savage.

Modern scholarship has finally refuted the idea that the continuity and distinctiveness of the culture of the Central States was preserved for millennia, thanks to the conceit that every foreign entering the states’ sphere of influence would eventually


15 On a comparative approach to the issues of the other and identity, see Mu-chou Poo, Enemies of Civilization: Attitudes toward Foreigners in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
embrace Chinese civilization and be transformed by it. But whereas few today would overlook the influence and persistence of non-autochthonous elements in Chinese culture throughout history, in the received textual tradition, the Other represented an alternative to Civilization only in a dialectical and paradoxical way. For example, although the *Shiji* addresses the negative trope of the uncivilized barbarian in critical terms, Sima Qian’s relatively unprejudiced treatment of the nomadic Xiongnu seems more instrumental to his preoccupation with court and foreign politics than due to a genuine interest in the Other itself.  

In the final remarks of the “Memoir of the Xiongnu” (“Xiongnu liezhuan”), it becomes evident that the author exploits the foreign challenge especially in order to focus on the failure to use competent officials properly and on the problematic task of safely offering criticism of official policy. In doing so, as Tamara Chin has pointed out, Sima Qian “avoids anthropological rhetoric.” Unlike Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE) in the *Han Shu* 漢書, and Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445 CE) in the *Hou Han Shu* 後漢書, the Grand Historian does not include his account of Han frontier campaigns in “a narrative of cultural and moral superiority.”

The “Xiongnu Liezhuan” opens with a negative characterization of the Xiongnu: they lack literacy, agriculture, care for the elderly, *li*, and righteousness (*yi*). But then the author counters this account with the extensive report of the vibrant defense of the “barbaric” way of life given by the eunuch Zhonghang Yue 中說, who had defected to the Xiongnu during Wendi’s reign (180-157 BCE). In the words the disgruntled eunuch spoke to an imperial envoy, the lack of an overly sophisticated bureaucratic and ritualistic (in the sense of *li*) system, no less than the possibility of marrying the widows of their relatives, made the royal lineage of the Xiongnu more stable and durable. Most importantly, Zhonghang Yue’s account reverses and mocks the negative “rhetoric of the uncivilized” at the beginning of the “Xiongnu liezhuan,” in an attack that—as pointed out by Tamara Chin—seems above all aimed at the superficiality and bias of traditional ethnography.

However, from the point of view of my present research, a fundamental element of the *Shiji* is Sima Qian’s self-serving treatment of foreigners. The “Xiongnu

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20 SJ 110, 2879.

21 SJ 110, 2898.

23 Chin, “Defamiliarizing,” 314-19
liezhuan,” for example, presents this nomadic people as an almost deviant byproduct of Chinese civilization by describing them as descendents of the royal family of the Xia. The “Book of Heavenly Officials” (“Tian guan shu,” juan 27 of the Shiji) associates the Xiongnu with the constellation of the Western Palace and with the Pleiades, and therefore includes them in the same cosmological system as the Central States. As for their relationship with the extra-human sphere, in the Shiji the Xiongnu did not worship foreign deities, but just sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, to gui and shen in their own ways, as though they were thought to partake of the same universe of sedentary civilizations. Unlike the ancient Mediterranean, the peoples of the Central States did not define identity through a shared religion. Also, what seemed to matter was not the object of the worship, but the modality and the rituals involved.

Sima Qian’s lack of interest in those elements that we would associate to the term ethnicity today (or in other words, his prevalent preoccupation with human relations and agency) is also evident in the way he narrates the life and achievements of the founder of the Han and of his entourage. The Grand Historian customarily paid attention to regional diversity, but addressed the question of unity in political rather than in cultural terms. It can be argued that the historian either did not perceive cultural complexity as a problem (as long as it did not endanger political unity) or that, since the socio-cultural situation of early imperial times was too complex, he preferred to concentrate on politics and human interactions.

Gaozu’s family, the Liu, came from the southern state of Chu, which, for the inhabitants of the Central Plain, represented a very distinctive, almost exotic, cultural reality. Still, the Grand Historian does not point out—at least directly—that the putative diversity of Liu Bang (or of his rival Xiang Yu) might constitute an obstacle to his claims to imperial leadership. In the description of the personal traits and actions of the

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24 SJ 110, 2879.  
25 SJ 27, 1305.  
26 SJ 110, 2892.  
29 Sima Qian (in SJ 40, 1659) traces the origins of the house of Chu back to the mythical sovereign Zhuan Xu 繆疆, grandson of and successor to the Yellow Emperor. He represented a positive model of rulership that was not based on li. Zhuan Xu “followed Heaven by according himself to its rhythms, prescribed norms that complied with spirits and ghosts, transformed the people by controlling the Five Qi (五氣), and offered sacrifices with purity and sincerity, according to SJ 1, 11. See also Gopal Sukhu, “Monkeys, Shamans, Emperors, and Poets: The Chuci and Images of Chu during the Han Dynasty,” in Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China, in ed. Constance E. Cook and John Major (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 145-65.
protagonists of the unification of the Central States, Sima Qian does not relate individual behavior to specific ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Although the Grand Historian traveled extensively throughout his life, and was attuned to diversity and multiplicity, the analytical approach of his work—as of basically all other pre-modern histories of China—is deeply influenced by the proximity of the imperial house, and benefits from the vintage point of the only conceivable “civilized” center.\(^{30}\)

For Polybius, by contrast, cultural and political hegemony did not coincide. As pointed out by Frank W. Walbank, “the impact of the outside world upon Greece” represented the focus of both Polybius’s life and work.\(^{31}\) Son of the eminent statesman Lycortas, Polybius was born in 203 BCE in the Arcadian city of Megalopolis, which was a member of the Achaean League, a confederation of Hellenic poleis whose aim was the protection of Greek autonomy especially against the intrusions of the Macedonian power.\(^{32}\) The League had to confront first Sparta’s resurgence under Cleomenes III (235-222 BCE) and then the rising power of Rome.\(^{33}\) Under such a threat, many had hoped that Perseus of Macedon (212-166 BCE), the political heir of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) and last king of the Antigonid dynasty, could better safeguard Hellenic independence. But the Third Macedonian War (171-168 BCE) against Rome ended with Perseus’ total defeat. After the fatal battle of Pydna in 168, the last Antigonid ruler was deported as a hostage together with his entourage and the members of those Hellenic political groups who had supported him directly or indirectly. And among them was the historian Polybius.

At the time of his exile, Polybius had already spent more than thirty years at the center of the Hellenic political scene as a young and active member of the Achaean League. In the footsteps of his father Lycortas and elder brother Thearidas, who had also participated in diplomatic missions to Rome, he seemed destined for an even more illustrious political career. At around the age of twenty, Polybius was chosen to accompany the urn of the beloved leader of the Achaean League, Philopoemen (253-183 BCE), during his funeral; in 170/69 BCE, at thirty—the youngest age of eligibility—he was elected as Military Commander (hipparchos) of the Achaean League, and the position of Supreme Commander (stratêgos) seemed likely to be his next prestigious appointment.\(^{34}\)

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30 As it is well known, the scholarship on Sima Qian has connected the historian’s disagreement with Emperor Wu (that eventually led to Sima’s castration) with the political pessimism of the Shi ji. Such an idea has been reinforced by the famous “Letter to Ren An” contained in the Hanshu, whose authenticity is at least questionable. Although many of the approaches that try to reconstruct Sima Qian’s psychological attitude and motivations are extremely compelling, my analysis will account only for what the Shi ji explicitly states or suggests. Although I conventionally attribute the passage to which I refer to Sima Qian, I do not assume a well-defined authorial personality (in a modern sense) behind the ideas expressed in the Shi ji.


33 Lycortas, as Military Commander (hipparchos), was selected as a member of the Achaean embassies to Rome and Alexandria in 188 BCE. In the subsequent decades, Lycortas was many times the head of the Achean League as stratêgos. See Craige B. Champion, *Cultural Politics in Polybius’ ‘Histories’* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 16-17.

Yet, Polybius’s exile in Italy did not coincide with his isolation from the center of political activity. Whereas his fellow countrymen were banned from the capital city, Polybius—either thanks to his influential acquaintances or because the host government wanted to keep an eye on him—was allowed to spend his exile in Rome. Here the historian was welcomed in the preeminent cultural and political circles of the time, while enjoying a relative degree of freedom, which allowed him to travel within and outside Italy and to take part in hunting expeditions. Most importantly, Polybius, in the years of his exile, became a tutor and friend of P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus (185-129 BCE), the military and political leader who would be forever associated with the siege and destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE (of which the historian was a direct witness) and with the establishment of Rome as the paramount imperial power of the Mediterranean. After promoting a policy of “cautious Achaean independence in international affairs,” and after witnessing the disbandment of the Achaean League with the destruction of Corinth by the Romans in 146 BCE, Polybius became involved in the reconstruction of Greece (he was repatriated in 150 BCE) and in the political mediation between Greece and Rome, which would gain him durable fame and praise among his fellow countrymen.

In terms of allegiance and identification, these events and experiences determined the complexity of Polybius’ historiographical approach. The historian’s analytical attitude developed among different political and cultural realities, through the long process of composition and publication of the Histories. The “last writer of a free Greece and the historian of its conquest” lived in a period characterized by strong intercultural connections. In writing the Histories for both Roman and Hellenic readership, Polybius offered a Greek perspective on Rome’s triumphal advance in the Mediterranean. Simultaneously, the historian had to justify for his fellow countrymen the legitimacy of foreign hegemony over the Hellenic world, while also helping them cope with a new administrative reality. The emphasis on contemporary and “pragmatic

36 Pausanias, the Greek geographer of the second century CE, could report of monuments celebrating Polybius’ activity as mediator between Greece and Rome scattered throughout the Hellenic world. See Champion, Cultural Politics, 18.
37 Of the forty books of the Histories, only the first five survive in a complete form. On the timing of the composition and publication of the Histories, see Walbank, Polybius, 13-31. On the different phases of Polybius’ appraisal of Rome’s military conquests and “imperialism,” see Walbank, Polybius, 157-83; according to Wallbank, Polybius’ attitude towards Rome becomes less immediately intelligible in the narration of the events following the battle of Pydna in 168, as he has to account for the efforts of the Achaeans to maintain their independence and for Rome’s shrewd treatment of the vanquished. On this topic, see Domenico Musti, Polibio e l’imperialismo romano (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1978), 69-148.
39 On the issue of Polybius’ readership, I follow Champion’s argument, summarized in Cultural Politics, 4). Frank W. Walbank instead considers Polybius’ intended public to have been mainly Greek, as he states in Polybius, 3-6, 16-19).
history," namely the specific attention to military strategy, politics, and institutional structures, in addition to representing a stylistic and intellectual choice, allowed Polybius to connect ethnicity and history in a more complex way. The Achaean historian, unlike Sima Qian, did relate ethnicity to human behavior and causality, but as the voice of the vanquished he could not establish an automatic correspondence between cultural and political superiority.

It is well known that Polybius recognized Rome’s “mixed” constitution as one of the principal factors of its surge to power. He interpreted the interplay of consuls, senate, and people in Rome’s politics as the balanced coexistence of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy—forms of government that had already been implemented in the Hellenic world with varying success. Polybius’ explanation of Rome’s conquest of the Mediterranean could not but simultaneously constitute an assessment of the lapse, however momentary, of Greek supremacy and civilization. It is not surprising that the historian’s attitude towards the cultural identity of his hosts, as brilliantly pointed out by Craig Champion, seems equivocal. Whether, according to Polybius, the Romans were members of the civilized Hellenic world or barbarians was “historically contingent upon the health of the institutional structures of the polity” and determined by the alternating cycles of “reason” and “unbridled passion.” Institutions and politics could influence the fate of civilizations. Ethnicity (or culture) did not determine the outcome of events in an absolute way.

Yet, the dramatic shift of center in the Mediterranean world must have had a very deep impact on Polybius. Roman dominion seemed to overshadow, in extension and foreseeable durability, even the achievements of the Persians, of the Spartans, and of the

40 On the meanings of πραγματική ιστορία in Polybius and on his historiographical approach see Walbank, Polybius, 66-96; see also Paul Pédech, Le méthode historique de Polybe (Paris: Université de Paris, 1964), 331-354.
42 Pédech (in Le méthode historique de Polybe, 331-354) singles out the following causal factors in the Hellenic historiography and in Polybius: influence of individuals, the character of political institutions and military expertise, geography, and fortune. Polybius (Hist. III. 5-7), in the analysis of the origin of war, famously expounds his theory based on the distinction among origins (ἀρχαί), causes (αἰτίαι), and alleged motives (πρόφασις).
43 This is the theme of book VI of the Histories.
45 Champion (in Cultural Politics, 30-31) defines the use of the concept of “Hellenism” in Polybius and among contemporary Greek intellectuals as a cultural strategy devised to counter Rome’s power. On the development of a pan-Hellenic identity and on its different (instrumental) formulations in different historical contexts, see Champion, Cultural Politics, 31-40; see also C.P. Jones, “ θνος and γενος in Herodotus,” CQ 46 (1996): 315-20.
46 Champion, Cultural Politics, 4.
47 Arnaldo Momigliano has pointed out that although Polybius was the only Greek historian to resort to the notion of cycles, he only did so with regard to the evolution of constitutions, for he did not include ordinary military and political events in this vision. See Momigliano, “Persian, Greek, and Jewish Historiography,” in The Classical Foundation of Modern Historiography, 18.
Macedonians, whose empires were the most formidable the historian had ever observed.\textsuperscript{48} Also, the unprecedented convergence of events concerning different areas and peoples of the known world that had determined Rome’s supremacy made possible for the first time the writing of a synoptic and universal history.\textsuperscript{49} And, as we will see, Fortune would have an interesting role in Polybius’s narrative endeavor.

c) Heaven before Sima Qian

Heaven in the \textit{Shiji} does not determine the fate of the Central States and their eventual unification. As I shall show below, Sima Qian refers to Tian in order to emphasize the cultural discontinuity he perceived between past and present and the impossibility to recognize in the cosmos patterns that could illuminate the meaning of human events. Yet, Heaven had been associated with the ideal reign of the Zhou and from the end of the Western Han to the end of the imperial age represented a central element in state cults and propaganda. For these reasons very few scholars have emphasized the originality of Sima Qian’s view in that in his opinion Heaven neither legitimized political power, nor rewarded moral behavior.\textsuperscript{50} In order to appraise the distinctive views expressed in the \textit{Shiji}, I provide below a brief cultural history of Heaven before the Han.

The notions of “Heaven” (\textit{tian} 天) and “Mandate of Heaven” (\textit{tianming} 天命) have traditionally been at the basis of studies concerning religion, metaphysics, and the relationship between cosmic and human orders in early China.\textsuperscript{51} According to the theory of the Mandate of Heaven, which is expounded in its most complete form in the \textit{Mengzi} (ca. 372 – 289 BCE), Heaven bestows the mandate to rule the Central States on worthy sovereigns and their lineages, while letting undeserving dynasts lose it.\textsuperscript{52} From the end of the first century BCE to the fall of imperial China in the early twentieth century, \textit{tian} has been customarily evoked in connection with dynastic legitimacy both in public state ceremonies and in discourses concerning the extra-human origin of political power.\textsuperscript{53}

For modern scholars looking for a metahistorical organizing principle in early Chinese civilization, Tian cannot unproblematically correspond to a monotheistic deity of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} \textit{Hist.} I, 2-3.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Polybius acknowledges Ephorus of Cumae as the first to attempt a general history; see \textit{Hist.} V, 33, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{50} One of the few exceptions to a traditional, “Confucian,” reading of state cults during the Western Han is found in Meguro Kyōko 月黒杏子, “Kandai kokka saishi seido kenkyū no genjō to kadai—Kōei kenryoku to uchūron no shiten kara,” \textit{Chūgoku Shigaku} 15 (2005): 103-119.
\item \textsuperscript{51} \textit{Tianming} has been traditionally translated as “Mandate of Heaven.” David Schaberg argued that “Heaven’s Command” is more appropriate; see D. Schaberg, “Command and the Content of Tradition,” in \textit{The Magnitude of Ming}, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 23-6.
\item \textsuperscript{52} In \textit{Mencius} the role of Heaven is also connected to the moral nature (\textit{xing} 性) of men; see Robert Eno, \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 99-130.
\end{itemize}
the Abrahamic kind.\textsuperscript{54} In early texts, for example, Tian ambiguously coexists with Shangdi 上帝, and it is not clear which of them is the prevailing factor and to what extent they both correspond or are related to dynastic ancestors.\textsuperscript{55} From the end of the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), some sources, as I shall show below, describe Heaven—together with Earth—as a fundamental cosmic factor and the parent of living creatures. But Tian, in these sources, never amounts to the personal God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Yet in the West, due to the influence of traditional philosophies and revealed religions, Heaven has been routinely assimilated to the idea of agent creators, founding principles, and systemic structures. Whereas some scholars still see Heaven as merely the “Chinese version of the Christian God,”\textsuperscript{56} as Mircea Eliade’s identification of the sky with father-like deities is—more or less implicitly—assumed as a psychological archetype.\textsuperscript{57} For all these reasons, Tian still occupies a preeminent position in theoretical models that emphasize the “organistic,” systemic nature of Chinese early thought—traits that scholars still invest with the cultural and ideological burden of epitomizing the very essence of “Chineseness.”\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{55} The origins of the term tian are obscure and it is still very difficult to ascertain to what extent it was an original Zhou creation or was instead already a Shang deity. For a summary of the influential theories about tian’s origins and meanings by Herrlee G. Creel (who considered Tian the collectivity of the rulers of the past living in Heaven), and Shima Kunio (who interpreted tian as the sky, a sky-god, or the altar of that god), see Robert Eno’s “Appendix A,” in \textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 181-86. See also Herrlee G. Creel, \textit{The Origins of Statecraft in China} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 1: 497-504; and Shima Kunio 島耕男, \textit{Inkyo bokujï kenkyû 軍營卜占研究} (Hirosaki: Chûkokugaku Kenkyûkai, 1958), pp. 174-86. Eno (\textit{The Confucian Creation of Heaven}, 186-89), on the basis of his philological analysis, sees tian also as the destination of the ashes of the sacrificial victims. Sarah Allan through a re-examination of the debates presented above, has recently interpreted Tian as both a natural phenomenon and in connection with dynastic ancestors; see Sarah Allan, “Ti'en and Shang Ti in Pre-Han China,” \textit{Acta Asiatica} 98 (2010): 1-18. On the connection between Heaven and sacrifice, see Sarah Allan, “Drought, Human Sacrifice and the Mandate of Heaven in a Lost Text from the \textit{Shangshu},” \textit{Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies} 47, no. 3 (1984): 523-539; Mark E. Lewis, \textit{Sanctioned Violence in Early China} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 205-10.

\textsuperscript{56} See Iggers \textit{A Global History}, 48.


1766-1122 BCE)—which were showing signs of corruption and unworthiness—to the more deserving Zhou (1122-771 BCE). The new dynasty would associate its fortune with Tian while not ceasing to refer to Shangdi, which had been the focus of the Shang’s concern with the extra-human and which James Legge, in his pioneering and still influential nineteenth-century English translation of the Chinese classics, rendered as “God.”

In the “Great Announcement” (“Dagao” 大諭), one of the earliest texts of the *Documents*, the young King Cheng 成 of the Zhou addresses the rulers of the dependent polities and the senior officials at court as he seeks support for a military expedition against a rebellion in the western territories. In the speech Cheng connects the mandate (*ming*) to rule that he is trying to interpret and honor not only to Heaven, but also to dynastic ancestors (*Shangdi*) and to his father Wu 武 (called in this instance Ningwang 寧王, the Tranquillizing King):

Yes, I who am but a little child am in the position of one who has to cross deep water. It must be mine to go and seek how to cross over. I must diffuse the elegant institutions of my predecessor and augment the mandate which he received from Heaven. So shall I not be forgetful of his great work, nor shall I dare to restrain the majesty of Heaven seen in the inflictions it sends down. The Tranquillizing King left me the great precious tortoise to bring into connection with me the intelligence of Heaven. I consulted it and it told me that there would be great trouble in the region of the west…

I, the little one, dare not disregard the mandate of the *shangdi* (上帝命). Heaven, favorable to the Tranquillizing King, gave such prosperity to our small state of Zhou. The Tranquillizing King divined and acted accordingly, and so he calmly received his mandate. . . The king says: “You who are the old ministers are fully able to examine the long-distant affairs. You know how great was the toil of the Tranquillizing King. Now where Heaven shuts up and distresses us in is the place where I must accomplish my work. I dare not but do my utmost. . . Heaven moreover is thus toiling and distressing my people, so that it is as if they were suffering from disease. How dare I allow the mandate which the Tranquillizer my predecessor received, to be without its happy fulfillment?" 

If *shangdi* refers here to royal ancestors of the Shang, it is not surprising that the new rulers of the Zhou, while careful not to present themselves as disrespectful and impious, would rather connect their dynastic claims to the relatively more impersonal Tian than to the forefathers of the Shang. Also, whereas Sima Qian would echo Confucius’ lamentation that Heaven was no longer readable in his times, in the tortoise

59 The *Shangshu* consists in a collection of texts narrating events that go back as early as to the pre-dynastic period. These documents were collected, edited (and in part probably interpolated and forged) between 179 and 156 BCE under Han Wendi. On the history of the compilation and on the dating of the *Shangshu*’s twenty-nine standard sections, see Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2001), 123-41.

60 On James Legge’s legacy, see Anne Birrell, “James Legge and the Chinese Mythological Tradition,” *History of Religions* 38, no. 4 (May, 1999): 331-353.

shells the Zhou had an effective means for reading Tian’s will. But Heaven’s command would not amount to unavoidable fate. A good ruler would prove himself worthy by promptly reacting to the disasters and the challenges sent down by Tian to choose and test deserving sovereigns.

According to another document in the *Shangshu*, the “Great Plan” (“Hongfan” 洪範, probably a work of the fourth century BCE), *shangdi* and Heaven clearly played different roles in legitimating and supporting specific ruling houses. The Zhou seemed interested in emphasizing appointment by virtue rather than mere lineage and bloodline, which they considered a lamentable custom of the Shang. Still, it was a former member of the Shang aristocracy, the viscount of Ji (Jizi 箕子), who transmitted the knowledge of Heaven’s plans to the founder of the Zhou, King Wu. Jizi had faithfully served the Shang for years, but when their last sovereign Zhou (纣) showed signs of immorality and recklessness, he forsook them in disgust. So according to the “Great Plan” he spoke to King Wu:

I have heard that of old time Gun 鬼 [the mythical father of Yu the Great] dammed up the inundating waters and thereby threw into disorder the arrangement of the Five Phases. The *di* (帝) were roused to anger and did not give him the Great Plan with the Nine Divisions (*jiu chou* 九疊) whereby the proper virtues of the various relations were left to go to ruin. Gun was then kept prisoner till his death, and Yu [Gun’s son and founder of the first dynasty of the Xia] rose up to continue his undertaking. To him Heaven gave the Great Plan with its Nine Divisions and thereby the proper virtues of the various relations were brought forth in their order.

This passage associates Heaven with the cosmic order the Zhou vowed to maintain. Jizi mentions water control—which is still debated in similar terms in today’s China—to allude to Yu the Great’s rescue of the Central States from the great flood. The founder of the Xia and of Chinese civilization famously managed to channel the violence of nature by letting the flood freely flow in the canals he had built, rather than “hubristically” constraining it. Therefore, Heaven rewarded him with organized knowledge concerning the working of the cosmos, the correct practice of government and justice, and the moral and physical norms aimed at the pursuit of individual happiness.

The harmony between the cosmic and human orders seemed thus established.

In a another text included in the *Shangshu*, the “Great Oath” (“Taishi” 契誓), which, although based on earlier documents, was probably forged in order to please the

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62 See Chapter 2 above.
63 Nylan, *Five 'Confucian' Classics*, 139-42
64 Legge, 3: 320-323
rulers of the Western Han, King Wu pairs Heaven with Earth and depicts them as the parents of the people. The ruler is of course Heaven’s favorite son, while the villain (the ruler of the Shang) shares some important traits with the vanquished Qin:

Heaven and Earth are the father and the mother of all creatures; and of all creatures man is the most highly endowed. The sincere, intelligent, and perspicacious among men becomes the great sovereign and the great sovereign is the parent of the people. But now Zhou, the king of Shang, does not reverence Heaven above and inflicts calamities on the people below. He has been abandoned to drunkenness and reckless in lust. He has dared to exercise cruel oppression. Along with criminals he has punished all their relatives. He has put men into office on the hereditary principle. . . he neglects the ancestral temples and does not sacrifice in them. The victims and the vessels for the millet all become prey of wicked robbers, and still he says: “The people are mine, the mandate is mine,” never trying to correct his contemptuous attitude. Now Heaven to protect the inferior people made for them rulers and made for them instructors, which might be able to help the Shangdi and secure the tranquility of the four quarters.

The role of the ruler in safeguarding what Heaven generates also features in the Annals of Master Lü (Lüshi Chunqiu 呂氏春秋). This encyclopedic work is attributed to Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (291?-235 BCE), a cunning merchant who eventually managed to become the Great Chancellor (chengxiang 丞相) of the Qin and who, according to the Shiji, might have been the natural father of none other than the founder of the dynasty, Ying Zheng 嬴政 (259-210 BCE), better known as Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝。So reads the Lüshi Chunqiu:

Heaven is what engenders life in things; man is what fulfills that life by nurturing it. The person who is capable of nurturing the life that Heaven created without doing violence to it is called the Son of Heaven. The purpose of the Son of Heaven’s activity is to keep intact the life Heaven originally engendered. This is the origin of the offices of government. The purpose of establishing them was to keep life intact.

In the same work we also find a very clear statement defining the boundaries of Heaven’s power, human agency, and success. In this passage, Yu the Flood Controller represents

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69 Lüshi chunqiu 1, 2.1; see Knoblock, Riegel, The Annals, 64.
the exemplary ruler who receives the leadership from the sage Shun 舜 because of his virtue and accomplishments and despite hereditary lines:

That one’s accomplishments and name are established as greatness is attributable to Heaven. This is why it is wrong not to be mindful of what is attributable to human effort... That Yu encountered Shun was attributable to Heaven. Yu’s making a circuit of the world searching for worthies whose service would benefit the black haired people, and his dredging and diking of rivers, ponds, streams and marshes so that they would be passable—these Yu did completely on his own and are the result of human effort.70

One of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, instead, presents the relationship between Heaven and man in definitely more conflicting terms. Scholars have attributed these texts (dated to the second century BCE and connected to the provincial aristocracy of the Han) to the so-called Huanglao 黃老 tradition, which would constitute an original blend of the “Daoistic” concern with yin, yang, and cosmic rhythms with the “Machiavellian” shrewdness of the political doctrine of the Legalists (fajia 法家). We can see how Heaven in this passage, as in the Shiji, does not show sympathy for men and in their fate:

Heaven and Earth are not partial. The four seasons do not cease. Heaven and Earth are positioned, and so the sage performs his tasks. Should he exceed the limit and fail to make [the correspondence between his actions and Heaven and Earth] Heaven will send down calamity. Should man conquer Heaven by force, take care to avoid and not face him. Should Heaven in turn conquer Man, follow and march with it.72

In the tradition of Confucius’s (551-479 BCE) purported disinterest in extra-human factors, it is Xunzi’s 荀子 (312-230 BCE) view to appear the closest to the ideas expressed in the Shiji. In his essay on Heaven (“Tian lun” 天論), Xunzi clearly separates cosmic rhythms and historical events. For him the scope of human action lies on non-transcendental, ethical bases:

Heaven’s action is constant. It is not preserved because of a [sage ruler such as] Yao 尧, it does not perish because of a [tyrant such as] Jie 桀. If one responds to the constancy of Heaven’s action with good rule, good fortune will ensue. If one responds to the constancy of Heaven with disorder, misfortune will ensue.74

70 Lushi chunqiu 14, 6.1; see Knoblock, Riegel, The Annals, 323.
74 Xunzi, 17, 362: 天行有常，不為堯存，不為桀亡。應之以治則吉，應之以亂則凶。
Thus, the gentleman cherishes what lies within his power and does not long for what lies within Heaven. The petty man forsakes what lies within his power and cherishes what lies within Heaven.\(^\text{75}\)

As I shall show below, Sima Qian will add to this approach a distinctive ironic attitude as though he wanted to underline to what extent traditional knowledge was inadequate to read present events.

**d) Heaven in the *Shiji***

Heaven of course plays an important role in the literary works of Sima Tan and Sima Qian, members of an ancient lineage of court astronomers. Yet, besides the chapter devoted to astronomy ("Tian guan shu" 天官書), in which Heaven is simply the place of constellations and astronomical bodies, references to Tian in the narration of historical events in the *Shiji* do not provide the reader with unequivocal insight into the writers’ intent and critical attitude.

Sima Qian’s intellectual approach surely is not consistent with the belief in the mutual influence of Heaven and men (Tian ren xiang guan 天人相關), which is associated with the *Gongyang* 公羊 commentary to the “Confucian” *Spring and Autumn Annals* and which would inspire Dong Zhongshu’s *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露).\(^\text{77}\) In the *Shiji*, the interrelation of Heaven, institutions, and human beings is not readable through reliance on the correspondence of microcosmic and macrocosmic phenomena, or on the existence of a conscious, Providence-like, transcendent entity.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the wide range of meanings—from fate to chance—recognizable in Sima Qian’s Tian.\(^\text{78}\) In this chapter I argue that while Sima Qian’s treatment of Heaven in the *Shiji* does not show that he believed in an extra-human sanction of the political unification of the Central States, it can offer a valuable perspective on his reasoning about the disjunction between morality and success, and on the inadequacy of the traditional literary heritage for the interpretation of present events. Moreover, it is evident enough that the Grand Historian’s complex and multifaceted way of approaching biographies and agency defies attempts at finding in his work a schematic explanation of historical causality.

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\(^{77}\) On the relationship between Sima Qian and Dong Zhongshu, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

\(^{78}\) Li Wai-yee, “The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi,*” 345-7.
First of all, the Mandate of Heaven (Tian Ming 天命) is mentioned very seldom in the Shiji. When Sima Qian states that a given ruler “receives the mandate” (shou ming 受命), he does not imply any extra-human investiture—the historian simply means that his sovereignty was generally acknowledged and accepted. When Sima Qian tells of omens or portents—whether or not he openly suggests that their occurrence might be just the result of a false or even fraudulent report—he never interprets them as manifestations of a superior design, nor does he directly connect them to Heaven. As for the ritual activities carried out under Han Wudi in the Shiji (as I shall show in detail in chapter 4), the assumption that they were addressed to Heaven as to the source of imperial legitimacy is based on later historiography such as the “Jiaosi zhi” 郊祀志 chapter of the Hanshu, for example. On the relationship between Heaven and the destiny of imperial houses, the Shiji is extremely ambiguous and, in the case of the founder of the Han, Liu Bang, interestingly connected to the controversial (and notoriously vicious) Empress Lü 』. In the collective chapter on imperial consorts, the “Waiqi shijia” 外戚世家, the Grand Historian clearly questions the possibility of understanding or controlling men’s (and rulers’) fates: “A man can make his path (dao 道) glorious but how can he control his fate (ming 命)?” In this chapter Sima Qian also states that, no matter how skilled rulers are, their eventual success is always due also to the support of an exceptional spouse. In the historian’s opinion, conjugal love was definitely the most relevant among the Five Relations (Wu Lun 五論), especially given the necessity of producing and grooming a male heir in a patrilineal aristocratic system:

How important the love of an imperial spouse is! The ruler cannot obtain it from his officials; the father cannot obtain it from his sons; how much more is this so among people of lower condition? But once a joyous union is realized, if one fails to produce a male heir, or if the heir does not fulfill his potential, is that not fate? If Confucius seldom mentioned fate, it is probably because it is difficult to talk about it. If it is not possible to deeply comprehend the transition from light to darkness, how could one possibly understand the destiny of human life?

After this passage, Sima Qian writes about Empress Lü, the main consort of the founder of the Western Han, Gaozu. She had been near Liu Bang/Gaozu during his struggle for control over the Central States, and had seen the extraordinary signs of his imperial future. Lü did give the emperor a male heir, Emperor Hui 惠 (194-188), but he proved too sensitive and delicate for the task and died at the age of twenty-three.
Hui’s empress had no children. Thereupon Lü assumed the role of regent and began issuing ordinances (zhì), which she stamped with her own seal.\(^85\) She unsuccessfully attempted to replace the Liu ruling family by appointing members of her own Lü lineage to important positions. In doing so she was shrewd and manipulative, and resorted to torture and murder. Surprisingly Sima Qian does not devote one of his twelve basic annals to Emperor Hui, but he dedicates the ninth to Lü.\(^86\) Moreover, at the end of the detailed enumeration of her cruelties, the Grand Historian praises her role in maintaining the empire and the peace in the world.\(^87\)

According to the chapters on Gaozu and Lü, the latter was always able to perceive and read the extraordinary signs regarding the unique fate that awaited her husband who, although clearly not a paragon of morality and intellectual sophistication, was destined to re-unite the Central States. In the chapter on Gaozu, there is a passage in which Qin Shihuang is concerned with the appearance in the sky of some signs that seem to announce the rise of a new Son of Heaven (tiānzi qi 天子氣).\(^88\) Liu Bang, instead of fighting for the fulfillment of his destiny, senses danger, flees and tries to disappear. To his surprise Lü can always find him by following the particular cloud formation (yún qi 雲氣) that she can recognize wherever Liu Bang dwells.\(^89\) It seems evident from the text that the future Gaozu was not aware of the clouds’ meaning but extremely pleased with what others saw in them.\(^90\)

In an episode set in the period in which the couple still lived a quiet rural life, we see Lü working in the fields with her two children.\(^91\) A mysterious wanderer passes by, and when she interrupts her activity to give him some water, the stranger reads in her facial features a dramatic change of status and glorious achievements. Then, from an outhouse, Liu Bang in person finally enters the scene and the vagabond foresees in his face an even more extraordinary future. The un-aristocratic context of this story and the oddity of some details might suggest that Sima Qian simply meant to acknowledge—not

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\(^{85}\) Such a seal was fashioned in jade and engraved with terms exclusively associate with the emperor; see Qin Bo 秦波, “Xi-Han huanghou yúxi he Ganlu ernian tongfanlou de faxian” 西汉皇后玉玺和甘露二年铜方炉的发现, Wenwu 5 (1973): 26-9.


\(^{87}\) SJ, 9, 412.

\(^{88}\) SJ, 8, 348.


\(^{90}\) SJ, 8, 348.

\(^{91}\) SJ, 8, 346.
without irony—popular beliefs connected to the legendary aura surrounding Liu Bang and his lineage. As for Lü’s ability to interpret heavenly signs, the Shiji provides the reader with contradictory information. According to what none other than King Wu of the Zhou in the fourth basic annal of the Shiji (“Zhou benji”), “women cannot understand the Mandate of Heaven.” Yet, Sima Qian remarks in the chapter about imperial consorts that the transmitted knowledge about the eras before the Qin is not reliable enough for the compilations of dynastic histories. And how should we interpret the story that it was old Lady Wu, the owner of the brothel where the future Gaozu would habitually get drunk and pass out, who recognized the image of a dragon, symbol of imperial power, floating over his sleeping body?

The first mention of an omen in connection with the establishment of the Han dynasty in the Shiji is in the section about Chen She 陈涉, one of the two heads of the levy whose revolt in the southern state of Chu sparked the revolution that would overthrow the Qin in 206 BCE. Chen She is not an aristocrat and Sima Qian justifies the fact the he devotes a whole “Hereditary House” chapter (shijia 世家) to him in light of the extraordinary events that sprang from his deeds. Sima Qian introduces Chen She to the reader in the act of working in the fields. But unlike the future Gaozu—who needed to be persuaded by his aides about the possible outcome of his actions—Chen She stands out for the blind confidence with which he boasts to his skeptical friends that he would achieve richness and glory and leave them behind.

Famously, in the second month of the second year of Emperor Er Shihuang 二世皇 of Qin (209 BCE), Chen She is appointed with Wu Guang 吴广 to lead a group of nine-hundred men to garrison Yuyang 漁陽 (near present-day Beijing), against possible Xiongnu attacks. As a heavy rain falls, Chen She realizes that they would not reach their destination on time, which was a failure punishable with decapitation. As Both Chen She and Wu Guang became aware that they had very few chances to survive, decided to plot a revolt so that they could at least die for the glory of Chu.

And it is noteworthy that they justified their actions not on the basis of the supposed cruelty of the Qin rule, but because they considered the succession of the Second Emperor illegitimate. Er Shihuang had ascended to the throne instead of his elder brother Fusu 扶蘇, who had courageously attempted to challenge him several times before disappearing, allegedly killed by the usurper. Thus, Chen She convinced Wu Guang that they should stir and lead a rebellion disguised, respectively, as Fusu and the beloved Chu general Xiang Yan 項燕 (grandfather of Xiang Yu 項羽), who had bravely fought the Qin as well, before mysteriously vanishing. Upon embarking in their

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92 SJ 4, 121: 女未知天命，未可也。
94 SJ 8, 343.
95 SJ 48, 1949.
96 SJ 48, 1950: 今亡亦死，舉大計亦死，等死，死國可乎？
97 SJ 48, 1950.
98 SJ 48, 1950: 足下事皆成，有功。然足下卜之鬼乎！
military enterprise, Chen and She decided to consult a diviner. The response sounded positive but ended with an ominous note: “You will accomplish all your plans and achieve success. But then, would you seek responses with the ghosts?”

At the time in which the passage was written everyone knew that Chen and Wu would both perish (and be in the ghosts’ number) before the establishment of the Han. Thus Sima Qian here, in hindsight, is probably satirizing their naïve arrogance and blind optimism. In his description, the two rebels reacted enthusiastically at the divination and felt encouraged to make up their own omens. Chen and Wu swiftly wrote “Chen shall be a king” on a piece of white silk and stuffed it in the belly of a fish to the astonishment and awe of the soldiers who were going to have it during the common meal. Furthermore, Chen sent Wu to hide behind a shrine in a grove by the camp. When night fell, Wu produced light effects by concealing a torch underneath a basket; imitating the cry of a fox (an animal believed to belong to the realm of spirits), he howled: “The great Chu will rise, Chen She will be king!”

At this point, before proceeding with the narration of the rebellion, Sima Qian informs the reader that Wu Guang had such a good relationship with the soldiers that they would have done anything for him. And Liu Bang’s ability to win the cooperation and loyalty of brilliant officials as well as the sympathy of common people constituted, according to the historian, one of the notable reasons for his success despite his various well-documented flaws and limitations. Sima Qian, in his narration of historical events, does not show interest in extraordinary phenomena per se. Whether or not his primary narrative aim is to induce the reader to a skeptical attitude towards miraculous phenomena, the Grand Historian concentrates on the circumstances of human response, on beliefs, and especially on the possibility of exploiting the willingness to believe that a given leader might be benefiting from extra-human help.

In the case of Chen’s biography, Sima Qian presents the successful—albeit clumsy—fabrication of his extraordinary investiture as the crucial element needed by the common people, the soldiers, to finally revolt, fight, and eventually die under the command of the two heads of the levy. But it is nonetheless evident that the historian deems equally important the climatic conditions, the fear for a dreadful punishment, Chen’s almost mindless ambition, the soldiers’ attachment to Wu Guang, and the perceived illegitimacy of Er Shihuang’s succession. Sima Qian’s attention to the subjectivity of opinions is also noteworthy. The chapter about Chen She does not end with the customary remarks by the Grand Historian but with an essay by the famous erudite Jia Yi, who instead of referring to Er Shihuang’s illegitimacy and unworthiness, provides a general assessment of the rule of the Qin and of the moral reasons for their collapse. He defines them as exceptionally ruthless and as an aberration in the millennium political tradition of Central States, which was founded on filial piety. This, even enough Sima Qian had written elsewhere in the Shiji that

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103 SJ 48, 1950.
104 SJ 48, 1950: 大楚興，陳勝王。
105 SJ 48, 1950: 吳廣素愛人，士卒多為用者。
106 SJ 8, 358.
despite the dynastic shift the Han basically followed the protocol and the practices of the Qin even up to his own times.\footnote{SJ 25, 1159-69. See Chapter 1, above.}

Going back to Liu Bang’s chapter: after the future founder of the Han had already shown the signs of predestination addressed above, we find an episode that closely resembles the circumstances of Chen She’s revolt. When Liu Bang was still just a village head, he received the order to conduct a group of convicted laborers from Pei 沔 to Lishan 邴山, where the First Emperor of Qin was building his mausoleum. Along the way, the laborers began to defect one by one and disappeared in such numbers that the future Gaozu feared that he might reach his destination alone. But instead of reacting with violence and authority, Liu Bang stopped his march, got drunk and then decided to return home after releasing all the men under his command.\footnote{SJ 8, 347.}

The action is set to reach the center of the empire and the locations of the fundamental struggle for the unification that would be the main topic of the Shiji. Yet, Sima Qian describes Liu Bang as merely concerned with his petty habits and his obscure hometown. At the time, not only did the future Gaozu not harbor any imperial dreams yet, but even held Qin Shihuang in awe.\footnote{SJ 8, 344: \textmd{嗟乎，大丈夫當如此也！}}

Thus, a group of about ten men decided to accompany Liu Bang on his way home. While crossing the swamps near Feng 蟠, a scout rushed back and suggested that they should all retreat, as a big snake was blocking the path. Liu Bang, still drunk, boasted that brave soldiers fear nothing, advanced, pulled out his sword and beheaded the reptile. Then he continued on his way for a while before falling asleep under the weight of all the alcohol he had consumed. Meanwhile, a man who was lagging behind reached the spot of Liu Bang’s heroics where he found an old woman weeping. According to her story, she was grieving her son, the son of the White Emperor (Baidi 白帝), who, after assuming the semblance of a snake had just been slaughtered by the son of the Red Emperor (Chidi 赤帝).\footnote{On the contrary, Liu’s rival Xiang Yu, when a boy, upon seeing Qin Shihuangdi for the first time, expressed the desire to depose and replace him; see SJ, 7, 296.} The man was incredulous. He wished to enquire further to ascertain her sincerity, but she suddenly disappeared. When Liu Bang finally woke up, he was delighted to hear the man’s extraordinary account. It seems that from that day on Liu had his self-confidence dramatically bolstered while his followers began to look up to him with increasing awe.\footnote{SJ 8, 347.}

Sima Qian relates the miraculous events that should sanction the extra-human investiture of the Han to the accounts of convicted laborers who must have been grateful for being released from a feared corvée that might have meant death (the men who worked at Qin Shihuang’s mausoleum were routinely killed at the end of their duty) and to their magnanimous, sometimes sluggish, and often intoxicated leader. If portents were to manifest Heaven’s will about the fate of dynasties, Sima Qian’s narrative makes their reliability at least problematic. If there is a superior design concerning the fall of the Qin and the rise of the Han, both Chen She and Liu Bang seem instead concentrated

\footnote{SJ 7, 322.}
shortsightedly on immediate and selfish goals. By contrast, the element that becomes more evident is the author’s focus on personalities, behaviors, and interactions.

Thus, if we compare Chen She’s and Liu Bang’s stories, the almost reckless resoluteness of the former contrasts with the obliviousness and indolence of the latter. In many instances, despite his bad judgment or even cowardice, Gaozu (and the future of the Han dynasty) was saved by the prompt advice and intervention of his aides. Not only was Liu Bang ready to destroy buildings and archives of old the capital city at the risk of compromising administrative continuity, but also he would have lightheartedly dumped his son and heir from his carriage in order to accelerate his flight from Xiang Yu’s approaching horsemen.\(^{114}\)

The *Shiji* portrays Liu Bang as scarcely aware of the importance of the historic events of which he was the protagonist. Gaozu would customarily ask his more articulate officials to explain why he managed to defeat the braver and more competent Xiang Yu. Even though Liu Bang did not seem to grasp the value of effective propaganda, he finally left the most sophisticated and shrewd of his followers connect his rule to glorious ages of the past through literary citations. His famous dialogue with the classicist Lu Jia clarifies the ideas of the author of the *Shiji* on the creation of the rhetoric about the triumph of the Han. Lu Jia tries repeatedly to persuade the emperor of the value of the classics, but what he obtain is a scornful reply:

“All I possess I have won on horseback!” Said the emperor. “Why should I bother with the *Odes* and *Documents*?” “Your Majesty might have won it on horseback, but can you rule it on horseback?” Asked Master Lu. “Kings Tang and Wu in ancient times won the possession of the empire through the principle of revolt, but it was by principle of obedience that they assured the continuance of their dynasties. To pay due attention to both civil and military affairs is the way for a dynasty to achieve long life... Qin entrusted its future solely to punishment and laws, without changing with the times and thus eventually brought about the destruction of its ruling family. If after it had united the world under its rule, Qin had practiced benevolence and righteousness and modeled its ways upon the sages of antiquity, how would Your Majesty ever have been able to win possession of the empire?” The emperor grew embarrassed and uneasy and finally said to Master Lu, “Try writing something for me on the reasons why Qin lost the empire and I won it, and on the failures of the states of ancient times.”\(^{115}\)

Eventually, Liu Bang would take credit for acknowledging and exploiting the talent of his officials, as though letting them save him from his own inconsiderate behaviors and shortsighted decisions was part of a conscious plan of his:

When it comes to sitting within the tents of command and devising strategies that will assure us victory a thousand miles away, I am no match for Zhang Liang. In ordering the state and caring for the people, in providing rations for the troops and seeing to it that lines of supplies are not cut off, I cannot compare to Xiao He, In leading an army of a million men, achieve success with every battle, and victory

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with every attack, I cannot come up to Han Xin. These three are all men of extraordinary ability, and it is because I was able to make use of them that I gained possession of the world.\footnote{\textit{SJ} 8, 381.}

Sima Qian suggests that Gaozu would progressively appropriate the idea that his skills and destiny were extraordinary. In bed with a curable illness, Gaozu is so convinced that his successes have nothing to do with human qualities that he even refuses the cures of a doctor: “I began as a commoner and with my three-foot sword conquered the world. Was this not the will of Heaven? My fate lies with Heaven. Even Bian Que, the most famous doctor of antiquity, could do nothing for me!”\footnote{\textit{SJ} 8, 391.} After the account of Gaozu’s rambling, Sima Qian immediately tells of the real concerns of Empress Lü. She is seriously worried that no one would be able to properly replace the Prime Minister Xiao He, the brilliant general who had led Gaozu’s armies to victories and who was approaching death as well.\footnote{\textit{SJ} 8, 391.}

Finally, it is clear that when Sima Qian mentions Heaven and its positive role in determining human affairs, he is actually reporting ideas and beliefs, cultural factors that, in his opinion, played a fundamental role in shaping historical events. When the Grand Historian directly refers to Heaven in his personal remarks, it seems that the ambiguous and even tautological tone of his statements is meant to admonish the reader’s that historical causes are to be sought beyond grandiose proclamations and official truths. After the narration of the struggles between the Qin emperors and the feudal lords, whom he refused to grant enough land, the fourth Chronologic Table (\textit{biao} 表) on the states of Qin and Chu reads thus:

Yet from the lanes of the common people there arose the signs of a man of kingly stature whose alliances and military campaigns surpassed those of the three dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou. Qin’s earlier prohibitions served only the noble and the wealthy and helped them remove the obstacles they had to face. Therefore [Gaozu] manifested his indignation and became the leader of the world. Why do people say that no one can become a king unless he possesses land? Is such a man not what the literary tradition would consider a “True Sage”? Is this not the work of Heaven? Is this not the work of Heaven? A True Sage is not the man who is able to receive the mandate and become emperor?\footnote{\textit{SJ}, 16, 760.}

Is Sima Qian stating that Heaven is the power that allowed a commoner to re-establish the privileges of a group of dispossessed landowners? Is the historian referring here to the momentous convergence around Gaozu of exceptional personalities? Did Liu Bang prevail because those aristocrats, generals, and politicians whom Sima Qian ultimately credits with his success relied on his charisma and popularity, as they thought that the future Gaozu, being a land-less outsider, could not interfere with their specific...
interests? Is Sima Qian suggesting that a legitimate ruler is just the one who, ex post facto, can be acknowledged as having real power? Finally, I believe that Sima Qian’s rhetorical and ironic way of referring to Heaven is even more evident in a statement by Li Yiji, “the Mad Scholar,” an outspoken erudite of humble origins who would end up boiled alive. Here Master Li is advising about possible military strategies against Xiang Yu, and advocating the necessity of controlling the granaries.

I heard a saying that “he who knows the ‘heaven’ of Heaven may make himself a king, but he who has not this knowledge may not. To the king the people are Heaven, whereas to the people food is Heaven.”

According to this passage, Heaven refers to the specific knowledge required to get the best out of specific circumstances or social conditions. It does not present any extra-human connotation. It is an empty word that can be used to glorify one’s contingent aims. It is connected to adaptability and receptiveness rather than constants and absolutes. And in this respect, Gaozu acted, almost unconsciously, as an empty center around which different interests and agencies could converge.

e) Polybius and Fortune between the Hellenic World and Rome

As for the role of Fortune (Τυχή, Tóξη in Greek, Fortuna in Latin) in the Greco-Roman world, it never epitomized the extra-human investiture of ruling lineages nor the organic connection of the human and of the natural realms. Yet, as pointed out by J. J. Pollitt, in the social and political uncertainty that characterized the Hellenistic period, Fortune positively turned into an obsession. Customarily personified as a female deity, Tyche was often chosen as the patron of newly founded colonies, as their future could not be entrusted to a pre-existent cultic tradition. Between the rise of the Macedonian empire and the consolidation of Rome’s power over the Mediterranean, the known world seemed to be undergoing continuous and unforeseeable transformations. Whether life was subject to unpredictable chance, as the Epicureans held, or ruled by unchangeable destiny, as believed by the Stoics, Fortune could be invoked to favor the precarious existence of individuals or communities throughout the Mediterranean and the ancient Middle East.
According to the literary and legendary tradition, it was the sixth king Servius Tullius (578-535 BCE) who introduced to Rome the cult of Fortune by building on the Capitoline the temples of Fortuna Primigenia and of Fortuna Obsequens. Either the son of a slave, or the heir of an enemy chief killed by the Romans, Servius was raised at court among the servants while being surrounded by signs of supernatural predestination. Queen Tanaquil, the wife of Lucius Tarquinius Priscus (616-579), the first Etruscan ruler of Rome, perceived her lineage as extremely vulnerable. She arranged that Servius would marry her daughter as she hoped that he would be the savior of her husband’s dynasty:

Do you see this child whom we are bringing up in so humble a fashion? Be assured he will one day be a lamp to our dubious fortunes, and a protector to the royal house in the day of its distress. Let us therefore rear with all solicitude one who will lend high renown to the state and to our family.

Thus, upon the violent death of Tarquinius Priscus, Tanaquil solicited Servius to take over the throne. In his case, as he showed clear signs of an extra-human investiture, lineage should not count. She admonished Servius that in accomplishing his royal mission, he should consider who he was and not whence he was born. Servius would reign for forty-four years until his violent death in 535 BCE. His murderer was his son-in-law Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, Tarquinius Priscus’s son, and the seventh and last king of Rome. His proverbially violent and corrupt reign led to the revolt of 509 BCE and to the establishment of the Republic.

Servius Tullius’ relationship with Fortune has been connected to the “anomaly” of his kingship, which he achieved despite his non-Roman and probably non-aristocratic origins and thanks to the influence and scheming of a foreign woman. In the words of Plutarch (46-120 CE), Fortune epitomizes the exceptional character of Servius’s reign:

This was a token of his birth from fire and an excellent sign pointing to his unexpected accession to the kingship, which he gained after the death of Tarquinius, with the zealous assistance of Tanaquil. Inasmuch as he of all kings is thought to have been naturally the least suited to monarchy and the least

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127 *Livy I*. 39, 1: While a child named Servius Tullius lay sleeping, his head burst into flames in the sight of many (See also Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 4.14, 3-4) On Augustan reforms and their connection to the Servian tradition, see Beard, *Religions of Rome*, 1: 184.
129 *Livy I*. 39-41 (I, 41,3; “qui sis, non unde natus sis:” Consider what you are, not whence you were born).
desirous of it, he who was minded to resign the kingship, but was prevented from doing so; for it appears that Tanaquil on her death-bed made him swear that he would remain in power and would ever set before him the ancestral Roman form of government. Thus to Fortune wholly belongs the kingship of Servius, which he received contrary to his expectations and retained against his will.\(^\text{131}\)

The role that Fortune plays in Polybius’s histories does not seem to coincide with the fulfillment of the author’s hopes and expectations either. Unlike Christian Providence, it does not constitute the manifestation in history of an unambiguous supernatural plan or the victory of absolutely rightful forces. In the Fortune of the Histories, the historiographical and the moral levels are only connected to the extent to which Tyche’s unexpected turns test men’s wills and skills, just as Rome’s triumphs must have challenged the Hellenic pride of Polybius. As clearly stated in the proem of the Histories, Fortune represents the factor that allows events to converge towards one end. Unlike Sima Qian’s treatment of Heaven, Polybius programmatically sets Tyche at the center of the theoretical model that should inform his Histories:

For what gives my work its peculiar quality, and what is most remarkable in the present age is this. Fortune has guided almost all the affairs of the world in one direction and has forced them to incline towards one and the same end; a historian should likewise bring before his readers under one synoptical view the operations by which she has accomplished her general purpose. Indeed it was chiefly this that invited and encouraged me to undertake my task; and secondarily the fact that none of my contemporaries have undertaken to write a general history, in which case I should have been much less eager to take this in hand.\(^\text{132}\)

It is in the universality of his approach, Polybius claims, that his oeuvre is superior to previous historiographical enterprises.\(^\text{133}\) Other authors such as Ephorus and Herodotus had already included remote lands and civilizations in their narrations, but the unprecedented scope of Rome’s conquests made it possible to entwine the unitary, teleological narrative that would characterize the Histories as a groundbreaking work:

Now up to this time the word's history had been, so to speak, a series of disconnected transactions, as widely separated in their origin and results as in their localities. But from this time forth History becomes a connected whole: the affairs of Italy and Libya are involved with those of Asia and Greece, and the

\(^{133}\) On Polybius’s relationship with past historiography, Walbank Polybius, 32-65.
tendency of all is to unity. This is why I have fixed upon this era as the starting-point of my work.\textsuperscript{134}

It is to this unitary intent, as Momigliano has noted, that Polybius’s persistent popularity up until the modern age is due.\textsuperscript{135} Although Polybius did not share Herodotus’s narrative talent and richness or Thucydides’s analytical rigor, critics could still praise the quasi-Christian universality of the \textit{Histories}.\textsuperscript{136} But unlike Providence, Fortune in Polybius does not embody the moralizing will of a conscious deity. The only instance in which the Greek historian qualifies Fortune’s agency in determining Rome’s success as a non-arbitrary, quasi-ethical act is when he references the work On Tyche (\textit{Peri Tyches}) by the Aristotelian philosopher Demetrius of Phalerum (c. 350-280 BCE).\textsuperscript{137} Just as Demetrius was able to foresee Tyche punishing the hubristic Persians at the hand of the Macedonians, so too Polybius acknowledges the punishment of hubris in the defeat of Perseus at Pydna by the Romans in 168 BCE. The initial fault lay in the scheme devised in 203 BCE by Perseus’s father Philip V of Macedon together with Antiochus III of Syria to attack and divide the kingdom of the infant Ptolemy V of Egypt. It is clear from the passage below that Polybius considered Fortune’s direct moralizing function only occasional and hardly an element of a conscious plan:

If a man were disposed to find fault with Fortune for her administration of human affairs, he might fairly become reconciled to her in this case; for she brought upon those monarchs the punishment they so well deserved, and by the signal example she made of them taught posterity a lesson in righteousness. For while they were engaged in acts of treachery against each other, and in dismembering the child's kingdom in their own interests, she brought the Romans upon them, and the very measures which they had lawlessly designed against another, she justly and properly carried out against them.\textsuperscript{138}

Still, Tyche plays an important—albeit indirect—role in testing human behavior and in exemplifying the didactic purpose of history writing:

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\footnote{The starting point of Polybius’s narration is the 140\textsuperscript{th} Olympiad in 220 BCE. These are in the author’s opinion the fundamental events: “In Greece, what is called the Social war: the first waged by Philip, son of Demetrius and father of Perseus, in league with the Achaeans against the Aetolians, in Asia, the war for the possession of Coele-Syria which Antiochus and Ptolemy Philopator carried on against each other. In Italy, Libya, and their neighborhood, the conflict between Rome and Carthage, generally called the Hannibalian war. My work thus begins where that of Aratus of Sicyon leaves off.” See: \textit{Hist.} I, 3.}
\footnote{A. Momigliano, \textit{The Classical Foundations}, 44-53.}
\footnote{Momigliano refers in particular to Hermann Ulrici, \textit{Charakteristik der antiken Historiographie} (Berlin, G. Reimer, 1833).}
\footnote{\textit{Hist.} XV, 20, 1-4.}
\end{footnotesize}
All historians... have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History, and the surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of Fortune.”  

Despite the theoretical statements that open the *Histories*, scholars deemed Polybius’s connection of Fortune and empirical facts as one of the most problematic and inconstant features of his writing. According to Walbank, both linguistic ambiguity and philosophical naïveté characterize Polybius’s narrative recourse to Fortune. As the British scholar notes, in the *Histories*, the word “tyche” is at times employed loosely as a tense of the verb τυγχάνω, “to happen.” This usage is consistent with the mention of Tyche in casual conversations during Polybius’s times, when it referred to agents considered completely outside human control, or was simply uttered as an interjection—as well as “Heaven,” or “God” in contemporary speeches.

As for Polybius’s philosophical inconsistency, in Walbank’s opinion, the Greek Historian resorted often to Tyche in order to compensate for his unsophisticated application of the principle of causality in the *Histories*. Whenever Polybius could not account adequately for the “interactions of events and the dynamic and dialectical character of almost any train of causation,” Fortune would intervene almost as a *deus ex machina* of the Greek tragic literary tradition. In other instances instead, Tyche coincided with the unpredictability of meteorological and natural forces. As Polybius states in one of the surviving fragments of Book 36 (which deals with the Macedonian Wars, 215-148 BCE):

In finding fault with those who ascribe public events and incidents to Fate and Chance, I now wish to state my opinion on this subject as far as it is admissible to do so in a strictly historical work. Now indeed as regard to things the causes of which it is impossible or difficult for a mere man to understand, we may perhaps be justified in getting out of the difficulty by setting them down to the action of a god or of chance, I mean such things as exceptionally heavy and continuous rain or snow, or on the other hand the destruction of crops by severe drought or frost, or a persistent outbreak of plague or other similar things of which it is not easy to detect the cause. So in regard to such matters we naturally bow to public opinion, as we cannot make out why they happen, and attempting by prayer and sacrifice to appease the heavenly powers, we send to ask the gods what we must do and say, to set things right and cause the evil that afflicts us to cease. But as for matters the

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139 In this passage the word choice tells us that for Polybius, Tyche could represent a hostile force, in this case almost as capricious as the gods of the Homeric tradition; see Hist. I, 1,2. literally “to bear the changes of Fortune with a noble composure,” “τὰς τῆς τύχης μεταβολὰς γενναίως ύπορέειν.”
140 Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 16-17.
141 Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 17.
efficient and final cause of which it is possible to discover we should not, I think, put them down to divine action.\textsuperscript{145}

The last sentences of this passage clarify Polybius’s concern with direct divine intervention, which he strives to exclude from the explanation of causal connections. In the narration of Hannibal’s heroic march through the Alps, for example, he chastises the bad habits of previous authors who enrich the simple history of facts with the insertion of supernatural forces.\textsuperscript{146} Yet, Polybius acknowledges the value of religious beliefs in restraining the behavior of Rome’s masses. In his opinion, the political exploitation of the sacred and of people’s irrational fears makes Rome superior to its contemporary rivals:

But the most important difference for the better which the Roman commonwealth appears to me to display is in their religious beliefs. For I conceive that what in other nations is looked upon as a reproach, I mean a scrupulous fear of the gods, is the very thing which keeps the Roman commonwealth together. To such an extraordinary height is this carried among them, both in private and public business, that nothing could exceed it. Many people might think this unaccountable; but in my opinion their object is to use it as a check upon the common people. If it were possible to form a state wholly of philosophers, such a custom would perhaps be unnecessary. But seeing that every multitude is fickle, and full of lawless desires, unreasoning anger, and violent passion, the only resource is to keep them in check by mysterious terrors and scenic effects of this sort. Wherefore, to my mind, the ancients were not acting without purpose or at random, when they brought in among the vulgar those opinions about the gods, and the belief in the punishments in Hades: much rather do I think that men nowadays are acting rashly and foolishly in rejecting them. This is the reason why, apart from anything else, Greek statesmen, if entrusted with a single talent, though protected by ten checking-clerks, as many seals, and twice as many witnesses, yet cannot be induced to keep faith: whereas among the Romans, in their magistrates and embassies, men have the handling of a great amount of money, and yet from pure respect to their oath keep their faith intact.\textsuperscript{147}

And it is perhaps Polybius’s view of religion as instrumentum regni that, through Livy (59 BCE – 17 CE), would inspire Niccolò Machiavelli’s (1469-1527) influential analysis of the political use of religion throughout western history.\textsuperscript{148}

\textsuperscript{145} Hist. XXXVI, 17: τῶν πολλῶν δόξαις
\textsuperscript{146} Hist. II 20.
\textsuperscript{147} Hist. VI, 56.
\textsuperscript{148} See “Libro Primo” (Book One): XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV in Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio, (Torino: UTET, 1999), 507-17.
f) Conclusion:

To return to Polybius’s treatment of Fortune, it can be said that its apparent contradictory nature overlaps with the author’s complex relationship with the rise of Rome, which he had to accept and explain despite his possibly different emotional attachments. The traditional association of Tyche in the ancient Mediterranean world with new, unexpected, young political realities, provided Polybius with an evocative unifying element that could resemble a conventional god while simultaneously constituting an intermediate stage towards a rational refutation of the role of the divine in history. Fortune, according to Polybius, acted to a certain extent, as a traditional force in that it seemed to punish and reward specific ruling lineages by following a hereditary principle. Conversely, by binding together the fates of different civilizations and political entities, it created a new world, which necessitated a new comparative brand of historical writing. Sima Qian, instead, does not have to account for successful foreign examples. The unity to which he refers only involves the civilization of the Central States. The Grand Historian does acknowledge an at least momentary separation from the ways and the virtues of old. But the discourse on society and institutions he establishes in the Shiji concentrates mainly on the past, and does not address the foreign Other as a cultural rival worthy of consideration.

Heaven, because of his traditional association with dynastic legitimacy, constitutes in the Shiji a fundamental element through which appraise the author’s take on historical change and agency. Ironically, Sima Qian treats Heaven as an obsolete linguistic residue, as he shows the extent to which rhetorical generalizations deriving from the literary tradition of the Central States were inadequate to understand the present times. Paradoxically, although Polybius belonged to a cultural traditions in which gods behaved as unpredictably and capriciously as human beings, the schematic theorization of causality on which he informs his work—as noted by Walbank—seems to conditions his understanding and rendition of complex interactions in restrictive terms. Although both Sima Qian and Polybius, more or less openly, manifested a skeptical attitude against extra-human factors, the Shiji, being free from the programmatic, theoretical formulations and structures, results more effective in depicting the richness and intricacy of human agency.
Chapter 4

Center and Periphery in Han Wudi’s (141-87 BCE) Religious Activity: Emperors, Magicians, and Immortals in Early Imperial China

Alas! I sincerely wish I could be like the Yellow Emperor!
Then, for me, leaving behind my wives and children would be as easy as taking my shoes off!
Han Wudi

The Immortals do not seek for the ruler of men. It is the ruler who must seek for them.
And unless one sets about the task with an open-minded attitude, the immortals do not come.
Gongsun Qing (a magician from Qi)

a) Introduction: The “Book on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices” and the Triumph of the Han Dynasty

The “Book of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices” contains Sima Qian’s conclusive thoughts on his own time.3 Because of the broadness and the complexity of the themes it treats, this monograph represents perhaps the most challenging section of the Shiji. It covers the events from the remote, mythical eve of the Yellow Emperor to the reign of Wudi (141-87 BCE), Sima Qian’s ruler. The declared topic of the “Fengshan shu” is the history of the relationship between monarchical power and those sacrifices that ancient sources regarded as a special channel of communication between rulers and cosmic and extra-human forces. The ostensible aim of its narrative is to chronicle the feng and shan sacrifices carried out on the thirty-first year of Wudi’s reign, in 110 BCE. This event, which took place almost ninety years after Gaozu and his allies had wiped away the Qin, was expected to celebrate the definitive legitimation of the Han dynasty.

And yet the very structure of the “Fengshan shu” seems to contradict this solemn statement. In describing the events from the Yellow Emperor to the Shang, the text exhausts the topic of sacrifices in a few lines as it narrates the various exploits of each ancient ruler. Then, after the account of the invasion by the nomadic Rong of the Zhou capital in 771 BCE, the narration becomes notably more intricate and fragmented. Setting aside the fact that Sima Qian presumably could access a larger and more accurate set of documents about these later ages, his treatment implies that, with the waning of the cultural legacy of the Zhou, the Central States had lost the most authoritative model of ritual behavior. Afterwards, previously unknown religious beliefs and practices proliferated, as individuals and groups of self-proclaimed experts began to exploit—for

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1 SJ 28, 1394: 喪乎！吾誠得如黃帝，吾視去妻子如脫屣耳.
2 SJ 28, 1396.
3 If we consider the famous letter to Ren An 任安 (in HS 62, 2725-38) a work of literary impersonation—as many scholars tend to do—the “Fengshan shu” represents the most telling account of Sima Qian’s opinion on his age.
immediate economic and political gain—their knowledge of, yin and yang, the Five Virtues astrology, alchemy, and spirits and ghosts. According to Sima Qian, the multifarious and chaotic regional religious traditions of the Warring States found in Han Wudi an eager listener and a generous patron. His performance of the feng and shan sacrifices, to our historian, epitomized the hypocrisy and moral confusion of his age. And it is probably for these reasons that Sima Qian described, not without sarcasm, Wudi’s ritual activities as an incoherent patchwork of misunderstood religious practices and beliefs. Although it would be impossible to render the richness and the complexity of a multilayered text such as the “Book of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices,” following some specific themes, such as the different characterizations of the Yellow Emperor as an ideal ruler, myths concerning metal and the casting of ritual vessels, the trope of immortality, the astronomical and military aspects of the cults of Taiyi and Houtu, and Wudi’s interest in spirit mediums, makes it possible to analyze the apparently contradictory ritual activities carried out under Wudi’s rule and see them as attempts at conceptualizing and legitimizing some specific aspects of the politics of the central government in its strife with local powers. Hence, Sima Qian’s statements on sacrifices, on spirits and ghosts, and on their influence upon human affairs will appear in its distinctive traits.

b) Sacrifices, Tradition, and Innovation

Although none of the experts at Han Wudi’s court seemed to possess definitive knowledge of the origins and the ritual requirements for the feng and shan, it was at least well known that only rulers whose legitimacy was unquestionable and complete could embark upon their complex performance.

Among the emperors and kings of old who received the Mandate, why are there some who did not perform the feng and shan? There have been those who did not have what it was required to carry them out and those who received the positive omens but could not reach Mount Tai [For the feng]. Some, although had received the Mandate did not show sufficient merits; some could reach Mount Liangfu [For the shan], but lacked the virtue; others had sufficient virtue but not

4 Only the Shiji chapter on astronomy mentions the Five Phases, wu xing 五行 (twice, in SJ 27, 1293; 1342), whereas the “Fengshan shu” mentions the Five Virtues, wu de 五德 (once, in SJ 28, 1368). Sima Qian’s never describes yin and yang, the Five Phases, and alchemy as the bases of distinct philosophical systems or schools that were active at his time, although it is clear that the number five (wu 五) was associated with sets of things or systems perceived as complete. Note the recurrence of wu in the Huangdi’s founding acts (SJ 1, 1-4). For a discussion on the cultural relevance of these concepts in early China, see Nathan Sivin, “The Myth of the Naturalists,” in Medicine, Religion, and Philosophy in Ancient China, Nathan Sivin (Aldershot [UK]: Variorum, 1995), 1-33. For an overview on recent studies about ideas conventionally (and often wrongly) attributed to Daoist thought, see Nathan Sivin, “Old and New Daoisms,” Religious Studies Review 39, no. 1 (2010): 31-50.


6 SJ 28, 1355.
the time to accomplish them. And for all these reasons, the *feng* and *shan* have been so infrequent!\(^7\)

By this logic, even if Wudi had received the Mandate and the right omens, showed sufficient merit, and possessed the time and the means to accomplish the sacrifices, such an endeavor would be anyway pointless. The original forms and purposes of the *feng* and *shan* could not be revived, while truly worthy rulers did not even need to perform them. In citing a passage that is ascribed to the *Analects*, the Grand Historian promptly reminds the reader that: "If for three years rites (*li* 禮) are not performed, they will fall into disuse. If for three years music is not played, it will become lost."\(^8\) In the passage above, Sima Qian not only expresses a concern with ritual propriety but also his preference for less active monarchs whose legitimacy is acknowledged because of their moral qualities rather than autonomously affirmed as a consequence of their charisma and authority. Autocratic rulers, to the historian’s way of thinking, were acceptable only insofar as they belonged to a remote past. Furthermore Sima Qian had already stated elsewhere that he considered the ages that followed Confucius’s death, and his own age in particular, to have fallen well below the loftiest moral standards set by the early Western Zhou.\(^9\) After the demise of Confucius in 479 BCE, no one could read cosmic changes well enough to propound a model of political leadership attuned to natural rhythms.\(^11\) If men were no longer able to interpret the movements of the cosmos, how could monarchs claim that it was Heaven that had bestowed upon them the mandate to rule?

Not surprisingly, the “Book of the *Feng* and *Shan*” reads as a censure of Wudi’s ritual activities. These activities clearly were not modeled after the ancient rituals described in the revered Classics,\(^12\) but rather conceived and carried out under the influence of experts in formulas (*fangshi*) of dubious reputation (mainly from the coastal states of Qi and Yan).\(^13\) These *fangshi* left their local courts in order to look for more

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\(^7\) *SJ* 28, 1355.

\(^8\) *SJ* 28, 1355; *Analects* 17: 21.

\(^9\) *SJ* 28, 1355: 每世之隆，則封禪登焉，及衰而息.

\(^10\) See Chap. 1 above.

\(^11\) The Grand Historian does mention Dong Zhongshu, the thinker eventually associated with the philosophical view in which the ruler, by working as an *axis mundi* maintained harmony among heaven, earth, and man. Sima Qian presents him, however, just as a classicist whose skills in predicting rainfall could not ensure him a decent political career. See Chapter 2 above.

\(^12\) Sima Qian defines contemporary theories about the *feng* and *shan* as *bu jing* 不經, as they were not mentioned neither in the *Odes* nor in the *Documents*. See chapter 1 above.

\(^13\) A fundamental study on *ru* and *fangshi* during the Han is Gu Jiegang, *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng* 秦漢的方士與儒生 (Shanghai: Qunlian chubanshe, 1955). Marianne Bujard sees the development of state sacrifices under Wudi as the result of a *ru/fangshi* court struggle, see Marianne Bujard, “Le ‘Traité des Sacrifices’ du *Hanshu* et la mise en place de la religion d’État des Han,” *Bulletin de l’École Francaise d’Extrême-Orient* 84, (1997): 111-127. Nagai Mizuhito 永井彌人 instead analyzed them through what he
c) Divinity, Immortality, and the Legitimation of Imperial Power in Early China

The feng and shan were the first large-scale rituals after the foundation of the Han dynasty in 206 BCE, and were directly carried out by the Son of Heaven. Therefore, Asian scholars have highlighted them as a formative stage in the development of fundamental notions of imperial ideology. They have analyzed these rituals in the broader context of other contemporary ritual activities, and have tried to formalize the idea of a cohesive early Chinese religion. In the West, the most compelling study of the feng and shan sacrifices has been conducted by Michael Puett. The American scholar, in keeping with a long tradition of anthropological studies on divine kingship, has forcefully connected Wudi’s peculiar interest in eternal life with an attempt at self-divinization, which he interprets as a way to exorcise the inherently hubristic establishment of an empire by means of extra-human legitimation. Studies on divine kingship in different geographical and historical contexts have produced a vast array of analytical methodologies and paradigms. Briefly outlined, the shared conclusion (or assumption) of most approaches is that the association of rulership with extra-human, transcendent, immutable, or eternal elements legitimized political change and the novelty of specific institutions. When divinity is somehow attached to discrete ruling lineages, it

perceived a struggle between experts from the ancient states of Lu and Qi; see his “Zenkan Butei ki no Taizan Mindō kensetzu ni kansuru ichi kosetsu” 前漢武帝期の泰山明堂建設計に関する一考察, Tōyō no shisō to shūkyō 20 (2003): 98-110.


presumably makes their claims to power hereditary, despite historical contingency, human fallibility and mortality. But even these very broad generalizations fall short once they are applied to the Qin and Han empires.\(^\text{16}\)

In addressing some of the tendencies mentioned above, this chapter, tries to overcome methodological issues that have conditioned the study of Wudi’s official cults in particular, and of early Chinese religion in general. These issues include: 1) The assumption that “divinity” represents a self-explanatory universal category rather than a specific cultural product rooted in ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern history; 2) the persistence of ethnocentric biases and post-colonial cultural complexes that lead to the programmatic search for rational structures in early Chinese rituals;\(^\text{17}\) 3) the tendency to adopt a philosophical point of view when analyzing official cults in order to seek systemic coherence, as though the cults’ main aim were theoretical rather than political.

If we compare the gradual establishment of the divine cult of the emperor in Rome with Han Wudi’s ritual activities, it is clear that they differed the most in the way specific groups utilized the institutionalization of religion to legitimize specific claims to power. Octavian (63 BCE – 14 CE), in founding the Principate, progressively accumulated official priesthoods that were traditionally controlled by members of the Senate. Also, he allowed the proliferation of the religious cult of the emperor outside the capital and in the provinces.\(^\text{18}\) Sima Qian argues that Wudi, instead, was under the influence of different individuals and factions of both courtiers and outsiders, who, in the absence of a religious tradition that was broadly revered as ancient and uninterrupted, tried to shape practices and ideas concerning unitary rulership or convince the Son of Heaven that he could become an immortal.

In Rome, the public cult of the gods had traditionally been connected with the mos maiorum, the unwritten values and practices of the ancients, on which society was purportedly founded.\(^\text{19}\) With the adoption of Christianity as the official doctrine of the Roman Empire, monotheistic religion would become instrumental in the legitimation of hereditary monarchies throughout Europe. In China, by contrast, starting with the mid-first century BCE, educated courtiers and officials thought that direct contact with the extra-human realm of spirits and ghosts could undermine claims to moral and political authority.\(^\text{20}\) For these reasons, before the more systematic resort to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven towards the end of the first century BCE, Wudi’s rule (141-87 BCE)


\(^{17}\) I use “programmatic” to refer to those scholarly approaches whose declared or implicit aim is the search for a distinctive and coherent structure in Chinese rituals. In the search for a rationalization of the sacred, Max Weber’s influence is still noticeable.


\(^{19}\) Giuseppe Zecchini, *Cesare e il mos maiorum* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001).

\(^{20}\) See chapter 1, above.
represents a unique attempt to conceptualize a more active imperial rule, one that implied the direct involvement of the sovereign with extra-human forces and esoteric practices.\(^{21}\)

First of all, the very concept of “divinity,” from the ancient civilizations of the Near East, through the Greco-Roman world, to its formalizations in the Abrahamic religions does not correspond to any term or idea in the early Chinese sources. Shen 神, which is conventionally translated as “gods,” or “spirits” when used as a noun, and as “divine,” “sacred,” “holy,” or “spiritual,” when used as an adjective, has clearly different meanings in different Chinese sources and periods.\(^{22}\) Puett argued that shen in the Bronze Age referred almost exclusively to divine beings; only with Warring States did it begin to be associated with “substances within humans” through whose cultivation one could become a “god.”\(^{23}\) Yet, it is almost impossible to apply this concept of divinity to Wudi’s age, as if it simply represented a discrete hypostasis of a universal, metaphistorical, archetype. Divinity was never formalized in early China as a coherent category that represented the focus of debates about the legitimacy of hereditary rule, nor was it regarded as the transcendent origin of the moral values on which society was founded. Despite several attempts at ritual or theoretical organization, the world of the shen, because of its sheer variety, could hardly epitomize or legitimize unity.

During Western Han, and more specifically in the Shiji, the range of meanings of shen could simultaneously apply various notions of extra-human phenomena and faculties, without being ever defined with philosophical exactness. As both the Chunqiu fanlu and the Zhong Yong note, shen defy human senses, and so then can be hardly spoken about.\(^{24}\) It is important to remember that an official, unambiguous, and legally binding definition of divinity, such as the one formalized and enforced by the Catholic Church over the Mediterranean since Constantine, was unknown in early imperial China. And whether the spirits pertained to an ontologically separate realm, or whether instead the “human” and the “divine” represented just two different stages of the same existential continuum, shen in Sima Qian did not necessarily entail moral superiority, because Sima Qian conceived morality as a specifically human question.\(^{25}\) Shen were for Sima Qian

\(^{21}\) This kind of rule was expressed in works such as the Lushi Chunqiu, and, as we will see below, in the Huainanzi.

\(^{22}\) In the Chunqiu fanlu (in Chapter 19 “Li yuan shen 立元神, 156-62) offers a definition shen that is associated to the superior powers, prerogatives, and responsibilities of a ruler as a True Sage (sheng 聖) who maintains the harmony between Nature (tiandi 天地) and Man. See also Sarah Queen, From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the ‘Spring and Autumn,’ according to Tung Chung-shu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89. Queen therein comments on the meaning of shen as an innate human component in the famous account on the “Daoist” practices and beliefs attributed to Sima Tan (in SJ 130, 3289). On gui 和 shen in Han thought, also see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, Readings in Han Chinese Thought (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), 116-139.

\(^{23}\) Puett, To Become a God, 21, 31-79, 80-121.

\(^{24}\) Zhong Yong, 16: 1-2; Chunqiu fanlu 19, 6.

\(^{25}\) David Hall and Roger Ames argued that since shen 神 probably derives from shen 伸, “to extend,” which in most of the cases indicates the awesome or fearsome extraordinary faculties and capabilities of things or living beings, it could not imply transcendence; see David Hall and Roger Ames, Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture (Albany: State of New York Press, 1998), 236-7. M. Puett held instead that attempts at redefining the boundaries between the human and the divine (whether the two realms where continuous or not) presented important cultural and political implications; see M. Puett, To Become a God, 21. On shen and its possible interpretations, see also Willard J. Peterson, “Making Connections: ‘Commentary on the Attached Verbalization’ of the Book of Changes,”
the epistemological boundaries of human experience. For a chronicler of human events, they represented a problem rather than a solution. Besides, Sima Qian does not show interest in the shen per se. He seems rather concerned with the ways the belief that they actually existed and intervened in human events affected human decisions and behavior. When he does connect shen to a specific episode, it is usually to raise suspicions about the reliability of the account in which they appear.

As seen in the earlier chapter about Heaven, Tian does not coincide in the Shiji with a supreme shen comparable with anthropomorphic monotheistic deities. After creating the universe ex nihilo, these continue to observe the behavior of humankind, and to judge whether it abides by divine laws, whose revelations are often written down in a scripture.26 In the world conceived by Sima Qian, not even nature represents a conscious organism whose will or cycles can be understood with certainty and translated into a moral code. Therefore to set aside an essentialist definition of divinity in early imperial China, we must look at the functions Sima Qian attributes to shen in different contexts, and ascertain to what extent, and with what purpose, he was reacting to past or current cultural traditions.

As seen below, the various shen entities that crowd the world of the “Fengshan shu” hardly embody a well-defined set of moral values that are connected to the basis of social life. Nor did they form a polytheistic system of the Greek or Roman kind. If “[p]olytheism means that many gods are worshipped not only at the same place, but by the same community and by the same individual,” and “only the totality of the gods constitute the divine world,” certainly early Chinese shen do not belong to a unitary and organic “religious” whole that mirrors society’s structures and hierarchies.27

In the Greco-Roman world, the association of political leaders with one or more specific gods or goddesses amounted to the appropriation of particular virtues and prerogatives. By claiming divine ancestry, eminent families could also boast a genealogical connection with the more or less remote foundation of the community. When Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE), the man who brought Rome from the Republic to the Principate, dedicated a temple to Venus Genitrix in 46 BCE, in characterizing the goddess as the divine ancestor of his clan and mother of the Homeric hero Aeneas, he was also celebrating the connection of his lineage with the Hellenic origins of the city.28 In fleeing from a burning Troy, the proverbially compassionate and filial Aeneas had already shown Roman qualities by carrying his old (and completely human) father

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26 As synthesized by Csikszentmihalyi, Mozi 墨子 (479-438 BCE) and his followers were considered “staunch advocates of the retributive power of demons and spirits that delivered an automatic reward for acts that had positive social utility and punishment for those that did not;” see Csikszentmihalyi, Readings in Han Chinese Thought, 118-9; and Chapter 31 of the Mozi, “Explaining Demons” (Minggui 明鬼), in Mozi xiangu, 8. 153. However, Mozi’s view were often challenged and never became mainstream.

27 Burkert, Greek Religion, 216. Burkert’s view is in turn based on Brelich’s classic formulation about the connection between complex, socially stratified civilizations and polytheistic systems: see Angelo Brelich, Introduzione alla storia delle religioni (Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1966), 28-35.

28 Stefan Weinstock, Divus Julius (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 80-7. Venus and Caesar appeared also on the opposite sides of Roman coins; The Greek connection might have been exploited by Caesar also in order to present his Greek education and over-refined and eccentric lifestyle under a more positive light.
Anchises to safety.  After landing on the Italian shores of Latium, Aeneas spawned the lineage that, through further divine intervention, would eventually produce Romulus, the founder of Rome. By evoking any of the twelve Olympian gods, political innovators and pretenders alike could legitimize the new by identifying it with values that were perceived not only as ancient but also eternal and immutable. In sum, it is obvious enough that in Wudi’s time to evoke shen and ghost did not correspond to the acknowledgment of a shared cultural and moral background, as Sima Qian repeatedly conveys, the unity of the Central States could not be built on any widely accepted idea or practice regarding the elusive, chaotic, and disquieting world of spirits and ghosts.

As for official cults, Caesar and Augustus’s association with extra-human elements appealed more to the popular masses than to the members of the Senate. Senators feared it as the tyrannical attempt of an individual determined to trump their collegial power in order to re-institute a hereditary monarchy. Yet, once the empire was firmly established, the public divine cult of emperors, which involved temples and statues of the sovereigns, contributed to the widespread acceptance of Rome’s power throughout the Mediterranean. In early China, too, dynastic clans traced their origins back to legendary characters. Yet the sources do not describe the pre-dynastic mythical sovereigns, or the founders of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, as immortal gods but as primeval culture heroes or champions of subsequent evolutionary stages. Whether or not these legendary figures possessed extra-human features and powers, they all eventually died and turned into dynastic ancestors. Unlike the Olympian gods, Chinese culture heroes were not believed to exert a constant and direct influence on human affairs, nor were they worshipped in similar ways by different dynasties throughout the Central States. Yet during the Western Han debates on their alleged deeds on these culture heroes or dynastic ancestors could serve immediate political and propagandistic goals.

Sima Qian does celebrate the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) as the founder of Chinese civilization and the originator of the political tradition that would culminate with

29  Beard, Religions of Rome, 2-3.
30  On the various legends concerning either Romulus’s apotheosis or murder by the senators (give in Livy, I.16=2.8a), see Beard, Religions of Rome, 4-6. Not surprisingly the cult of a divinized Romulus appears in the Roman sources starting with the first century BCE. See Duncan Fishwick The Imperial Cult in the Latin West (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 53. On the ambiguous state (between gods and ancestors) of heroes, see Angelo Brelich, Heros: Il culto greco degli eroi e il problema degli esseri semi-divini (Roma: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1966).
31  See Chapter 1.
32  Dynamic ancestors were worshipped in China as immortal deities in popular cults, but as “gods” they did figure in discourses about imperial legitimation. See Sarah Allan, The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981).
33  See Ramsay MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). The “melting pot” of Roman popular religion actually resembles the situation of popular cults in early China. The difference was in the way political power relied on religion for legitimation.
34  The cult of Hou Ji, founder of the Zhou and also the “god” of the Soil and patron the grains, according to the Shiji, was always associated to the lineage he had originated. In other words, he never became a Han god; see SJ 28, 1357.
the Han emperors. But different characterizations coexist in the text: Whereas in the opening chapter of the Shiji casts Huangdi as a typical culture hero, who after extraordinary deeds eventually dies and becomes the object of an ancestral cult, the fangshi depicted in the “Fengshan shu” chapter revere him as their patron. For them he had been the first to achieve immortality after mastering alchemic techniques.

For Sima Qian, the kind of immortality sought by Wudi did not correspond to the superior ontological and moral prerogatives associated in the West with divine status. The Grand Historian chastises his ruler’s obsession with immortality deeming it a way to escape the duties ideally performed by a sovereign on behalf of his people, duties that the Classics defined in terms of filial piety. Admittedly Sima Qian’s attitude towards immortality may have not be in keeping with the prevailing beliefs of his own time. In any case the very structure of the chapter devoted to Wudi’s rituals suggests that the Sima Qian’s main goal was polemical, for Grand Historian does not organize the “Fengshan shu” as a systematic description of Wudi’s sacrifices. Instead, the narrative is shaped by the ruler’s encounters with the fangshi and their individual contributions to state sacrifices.

The treatment of the pursuit of immortality in early, pre-Buddhist China often expressed a critique of the basic values of society and civilization, especially those formalized in the Five Classics. Immortality was not thought to safeguard society’s foundational values against contingency by making them transcendent and eternal. Chinese immortals were not even born immortal. They achieved their status through individualistic self-absorption, esoteric bodily practices, and particular forms of abstinence. They did not join the gods after performing exceptional deeds for their community, unlike the case of the founder and first king of Rome, Romulus, whose alleged apotheosis became the object of debates concerning the divine prerogatives of kings.

Sima Qian criticized Wudi’s ritual activities, and most especially his quest for immortality as acts of individualistic indulgence, asocial tendencies, or gullibility. The sacrifices carried out under Wudi appeared to our historian as an incoherent patchwork,

35 Sima Qian shows Wudi as inclined to associate himself with particular individuals or groups for immediate strategic reasons rather than carrying out coherent and far-reaching plans. For example, in SJ 121, 3115, a young Wudi tries to limit the influence of his grandmother Dowager Empress Dou 貞, who was known for her Huang-Lao sympathies, by promoting a group of influential classicists. On this topic, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, “Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China,” T’oung Pao 89 (2003): 73-4. Likewise, Sima Qian presents the economic policies described in the “Book on the Balanced Standard” as influenced by the officials Wudi would appoint and frequently, for various reasons, dismiss.


for they derived from different local cultural contexts, were probably meant for different 
publics and aimed at diverse goals. Especially in their esoteric, secret stages, their 
function was less social than connected to specific personal concerns of the emperor as an 
individual. Given the obstacles the Han government faced in the first century of its 
existence in enforcing measures aimed at economic and administrative centralization, 
cultural unity hardly represented a priority. This circumstance and the absence of 
institutions that could impose ritual uniformity represent some of the factors that make 
the search for systemic coherence highly anachronistic.

By following, sponsoring, and carrying out various ritual activities whose origins 
and ends were heterogeneous, the Son of Heaven was not trying to enforce one state 
religion, but addressing different needs under varying circumstances. In specific cases, 
Wudi arguably resorted to particular cults in order to find a solution for his private 
concerns. The new cults that Wudi had inherited from the Qin (such as the one of the 
Five Sovereigns and the Jewel of Chen) or established anew (such as Taiyi o Houlu), 
whatever they meant, were discontinued a few decades after his death in the wake of the 
establishment of the state worship of Heaven and Earth. And it has been often in light 
of this later ritual development that they have been often interpreted.

We should assess Wudi’s religious activities, notably the feng and shan, Taiyi and 
Houtu, by using both internal evidence and contemporary sources, transmitted and 
excavated. Western Han sources outside the Shiji are especially important here as they 
refer to traditions Sima Qian ignored or preferred to ignore. In studying specific rituals 
and ceremonies from Wudi’s era, I will attempt to establish the degree to which they can 
be understood in light of other contemporaneous political events, reforms, and debates.

Sima Qian, as I mentioned in chapter 1, considered ritual activities under two 
logically separate categories. The first one included those ceremonies, rules of conduct, 
and behaviors associated with the elites of the Zhou and their textual tradition, defined by 
filial piety (xiao 孝), that do not involve spirits other than ancestors, and whose 
performance reinforces social connections and hierarchies. The second one included 
those practices and beliefs described in the “Fengshan shu” whose origins, being not 
rooted in the textual tradition, did not provide unambiguous moral lessons. Sima Qian 
reminds us that the true forms and meanings of the rituals of the first kind based on li 
were long forgotten; moreover they only fit the superior cultural and moral standards of 
the Western Zhou. In other words, the Grand Historian propounded a brand of 
historiography that concentrated on human factors and on those recent or 
contemporaneous events that could be the object of direct inquiry. In his view, the 
Classics were still fundamental not as a source of absolute and timeless values, but

39 See chapter 1. On the transmission and compilation of the three rites canons (Yili, Zouli, Liji) and their popularity during Han, see Nylan, The Five Confucian Classics, 168-201.
40 Itano Chôhachi already argued that Han Wudi’s religious activities represented an attempt to promote 
his autocratic conception rulership over the models propounded in the Classics: see, Itano Chôhachi 板野長八, Chûgoku kodai ni okeru ningenkan no tenkai 中国古代における人間観の展開 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, Shôwa, 1972).
41 Sima Qian in the “Fengshan shu” explicitly mentions the Odes and the Documents. On the question of 
the establishment of a literary canonical corpus during the Han, see Nylan, The Five ‘Confucian’ Classics,
because facilitated an emotional connection with great personalities of the past. In the *Shiji*, it seems that Chinese history since the death of Confucius is a history of the irreconcilable separation between morality and political necessity.

By means of his narration of sacrifices in the “Fengshan shu,” Sima Qian denounced the degradation of his times and the unworthiness of recent rulers (especially Gaozu and Wudi). The Grand Historian, consistently following the teachings of Confucius, attempted to establish a kind of historical analysis based on verifiable phenomena and ignored extra-human factors. In the narration of the sacrifices from the Yellow Emperor to the Han dynasty, Sima Qian concentrated on ascertaining if the ancient rituals were performed according to Classics, and hence relied on human virtues (*de*), or rulers were instead more interested in exploring the world of the spirits. Generally throughout his accounts, the historian tells of sovereigns who met with misfortune for focusing too much on extra-human phenomena, or for ignoring them altogether.

It is with the loss of the political hegemony of the Western Zhou, after the nomadic Rong 戎 had invaded their capital in 771 BCE, that the “Fengshan shu” begins to mention those specific rituals and beliefs that would gain relevance during Qin and Han. Regardless of Sima Qian’s access to earlier sources, he seems to connect such proliferation of extravagant cults with the loss of the ritual propriety embodied by the Zhou. Not surprisingly, the first ruler who, according to the *Shiji*, showed interest in performing the *feng* and *shan* is Duke Huan 桓 of Qi (d. 643 BCE), the most famous hegemon (ba 霸) of the Spring and Autumn period (722-453 BCE). The kind of power Duke Huan exerted, which was based on military strength and economic wealth, required a new kind of ritual legitimation that did not merely symbolize perfect filial piety as in the case of Yao and Shun. Therefore Duke Huan sought advice about the performance of *feng* and *shan*, but Master Guan Zhong 管仲, the minister who had helped him re-organize his domain and defeat rivals, managed to dissuade him.

The *Shiji* “Book on Ritual” (“Li shu”) had already identified Guan Zhong with a method of political control based more on expediency than on *li* and constant moral values. According to Sima Qian, Guan Zhong’s approach befitted the Han age, for the historian considered it impossible to rule by virtue in those troubled and inglorious times. Guan finally convinced Duke Huan to desist from the performance of the *feng* and *shan*, by mentioning the remoteness of the twelve sovereigns who had succeeded in the

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43 For example Kongjia 孔甲 of the Xia dynasty, who lacked virtue, was so concentrated on the spirits that managed to offend them. Two dragons eventually came and took him away. See SJ 28, 1356.
44 The ancient ruler Wu Yi 武乙 defied the spirits and was killed by lightning. See SJ 28, 1356.
45 SJ 28, 1356: 妖不勝德. Tai Wu of the Shang, excelling in virtue, managed to kill two giant mulberry trees that had grown prodigiously in his courtyard.
46 SJ 28, 1361.
47 SJ 28, 1361.
48 See Chapter 1 above.
performance of the sacrifices (Huangdi being the first of them), then the difficulty of obtaining the required omens and offerings. This probably meant that the control that Duke Huan exerted over the empire and in all its realms was not extensive, nor solid enough. As Guan Zhong noted, not only had auspicious portents not appeared, but the prodigious plants and beasts required for the sacrifices came from distant lands not reached by Huan’s authority.

When the Qin came to power in 221 BCE, according to Sima Qian’s work, the question of the celebration of the feng and shan was raised once again. This dynasty conquered the world not by means of virtue, but through the establishment of fa, defined as punishments and institutions. Sima Qian notes that the Qin territorial basis was not included within the region defined by the Five Peaks, which represented the locations of the most important religious ceremonies within the Central States. In their ritual activities, the Qin tried to follow various pre-existing traditions, especially those from the state of Qi. The Qin justified its success by associating their rise to an ascending cosmic phase. However, Sima Qian remarks that Qin, in adopting these cultural traditions associated with Qi, were always under the sway of unreliable and dishonest fangshi. Thus to Qin Shihuangdi, the performance of the feng and shan represented mainly a stage of his quest for immortality. Nonetheless, when it was reported that a thunderstorm prevented the first emperor from reaching the summit of Mount Tai, Sima Qian noted that this might have been just a rumor spread by the disgruntled Gentlemen of Broad Learning (boshi) who had not been allowed to accompany Qin Shihuangdi for the final phases of the ceremonies. Nevertheless, for the Grand Historian, after all, to celebrate feng and shan was simply pointless.

From a Western Han cultural standpoint, it is not necessarily surprising that Sima Qian would not acknowledge any responsible motivation behind the sacrifices carried out under Han Wudi. To an astute observer such as Sima Qian, it must have been evident that the lavish ceremonies and expansionistic military campaigns carried out under Wudi, which were obviously not in keeping with the frugal politics of the sovereigns of old, were leading the country toward a dramatic fiscal crisis.

It is unlikely, however, that a highly educated sovereign such as Wudi was so oblivious to the potential propagandistic import of state rituals as to accept passively the input of magicians and charlatans. He reigned for more than half a century and survived conspiracies and revolts; his generals expanded the Han empire in all directions; his officials devised and enforced aggressive plans of bureaucratic and economic centralization. Although the Son of Heaven often acted under the sway of the families of his empresses (the Wang 王 and the Dou 劍, for example) and of cunning officials, in

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49 These were the millet from Huoshang, grain from Beili, a special kind of reed growing between the Huai and the Yangtze rivers, a couple fish from the Eastern Sea that shared one eye, birds from the Western Sea whose wings grew together, the spontaneous appearance of fifteen strange animals, the phoenix, the lin unicorn, and the “auspicious grain.” See SJ 28, 1361.
50 SJ 28, 1371.
52 The economic challenges faced by Han Wudi’s administration are chronicled in the Shiji chapter called the “Balanced Standard.”
many instances he got rid of them after changing his mind. Therefore his agency cannot be completely excluded.

Notably, Sima Qian describes Wudi in his first years of reign as constantly oscillating between his interest in spirits and ghosts and his willingness to counter his grandmother’s influence by promoting to relevant political positions eminent classicists such as Zhao Wan, Wang Zan, and Gongsun Hong. But even after the powerful Empress Dowager Dou, a supporter of Huang-Lao, died in 135 BCE, Wudi’s ambivalent attitude did not seem to change.

d) The Yellow Emperor as a Model of Unified Rulership

The “Fengshan shu” does not explicitly criticize Wudi’s religious activities. Whereas Sima Qian’s skepticism about the various fansghi emerges clearly in his meticulous record of all their frauds and failures, the historian never directly recommends particular ritual corrections or behaviors, nor does he provide a coherent view of the extra-human realm. Other chapters of the Shiji, however, especially the first of the Basic Annals, describe the acts of praiseworthy pre-dynastic and dynastic rulers vis-à-vis spirits and ghosts. Therefore, by looking at the ways the author evaluates different reigns, it is possible to appraise his opinion on the relationship between unified rule and the establishment of official cults and identify which examples he considered more or less ideal. It is noteworthy, for example, that in Sima Qian’s account, the Yellow Emperor does not achieve immortality as the various fangshi at Wudi’s court claim, but dies as an ordinary human being.

The history of Chinese civilization in the first of the Basic Annals opens with the narration of Huangdi’s endeavors, which the historiographical models of Sima Qian had ignored or briefly sketched: The Yellow Emperor does not feature at all in the Book of Documents, whereas the Book of Changes (Zhou Yi 周易), the Book of Rites (Liji 禮記), and the Zuozhuan commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (Zuozhuan Chunqiu 左傳春秋) mention him only in passing. The Grand Historian, in his final remarks at the end of the first of the Basic Annals, states that he decided to recount the deeds of the sovereigns preceding Yao and Shun because he wanted to correct the inaccuracies that the Hundred Experts (baijia 百家) were spreading about those early ages in general and Huangdi in particular.

The very choice to place the Yellow Emperor at the beginning of his masterwork can be understood in political terms, as an expression of Sima Qian’s views on the Han.

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53 In SJ 28, 1396. When Wudi wonders how it was possible that Huangdi became an immortal if his burial place was well known, some one replied that the mound only contained Huangdi’s hat and cloths, which he had dropped upon ascending to Heaven.

54 See, Charles LeBlanc, “A Re-interpretation of the Myth of Huang-ti,” Journal of Chinese Religions 13-14, (1985-86): 45-63. As pointed out by LeBlanc in his systematic survey on all the literary references to Huangdi, the date of compilation of majority of the texts mentioning him (e.g. Guanzi, Zhuangzi, Han Feizi, Shan Hai jing, and so on) is very problematic (for a complete of Huangdi’s reference in these texts, see pp. 50-1). The Shiji represents one of the few sources whose mythological narrations can connected more directly to specific historical events and social conditions.

55 SJ 1, 46.
As pointed out above, Sima Qian did not consider his age comparable to that of Yao Shun, the ideal rulers praised so often by Confucius, his followers, and the Classics.\(^{56}\) Yao and Shun had reigned many centuries after Huangdi, and Sima Qian, by pushing the origins (which were not *ex nihilo*, as we shall see) of statecraft to an earlier age, was probably suggesting indirectly that Huangdi’s rule represented a less perfect model than the one embodied by Yao and Shun. Furthermore, there is evidence that the historian considered the age of the Yellow Emperor to be very similar, in several respects, to the conditions of the Central States during Western Han.\(^{57}\)

The first of the Basic Annals chapters characterizes Yao and Shun’s reigns as informed by their superior moral and ethical qualities, which they were able to transmit to the people, paradigmatically, by means of their perfect filial piety.\(^{58}\) As for Huangdi, Sima Qian portrays him as rather concerned with basic tasks of the pacification of the world, the harmonization of cosmic and human rhythms, and the establishment of cultural, economic, and administrative standards. In that age, the country appeared chaotic and diverse, as it was recovering from a tyrannical rule, as Sima Qian writes.\(^{59}\)

Thus in 104 BCE, imperial propaganda was presenting Wudi’s age as a New Beginning, the start of a new cosmic cycle that, according to the “Fengshan shu,” matched the conditions of the archaic age of the Yellow Emperor, the legendary figure that the current Son of Heaven was striving to emulate. The different myths about Huangdi in the *Shiji* constitute different discourses about the newly established imperial rule, its extra-human connotations, and its relationship with past or legendary models.\(^{60}\) These myths clearly address political issues, and by appraising them against specific historical circumstances, it is possible to assess their cultural import.

It seems that the popularity of Huangdi had dramatically increased in the last century before the Qin unification, as he began to feature in different mythological traditions throughout the territories of the Central States. The Yellow Emperor embodied in different contexts, “the God of the Center,” “Genealogical Ancestrality,” “Paradigmatic Emperor,” or the patron of medicine and exoteric practices as in the *Huangdi sijing* and *Zhuangzi*.\(^{61}\) Especially in the wake of the discovery of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts in the early 1970s, some scholars have interpreted the cult of the Yellow Emperor (with Laozi) as the focal point of a well-defined Huang-Lao religion or philosophy. Such a tradition would propound a kind of universal rulership modeled on natural rhythms that combined the physiologic and cosmological speculations of an “early Daoism” with some of the political concerns that characterized Legalist thinkers. More recent scholarship of early China has dismissed the theory that

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\(^{56}\) See chapter 1, above.

\(^{57}\) This is evident especially if we consider that Huangdi is portrayed in the act of establishing unified rule and common standards over diverse territories that had just experienced tyranny. See below.

\(^{58}\) SJ 28, 1355-6; SJ 1, 14-24.

\(^{59}\) SJ 1, 1-4.

\(^{60}\) SJ 28, 1359, 1361, 1364, 1366, 1385-6, 1392-4, 1396-7, 1400-3.

Huang-Lao constituted an organic doctrine. The years between the end of the Warring States period and Wudi’s reign represented a cultural mixing in which exponents of specific traditions were connecting and reformulation old and new legends in order to conceptualize and advocate for possible forms of rulership, as political authority over the Central States was undergoing continuous changes.

In such a context various myths depicting the Yellow Emperor as the ideal monarch were formalized, and, as the “Fengshan shu” attests, exploited for personal or political advantage. According to Charles LeBlanc’s reconstruction, in sources referring to mythical ancestors the character huang 黃, “yellow,” replaced the homophonous huang 皇, “sovereign, august.” This happened exactly at the time when speculations about the Five Virtues or Five Phases (later associated with five colors) attributed to Zou Yan 鄒衍 (305-240 BCE) were spreading from his hometown in the ancient state of Qi. The earliest archeological source that mentions the Yellow Emperor is an inscription on a fourth-century sacrificial bronze vase, which King Wei of Qi (r. 357-320 BCE) had dedicated to his forefather Duke Wen (r. 815-804 BCE). Here Huangdi was defined as the highest, mythical ancestor (gaozu 高祖) of the house of Tian 田, the royal lineage of Qi. The Tian had just recently gained power in Qi, and this might explain why they chose a new dynastic ancestor. When in 286 BCE Yan attacked Qi, the various experts who had received patronage at the capital, were forced to scatter throughout China seeking new supporters. This might have contributed to the spreading popularity of the Yellow Emperor.

Despite the difficulty of reconstructing cultural lineages in the fluid situation of the third and second centuries BCE in China, texts written or compiled in that age contain stories of Huangdi as an ideal ruler that can be compared with aspects of the ritual activities carried out by Wudi, even where Sima Qian does not attach a particular meaning.

In the Huainanzi 淮南子, which was produced at the court of the prince Liu An 劉安 (180-122 BCE), a cousin and rival of Wudi, Huangdi is associated with the (usually female) Deity of Earth, Houtu 后土 in the task of measuring and dividing the universe. In his regulating function, Huangdi was also linked to the axial Mount Kunlun 嶤崑 (in

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63 See, Robert Yates, Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huang-Lao and Yin-Yang in Han China (New York: Ballantine 1997), 19. In SJ 74, 2344, Zou Yan is depicted as a very skilled expert of yin and yang, natural sciences and geography, who, by studying minor phenomena, aimed at larger truths. He recounted a history of the Central States that started with Huangdi. His speeches were lofty but were never written down. According to Sima Qian, Zou Yan speculations about natural were rooted on moral qualities and human relations. See also Sivin, Medicine, Religion, and Philosophy, 7-13.

64 Yates, Five Lost Classics, 19.


Astronomic texts mentioned him in association with the planet Saturn (Zhen Xing or Huangshigong), which was in turn connected with the Northern Dipper (Beidou), the color yellow, earth, and the yin factor. In the texts unearthed from Tomb 3 in Mawangdui, instead, the Yellow Emperor is depicted as the monarch who moves incessantly in order to listen to his people and who builds one great granary. Whereas all these elements also recur in different moments of Wudi’s ritual activities in the “Fengshanshu,” they are interestingly absent from Sima Qian’s “historicized” biography of Huangdi at the beginning of his masterwork.

The first chapter of the Shiji introduces Huangdi as any other historical character, by mentioning the name of his father, Shao Dian, and his surname Gongsun, (which was rather common during the Han). He was the first notable ruler of Chinese civilization. He pacified and organized its peoples but was not its creator. The Shiji, however, remarks that Huangdi’s extra-human qualities (shen ling) were immediately evident when he was born. Huangdi spoke very precociously and, by the time he became an adult, already displayed indisputable signs of superiority. In that age, the sovereignty of the beast-like Shennong, the mythical farmer and Flame Ruler, was in decline, the local lords (zhuhou) were striving to encroach upon each others’ domains, and common people were brutally oppressed. At the same time, the world was fearful of the increasing violence of Chi You, the legendary creator of metal weapons.

Unable to cope with all these sources of danger, the local lords sought Huangdi’s help. He promptly restored virtuous rule and organized the armies, mastered the Five Qi (qi), planted the Five Seeds, comforted the common people, inspected all the territories, tamed various wild animals, and with them fought and defeated Shennong/Yandi. After Huangdi also vanquished the unruly Chi You, the local lords,

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67 SJ 27, 1290. See also Isaia Iannacone, Misurare il cielo: l’antica astronomia cinese (Napoli: Istituto Orientale, 1986), 144-47.
69 See LeBlanc, “A Re-interpretation,” 50-51; Zhuangzi, 6:2, 41 and in the Huangdi Sijing, 2, 82b, 93a; 121a.
70 SJ 1, 1.
71 The conflation of Shennong with Yandi—originally two distinct legendary rulers—seems a Han dynasty common misunderstanding. Chapter 1 of the Shiji uses both names to refer to the same being. See Birrell, Chinese Mythology, 131-2. On Shennong as Huangdi’s rival in the Huainanzi, see Major, Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapter Three, Four and Five of Huainanzi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 8-14.
72 This chapter describes Shennong’s reign only in negative terms, as it presents it already in a descending phase. We can assume that Sima Qian could have listed several other cycles of power that went from glory to decline, but that he chose to begin his narration with Huangdi, since his era could be compared to the Han period, as the beginning of a similar historical trajectory.
73 See also Birrell, Chinese Mythology, 50-1
74 This may be an early reference to those speculations that would be eventually formalized in the Five Phases (Wuxing). See Sivin, Medicine, Philosophy, and Religion, 2-7. Very interestingly, Shun (in SJ 28, 1356) mastered the Five Li (wu li).
75 The Five Seeds were exactly what immortals abstained from. See Yu, “Life and Immortality,” 51.
76 SJ 1, 3.
whom he had drafted for his final battles honored him as the Son of Heaven, replacing Shennong.  

Whether the faculties and skills that allowed the Yellow Emperor to carry out these exceptional deeds were merely human or not, the Shiji clearly defines his investiture as political.  It was not Heaven (which did not have any role in these founding events), but the grateful local lords who acknowledged Huangdi as their legitimate monarch.  Furthermore, the replacement of a tyrannical rule did not suffice to justify power over the Central States.  Once he had overcome his main enemies, Huangdi engaged in a series of magnanimous and groundbreaking acts.  He rushed wherever his pacifying work was needed and left only when order was restored.  Many passages in this chapter emphasize Huangdi’s restlessness and continuous traveling.  He opened new paths, visited remote places, climbed impervious mountains, chased away hordes of nomadic barbarians.  After verifying the legitimacy of the various pre-existing enfeoffments, he finally founded a capital at the foot of Mount Zoulu 涼山，but continued roaming the land and accomplishing exceptional deeds.  Whereas Huangdi’s restlessness reminds of Wudi’s continuous campaigns all over the country in order to fight the Xiongnu, carryout inspection travels (xunshou), fight private minting, pursue tax evasion, and engage in various ritual activities, it sharply contrasts with the more sedentary rulership embodied by the emperors of the late Western and Eastern Han, especially from Chengdi (51-7 BCE) on.

The sources’ aim is to underline Huangdi’s efforts in enforcing political and cultural standards that allowed him to rule over very heterogeneous territories.  Very interestingly, the Yellow Emperor of the first of the Basic Annals, did not perform the feng and shan.  It seems that the various lords, after he had pacified the world, carried out these ceremonies locally, together with other sacrifices involving spirits and ghosts.  As if to say that “religious uniformity” in the extra-human realm constituted the least achievable of the goals.

As a “cosmic sovereign” the Yellow Emperor engaged in correlating cosmic and human rhythms, in regulating the interaction of different realms—in anthropological terms, he was the hero who enabled Chinese civilization to undergo the fundamental passage from “nature” to “nurture.”  Also, Huangdi obtained the Precious Tripod (bao ding 寶鼎), which was associated with the communication between dynastic rulers and ancestral spirits, and by using achillea stalks promulgated a calendar.  Huangdi explained to the people the interaction of Heaven and Earth, the changes between light and darkness, the hardship of life and death.  Huangdi promoted the cultivation of all plants, the development of all animals.  He regulated the movements of the astral bodies

77 SJ 1, 5. On whether Sima Qian believed in the Mandate of Heaven, see chapter 3 above.
78 SJ 1, 5: 而諸侯咸重黃帝為天子，代神農氏，是為黃帝。
79 SJ 1, 8: 萬國和，而鬼神山川封禪興為多焉。
80 Chang Art, Myth, and Ritual, 95-106.
and made all natural and mineral elements productive.\textsuperscript{82} He obtained the auspicious omen of Earth and for this reason was called the Yellow Emperor.

After discussing his wife and numerous descendants, the \textit{Shiji} mentions Huangdi’s death and the place of his burial, Mount Qiao 桥.\textsuperscript{83} It is also for this reason that LeBlanc considers Sima Qian’s Huangdi the product of a process of historicization, and almost devoid of a symbolic, mythological function.\textsuperscript{84} Yet, whatever meaning we associate with the word myth, Sima Qian wrote about a paradigmatic Yellow Emperor, who could be opposed to the stories created by the \textit{fangshi}. The “Fengshan shu” presents a very fluid cultural reality in which competing individuals or traditions claimed shared symbols and narratives connected to idealized figures of the past in order to set forth different interpretations of universal rulership.

e) Han Wudi, the Yellow Emperor, Alchemy, Metal, and the Precious Tripod

Several elements of the biography of the Yellow Emperor in the first of the Basic Annals, such as his continuous traveling, his climbing axial mountains, and his reforming the calendar, are mirrored by the actions of the Son of Heaven in the “Fengshan shu.” Wudi and Huangdi’s connection with the Precious Tripod represents the most powerful metaphor of the prerogatives of universal sovereignty expressed in this section of the \textit{Shiji}. According to a myth reported in several textual variants, Yu the Great, the founder of the Xia dynasty, had received nine tripods from the leaders of the peoples he had rescued from the flood.\textsuperscript{85} These vessels, which symbolized dynastic legitimacy, were handed down generation after generation, ruler after ruler, all the way to the Zhou, until one of them supposedly disappeared in the Si 洙 River (in present-day Shandong) when the Qin destroyed the ancestral altars of the house of Shang during their ruthless advance.\textsuperscript{86}

In Wudi’s times there were expectations that the lost tripod would resurface. This would have meant a restoration of legitimacy—namely that the Han belonged to the same line of sovereigns started by Yu. During the Shang, bronze tripods had played an important role in aristocratic rituals concerning communication with ancestors and spirits. During the Han they were also associated with the crucible of the alchemist, wherein the “raw” would become “cooked” and the mixing of yin and yang could produce extraordinary transformations.\textsuperscript{87}

The first \textit{fangshi} to entice a young Han Wudi with fantastic tales in which the Yellow Emperor achieved immortality (by alchemical means) appeared at court around 132 BCE. According to Sima Qian, it was a certain Li Shaojun 李少君, who had no family

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\textsuperscript{82} SJ 1, 6.
\textsuperscript{83} SJ 1, 10.
\textsuperscript{84} LeBlanc, “A Re-examination,” 56.
\textsuperscript{85} On the same topic, see Puett, \textit{To Become a God}, 63.
\textsuperscript{86} It is not clear what was known of the actual Yu tripods at the time of Sima Qian. According to what he writes, some believed that the Qin had obtained all of them from the Zhou; see SJ 28, 1365: 其後百二十歲而秦滅周，周之九鼎入于秦，或曰宋太丘社亡，而鼎没于泗水彭城下。
and whose birthplace and real age were unknown. After being noticed in the capital for his extraordinary skills and knowledge, Li gained Wudi’s attention by presenting himself as an expert in alimentary practices that augmented longevity. In particular, the fangshi claimed exclusive knowledge of ritual techniques that involved the crucible of the alchimist, zao 罈, which, in a far-fetched fashion, he finally connected to Huangdi:

Sacrifice to Zao, then the creatures come. Once the creatures have arrived the powder of cinnabar can be transformed into yellow metal. With the yellow metal it is possible to make those tools to drink and eat which prolong life; once one has his life prolonged he can meet the immortals who dwell in the Penglai 蓬莱 islands in the middle of the sea. Having met them, it becomes possible to accomplish feng and shan and therefore not to die. The Yellow Emperor realized this.

Li Shaojun, in order to strengthen his thesis, added that he had once personally encountered the immortal master An Qi 安期 in Penglai, where he had also witnessed his prodigious deeds. Evidently impressed with these stories, Wudi dispatched some fangshi to look for An Qi in Penglai while trying to use the crucible in the way he had been instructed. Sima Qian promptly informs the reader that after some time, Li Shaojun fell ill and died. The Son of Heaven, according to Sima Qian, preferred to believe that Li had simply disappeared after becoming an immortal, so he continued to seek people who could connect him with the Penglai immortals. The “Fengshan shu” reports that no one returned from these maritime expeditions, while fangshi from Qi and Yan who filled the court with stories about extraordinary beings (shen) became even more numerous.

In the summer of 113 BCE, a shamaness from Fenin 汾陰 accidentally unearthed a voluminous ding while performing sacrifices for Houtu in the region of Wei 魏. Whether it was Huangdi’s Precious Tripod mentioned in the first of the Basic Annals, or the one from Yu’s original set of nine that had disappeared in connection with the Qin conquest, the uncertainty of the attribution spurred an interesting discussion at court. The people in charge of rituals (probably classicists, ru, as Sima Qian describes them citing the Odes) promptly connected the event to the contemporary sighting of

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88 SJ 28, 1385-6.
89 In a banquet held by the Marquis of Wu’an 武安, Tian Fen 田盼, Li impressed everyone by showing precise knowledge of past circumstances regarding guests. He was also able to guess that a particular ritual bronze vessel had belonged to Duke Huan of Qi. Sima Qian perhaps expected his readers to suspect independently that Li could have obtained those pieces of information by means of a previous inquiry. See SJ 28, 1385.
90 Zao in this case can refer either to the crucible itself or to the Stove God, whose cult is still popular today throughout China; see Robert L. Chard, “Rituals and Scriptures of the Stove Cult,” in Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies, ed., David Johnson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 3-54
91 Wu 物, in the text, is usually translated as “things” or “creatures.” According to a passage in Wang Chong (Lunheng, 26.2), wu can refer to anything capable of transformation without external intervention. On this topic, see below in this chapter.
92 SJ 28, 1385-6.
93 SJ 28, 1392.
yellow vapors and to the recent capture of a deer, which in turn might have reminded everyone of the *lin* unicorn that had announced the age-changing death of Confucius.

According to the courtiers, the times were ripe to carry out grand state rituals. But the harvest had been poor that year, and Wudi—at least for once—did not seem inclined to interpret the find as an auspicious omen. Thus, the courtiers trotted out a myth in which the Yellow Emperor and the tripods became a metaphor of the purported function of monarchs in mediating between men and cosmic forces. Their story had all the elements needed to satisfy Wudi’s notoriously eccentric preoccupations, but they were set in a completely different context. In the courtiers’ interpretation, the precious vessel did not entail extraordinary powers and immortality, but moral restraint and long life. Interestingly enough, the account of Huangdi in this story does not correspond to the one told in the first of the Basic Annals. Evidently there was no consensus yet on how to interpret the ancient past:

They say that under Taidi 泰帝 [Fuxi 伏羲] there flourished (xing 興) just one extraordinary (shen 神) tripod, “one” meaning “the whole”: the union of Heaven, Earth and all creatures was perfect. Huangdi made (zuo 作) three tripods, representing Heaven, Earth, and Man. Yu received (shou 收) the metal from the Nine Shepherds and cast the Nine Tripods. All used them to prepare the victims offered to the lords of high (shangdi 上帝), spirits and ghosts. The tripods appeared in concomitance with a Sage Ruler (sheng 聖) and were handed down to the Xia and then to the Shang. But, as the virtue of the Zhou became perverted and the Altar of the Soil of Song was lost, the tripods fell in the water and disappeared. The temple hymn in the *Books of Odes* reads: From hall to gatehouse, from ram to bull he moves with great cauldrons and small, neither contentious nor proud beautiful. Shall be the blessing of long life for him! 

This passage says, in essence, that in the remote age of Taidi/Fuxi, the “culture bearer” who predated the beginning of history in the *Shiji* and was associated with the union between man and woman, fishing, trapping, and the Eight Trigrams, harmony reigned throughout the entire cosmos, for the realms of existence were not separated. Hence humans did not need to create the tripods, which took shape as spontaneous, unprovoked phenomena. The Yellow Emperor instead had to create his “religious” tools in order to transcend the separation from the world of the spirits. The passage seems to describe a transition from a natural to a cultural phase, from primeval unity to separation. Because of the intervention of a new factor, (perhaps human agency itself), the unity and the harmony of the universe are no longer unquestioned; they must be guaranteed and in a sense re-established, through a ritual, demiurgic process carried out through the tripods.

Rightly, after this fall from primeval grace, the Yellow Emperor cast three tripods standing for Heaven, Earth, and Man, to connect these three different components of reality. His sovereignty was justified by his ability to create, mediate, and differentiate. His rule definitely represented an active kind of kingship. On the other hand, Yu the

94 On Fuxi, see Birrell, *Chinese Mythology*, 44-7.
95 On the debate on the possible meanings of *shangdi*, see Chapter 3 above.
96 SJ 28, 1392.
Great merely received (shou) the metal for his tripods from the Nine Regions of the empire. He had been the hero who saved humankind from the flood, but this act, by itself, did not suffice to grant him the right to govern. His supreme and charismatic power and authority derived, like Huangdi’s, from his function of connecting the three realms, but it nevertheless depended upon the acquiescence and cooperation of the leaders of the polities under his aegis—in other words, upon political sagacity.

In their mythological synthesis, the ritual experts at court were describing the Yellow Emperor as a worthy embodiment of a “religious” conception of rulership (i.e., one characterized by its active mediating function among different existential realms) that was nonetheless inferior to the one embodied by the founder of the Xia. In presenting Yu as the champion of the last stage, they were implicitly propounding a form of imperial rule that was culturally and politically less active. And since Wudi was the intended recipient of their lesson, these ritual experts, whatever political interests they were voicing, were probably also commenting on the thorny relationship between central authority and regional centers of production and power.

In those years, as the “Book on the Balanced Standard” (Ping zhun shu) attests, the imperial government was engaged in various attempts at intervening locally throughout the country in order to collect funding for the works of canalization, for lavish ceremonies, and especially for the numerous military campaigns against the unruly Xiongnu, which also involved the expensive reconstruction of roads, bridges, and buildings (especially those which were to host public rituals). Metal, which in the passage cited above is connected to the production of ritual objects, constituted the focus of growing tension between center and periphery. The imperial administration was struggling to establish a uniform system of currency. Nonetheless, taxation remained extremely problematic while the economic and social situation seemed even more urgent. Wudi had been fighting a violent and extensive war against illegal mints, producers of counterfeit coins, embezzlers, and tax evasion. The result of these policies was that, 

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97 Sima Qian, in SJ 30, 1438, reports that it was in 114 BCE (a year before the tripod surfaced) that the Son of Heaven had begun to carry out inspection travels throughout the commanderies (jun 郡) and kingdoms (guo 郭) of the empire.
98 See “Ping zhun shu” SJ 30, 1438. In 115 BCE the Yellow River had flooded the northeastern territories, famine had ensued and “the distress was so great that people were reduced at times to cannibalism.” See SJ 30, 1437.
99 See SJ 30, 1433-4: “(In 114 BCE) an order was issued forbidding any further minting of coins in the provinces and kingdoms. All minting was to be done by three offices set by the Shanglin 上林 Park (in the capital Chang’an). Since there were already a number of coins in circulation, it was ordered that no cash other than those minted by the three offices should be accepted as a legal tender anywhere in the empire. All copper coins previously minted in the provinces and kingdoms were withdrawn from circulation and melted down, the copper being turned over to the three offices. After this there were fewer and fewer people who attempted to mint their own cash, since the cost of making a passable imitation did not repay the effort.” For the translation see, B. Watson, Records, 2: 77.
Practically every family of middling means or over found itself under accusation… The wealth confiscated from the people as a result of investigations was calculated in the billions of cash, with male and female slaves numbering in the thousands… All the merchants of middling or better means were ruined and the people, deciding that they had better indulge in tasty food and fine clothing while they still had the opportunity, made no effort to lay away any wealth for the future. The government officials for their part found themselves with more and more funds at their disposal, due to the salt and iron monopolies and the confiscations of wealth.  

Of course, it is not possible to directly translate the passage about the tripods and the three ancient sovereigns into economic terms. Yet, discourses on political authority, metal, religion, and warfare were typically connected in the Chinese textual tradition. And in such an economic climate the passage would have resonated deeply with Sima Qian’s contemporaries. The fact that it depicted the local lords providing Yu the great, willingly and peacefully, with the metal for his ritual paraphernalia, and that it represented Huangdi (to whom Wudi wished to be likened) independently creating his tripods, might have represented a powerful metaphor—especially as Sima Qian used the same character (zhu 鍾) for both tripod-casting in the case of Yu and coin-minting in the “Book of the Balanced Standard.”

These themes appeared together in an earlier version of the story of the Nine Tripods recounted in the Zuozhuan commentary of the Chunqiu—a rendition that Wang Chong’s would attack from a “rationalistic” point of view in his Lun Heng. The Zuozhuan’s account, with which the ritual experts at Wudi’s court were likely familiar, can be perused to assess the nature of debates concerning the religious prerogatives of rulers, and the relationship between center and periphery in the period of strife preceding the unification of the Central States. The critique in the Lun Heng can instead provide an interesting appraisal of how the question of shen could be treated at the beginning of the Eastern Han.

In the Spring and Autumn entry for 605 BCE (Duke Xuan 宣, Third Year, Spring), the Zhou, whose authority was more symbolic than actual at the time, sent an envoy to the South. They feared that the Chu, because of their recent victory against a barbaric tribe, might feel confident enough to challenge Zhou’s waning power. The ruler of Chu expressed his ambition by doubting the actual size of the Zhou tripods, as though the vessels, by becoming smaller, were announcing the imminent shift of the Mandate. This is the elaborate rebuttal of the Zhou envoy:

[Authority] depends on virtue (de 德) not in [the size of] the tripods. In the past, just when Xia possessed virtue, pictures of wondrous things (wu) were sent from afar, and the leaders of the Nine Provinces submitted metal, so that tripod cauldrons were cast with representations of wondrous things. The hundred

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101 SJ 30, 1434.
102 Chang Art, Myth, and Ritual, 95-106.
103 On the problematic dating of the Zuozhuan, which is probably later than conventionally held, see Nylan, The Five ‘Confucian’ Classics, 253-89.
things were therewith completely set forth, and the people thus knew the spirits and the evil things. That was why when the people entered marshes, mountains, and forests they could not meet what would harm them, nor would they encounter evil spirits. Thus they could harmonize with those above and below them and receive Heaven’s favor. The last Xia king, Jie 禹, possessed dimmed virtue, and the tripod were moved to the house of Shang, to remain there for six hundred years. The last Shang king, Zhou 王, was tyrannical and the tripods were moved to the house of Zhou. When virtue is bright and resplendent, the tripods, though small, grow weighty. When virtue is distorted, the tripods, though big, are light… Although the Zhou virtue is in decline, the Mandate of Heaven has not changed. The question whether the tripods are weighty or not may not be asked yet.  

In this passage it is clear that, according to commentators of the late Warring States period, direct contact with the spirits characterized an earlier, remote, form of rulership. At such a stage, representations of animals, which can be associated with shamanistic and totemic forms of religion, still played a fundamental role in connecting men with the realm of the invisible. In subsequent and purportedly more sophisticated ages, tripods no longer served an active religious function. These metal objects merely symbolized—did not make—the moral superiority of a given dynasty, regardless of its actual strength. Whereas the story told at Wudi’s court promoted a notion of rulership that in acknowledging the investiture of local powers was less autocratic, the one outlined by the Zhou envoy seemed to state that authority must lie in moral excellence, even though the means to actually enforce it might be momentarily lacking. In sum, the Nine Tripods in the Zuozhuan and in the Shiji constituted a pretext to discuss the nature of imperial authority, which could be interpreted either as active and autocratic or as more receptive and collegial.

Wang Chong’s attack, instead, seems to concentrate on the connection between supernatural qualities and charisma, between the implied sagehood of a monarch and the realm of shen. From his critique, it is clear that at his time many thought that some particular paraphernalia, such as the tripods, might carry an intrinsic power (as well as the Son of Heaven as a True Sage), by virtue of their association with the sage kings of the hallowed past:
The tribute metal from distant places was deemed to be very beautiful, and therefore it was cast into tripods, on which all sort of curious objects were depicted. How could this have the effect that people in forests or by lakes did not meet with specters, and could ward off the evil influence of spirits? [The tripods] cannot ward off evil influences. There is a popular tradition that the tripods of Zhou boiled of themselves without fire, and that things could be taken out of them, which had not been put in. This is a popular exaggeration. The exaggerated statements preserved in the books of the classicists (ru), turned the ordinary emptiness of the Nine Tripods into something extra-human (shen)... If as a tribute from distant lands they were shen, why should things from distant places be more shen? Were they so because Yu cast them? Yu was a True Sage (sheng) but could not do anything extra-human (shen). A True Sage, physically, cannot do anything extra-human (shen). How could the vessels he cast be extra-human?

Wang Chong’s tirade shows that popular culture during the Han was appropriating myths from the classical traditions, while many believed that sovereignty not only entailed moral superiority but also extra-human powers. Wang Chong’s attack seems directed against both trivial superstitious attitudes and more sophisticated theories, such as those associated with Dong Zhongshu. According to Sima Qian, however, Wudi’s exploitation of the aura of the tripods did not represent a way to conceptualize and legitimate a particular conception of rulership, but betrayed a specific interest in the intrinsic potential of the vessels, as if they might grant him an extra-ordinary journey towards immortality. Still, the Grand Historian does not engage in a philosophical confutation of the extra-ordinary powers associated with the tripods as Wang Chong would do. By presenting empirical evidence—even if in his typically indirect way—Sima refutes all the fabulous claims about the resurfaced tripod.

In the “Fengshan shu,” before his account of the discovery of the tripod, Sima Qian has already told of a certain Xinyuan Ping, a fangshi who had tried in 163 BCE to convince emperor Wen (180-157 BCE), Wudi’s grandfather, of the urgency to celebrate the beginning of a new age by changing ritual protocols. According to Xinyuan Ping, the cosmic shift would be sanctioned by the resurfacing of the lost tripod of the Zhou in Fenyn. This was that very same Fenyn from which fifty years later the shamaness would hail who casually “discovered” the vessel eventually offered to Wudi.

Sima Qian reports that Wendi received memorials denouncing Xinyuan’s talk of qi vapors and shen as a fraud. These accusations persuaded Wendi to have the fangshi swiftly executed. Wendi then abandoned any plans concerning new beginnings, renewal of protocols, and shen. But if Xinyuan Ping was a notorious charlatan and trickster, the tripod that eventually resurfaced in Fenyn might well have been the same he had buried half a century earlier in order to manufacture a felicitous omen.

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106 This statement about the intrinsically extraordinary faculties of the of ding tripods id found in the “Gengzhu 耕柱” chapter of the *Mozi*. See Sun Yinrang 孫詒讓, *Mozi xian gu* 墨子閒詰 (Beijing: Zhinghua shuju, 1986), 388.

107 *Lun Heng*, 26, 376-77.

108 SJ 28, 1383.

109 SJ 28, 1384.
Significantly, the “Fengshan shu,” after a lofty citation from the *Odes*, immediately relates the failures of everyone Wudi had sent in search of the Penglai islands. Again, it is clear that for Sima Qian the realm of spirits did not matter in itself but only insofar as individuals or groups were trying to exploit it for political advantage.

_Fangshi_ continued to flock to the capital. In 113 BCE, in the fall, a certain Gongsun Qin 公孫卿 from Qi (who shared Huangdi’s family name), appeared at court and began to spread stories about alchemy and the Yellow Emperor’s tripod that seemed perfectly tailored to catch Wudi’s attention. First of all all the _fangshi_ noted that in that very year in which the vessel had been found, the first day of the lunar month (xinsi 辛巳) corresponded with the winter solstice. This was the same cosmic conjunction that had occurred at the time of Huangdi. Hence, the _fangshi_ claimed, a new cycle was starting. Gongsun moreover claimed to possess a document on wood that stated that those circumstances also coincided with the Yellow Emperor’s obtaining the tripod and the divine calculations (shence 神策). Since a courtier openly doubted the _fangshi_’s honesty, Gongsun Qin exploited another of Wudi’s weaknesses and had one of his female favorites present him with a letter whose pleasing content compelled the Son of Heaven to summon the _fangshi_ and question him personally:

> I received this letter from master Shen 申 but he is dead… Master Shen was a man of Qi. He met with master Anqi 安期, who had received the oral teachings of the Yellow Emperor. He did not have any written text but only a tripod with this inscription: “The rise of the Han corresponds with Huangdi’s times. The True Sage of the Han will be either a son or a grandson or a great-grandson of Gaozu. A tripod will surface and it will be possible to meet with the _shen_, and to perform the _feng_ and _shan_. Of all the seventy-two rulers who attempted the _feng_ and _shan_, only the Yellow Emperor was able to climb Mount Tai and perform the _feng_. The ruler of the Han who will perform this will become an immortal and ascend to Heaven!”

Gonsun Qing went on to tell of how the Yellow Emperor traveled around the country, making sure to conquer all the lands where the Five Peaks were situated and where _shen_ were worshipped. The _fangshi_ defined warfare and the pursuit of immortality as the two most important activities of Huangdi. He said that the Yellow Emperor promptly beheaded all those who denied the existence of spirits and ghosts. Then he described Huangdi’s ascension to heaven in these terms:

> The Yellow Emperor collected copper from Mount Shou 首 and had it melted and cast into a cauldron at the foot of Mount Jing 营. When the cauldron was completed, a dragon with whiskers hanging from its chin came down from the sky

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110 _SJ_ 28, 1393.
111 _SJ_ 28, 1393.
112 A circumstance that recalls Huangdi receiving the tripod and the achillea stalks in the first chapter of the Basic Annals.
113 _SJ_ 28, 1393.
114 _SJ_ 28, 1393.
to fetch him. The Yellow Emperor mounted the dragon back, followed by his ministers and palace ladies, making a company of over seventy persons… The lesser ministers, unable to mount the dragon clung to its whiskers until the whiskers came out and fell to the ground, along with the bow of the Yellow Emperor. The common people gazed up into the sky until the Yellow Emperor had reached heaven and then they clasped the whiskers and the bow and began to wail.

Sima Qian had already stated that these stories did not derive from the Classics. Thus they were untrustworthy. Clearly the “Fengshan shu” documents, not without irony, struggles among courtiers and outsiders to win Wudi’s favor. As the historic time of the feng and shan approaches in 110 BCE, the Son of Heaven seems definitely confused. As the Grand Historian remarks, the various recommendations made by fangshi and classicists about the feng and shan sacrifices contradicted one another, and their instructions sounded absurd and impossible to follow.

f) Public and Private: Wudi, Shenjun and the Female Spirit Medium

The celebration of feng and shan sacrifices, which was expected to sanction the apogee of power for the Han dynasty, finally occurred in 110 BCE. Nevertheless, the feng and shan did not constitute the only religious undertakings in which Wudi was involved in those years. Either under the influence of the usual fangshi, or due to his notorious infatuation with spirits and ghosts, the Son of Heaven had also sponsored rituals such as Taiyi and Houtu, the cult of the Jewel of Chen (Chenbao 陳寶), while continuing to consult with a famous spirit medium.

To Sima Qian, such a flurry of eclectic religious activity clearly meant that his sovereign was far from embodying one of those True Sages praised in the Classics; Wudi was not the champion of a new Golden Age. His activities concerning shen and cosmic forces hardly belonged to the same intellectual vision or political plan. Yet by analyzing them in their specific context, it is possible to ascertain what kinds of preoccupations they addressed. When the sixteen-year old Wudi ascended to the throne in 141 BCE, the Han had already been in power for more than sixty years. Peace had lasted long enough that a great number of officials in the capital, Sima Qian remarks, were now anxiously awaiting the celebration of the feng and shan, the promulgation of a new calendar, and a shift in official protocols—that is, the solemn proclamation of a new era. Sima Qian instead describes the young Wudi as overwhelmed with several tasks, pressed by different interest groups, and involved in confusingly diverse ritual activities.

As we have seen, one of the first acts of the new emperor was the promotion of several eminent classicists from minor towns to important positions in the central

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115 SJ 28, 1393-94.
116 SJ 28, 1397.
118 SJ 28, 1384.
government. In particular, these classicists were called to the capital to deliberate about the re-construction of the Ming Tang, the awe-inspiring building where, according to the Classics, ancient rulers would receive local lords while maintaining cosmic harmony through ritual perambulations. Sima Qian implicitly suggests that in adopting these measures, Wudi was not expressing a preference for more traditional and sober forms of religion, but simply trying to counter his grandmother, Empress Dowager Dou (a Huang-Lao follower), and presumably her palace clique. After she died, Sima Qian remarks, Wudi continued to employ more classicists and try to maintain a certain degree of ritual continuity with the past, but without neglecting his extravagant religious interests.

In 133 BCE, Wudi traveled to Yong to perform sacrifices to the Five Sovereigns inherited from the Qin. Also at this time the Son of Heaven began to host a spirit medium in a building in the imperial park. This Wangruo was a woman from Changling, whose sister-in-law had possessed her after dying in childbirth. Wangruo and her host spirit, Shenjun, soon became the object of a very popular local cult that even members of the palace aristocracy, such as the princess of Pingyuan, started to attend. When this story reached Wudi, he wasted no time and had Wangruo promptly sent to the capital, where she took up residence in a building in the Shanglin park.

As expected, Sima Qian causes the reader to suspect a fraud. He reports that in all those years no one was able to catch a glimpse of Shenjun, while Wangruo would hide behind a curtain. Shenjun spoke seldom and at irregular intervals, but Wudi’s secretaries would immediately write down her words, which were solemnly called “Planning Laws,” (huafa). Although these speeches were in fact banal and uninteresting, Sima Qian writes, Wudi found great delight in them. When Wudi fell ill 118 BCE, he requested Shenjun’s prognostication. She announced a ready recovery, and when this happened, the Son of Heaven was so pleased that he bestowed on Shenjun public honors equal to those to Taiyi. Very interestingly, Sima Qian implies that the facts regarding Wangruo and the spirit were kept secret so that very few people knew of their existence, at least until 118 BCE.

It is of course extremely problematic to gauge the import of Shenjun’s “private” cult in its initial fifteen years. Yet, it can be inferred that Wudi’s exclusive access to the truths of a powerful shen played a role in the balance of specific power dynamics at court.

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119 SJ 28, 1384.
121 SJ 28, 1384.
122 These sacrifices were in turn based on Warring States local cults. The Qin initially worshipped on four sovereigns. It was Gaozu who added a fifth altar dedicated to Heidi 黑帝, the Black Sovereign; see SJ 28, 1378.
123 SJ 28, 1384.
124 SJ 28, 1388.
125 SJ 28, 1388.
126 SJ 28, 1388.
In that respect his privileged relationship with an extraordinary being may have represented a means to inspire the awe and faith of palace personnel, which he could then exploit in political and personal struggles at court. Besides this conjecture, the episode of Wudi’s sickness makes it clear enough that his recourse to Shenjun defined a moment of uncertainty caused by physical and emotional distress. The rapid recovery of the emperor resulted in the promotion of the cult of Shenjun (interestingly a female one) from the private to the public level. Such a shift may have represented one of Wudi’s attempts at influencing the complex discourse on state rituals that various groups and individuals, as we have seen, were trying to condition. And Wudi’s powerful religious statement concerned a spirit whose cult was laughed at by educated courtiers such as Sima Qian, but had been extremely popular among the common people. It cannot be excluded that the Son of Heaven was trying to impose his own view by appealing to a public other than palace factions.

g) Taiyi and Houtu: Center, Periphery, and Centralized Rule

In 133 BCE, the same year Li Shaojun introduced Wudi to alchemy, a certain Miuji from Bo appeared at court presenting a plan for the construction of an altar to Taiyi (Grand One). The earliest literary sources that mention Taiyi are the Zhuangzi, the Xunzi, the Lüshi chunqiu, the Heguanzi, and the Huainanzi. When Taiyi emerged is uncertain. The Huainanzi directly connects this cult to the cosmic prerogatives of a di as an imperial ruler:

The Sovereign (di) embodies the Grand One; the king (wang) emulates yin and yang. The hegemon (ba) follows the six pitch pipes. Now the Grand One encloses and contains Heaven and Earth, weighs on and crushes mountains and streams, retains or emits yin and yang, stretches out and drags along the four seasons, knots the net of the eight directional eight points, and weaves the web of the eight coordinates.

In the Shiji, the establishment of Taiyi worship is characterized instead by progressive attempts to combine pre-existing cults, often of obscure origin, into a single ritual. Nonetheless, the subsequent adjustments that Taiyi underwent under Wudi, its

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127 In Tang popular culture and in the Han Wudi Neijing, Shenjun is replaced by Xiwangmu. See Kristopher M. Schipper, L’empereur Wou des Han dans la légende taoiste (Paris: Ecole Francaise D’extreme Orient Paris, 1965).
128 SJ 28, 1386.
later developments, and recent archaeological evidence attest that a unitary vision of Taiyi worship never prevailed. Different traditions continued to attribute to Taiyi heterogeneous meanings and functions. It was understood as the representation of primordial unity, an astronomic body, an element in a system of divination, and warfare. Scholarship still disagrees as to whether diverse interpretations evolved from a common origin or unitary views were the product of a later syncretistic tendency. In the explanation Miüji offered to Wudi, Taiyi worship was very old and had upstaged the cult of the Five Sovereigns (Wudi 五帝) at Yong:

Taiyi is the most honored of the spirits of Heaven and his helpers are the Five Sovereigns. In ancient times the Son of Heaven sacrificed to Taiyi each spring and autumn in the southern suburbs, offering one set of sacrificial animals each day for seven days. An altar (tan 坛) was constructed that was open on eight sides to favor the arrival of the ghosts (gui 鬼).

Hence, Wudi ordered the Head of Sacrifices (Taizhu) to build an altar southeast of the capital according to Miüji’s instructions. After the construction, the Son of Heaven received a memorial proposing the performance of another cult (allegedly of ancient origins as well) to be carried out every three years. This involved offerings to a triad of “unitary” deities: Tianyi 天一, Dyi 地一, and Taiyi 太一. The Son of Heaven approved and commissioned the Head of Sacrifices to perform the new cult on the same Taiyi altar built according to Miüji’s plan. Again, a memorial was presented that suggested the performance of a further cult. This involved the Yellow Emperor, Taiyi, the Messenger of Yin and Yang, as well as a further a set of hardly identifiable deities. In this case too, Wudi obliged and had ritual officials performing these new sacrifices next to Miüji’s altar.

In 112 BCE the Son of Heaven commissioned the officials in charge of sacrifices to build a second Taiyi altar south of the Ganquan palace, always according to Miüji’s plans. The text provides a more precise description of this building organized on three tiers. The upper one, the Purple Altar (Zitan 紫坛), was dedicated to Taiyi. The one in the middle, the Wuditan 五帝坛, was larger, surrounded the upper one and was dedicated to the Five Sovereigns. The Yellow Emperor, because of his association with Earth, should have occupied the central position, but in this case, his altar was placed southwest of the center to give way to Taiyi. The lower level was dedicated to the multitude of the spirits and ghosts, and to the constellation of the Northern Dipper. Five priests, whose robes matched the colors of the Five Phases, were assigned to the cult of each of the Five Sovereigns.

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132 SJ 28, 1386.
133 SJ 28, 1386.
134 SJ 28, 1386.
135 SJ 28, 1394.
136 As mentioned by Li in his “An Archaeological Study of Taiyi,” 4. See also the Liji (“Yueling,” 16:7b) associated Earth with the third month of the summer, which corresponds, spatially, to southwest.
137 For a detailed reconstruction of the Taiyi altar, see Li, “An Archaeological Study of Taiyi,” 2-5: also SJ 28, 1394; HS 25, 1230, 1256.
Neither of the altars is extant. Ad it is not clear how the different shen involved in the various Taiyi cults were represented either. As already pointed out by Qian Baocong, the account in the “Fengshan shu” is probably describing the phases of a conflict among different experts or ritual factions. The Huainanzi, for example, in one of the references to Taiyi, connects its worship to a tradition of self-cultivation that explicitly opposed the way embodied by Confucius’s followers. Yet, it is extremely problematic to identify discrete intellectual stances behind the strife described in the Shiji, especially because in Sima Qian’s work, Wudi, unlike Gaozu and his notorious hatred for classicists (ru), never explicitly expresses an aversion to a specific group. Sima Qian clearly emphasizes Wudi’s passive attitude in accepting all ritual suggestions without ever discontinuing any. But it is hard to be sure whether our historian, in doing so, was denouncing Wudi’s cluelessness or opportunism.

The question of the possible meanings for Taiyi has been enriched by Li Ling, who, in light of new archeological and textual finds, interpreted it in terms of astronomy, divination, and warfare. Fundamental is Li’s analysis of the Shiji account of the preparation for the expedition against Nanyue in light of specific pieces of archeological evidence. In 113 BCE (the same year of the construction of the second Taiyi altar) the Grand Historian—in this case probably Sima Qian’s father Tan—prayed to Taiyi and then raised the so-called “Taiyi Spear” (Taiyi feng 太一鋒) in the direction of the enemy. The “Taiyi Spear” consisted of the “Numinous Flag” (lingqi 靈旗), which was mounted on a jujube pole and represented the sun, the moon, the Northern Dipper, an ascending dragon, and the three stars of the Taiyi constellation.

All these elements appear in the evidence analyzed by Li Ling. I will limit my treatment to those most germane to the present discussion. First of all, the treatise on astronomy in the Shiji (“Tianguan shu” 天官書), in its initial entry, identifies Taiyi (βUMi, Kochab) with a star in the constellation of Heaven’s Culmen (tiangjixing 天極星), immediately above the Northern Dipper. The Northern Dipper is in turn associated with the emperor’s chariot and patrolling expeditions (xunshou 巡狩), and with his function of separating and organizing yin and yang and the Five Phases. Taiyi and the Northern Dipper were also featured on the pointers on Warring States divination devices, whose round and square quadrants (which were perhaps reproduced in Miuji’s altar) represented Heaven and Earth. The “Repel-weapons Chart” (bibingtu 避兵圖) depicted on a sheet of silk recovered from Tomb 3 in Mawangdui (dated 168 BCE) portrays Taiyi as an...
anthropomorphic red shen, which is accompanied by other figures. Li Ling identifies these by characters on the chart as warrior disciples (wu dizi 武弟子), the Rain Master (Yushi 雨師), the Thunder Lord (Leigong 雷公), and three dragons, one of which is holding a stove. Interestingly, inside a circle under Taiyi’s left arm, there is depicted the character she 社, which was associated during the Han with the Altar of the Soil of the Zhou, the Earth God, and the color yellow. The colors used in the chart were yellow, red, azure, black, and white, the same as the Five Phases.

The richness of all these overlapping symbolic frameworks, fragments, and echoes of the multifarious traditions that flourished at the end of the Warring States period defies attempts at defining Wudi’s religious activities as a unitary system. Furthermore, Sima Qian scattered the information about discrete cults throughout the “Fengshan shu” as though he intended to persuade the reader that the Son of Heaven did not possess any coherent ritual vision, as he heeded all possible suggestions. Still, I would argue that it is possible to interpret the tentative religious enterprises of Wudi as an effort to conceptualize a new territorial politics, which implied various attempts at imposing centralized control on traditionally independent regional powers. Contrary to what is conventionally held, the repression of the Seven Kingdoms Revolt in 154 BCE under Jingdi had not resulted in the loss of relative autonomy of the guo.145 This is particularly evident in the accounts of the violent struggle to impose state control over minting and taxation during Wudi’s reign. It was especially in those years that the government needed to centralize all resources in order to cope with the Xiongnu menace, the frequent floods of the Yellow River, the reconstruction of roads and canals, and the performance of public ceremonies.

The first chapter of the Shiji expresses the tension between center and periphery in the description of ancient paradigmatic sovereigns. The Yellow Emperor never rested, after defeating barbaric foes, and governed directly by constantly patrolling his territories in all directions and by imposing rules and standards over a multifarious world that had been just pacified through war. Yao and Shun instead did not need to govern in such an active way. They ruled by virtue and example. They displayed unequalled wisdom in appointing the right ministers and in delegating power. Hence they could proverbially rest with their hands crossed while beholding their subjects thriving in peace and harmony. The model of an emperor who reigns without leaving Chang’an, who by sacrificing in the microcosm of the capital maintains all under Heaven in harmony with cosmic forces, would prevail at the end of the first century BCE. Meanwhile, in his chaotic and transitional age, Wudi could carry out ritual reforms while being receptive to the different interpretations of imperial sovereignty that were flourishing in every corner of the empire. It is not clear whether, in the end, Wudi’s acts were just the result of external pressure and factional schemes. Still, it is evident that instead of imposing a unitary vision, Wudi continued to collect and juxtapose heterogeneous religious practices without never completely replacing old or obsolete ritual traditions. It was as though a

144 Li Ling in his essay corrects previous readings of the chart by comparing it with the decorations on a dagger-axe excavated in 1960 from a Warring state tomb in Hubei. For an early analysis of the chart, see Zhou Shihong 周世榮, “Mawangdui Han mu de ‘Shenqi’ tu bohua,” 馬王堆漢墓的神祇圖帛畫 Kaogu 10 (1990): 925-28. For the dagger-axe, see Wang Yutong 王毓彤, “Jingmen chutu yijian tongge” 荊門出土一件銅戈 Wenwu 1 (1963): 64-5.

145 See Chapter 1 above.
diversified approach were needed to rule over a composite reality insofar as the acceptance of cultural diversity became instrumental in enforcing centralized political control.

Nonetheless, in the complexity of the subsequent adjustments to the Taiyi cult, it is possible to identify a few recurring themes connected to the military prerogatives of Wudi’s rulership. Especially if we take into account the orientating role of Taiyi and Beidou as expressed in astronomic treatises and divinatory devices, the new cult seems to be designated to legitimize Wudi’s incessant roaming over the country by ritually equating it to astral movements and cosmic rhythms.

Very interestingly, in the Shiji chapter about imperial princes, the last of the Hereditary Houses (“San wang shijia” 三王世家), Sima Qian writes about the difficulties of ruling the land by entrusting peripheral territories to members of the imperial family.\(^{146}\) When in 110 BCE, the king of Qi, Wudi’s beloved son Liu Hong 劉闓, died without heirs at the age of seventeen, the Son of Heaven decided to divide up Qi into smaller administrative unities (commanderies, jün 郡), as it he deemed it impossible to control this ancient and rather exotic state directly through his relatives. At this point, Sima Qian says that in the past the relationship between center and periphery was expressed through the (likely highly idealized) “Shou ci tu 受此土” ceremony that involved the altar of the Soil (she 社) of the Son of Heaven.\(^{147}\) The she altar consisted in a square mound of five colors. Its center was yellow, while the four sides were colored according to the four directions. In the ancient ceremony of “enfeoffment,” a lord would bestow on a dependent ruler a lump of dirt from his own altar picking from the side that corresponded to the direction from which the vassal was coming. Thereupon, the dependent ruler would go back and built a second she altar around the clod he had received. Accordingly, he would repeat the same ceremony of “enfeoffment” with lesser rulers. Regardless of the historicity of ceremony, Sima Qian’s account epitomizes both a cultural and political shift: the waning of a conception of aristocratic rulership that was modeled on filial piety and devolution of power and implied the modular reproduction of central authority via the gradual delegation of its prerogatives to peripheral polities.

The military, cosmologic and divinatory ideas connected to Taiyi better suited Wudi’s rulership, in that they ritually legitimated his central authority by identifying it with the unfolding of cosmic forces. The traditions that influenced Wudi’s Taiyi conceptualized power as emanating radially from the center and mapping the territory through sweeping military campaigns that brought the periphery under the imperial aegis. The center did not reproduce itself farther away on a lesser level—as in the case of the ceremonies connected to the she altar—but conquered and incorporated the periphery. This new conception of territorial control is better understood once Taiyi is analyzed in its association with the cult of Houtu.

The specific characteristics of the cult of Houtu, its gender, and its relation with she and Houji during the Han have been the object of an intense and ongoing scholarly debate.\(^{148}\) Yet, the Shiji undoubtedly defines Houtu in terms of land fertility, as a cult

\(^{146}\) SJ 60, 2115.
\(^{147}\) SJ 60, 2115-16.
\(^{148}\) See, Birrell, Chinese Mythology, 160-3.
that was also followed by the common people. Wudi resorted to worshipping it when he feared he was not obtaining the results he had hoped for by concentrating on the Five Sovereigns, which were dynastic deities. He also sacrificed to Houtu in the wake of a natural disaster, praying for a bumper harvest on behalf of his suffering subjects. Finally, when after the victorious campaign against Nanyue in 113 BCE Wudi honored both Taiyi and Houtu, he was simultaneously sanctioning his control over the land in a way that could be broadly understood in military, economic, and agricultural terms.

h) Conclusion: The Feng and Shan or the Grand Misunderstanding

In 122 BCE, after sacrificing at Yong, Wudi captured a beast that had only one horn. Some courtiers tried to persuade the Son of Heaven that his ritual performance had been so thorough that the Five Sovereigns rewarded him with the auspicious omen of the lin, a mythical unicorn-like animal. The appearance of a true lin, in Confucius’s biography in the Shiji, had announced the imminent death of the Master and the beginning of a dark age. In the “Fengshan shu” instead, the Qi minister Guan Zhong had included the lin in the list of those extremely rare portents that anticipated the performance on the feng and shan during the age of the Yellow Emperor.

As expected, according to Sima Qian, Wudi’s contemporaries followed the second interpretation; thus special celebrations ensued. Since the performance of the feng and shan seemed imminent at that point, the King of Jibei offered the Son of Heaven Mount Tai and the surrounding commanderies for the performance of the historic sacrifices. In this way, all the Five Peaks that determined ancient China’s ritual boundaries fell under Wudi’s direct control.

Of all the omens required for the feng and shan sacrifices that Guan Zhong had mentioned, the spontaneous appearance of spirits had not occurred yet. Therefore in the years immediately following the capture of the lin, Wudi continued pursuing shen or fangshi who were allegedly capable of conjuring them. Although all the attempts failed, when the Precious Tripod was unearthed in 113 BCE—a hoax, according to Sima Qian—and Gongsun Qing hailed it as the Yellow Emperor’s tripod, the Son of Heaven seemed persuaded that the feng and shan were finally possible. However, the modalities of their performance were clear to no one. Hence, Wudi had courtiers and fangshi discuss the proper rituals and paraphernalia. The classicists were never satisfied, for none of the proposed actions or vessels seemed to correspond with the instructions in the Odes and the Documents. Wudi became very impatient and decided to do without their advice.

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149 SJ 28, 1392.
150 SJ 28, 1389.
151 SJ 28, 1392.
152 SJ 28, 1387.
153 SJ 47, 1942. On the meaning of this passage, which in turn cites a Chunqiu entry (Duke Ai, fourteenth year, Spring), see also Chapter two above.
154 SJ 28, 1361.
155 SJ 28, 1387.
156 SJ 28, 1397.
157 SJ 28, 1398.
Before and during the complex preparations for, between, and right after the performance the feng and shan, Sima Qian reports, Wudi stopped several times in order either to attend cults that had been established by the Qin or to continue searching for shen—so much that, always according to our historian—people began to mock the Son of Heaven by reporting the sighting of spirits, gigantic creatures, mysterious old men, and disparate evidence of extra-human presence.\textsuperscript{158}

On May 17 110 BCE, Wudi finally embarked upon the sacrifices. The feng was carried out on Mount Liangfu. Wudi performed the ritual alone with a young charioteer, who would die some days after under unclear circumstances.\textsuperscript{159} The ritual consisted in raising the feng mound and in burying in it a jade tablet that was inscribed with a secret message.\textsuperscript{160} The shan was celebrated the following day, on May 18, on Mount Suran, on the northwestern foothill of Mount Tai. Whereas the feng had been immediately preceded by the worship of Taiyi, the shan was explicitly carried out by following the Houtu ritual, which involved music, dances and the donning of yellow clothes. Unlike the rituals under Qin Shihuangdi, bad weather had not occurred and since a yellow glow was observed above the feng mound at dawn the following day, the sacrifices were considered a success. Through the imperial secretary, Wudi issued this edict:

I, in my humble and insignificant person, have been accorded the position of highest honor. Constantly I tremble with fear that I shall not be worthy of it, for my virtue is poor and slight and I have no understanding of ritual (li 禮) and music. When I performed the sacrifice to Taiyi, something that looked like a beam of light was seen faintly from afar. I was filled with awe at this strange phenomenon and would have proceeded no further, but I did not dare to halt. Thus I later ascended Mount Tai to perform the feng sacrifice, journeyed to Liangfu and later performed the shan sacrifice on Mount Suran, thus renewing myself.\textsuperscript{161}

Then Wudi, in order to celebrate the imminent announcement of a new beginning, bestowed on the common people donations of oxen and wine, and granted amnesty and corvée exemptions to all the households whose lands he had passed through during the performance. A further edict was issued:

In ancient times the Son of Heaven journeyed about on an inspection tour (xunshou 巡狩) once every five years, and at that time he performed sacrifices to Mount Tai. The local lords who came to pay court to him constructed their lodgings there. Let an order be given to the local lords to build their own lodges at the foot of Mount Tai.\textsuperscript{162}

Sima Qian does not provide any comment on the edicts above. Yet the humble and respectful tone employed in the edict, the mention of Taiyi, Houtu, and the local

\textsuperscript{158} SJ 28, 1398.
\textsuperscript{159} SJ 28, 1398.
\textsuperscript{160} SJ 28, 1398.
\textsuperscript{161} SJ 28, 1398.
\textsuperscript{162} SJ 28, 1398.
lords connect feng and shan to a new model of territorial control, and to the tension between the center and regional powers. Wudi’s inspections tours and the ritual activities that Wudi was carrying out all over the country might have threatened local interests while eliciting the hostility of local lords. It seems that the Son of Heaven was trying to ingratiate himself with the people while separating them from their regional leaders.

In the years following 110 BCE, Sima Qian becomes even more explicit in his skepticism. The historian points out that Wudi progressively lost confidence that the successful performance of the feng and shan anticipated the achievement of immortality. According to the Shiji, an anxious and always unsuccessful quest for spirits, fangshi, and immortals characterized this period of Wudi’s reign. The Son of Heaven became so desperate, Sima Qian writes, that he had shamans brought from the vanquished Nanyue to live in the imperial park, as he had heard that they could conjure immortal ghosts. 163

Ironically, it is after the official promulgation of the Grand Beginning in 104 BCE, that Sima Qian first records an event that may have signaled Heaven’s response to a human action—a locust invasion. 164

As it is well known, Sima Qian in his work does not chronicle Wudi’s reign until its end in 87 BCE. And it has been argued that the “Fengshanshu” accounts following the Grand Beginning were the result of later additions. 165 Thanks to subsequent historiography we know that in 31 BCE, following Kuang Heng’s advice, Chengdi abolished, the Five Sovereigns at Yong, the Jewel of Chen, Taiyi and Houtu, among many others cults. At the same time he promulgated new official ceremonies according to which the Son of Heaven would worship Heaven and Earth in the southern and northern suburbs of the capital, which from now on would ritually replace the whole empire. 166

Interestingly enough, the cults associated with the first emperors of the Han and Wudi would momentarily be reconsidered when a ruler fell ill or for the occurrence of some inexplicable phenomena—as if esoteric forms of worship were still associated with the individual search for a more effective, personal, and direct relationship with the extra-human realm. 167

The most relevant function of Wudi’s ritual activities was conceptualization of the ruler’s military prerogatives, of his need to control, politically and economically, the territories of his realm more directly. His interest in spirit possession and immortality seem to respond instead to private, personal concerns about the vulnerability of human life. And if we see only incoherent references to these activities it is due to the development of a skeptical attitude against direct the contact with spirits and ghosts that was connected to Confucius’s secular interpretation of li and that would become dominant in among the educated elites and in the official historiography from the Eastern Han on.

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163 SJ 28, 1399.
165 Zhao Zhengqun 赵生群, Shi ji wenxianxue conggaos “史记”文献学丛稿 (Nanjing, Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 2000).
166 See Loewe, “K’uang Heng,” 154-93.
167 See Loewe, “K’uang Heng,” 180-92
Conclusions

For Sima Qian the spirits and ghosts mentioned in the various literary traditions, and worshipped all around the country in different times and fashions did not make up an organic pantheon but a chaotic and multifarious realm. Their elusive and protean nature distracted rulers and common people alike from more important duties concerning the state and the family. The invocation or the alleged presence of extra-human entities did not make human actions more moral. On the contrary, our historian deemed their influence in stark contrast with the cultivation of those ethical virtues on which a stable and hierarchically organized society must be founded.

In recounting the exploits of pre-imperial monarchs, Sima Qian accepted received traditions about spirits and ghosts without directly criticizing them. Yet, the extent to which he emphasized different ancient rulers’ fascination with the extra-human reflected Sima Qian’s implicit assessment of their moral exemplarity. In chronicling the events from the Qin to his own times, he never failed to point out how hopes and fears concerning the invisible were exploited in order to take advantage of human gullibility, for economic or political gain.

Sima Qian was not interested in spirits and ghosts per se. Their worship did not define cultural identity. Therefore Sima Qian did not concentrate on the quality of the different cults but on the amount of attention people devoted to them. Spirits and ghosts simply provided the epistemological boundaries of his historiographical enterprise, the external limits of his field of inquiry: humankind. Sima Qian did not perceive the world as a self-regulating unitary organism. The Grand Historian did not believe in the presence of a conscious being that responded morally to good and bad behavior. Rather, he interpreted history and the world as the alternating of different ages and universes, each requiring recourse to specific sets of values and timely choices.

Yao and Shun, the Zhou, and Confucius of course represented Sima Qian’s unequalled models. But during his times, as the central government strove to enforce administrative and economic centralization, circumstances did not allow the establishment of a perfectly moral rulership. Sima Qian did not even acknowledge Han classicists as deserving heirs of Confucius’s cultural legacy, for they seemed to him pointlessly pedantic or just petty and self-involved.

The Han sanctioned a new age. Thus new standards were required: above all expediency and readiness to respond to contingency. The appointment of honest and capable politicians and the sound administration of economic matters, according to the Grand Historian, should have been Wudi’s absolute priority. And if in under the Han it was customary to look back to the past for political models, according to Sima Qian current rulers should model their conduct not on the filial piety of Yao or Shun or Confucius, but on the financial savvy and practical sense of Guan Zhong and Yan Ying of Qi:

After the current emperor took charge, he summoned experts in the Classics and arts and ordered them to decide about ceremonies, but in more than ten years they produced no results. Then someone said that in the ancient age of the Great Peace the people were in harmony and happiness, good omens appeared everywhere, so that rules and actions were established on the basis of popular
mores. The emperor heard this and through the Imperial Secretary issued this decree: “I am ruling by mandate. Every sovereign flourishes on different bases, there are different ways but a common goal. To act by following the people is to study customs and then make rules. Those who criticize all exalt the ancient past, but what should the common people look up to? The Han dynasty is the enterprise of just one lineage, if standards and rules cannot be passed down, how could we talk about posterity? Those who realize grandiose deeds are eminent and far reaching. Those who govern in a shallow pond are petty and narrow minded. How could we not try?”

At the end of the economic chapter of the *Shiji*, just before the Grand Historian’s final remarks, there is a passage that sums up Sima Qian’s point of view on state rituals. After a minor drought, the eminent official San Hongyang 桑弘羊 (152-80 BCE) orders court invokers to pray for rain. And Bu Shi 卜式, one of the few court advisors Sima Qian surely appreciated, rebukes San’s measures in an unequivocal way. Bu Shi was a capable and honest farmer who had always worked hard to provide for his less skilled brother. Wudi had appointed him after hearing that Bu Shi, unlike most of his wealthy contemporaries, had offered half of his fortune to defend the country against the Xiongnu. Thus spoke Bu Shi, with more than a little sarcasm:

The government officials are supposed to collect what taxes they need for food and clothing and that is all. Now Sang Hongyang has them sitting in the market stalls buying and selling goods and scrambling for profit. If Your Majesty were to boil Sang Hongyang alive, then I think Heaven might send us rain!”

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1 *SJ* 25,1160-61.
2 *SJ* 30, 1442.
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