

4.9 THE FORTUNES OF CONFUCIANISM DURING THE EARLY HAN

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I. The Confucian eclipse: from the Qin to Gao-di

Confucianism under the Qin. Confucians had every reason to look upon the dissolution of the Qin empire with optimism. Although the First Emperor had shown a great interest in the culture of the Shandong peninsula, which was the origin of Confucianism, after the fiasco of the *fengshan* sacrifice in 218 the position of Confucians became tenuous. Although they remained at court among the erudites, they exercised no discernable influence in the policies of Qin, which was, after all, an avowedly Legalistic state.

Nevertheless, we must realize that at the time that the Qin first came to power, Confucians, like everyone else, would have regarded the dynasty as the long-awaited new era of Tian's Mandate, even though the Qin government laid no stress upon the theory (they had no need of it, and its long-term implications would be subversive to future Qin rulers). For centuries, Confucians had avoided the dangers of political entanglements in accord with the *Analecets* formula of timeliness: "When the Dao does not prevail in the world, hide." But surely, Confucius could not have meant to hide forever! If the passing of the Mandate were not the signal to emerge and carry Confucianism to the powers of government, then what other signal could Confucians be waiting for?

But the *fengshan* incident was a great disappointment, and with the book banning of 213, the relationship between Confucians and the Qin seems to have become openly adversarial. Chunyu Yue, whose speech before the emperor led to the banning, was clearly a Confucian, and the response of Li Si was couched in anti-Confucian terms.

Still, Confucians were not banished from the Qin court or persecuted, so far as we can tell (the burying of the scholars, if it occurred, makes better sense as a punishment for charlatan *fangshi* practitioners). As late as 209, under the Second Emperor, we know of at least one Confucian erudite who was still at court. This was a man named Shusun Tong, and his story illustrates very well the paradoxical fact that at the outset of the Han, state policy towards Confucianism was far more negative than the Qin policy had initially been.

Shusun Tong was from Xue in western Shandong and was a specialist in Confucian texts and ritual ceremonies. The *Shiji* gives us an account of his life, and begins his story at the time of the rebellion of Chen She. When the rebel forces first threatened the court, the Second Emperor summoned his erudites to advise him on the situation. One after another, the erudites encouraged

the emperor to punish the rebels for their disloyalty. Shusun Tong, who was at this time apparently an aide to the erudites, stepped forward and gave different advice. He assured the emperor that with all China in harmonious unity under a sage like himself, there was nothing to worry about. Chen She's forces were nothing but local brigands and were not worthy of the emperor's attention. The emperor listened attentively to what Shusun Tong said, and then polled the erudites as to whether they regarded the uprising as a rebellion or as banditry. All who responded that it was a rebellion were imprisoned, and Shusun Tong was rewarded with gifts and a promotion to the position of erudite.

When questioned by other Confucians concerning his false flattery, Shusun Tong replied, "You would not understand. If I had not spoken so, I would never have escaped the jaws of the tiger!" Then he fled from the capital and made his way home east.

If we read this story closely, we can detect that it depicts Shusun Tong's motivation for his actions as a judgment concerning the appropriate application of the Confucian formula of timeliness. The news of Chen She's uprising is, for him, a clear indication that the Qin is doomed – that Heaven's Mandate had actually *not* shifted a decade earlier and that the era of Confucian salvation lay ahead. Under such circumstances, the appropriate Confucian imperative is not service at court but self-preservation, and this is the imperative that Shusun Tong followed (though in a manner that may indicate somewhat less nobility of character than Confucius might have hoped for).

The civil war as a Confucian disaster. Confucians must surely have been delighted to see the Qin fall and had few reservations about offering whatever services they could to the rebel forces. We do not have extensive records, but it is said that the Confucians of Lu "packed up their ritual vessels and marched off to join Chen She" when the revolt broke out, and we know of certain Confucians who later joined the forces of the rebel generals united under Xiang Yu.

Xiang Yu was an attractive leader for the Confucians. He had become, upon the death of his uncle, the leader of a patrician clan, and as a man he retained the cultural bearing of a Chou aristocratic warrior. He was from Chu, which might seem to have been a disadvantage – Chu was not a hot-bed of Confucianism during the Classical period. However, during the last decades of the Warring States era, Chu had expanded to the northeast, and had actually absorbed much of southern and central Shandong, including the Confucian homeland of Lu. Xiang Yu's ancestral estate in Xiang was in Shandong, not very far from Lu, and soon after Xiang Yu rose to prominence among the rebels, the titular king of Chu conferred upon him the title "Duke of Lu," successor to the descendants of the Duke of Zhou. Could the Confucians have hoped for a better sign?

Liu Bang, on the other hand, was not of patrician background. Although he too came from an area not far from Lu, he famously detested Confucians, with their distinctive formality of dress and punctilious manner. He seems to have seen them as an affront to his own peasant origins and rude manners, and he was blatantly and personally insulting to them, far beyond anything associated with the Legalist Qin rulers. Apart from barbed and disdainful remarks, Liu Bang indicated his contempt through dramatic gestures, the most famous of which he performed

at a banquet when he urinated into the ceremonial hat of a Confucian scholar. Could the Confucians have feared a worse outcome than the victory of Liu Bang over their champion Xiang Yu?

Liu Bang's triumph was a Confucian nightmare come true. The first passage of the Mandate to the Legalist Qin had been bad enough, but now the perversity of Heaven seemed unmatched. How could a brutish peasant emperor with a declared hatred of Confucians be part of Heaven's plan? The Confucian land of Lu, possessing no significant armed force at all, was nevertheless the last corner of the empire to submit to Liu Bang. The final scene of the wars occurred when Liu Bang brought his troops up to the walls of the old capital city of Lu. "From within," writes Sima Qian, "came the ceaseless sounds of strings and songs, for in that place, the Confucians still recited and chanted, practicing ceremony and music." Fortunately for the pious Confucians within the city, the city magistrate, who had been appointed by the recently deceased Xiang Yu, chose surrender over slaughter.

When Liu Bang ascended the imperial throne as Gao-di, he numbered among his extensive retinue of loyal advisors and supporters only one Confucian we know of. That man was Shusun Tong.*

The first service of Confucianism to the Han. After escaping from the Qin court and Xianyang, Shusun Tong had fled east and thrown his lot in with the rebels. Eventually, he joined the forces of Xiang Yu and was appointed by Xiang Yu to serve as the magistrate of a city in Shandong. Later, after Xiang Yu and Liu Bang became enemies, Liu Bang stormed the city and Shusun Tong offered its surrender. Shusun Tong, never a stickler about loyalty, soon departed the town as a stalwart member of Liu Bang's retinue. In recognition of Liu Bang's prejudices, Shusun Tong abandoned the ritual robes that identified Confucian masters so as to avoid provoking his new patron. Shusun Tong was not a stickler about minor matters such as ritual dress either.

During the reign of Liu Bang as Gao-di, Confucians were completely shut out of the government of the Han. Liu Bang's distaste for their presence generally persisted, and he never permitted the lifting of the laws that prohibited them from teaching or possessing their sacred texts. However, after a time, they made a single inroad, the first positive step of Confucianism towards participation in the Han regime. This step was the product of Liu Bang's frustration in trying to preside over a court of unpolished and raucous warriors. He found he could not do without *li*, and when he realized this, Shusun Tong was there, ready to help.

The story of Shusun Tong's role during the reign of Liu Bang is well told in the *Shiji*. We will pick the story up at the time when Shusun Tong had just surrendered to Liu Bang and joined his entourage.

*Somewhat earlier, another Confucian had served Liu Bang as a military advisor and diplomat. This man, whose service to Liu Bang seems to have in no manner involved his Confucian training, suffered the setback of being boiled in oil by another rebel general late in the civil wars, and was no longer numbered among Liu Bang's advisors by the time Liu ascended the imperial throne.

When Shusun Tong surrendered to the Han forces, he was joined by over one hundred Confucian scholars who had been studying under him. However, he did not recommend any of them for special appointment and only voiced support for former members of bandit gangs and ruffians. His disciples began to complain behind his back. “We’ve served the master for years and years and have finally been lucky enough to follow him in surrendering to the forces of Han, but instead of recommending us for appointments, he supports no one but gangsters! What is the meaning of this?”

Shusun Tong learned about their complaints and spoke to them. “The king of Han is beset with arrows and missiles contending for control of the world. Could scholars like you provide aid to him in this fight? This is why I have first spoken for men who can cut off the heads of enemy generals and seize the banners of opposing troops. Bide your time with me awhile, gentlemen. I won’t forget you!” In time, Liu Bang honored Shusun Tong with the rank of Erudite; he was known as the Scion of Jixia.

In the fifth year of Han (202), after the empire had been fully rejoined through the wars, the lords who had been granted lands joined in honoring Liu Bang with the title of August Emperor at Dingtao. Shusun Tong arranged the ceremony and set its terms and titles. Now that Liu Bang was Emperor, he completely eliminated the burdensome rituals that the Qin had used in favor of great simplicity at court.

However, the ministers at the new court would drink heavily and fall into disputes over whose accomplishments were worthy of greater honor. Once drunk, they might begin shouting wildly, or draw their swords and hack at the wooden pillars of the palace in their rage. Emperor Gao grew worried about this behavior. Shusun Tong knew that the Emperor was becoming increasingly disgusted, and he spoke to him about it. “Confucian scholars are difficult to work with when one is embarked on bold ventures, but they are useful when you are guarding what has been won. I beg your leave to go summon the scholars in Lu who can join with my disciples in designing rituals for your court.”

“Can they design ones that are not too difficult?” asked the Emperor.

“The Five Emperors each had different types of court music, and the kings of the Three Dynasties followed different rituals. Rituals should adjust their embellishments according to the spirit of the age. Thus when [Confucius] said, ‘What the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties added or discarded in their rituals may be known,’ he meant the rites of those eras were not mere copies. I plan to draw on ancient rituals as well as the ceremonial codes of the Qin.”

The Emperor said, “You may try designing something, but make the rituals easy to learn, bearing in mind that they must be things I can manage.”

Thereupon, Shusun Tong carried the Emperor's summons to more than thirty scholars in Lu. Two refused to participate. "Sir," they said, "you have served close to ten different lords, gaining favor through shameless toadying in every case. Now the world has just been set at peace, the dead are yet unburied and the wounded not yet risen from their beds. And yet you wish to fashion new ritual and music! Fashioning ritual and music is a process that occurs as a dynasty accumulates virtue; only after a century can it be accomplished. We could not bear to take part in what you are doing. It fails to conform to ancient norms and we will not go with you. Now go, Sir. Forbear to defile us further!"

Shusun Tong laughed. "You are truly simpleminded Confucians! You've no understanding of timeliness in action."

So Shusun Tong and the thirty scholars who did respond to the summons went back to the capital in the west. Together with other scholars in the Emperor's court entourage and his own disciples, a hundred men in all, he laid out a practice ground in the open land beyond the capital suburbs, using ropes and poles. For over a month they practiced their new ritual, and then Shusun Tong said to the Emperor, "We are ready for Your Majesty to come see."

With the Emperor watching, he had them perform the ritual. "I can manage that," said the Emperor, and he ordered all the courtiers to learn it and practice until they were ready to perform it at the New Year ceremonies of the tenth month.*

In the seventh year the Palace of Lasting Joy was completed and all the lords and officials came there for the court rites of the tenth month. The ceremony ran in this way: Before dawn the Master of Visitors began to conduct the ritual performance. He led the participants through the pavilion gate in rank order. Within the courtyard the cavalry were deployed with their carts and the infantry and palace guards stood with their weapons at attention and their flags and banners unfurled. The Master of Visitors ordered the participants to make their way forward with dispatch.

At the base of the pavilion stood the Palace Attendants lining the stairway, several hundred on the steps. The leading commandants, lords, generals, and army officers took their places by rank on the west side of the hall facing east, while the civil officials from the prime minister on down took their places on the east side of the hall facing west. The Master of Ceremonies in charge of the visitors of nine degrees then passed the order for them to take their places.

*It is an unusual feature of ancient Chinese calendars that in some of them the year did not begin with the first month, but rather in the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth month. At the start of his reign, Liu Bang simply continued the calendar of the Qin, which had begun the year in the tenth month.

Thereupon the emperor emerged from the palace rooms, carried in a sedan chair. One hundred offices bearing banners called the assembly to attention, and led each participant forward, from the lords and kings down to officers salaried at 600 bushels of grain, to offer their congratulatory words. From the lords and kings on down none failed to tremble and display reverent awe.

When the ceremony was finished wine was served according to rule. All those kneeling in attendance within the pavilion bowed their heads to the floor and then one by one arose in rank to drink long life to the Emperor. After the wine had been poured nine times, the Master of Visitors announced, “The wine service is concluded.” The Grand Secretary ensured that all rules were followed and that anyone who did not perform the ceremony correctly would be promptly removed from the ceremony and expelled. But during the wine service and right through to the end, not a person dared to become obstreperous or to break the rules.

As the ceremony ended, the Emperor said, “Today at last I have finally known the honor of being emperor!” So he appointed Shusun Tong Director of Ritual and awarded him five hundred catties of gold.

Shusun Tong seized the moment to speak. “My disciples, students of Confucianism, have followed me for a long time, and they joined with me in designing these ceremonies. I beg Your Majesty to provide them with appointments.” Accordingly, the Emperor appointed all of them as palace attendants.

When Shusun Tong emerged he proceeded to distribute the entire five hundred catties of gold to his disciples. They were all delighted and proclaimed, “Master Shusun is truly a sage! He understands what actions are essential for the time.” (*Shiji* 99. 2721-24)

The tale of Shusun Tong is a remarkable portrait of the subtlety and ethical ambiguity of the Confucian doctrine of timeliness. One can only wonder at the notion of a Confucian ritual specialist who was no stickler about rituals. Sima Qian appended his own evaluation to his biography of Shusun Tong, which captures these issues well while indicating the service that Shusun Tong ultimately rendered to the Confucian cause.

Shusun Tong measured his aspirations for the age in terms of essential action. In abiding by ritual and choosing when to serve or retreat, he changed according to the times and ultimately became the ancestor of all Han dynasty Confucians. “Perfect straightness appears crooked; the Dao is oblique by nature” – this is, perhaps, exemplified by Shusun Tong.* (*Shiji* 99. 2726)

*The quoted passage ironically appears to string together phrases from the *Dao de jing*.

II. The rise of Confucian classicism

The role of Confucianism at the Han court did not progress rapidly. Although Shusun Tong was, according to the *Shiji*, instrumental in convincing Liu Bang not to change the designation of the crown prince (a matter discussed earlier), and, perhaps as a result, is portrayed as having great influence over Hui-di in matters of ritual conduct, his impact on Han government is not otherwise discernable.

Nor did Shusun Tong's service to the Han court result in more active involvement by other Confucians. In fact, in so far as the standing of Confucianism at court was concerned, the reigns that followed Gao-di's were in many respects even more unfavorable. This was because of the rising influence of advocates of Huang-Lao style governmental policies, and the easy way in which Legalistically inclined ministers were able to coexist with the Huang-Lao School. The long high tide of Huang-Lao doctrine at court, in fact, persists up until the revolutionary changes made under the orders of Wu-di in 135.

However, Confucianism itself as a movement began to revive after the reign of Gao-di. This was very likely due less to the influence of men such as Shusun Tong than to the lifting of the prohibitions on private teachings and the private possession of ancient texts in 191, under Hui-di. It appears that up until that time, Confucian masters had continued to teach students (we have seen that Shusun Tong had numerous disciples), but had perhaps been required to have official patronage. Moreover, a conspicuous feature of Shusun Tong's Confucian ritualism was that it seems to have been largely independent of textual precedents, other than those provided by the *Qin*. It is entirely possible that the Confucian groups that did persist prior to 191 were forced to transmit the Confucian Dao orally, without reference to texts such as the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of Documents*, ritual texts, or the precursor texts of the *Analects*.

Confucian classicism. Perhaps because of the banning of Confucian texts, when Confucianism did at length reemerge in the Han it appears to have taken a far more bookish form than it had during the Warring States era. It may be that the principal issue for Confucianism during the two decades after the ban on Confucian texts had been the preservation of the written word through oral tradition: rote memorization of texts and their oral explication. This would explain why, once the Confucians were again allowed to speak, teach, and possess the texts of their school, their principal focus was not so much *li*, self-cultivation, or the character of the *junzi*, but was instead a canon of "classical" texts, mastery of which constituted the highest form of Confucian expertise.

The Confucianism of the Han did not view the preserved sayings of Confucius as the core of their school. The Confucian masters had come to believe that rather than make his teaching explicit through speech, Confucius had instead "lodged" his message in six books or traditions. The heavenly message of the sage lay in these texts; mastery of Confucianism meant the ability to read the sacred messages out of these texts. This tradition did not begin during the Han. We see traces of it as early as the late fourth century B.C., in the writings of Mencius. But it became the dominant mode of Confucianism only after the early decades of the Han.

The Five Classics. The “classics” that Confucius had edited were originally six in number. They were as follows, listed from the most straightforward to the most arcane:

The Book of Poetry
The Book of Documents
The Rituals
The Music
The Yi jing, or Book of Changes
The Spring and Autumn Annals

The *Music* had apparently been lost by the start of the Han (the name may not have referred to any single text). That left five texts, and these came to be viewed as a canon of sacred books, the “Five Classics.”

Confucius was viewed as having had a different type of relation to each of the five texts. The Han theory of the texts ran as follows.

Confucius selected, ordered, and ordained the proper context for employing the 305 poems in the Book of Poetry.

Confucius preserved and explained the original 100 chapters of the Book of Documents.

Confucius rectified and instituted the Rituals – in the case of this one classic, it is unclear whether the early Han Confucians meant by its title a specific text or the entire body of *li* that Confucians sought to master.

Confucius added a final level of commentary to the Yi jing.

Confucius subtly altered the wording of the Spring and Autumn Annals in order to endow this simple annals with profound meaning.

During the early Han, the norm of Confucian scholarship was for an individual Confucian to seek to master one of these five texts so profoundly that he could articulate the authentic Dao that Confucius had either detected or engendered within it. Each text required a special methodology of interpretation (our contemporary term for such an interpretive method is “hermeneutic”).

Sometimes, masters of one particular classic might differ on their methodologies and on the way in which they interpreted the classic in which they specialized. In that case, they were said to be teaching different “traditions” of the classic. Early Han Confucianism is well pictured as a population of men, each qualifying as a Confucian by virtue of his mastery of one classic, and each fiercely loyal to the interpretive tradition that his own teacher had passed on to him.

Where were these lost texts found? The Qin had attempted to destroy most of these texts, allowing only court erudites to possess them. (The *Yi jing*, a divination book, had never been

banned; Li Si, knowing the First Emperor's superstitious nature had exempted such texts from the law.) It is likely that most of the erudites' copies were destroyed when Xiang Yu sacked and burned the Qin capital city of Xianyang. The ban had continued for over fifteen years after the fall of the Qin. How did these texts survive?

Since the *Rituals* may not have actually constituted a written text and the *Yi jing* had never been banned, this question actually applies only to the other three texts. The answers are different in each case.

Rote memorization of the *Book of Poetry* had been required of patrician youths for centuries. The poems were metered, rhymed, and brief, generally easy to memorize and to retain. It is likely that the *Poetry* was never, in fact, lost, because even with no written text it would have been so common a possession of former patrician families that daily speech as well as concerted effort would have dictated its continued availability in the minds of a broad range of people.

The *Book of Documents*, however, was a different matter. Its chapters (a number of which you have encountered in this course) were relatively long and dry and had been composed in a difficult, arcane style. This text was, indeed, lost during the period of banned books. It was recovered only in the early years of Wen-di's reign, during the 170s, and even then, only 29 chapters were pieced together.

The recovery of the *Book of Documents* was a celebrated event. Interest in lost Confucian texts first emerged at the Han court about the time that Wen-di took the throne, and it was soon reported to the emperor that there remained only one man in China who still had knowledge of this text, a scholar named Fu Sheng, who lived in Shandong. At the time that Li Si had banned the *Documents*, Fu had been an erudite at the Qin court, and he had hidden a copy of the text in a wall of his home. After the ban was lifted, he had rescued what remained of that copy, which turned out to be only 29 of the original 100 chapters. These he began to transmit orally to students. In the course of doing so, he memorized it perfectly, but lost the written copy for good.

Wen-di deputed a high officer named Chao Cuo to travel to Shandong to receive from Fu Sheng the transmission of this text, since Fu, who was about ninety years old, was too frail to go to Chang'an. Chao Cuo, who later became prime minister under Jing-di and seems himself to have been principally a Legalist, found Fu, but discovered that the scholar was not only toothless, but the proud possessor of a heavy Shandong accent (tough to understand even today!). Chao Cuo obtained the text, but, we are told, only by enlisting Fu Sheng's daughter as an interpreter for her father.

The story is charming, but is so far-fetched and illogical that it cannot be credited (if Fu had been an erudite, he would not have needed to hide the copy, and why on earth had neither he nor his students ever committed the text to writing?). Nevertheless, *something* happened at this time which resulted in our obtaining a 29-chapter version of the *Documents*, and this tale will suffice as well as any other.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, one of the most bizarre texts in any cultural tradition, has something of a different story. We will discuss it in detail in a later section devoted to that text. Like the *Poetry*, it was preserved intact through a strong oral tradition, but in this case, the power of memory that carried the text was a product of neither the text's poetic quality (it is immaculately dull) nor its widespread familiarity (it was known only to fanatic Confucians). It was preserved through an extremity of reverence which could only be called religious faith in the divinity of its wisdom (though today, almost everyone familiar with it would agree that it possesses no more of that item than a Sears catalogue).

The return of Confucian erudites under Wen-di. All early Han emperors continued the Qin practice of appointing learned men to the position of Erudite at court. The office not only constituted official recognition of each individual erudite's worth as a scholar or master of some valuable art, it carried the privileges of high rank, a very substantial salary, and certain powers of patronage. Erudites were in a position to ensure that their friends and followers would receive lower level appointments (as we can see from the story of Shusun Tong).

Confucians had served as erudites during the Qin and the early years of the Han, but their presence among the ranks of these wiseman advisors was entirely according to the whim of each individual ruler and the recommendations of his high ministers. There existed no institutionalized Confucian presence at court, and no sure avenue of government patronage to which aspiring Confucians might turn. Confucianism was simply a privately pursued scholarly tradition, without any form of official endorsement.

This began to change during the reign of Wen-di, and the form of the new arrangements that were created fully reflected the new character of Confucianism as a text-based cult of classical learning. Although Sima Qian reports that Wen-di himself was inclined towards the works of Legalist writers, as we have already seen he showed a clear interest in the preservation of Confucian learning. It was apparently under Wen-di's reign that Confucians first began to be appointed to the office of erudite on the basis of their mastery of the classical traditions. This opened a new avenue to prestige and potential power for the Confucian movement, one that would reward with government recognition the abstruse textual skills that had increasingly come to characterize Confucianism as a private teaching. Although the presence of masters of the classics did not grow during the era of Huang-Lao court dominance under Jing-di, the office of erudite became the foundation upon which was built Confucian state orthodoxy during the reign of Wu-di.

III. Dong Zhongshu's new Confucian synthesis and his proposals to Wu-di

Dong Zhongshu (c. 179-104) was perhaps the most influential Confucian after Confucius himself. His impact on Confucianism was threefold.

First, he reformulated Confucianism by systematically adapting the popular notions of yin-yang and the five forces into a thoroughly Confucianized

metaphysics, specifically tailored to exalt of the emperor in the style of the Qin-Han state.

Second, from a position as a minor official he successfully proposed to Wu-di the adoption of his enlarged concept of Confucianism as state orthodoxy, and the establishment of Confucian studies as a prerequisite for official position.

Third, within the Confucian tradition, as a master of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* Dong Zhongshu sustained an anti-hereditary doctrine that was explicitly counter to Han imperial interests, thus endowing state Confucianism with a provocatively subversive esoteric direction. (We will discuss this aspect in part IV of this section.)

Dong Zhongshu's imperial metaphysics. Metaphysics is the branch of thought that concerns structures of existence transcending the boundaries of ordinary experience; it often includes cosmology, or speculation on the greater order of the cosmos. Classical Confucianism was extraordinarily free of metaphysics. Confucius's disciple Zigong states in the *Analects* that we may not hear of Confucius's view of the Dao of Heaven or of human nature, and Xunzi, in his "Treatise on Heaven," maintained that man's only proper sphere of inquiry was the social and natural world, not the cosmic or supernatural.

Confucianism changed dramatically during the Han and it is Dong Zhongshu who is usually credited with engineering the change. (Although recent scholarship has cast doubts upon his authorship of some key texts concerning these issues that have long been attributed to him, we will not become engaged in those debates.) The writings that bear Dong Zhongshu's name present traditional Confucian concerns of personal morality and humane rule in the context of an elaborate model of the universe and mankind's entailment in it.

Dong pictured the universe as an organically connected composite of three separate realms of existence: the realm of heaven above, the realm of earth below, and the realm of man between them. Heaven and earth possessed natural types of cyclical rhythms, governed by the forces of yin and yang and by the successive influences of the five forces. This natural realm was largely a *homeostatic* (balanced and self-correcting) system that harmonized a concatenation of rhythms: the day, the month, the seasons, the year, the circuit of Jupiter, and so forth.

But this homeostatic system is not an exhaustive portrait of the cosmos, which also includes elements such as the spirits, mankind, and anomalous natural irregularities, such as comets, earthquakes, floods, and so forth. Dong Zhongshu seems to have viewed mankind as a governor preserving the regularities of nature through action that suppressed the eruption of anomalies. The way in which the human realm performed this function has a number of aspects.

In terms of the regularities of yin, yang, and the five forces, mankind preserves their balance by emulating their natures. That is, in the spring, mankind must act in accordance with the principles of life-giving, as yang is on the rise, and must wear green colored clothes, so as to accord with the force of wood. In autumn, mankind must reap and may make war, as yin is in the

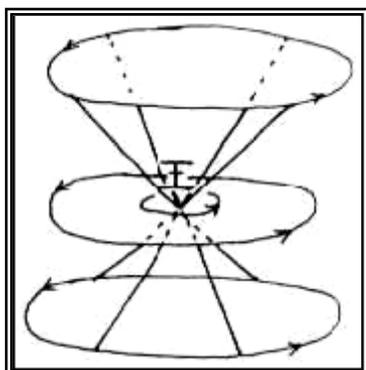
ascendant, representing forces of life-taking; human beings should dress in white, the color of metal, which is the predominant force in the fall. These systems were available to Dong in texts such as the “Monthly Ordinances,” part of which we encountered earlier. Dong worked out new systems along these lines, and we can recognize in them adaptations of *fangshi*, five elements, and Huang-Lao ideas that had previously served to *undermine* the authority of Confucianism.

In terms of the disruptive potential of the spirits, mankind acted as a governor in maintaining the appropriate schedule of sacrifices to the spirits and performing the ceremonies that would honor and propitiate them. If there should appear a sign of spirit disruption, mankind was responsible for adjusting the ceremonies and sacrifices in such a way as to restore homeostatic balance. Spiritual disruptions generally took the form of natural anomalies, reflecting the tight weave between spiritual and material forces.

Such disruptions were, in any event, largely the consequences of human action, which was governed by complex forces beyond those governing nature. It was good that man should employ his mind to go beyond nature, but the innovations of mankind were only appropriate to the degree that they matched the balance of the cosmos. The fundamental issue that determined the value of human behavior was the way in which human action related to natural structures. As a Confucian, Dong offered portraits of virtues such as *ren* and righteousness that were highly naturalistic, in the sense of his overall model.

The central regulator of the human sphere was the king, or emperor. The actions of mankind could not hope to accord with natural patterns if each individual invented his or her own guidelines. Instead, over the course of history, sages had traced the appropriate forms of confluence between human and natural patterns, had developed the complex array of everyday life rituals and focal state ceremonies that ensured a proper fit between man and the cosmos. At the center of this system stood the king, who represented the pivot of all human society, the hub of a constantly revolving wheel of action. The directionality of his actions – his ritual observances, his manifestations of character, his policies – synchronized the action of the entire human realm. If his acts were appropriate, the entire realm would harmonize with nature. If the king deviated from the appropriate path, all human action would be distorted and the homeostasis of the cosmos disturbed.

In cases such as these, the consequences could be grim. A wanton ruler could generate eons of natural disasters and social chaos. Fortunately, the cosmos itself serves as a reactive alarm system that can alert rulers to their errors. If a ruler is misguided, his actions disturb nature and result in visible anomalies. If these are observed by or reported to the ruler, he can become aware that a problem exists, and by administrative inquiry and self-examination he can determine what element of his governance has given rise to this imbalance. If he corrects the problem, balance can be restored before the consequences of his missteps grow beyond his abilities to control.



Dong Zhongshu’s model of the harmonious universe can be represented by the diagram at left, which pictures the realms of heaven, man, and earth in synchronous motion, with the king at the

center, his own directional action tied to the operation not only of the human sphere, but of all the lines of force (yin, yang, five elements, spirituality, and so forth) that link the three realms. The character for “king” (王) was, in Dong’s view, a representation of this model.

Dong Zhongshu elaborated the role of the ruler in this system at great length. In doing so, Dong was not only currying favor for Confucianism by appealing to Wu-di’s self-appraisal as the center of the universe. The portrait of the emperor as the center of the cosmos certainly had the potential to exalt his political standing to heights that were semi-divine, but it also had the effect of sharply *constraining* the emperor. Under Dong’s system, the ruler had a very extensive set of “cosmic duties” to perform. And in light of the stimulus-response model which pictured the effect of the emperor’s actions on the realm of nature, any natural anomaly could be interpreted as a sign of imperial error, thus opening the door to ministerial remonstrance.

Dong Zhongshu’s proposals to Wu-di. We know very little about Dong Zhongshu’s personal life. He came of age early in the reign of Jing-di. He was trained in the Confucian classics and likely benefited from Han court’s growing interest in the preservation of Confucian tradition under Wen-di. But by the time Dong was ready to establish himself in society, the influence of the Empress Dou had effectively closed the court to Confucians. When Wu-di first came to power as a young man with his grandmother the empress still alive, it must have seemed unlikely that the Han court, at which Huang-Lao and Legalist forces were entrenched, would open itself to outsider appointments. It must have seemed simply a matter of form that when Wu-di first ascended the throne in 140, he issued an edict calling for the recommendation of men of talent to serve the throne.

Moreover, if the historical texts are to be trusted, at the time of Wu-di’s accession, the laissez-faire policies of the Huang-Lao court, in effect since Wen-di’s time, had yielded a strong economy and a stable society. Things were going well, and the fact that the same edict called for memorials advising the new emperor on the course that his government should take must have seemed equally pro forma.

Therefore, it was most likely an act of great courage for Dong Zhongshu, a man of no significant position, to submit to the emperor a long and blunt memorial calling for a complete revolution in Han government. This is the way in which Dong’s memorial closed.

When a sage king succeeds to the throne after an era of chaos, he must make a clean sweep of all traces of that era, revive the teachings that transform the people, and exalt them. Once their brilliance has reformed the customary habits of the people, such a king’s descendants may rule for five or six hundred years, if they follow in his path.

In the closing era of the Zhou, the Dao was utterly abandoned and the empire lost. The Qin succeeded to power, but could not reverse this descent and only made it more severe. It laid a heavy prohibition on learning and people were banned from possessing books; it discarded ritual and righteousness and hated hearing mention of them, the hearts of the Qin being set on wiping out all trace of the Dao of the former kings and

indulging in illicit and rudimentary forms of self-interested rule. This why after reigning as Sons of Heaven for a mere fourteen years, the house of Qin saw its empire demolished. Never before had a house arisen that threw chaotic times into deeper chaos and brought ruin to the people of the world as did the Qin.

The poisonous embers of the Qin have yet to be fully extinguished. They have made the customs of the people shallow and vile. The people are contentious and ruthless, pugnacious and resistant, the corruption having penetrated so far.

Confucius said, “Rotten wood cannot be carved, a wall of dung cannot be whitewashed.” Now what the Han succeeded to in following after the Qin was like rotten wood or a wall of dung: though it wished to govern it well it could not be done. As soon as laws are proclaimed crime springs up; as soon as ordinances are issued false reports arise. This is like pouring hot water to cool a boiling pot or carrying tinder to put out a fire, the situation only grows worse.

May I suggest that the situation now is a zither out of tune: if too far gone the strings must be undone and the zither restrung before it can be played. If good governance does not prevail, in extreme cases the form of government must be changed, only then can the state be ordered. If you do not restring a zither that should be restrung needs it, the finest musician cannot play in tune. If you do not change a government that should be changed, the worthiest ruler cannot rule well.

From the time when the Han gained the empire to this day, though it has wished to rule well it has been unable to, and this is precisely because it has never changed what needed change. The ancients had a saying, “To set off to the riverbank wishing for fish is not as good as stepping back to string a net.” Now the Han has set to governance for seventy years, but it would be better to step back and design change. Once this change is designed good rule will be possible, and once government is well ruled, disasters will decrease by the day and blessings will come.

The *Poetry* says, “Aid the people, aid good men, the bounty of Heaven will come.” If you govern so as to aid the people, then you must indeed receive the bounty of Heaven. What one who rules as a king must cultivate is the Dao of the five norms: *ren* and righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and faithfulness. When these five are embellished the king shall receive the assistance of Heaven and benefit from the power of the spirits. The power of his virtue will extend beyond the borders and extend over to all living things.

(Han shu 56.2504-05)

Dong Zhongshu’s memorial caught the eye of Wu-di. Recall that Wu-di was at this time waiting impatiently for an opportunity to free himself from the constraints of a court that reflected the power and perspective of his grandmother. Here was a proposal that urged him to

thoroughly remake his government, and Wu-di was intrigued. He called on Dong Zhongshu to spell out his plan in more detail, and Dong replied with yet another lengthy memorial, filled with Confucian quotations and tales of the sage kings of the past.

In his second memorial, Dong Zhongshu focused upon the issue of staffing a reform government. His goal was clearly to persuade Wu-di to make a clean sweep of government offices. But apart from requesting a change in personnel, Dong also proposed far reaching reforms in the manner in which officials should be selected in the future.

Your Majesty personally ploughs the ritual field in spring to display the primacy of agriculture. Rising early, retiring late, you labor anxiously for the myriads of your people. Your thoughts ever turn to antiquity as you concentrate on seeking worthy men. This is indeed the way in which Yao and Shun set their minds to their task. Yet you have not yet captured those you hunt for, and you have consistently been lax with those officers who serve you.

Consistently failing to train your officers while seeking worthy men is like searching for beautiful patterns in jade without polishing it. In training officers, nothing is more critical than a Grand Academy. A Grand Academy is the gateway of worthy gentlemen and the source of teachings to change the world.

At the present time, within the entire population of a commandery or a kingdom there is often not a single person qualified to respond to a call for officer candidates. This is because the kingly Dao has long been blocked. It is my wish that Your Majesty would establish a Grand Academy and appoint enlightened teachers to train gentlemen from all the world. They should be repeatedly tested in order to make them exhaust the scope of their abilities.* If this is done, Your Majesty should be able to recruit the flower of talented youth.

The commandery wardens and county magistrates are the teachers and leaders of the people. Your Majesty's policies for transforming the world all flow through them to be spread among the people. So if the teachers and leaders are unworthy, then your majesty's virtue will not be spread and your grace will not flow through the empire.

But now, local officials often are themselves without any learning and many simply ignore the laws and guidance of their ruler. They are tyrants to the common people, scheme with scoundrels and turn profiteers. The poor and those without support, the orphaned and

*This appears to be the initial proposal for the Chinese civil service examination system. It was several decades before sporadic and informal exams actually began (with Wu-di acting as chief examiner). This famous meritocratic system predated government examinations in the European West by about fifteen hundred years, and lasted until 1905.

the weak, groan in bitterness without gainful employment. How deeply this falls short of Your Majesty's intent! And in consequence yin and yang have become misaligned, climatic vapors have become blocked, few animals now carry their offspring to term, and the common people are left stranded.* Lack of enlightenment among senior officials has brought all this to pass.

Senior officials generally come from the mid-level palace attendants; those who rise to positions of 2000 bushels of grain in salary are selected from among sitting officers, often on the basis of their wealth. They are not necessarily worthy. Moreover, in ancient times what counted for merit was based on assessments of performance in office, not solely on accumulated seniority. Thus a man of slight talent, though very senior, would not rise beyond a minor office, while a worthy man's lack of seniority was no barrier to his becoming a high ranking aide. (*Han shu* 56.2512-13)

Whether Wu-di was impressed by the ethical weightiness of these arguments we do not know. But they surely fit well with his wish to recruit his own corps of men to replace those beholden to his grandmother and others of her clique.** Dong's request to reorient appointment towards Confucianism, with the prerequisite of academic Confucian training would eliminate all the Huang-Lao and Legalists advocates at court, and his proposal to eliminate considerations of seniority would allow for the rapid installation of a new group of men nationwide. It was most likely considerations such as these which led Wu-di to implement the greater portion of Dong's proposals almost immediately after his grandmother's death in 135.

Dong Zhongshu received a substantial appointment in government after his memorials were accepted by Wu-di, though he never rose to the topmost ranks. Many of his ideas seem actually to have required endorsement by the few high ministers of time who had not been part of Empress Dou's clique, and who had favored Confucianism. However, within just a few years, the imperial academy had been set up, and all ministers who professed to be followers of schools of thought other than Confucianism had been driven from court by imperial edicts. Confucianism, as reformulated through Dong Zhongshu's emperor-centered cosmology, was established as the orthodox ideology of the Han state.

IV. The nature of Han Confucianism as state orthodoxy

State Confucianism and the Legalist state. Once established as a state-sanctioned ideology, Confucianism gradually grew into a mass movement. Young men of all backgrounds who hoped for advancement needed to become well acquainted with Confucian ideas and at least some Confucian texts. Those who wished to rise to the topmost levels of government henceforth had to serve time as textual scholars, studying with one or another of the academy teachers for a number

* Dong refers here to the last hexagram of the *Yi jing*.

** Unlike Empress Lü, the Empress Dou had not had her family installed in high office. Her influence was purely political, and her intimates held term positions from which they could be dismissed without the necessity of a coup.

of years. This did not happen overnight, and in the course of Wu-di's reign those studying at his new academy probably did not exceed one or two hundred. But the future seemed to be limitless for the Confucian school, and from this time on, it is customary to refer to the imperial state as "Confucian China."

There are good reasons why the label "Confucian China" is inappropriate for the Han or for any other era of Chinese history. These reasons concern the meaning that we assign to the word "Confucian." If we use that word simply to denote the fact that the figure and recorded sayings of Confucius were officially orthodox, and that all candidates for public office needed to show their knowledge of and worshipful attitude towards the teachings of Confucius, then the term is appropriate. If, however, the term were meant to suggest that China was ruled according to principles consistent with the early school of Confucianism, then it would be deeply inappropriate. The structures of Chinese governmental practice never varied in their basic form or goals from those established by the Qin. If we want to apply a Classical label to traditional Chinese government, "*Legalist*" would be the proper one to use. However, Legalism had been tarnished by the conduct and fate of the Qin, and until Mao Zedong attempted to rehabilitate the school in the 1960s, to refer to a person as a "Legalist" was to curse him. The proclaimed ideology of the state from the time of Wu-di on was Confucianism. It is an irony of Chinese history that Confucianism, which initially shunned engagement with any ruler who fell short of the legendary sages, endured for thousands of years as the handmaid of despotic autocracy.

Dong Zhongshu, whose genius brought Confucianism to power, was also largely responsible for this result. By reconfiguring Confucianism through the lens of yin-yang five-forces theory, he had created an ideology centered upon the figure of the autocrat. This was a powerful attraction to Wu-di, but it was also a great distortion of Confucius's original message, which linked efficacious rule to ethical self-cultivation, rather than to ritual punctiliousness and a view of the universe as a mirror of the ruler's grandeur.

The most direct way in which to measure the effects of Dong's repackaging is to reexamine the nature of Wu-di's reign. As we saw earlier, no reign more closely resembled that of the First Emperor. Wu-di's policies were militaristically expansionist. He was careless of the burdens of tax and labor that he placed upon his people and he was personally absorbed in religious quests that related principally to his own immortality. It is difficult to see how the major features of his reign reflect any degree of Confucian influence. He acted, as did the First Emperor, entirely in accord with Legalist principles while remaining a personal devotee of *fangshi* arts.

In addition, the men who rose to highest office under Wu-di, while schooled in Confucian rhetoric, were frequently military and economic technocrats. Confucianism served as their gateway to power and allowed them to present their proposals in a form that was widely palatable, but eventually they were, in fact, accused by those more closely tied to the Confucian academy of Legalist leanings.*

*This began a pattern frequent in later eras of Confucian appointees actually serving as an opposition faction to "pragmatic" ministers favored by the emperor.

The classical erudites. While the technocrats grew in numbers, those more deeply committed to Confucianism clustered at the Imperial Academy that was the first fruit of Dong Zhongshu's success. The academy became more than a school; it was also the home of a new array of erudites, whose history is central to the nature of Han Confucianism.

When the non-Confucians were expelled from Wu-di's court shortly after the death of the Empress Dou, one of the newly prominent Confucians at court proposed that the position of Erudite be reconfigured to reflect this changed situation. Since *fangshi* and Huang-Lao adepts were no longer eligible for court appointment, it only made sense to purge the ranks of the erudites as well, and reserve the office solely for those who were masters of Confucianism. In the context of Han Confucianism's bookishness, this meant that the post of erudite would now be reserved solely for masters of the significant teaching traditions of the "Five Classics." It would be men expert in the interpretation of wisdom texts who would be placed in charge of the education of all aspiring officers. Wu-di adopted this proposal.

The erudites thereafter became the defining force of Confucian understanding in the Han. The position of erudite became increasingly valued. Students at the academy who were attached to particular masters would, after all, move on to high positions in government, making the erudites the revered teachers of the most powerful men in China. In time (after Wu-di's reign) it became quite common for erudites themselves to rise to the highest positions in government, even becoming on several occasions prime ministers.

The effects on Confucianism were not always constructive. Mastery of existing interpretive traditions became the goal of men on the make, and instances of fraud crept into the erudite selection process. One prominent candidate almost received an erudite appointment on the basis of a unique and curious commentary of the *Yi jing* in his possession. He described movingly how his teacher, a celebrated master of an established tradition for which an erudite post had been created earlier, had on his deathbed conveyed this secret teaching to him, deeming him the only student capable of understanding it. Unfortunately, this worthy disciple's appointment fell through when his fellow students, learning of his claim, sent a letter to the capital noting that he had been out of town during his master's last illness and death.

Others invented elaborate new hermeneutic traditions, hoping that their esoteric interpretations would lead to the creation of a new erudite position which they could occupy. A bit after Wu-di's reign, the *Yi jing* master Jing Fang developed a means of combining *Yi jing* divination techniques with five forces theory, the sexagenary cycle, and local weather conditions. He rose high in the emperor's esteem and his teaching was eventually endowed with an erudite's chair, but it did him no good. Jealous enemies at court sought opportunities to displace him in the emperor's affections. When he was sent off on a mission distant from the capital, his position became vulnerable. The *Shiji* records his frantic efforts to use his arts to forestall his enemies. "The day is overcast with heavy clouds," he wrote to the emperor from a stop on the road, "and I have calculated that they're slandering me at court. I knew that they would – *but why are you listening to them?*" He rushed back, but met an untimely end before he could arrive. This tale of "Confucian" intrigue recalls the relationship between emperor and *fangshi* at the Qin court.

Such stories show how Confucian learning had become a commodity, a ticket to prestige and wealth. “Better to leave your son a classic than a basket of gold,” ran a popular saying. The erudite Xiahou Sheng, a master of the *Book of Documents* who also combined textual and meteorological insights to tell the future, instructed those studying the records of Yao, Shun, and the Duke of Zhou under his tutelage: “If you can’t master a classic, you might as well go back to the farm!”

The examples of Ching Fang and Xiahou Sheng show how court Confucians came increasingly to resemble the *fangshi* practitioners they had displaced in the ranks of the erudites. Apart from the practice of linking divination to classical exegesis (the explication of textual meanings), these men also made increasing use of Dong Zhongshu’s theory of omenology, based on the stimulus-response relationship of imperial action and the behavior of the cosmos.

The theory of omens held that anomalous events in the world of nature should be understood as the universe’s critique of the emperor’s policies or personal conduct.* Nature came to be filled with political meaning, and only the emperor’s ministers had received the type of training that would allow that meaning to be comprehended.

During the century that followed Wu-di’s reign, the omenological dimension of Confucius grew in scale until it dwarfed all other aspects. For a time, Confucianism became as much a school of divination as a school of ethical, political, or ritual ideology. Confucians became expert at creating their own omens – imprints of flaming birds, leaves with portentous words etched in them by “worms,” sightings of Elvis in supermarkets – it was no longer necessary to wait for nature to act in order to influence imperial policies.

These practices much later led to a rationalistic reaction within the Confucian establishment. Nevertheless, they were not alien to the spirit of Dong’s teachings. Dong seems very likely to have understood that his system and his proposals to Wu-di placed Confucianism under the aegis of an autocrat even as it grossly enhanced his symbolic status. There are many indications that Dong saw what he was doing as a pragmatic compromise, and meant to arm Confucianism with powerful weapons to use against its chief patron.

Perhaps the best evidence of this lies in the school of *Spring and Autumn Annals* interpretation to which Dong belonged. Dong was a prominent classicist at a time when it didn’t pay, and he was regarded as one of the two greatest *Annals* masters of his day. Both he and his peer, a man name Hu Wusheng, had received training in an interpretive school known as the “Gongyang tradition,” named after a man called Gongyang Gao, of uncertain origin or date. We will read more of the Gongyang tradition in a subsequent section, but we need to note here that one of the features of this tradition seems to have been that it denied any legitimacy whatever to hereditary succession to office – even when it came to the emperor’s position.

*This view utterly reversed the anti-religious stance of Xunzi, the last of the great Warring States Confucians, who had taught just a century earlier.

If Dong Zhongshu was a leader of this tradition, its teaching would place him in a position potentially adversarial to the interests of the Han imperial house. It is unlikely that Wu-di would have been quite so enthusiastic about Dong's placing the emperor at the center of the universe if this had no implications for his son and descendants, or if even his own qualifications to remain at the center were dependent upon the quality of his conduct.

The seriousness of this aspect of Dong's teachings and their influence upon the Confucian erudites is illustrated by an important story that postdates Wu-di's reign, but that enlightens us as to the fundamental relationship between the Han court and Confucianism.

The events of the story, which occurred in 78 B.C., during the reign of Wu-di's successor Zhao-di, concern Sui Meng, a Confucian attached to one of the ministries of court. Sui Meng was a master of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. He had received his training from one of Dong Zhongshu's principal disciples and his rise in the Han bureaucracy was a product of his expertise in *Annals* interpretation. While we know very little about how Sui Meng employed the classics, his biography appears in the *History of the Former Han* as one of a group of men known for their *fangshi* style of hermeneutics.

Sui Meng's story indicates that even some Han Confucians who appear to us to be charlatans may have had sincere political ideals, and it also illustrates how Dong Zhongshu's omenology may have been linked to the subversive ideas evident in his tradition of *Annals* interpretation.

During the first month (78 B.C.), south of Mt. Tai and Mt. Wulai, there arose a grumbling noise like the sound of thousands of voices. When the people looked towards it, a huge boulder twenty feet tall stood itself upright. It was so large that its circumference spanned the outstretched arms of forty-eight people. Its base was buried eight feet deep in the ground, and it stood on three other boulders.* After the boulder rose upright, a flock of several thousand white crows descended beside it.**

At this time, in the district of Changyi, the tree of the altar of the earth, which had withered and toppled over, came back to life.*** In addition, in Linyuan a huge willow

*The image is of a sacred tripod vessel associated with royal legitimacy.

**According to five-forces theory, the Han Dynasty (earth; yellow) would be succeeded by an imperial house of the sign of metal, whose color was white. (Recall that the Zhou succession was supposedly heralded by a red crow, the color of the Zhou force of fire.)

***Four years after these events, a scandal in the imperial succession involved the designated heir, the King of Changyi, and a member of the lowly Gongsun cadet branch of the Liu lineage, Gong-sun Bing, who displaced the King of Changyi as the next emperor.

tree that had been split and lay dead also came back to life, and worms ate written characters in its leaves forming a text that read, “Gongsun Bingyi is enthroned.”*

Sui Meng considered these events in light of the exegetical traditions of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. “Boulders and willows both belong to the class of yin objects,” he reasoned, “and are symbols of the common people. Mt. Tai is the sacred marchmount Dai and the location where kings ritually announce to Heaven changes of dynastic clan. Now a boulder rising upright and a dead willow coming to life are not things that can be achieved by human effort. These must indicate that one from among the people should be the Son of Heaven. Since it was a withered altar tree that returned to life, this must mean that the previously discarded clan of Gongsun will rise again.”

But Sui Meng had no idea where the descendants of the Gongsun branch might be. He reasoned in this way: “Our former teacher Dong Zhongshu has said: Though there sit on the throne the offspring of the prior ruler, bearing the patents of office, this should be no bar to the receipt of the Mandate by a true sage. Moreover, the house of Han is descended from the Emperor Yao,** and thus carries within it the tradition of yielding the state. The Han emperor would do best to send some person to search throughout the land for a worthy man and yield to him the imperial throne, providing for himself an estate one hundred *li* square to which he may retire, in the manner of the descendants of the rulers of the Yin and Zhou dynasties. Such action would constitute compliant obedience the Mandate of Heaven.”

Sui Meng prevailed upon a friend named Si who held a senior appointment among the palace officers to convey to the emperor a memorial to this effect.

At the time, Zhao-di was young and General-in-Chief Huo Guang was acting as regent. Huo Guang was outraged and sent the memorial to be investigated by the Chamberlain for Law Enforcement. The finding was that Sui Meng and Si were guilty of confusing the people by means of wild rumors, a capital offence against morality. Both men were executed.

Five years later, the future Xuan-di (Gongsun Bingyi) was raised from among the people. When he took the throne, he appointed Sui Meng’s son to a position as palace attendant.
(*Han shu* 75.3153-54)

The story of Sui Meng is a very complex set of historical data. The way that the story is told seems to force us to conclude that either worms or Sui Meng had the ability to see the future

*Evidence has not confirmed that early Chinese worms were politically astute. Zoological facts suggest that this canny prediction of future events may be a later human embellishment.

**This was a claim that the Liu clan had made to strengthen its legitimacy.

– in 78 B.C. no one could have foreseen that Zhao-di (then only eighteen) would soon die without issue, and that a bizarre succession dispute would result in the recruitment to the throne of a poor cousin of the Lius. Clearly, the events that led to Sui Meng's death differed from those recorded a century later in this tale.

But what is significant for us is that Dong Zhongshu's name is specifically linked to a subversive anti-hereditary doctrine, that the doctrine is put into play in the context of omenological *Annals* interpretation, and that a Confucian master risked and lost his head to pursue these doctrines in political practice.*

The Sui Meng story serves as a symbol of the complex relationship between the new Confucian bureaucracy of the Han and the Legalist state it served.

*If we rule out the possibility that Sui Meng knew the future, then the appointment of his son – the kinsman of a high criminal – by the next emperor also becomes a significant indicator of the strength of these ideas at court.

KEY NAMES AND TERMS

Shusun Tong
The Five Classics
hermeneutics

Dong Zhongshu
State Confucianism

Sui Meng
Classical

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *Why was the Han initially so hostile to Confucianism?*
2. *What services did Confucianism initially offer to the Han?*
3. *During the early Han, prior to Wu-di, how was Confucianism sustained while the Huang-Lao and Legalist cliques controlled the imperial court?*
4. *What is Confucian classicism?*
5. *How did Confucianism come to prevail as state orthodoxy? What did it have to offer Wu-di?*
6. *In what ways did Dong Zhongshu's brand of Confucianism differ from Classical Confucianism? In what respects was it truly a Confucian ideology?*
7. *Review how the erudite bureau of government influenced Chinese intellectual history during the Qin and early Han.*