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Michel Cartier

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris

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HISTORICAL MYTHS OR MYTHICAL HISTORY?

MICHEL CARTIER

Nothing would be more beneficial to Sinologists, who seldom venture in the fields of Japanese or Korean studies, than to attempt a reading of the *Shiji* (Historical Records) in parallel with the *Nihonshoki* or the *Samguk sagi*, which constitute the true Japanese and Korean counterparts to Sima Qian's historiographical masterpiece. A comparison of the three great chronicles of the major Eastern kingdoms, as a matter of fact, highly illuminates distinctive characteristics of each of the major Far Eastern cultures. The *Shiji* emphasizes the basic continuity of the Chinese political entity, in spite of all dynastic changes, whereas the *Nihonshoki* strictly identifies the Japanese destiny with the genealogy of the imperial clan and the *Samguk sagi* counts parallel historical developments culminating in the merger of the three originally independent “kingdoms” of Silla, Paekche and Koguryo into the unified Koryo, late in the tenth century of our era. The *Shiji* begins in the middle of an historical process, the moment where the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) pledges fealty to Shennong, the legitimate sovereign of the mythical Middle Kingdom, and stages a war against rebellious barons. This occurs at a time when the Chinese state is already constituted and when the Chinese culture is seen as already developed. The *Nihonshoki* actually begins at time zero, a time before time, when the first generation of the gods who are to give birth to the first imperial ancestors have not yet emerged from the original chaos. The *Samguk sagi*, on the other hand, cannot be said to have a definite chronological starting point since the three kingdoms which together will form the unified Korean state, originate at three different points of an “inverse” time: the first appearance of the leader responsible for the founding of the “legitimate” dynasty anticipates the ultimate reunification of the three independent kingdoms into the unified Koryo. Each section of the book invariably starts with the dis-
covery by an "anterior king"—the identity of whom remains unclear—of a "divine child"—the incarnation of a celestial deity—whose destiny is to become the actual founder, or re-founder, of one of the three kingdoms.

It seems quite natural to distinguish the secular or rational Chinese historical approach from the Japanese and Korean traditions which give supernatural beings a large share in the creation of their culture or the constitution of their kingdoms. This opposition is, however, simplistic and paradoxical because the historiographical traditions of both Japan and Korea are rooted in the Chinese tradition. The Shiji antedates the Nihonshoki by a good eight centuries and the Samguk sagi by more than a thousand years. It is clear that these different ways of recounting history are related to the concepts of kingship developed within the three different cultures. The Japanese "celestial emperor," or tennō, derives his legitimacy from a uninterrupted filiation going back to Amaterasu, the goddess of the Sun, and ultimately to deities as old as the universe. The Japanese imperial clan precedes the apparition of mankind and is by essence unique. There is, moreover, an identification between the first imperial ancestors and the revelation of the elements that constitute "genuine" Japanese culture. The Korean monarchy, on the other hand, is by essence discontinuous and is to be recreated, or relegitimated, at the time of each dynastic change. The founder of a royal clan is necessarily the incarnation of a "celestial deity." History is equated with the endless repetition of a myth: the discovery of a new "divine child" is often connected with mountain deities or requires the intervention of wild animals playing the role of intermediaries between men and gods. Hence the recurrent intervention of supernatural beings and powers supposed to ascertain the "divine" origin of the new ruler. A Chinese emperor, on the contrary, is but the momentary recipient of the "heavenly mandate," holding his power from Heaven only by virtue of a contract. He may be "legitimately" deposed at every moment as soon as he ceases to behave like a "Son of Heaven" and starts to behave like a tyrant. In other words, the Chinese state—the so-called Middle Kingdom—is by no means to be adequated with one clan or with any particular dynasty. Power ultimately rests with Heaven.

For Sima Qian, the author of the Shiji, the main task of the historian is not the legitimation of the ruling house nor the
nationalistic assertion of any "genuine" cultural traits but the elucidation of the political legitimacy of the present ruling family. This is the reason why so much space has to be devoted to events closely associated with the transmission of power such as deviations from the rule of heredity, rebellions, usurpations or "legitimate" revolutions. Although dealing with a form of transcendental kingship, Chinese history is basically secular. It is fundamentally different from the mythical histories compiled by Japanese and Korean historians.

This way of defining the Chinese "historical project," however, does not solve every difficulty. Despite the fact that the Chinese emperor has very little in common with a Japanese tennō who derives his legitimacy from his descent from the Sun, or with a Korean king conceived as the reincarnation of a celestial deity, he is nevertheless a sacred person, a unique mediator between Heaven and mankind. The typical messianic atmosphere that permeates the description of a Chinese dynastic change reminds one of the Korean tales associated with the "discovery" of a founder of dynasty. The mythical nature of Xie and Houji, respectively first ancestors of the Shang and Zhou royal houses, is obvious (1). Much nearer to Sima Qian's own time, the fall of the Qin dynasty and the rise of Liu Bang, the charismatic leader who founded the Han dynasty, are surrounded by various prodigies and supernatural interventions.

There is a mythic side to the Shiji's treatment of the history. Celestial powers are always active behind the scene. What seems really puzzling—or even paradoxical—for a modern reader in his comparison of the standard Chinese version of national origins with their Japanese and Korean counterparts is that all mythical elements have been so carefully eradicated, to the point that the first two chapters of the Shiji sound like the exposition of a dynasty, with very much space devoted to the elucidation of the genealogical line of succession of the different rulers. They are like a mutilated version of the Genesis, deprived of the whole story of the creation, life in Paradise, and the Fall. We can but notice the striking contrast between this purely "political" interpretation of the origin of the Middle kingdom and the parallel traditions transmitted through the writings of most philosophers, and particularly the Taoist school (2).

Myths referring to the founding of the Chinese monarchy
attribute a privileged position to the first “three emperors”—Fuxi, Shennong, and Huangdi—who are usually presented as cultural heroes, creators of the innovations which were to make the Chinese people different from the animals or the surrounding “barbarians.” They mythical character of these first “three emperors” is evident. The way they look—half-men, half-monsters—suggests the gradual transformation of non-human into human beings. Their succession is arranged as a means of expressing the emergence of the major elements of civilization in the eyes of Chinese philosophers of the pre-imperial period: the invention of a script and the related divination techniques by Fuxi, the revelation of the rites of marriage and the kinship system by Nügúa, Fuxi’s sister but at the same time his spouse; the elaboration of agricultural tools and techniques by Shennong, the “divine agriculturist,” and, finally, the complementary discovery of medicine and the art of war by Huangdi, the “Yellow Emperor.” In this way, nothing necessary was left to be discovered by mankind, except politics.

The notable absence in the first comprehensive history of the Middle Kingdom of any reference to the creation of the world or the invention of civilization is pertinent to the spirit of Confucianism, which, inasmuch as it accepts the world as it exists, is unwilling to consider the problem of origins and accordingly refuses ask how culture emerged. Sima Qian is perfectly true to the doctrine of Master Kong (Confucius) when he carefully erases any aspect of Huangdi’s personality which would remind one of his demiurgic character. The “Yellow Emperor” is no more than the last ruler of an almost forgotten dynasty, whose quick retreat from the scene makes possible the subsequent ascension of the “politicians.” According to the Confucian tradition, the most important event in the creation of the classical monarchy is not the replacement of Huangdi by the first of the “Five Emperors”, a mythical dynastic transition, but the voluntary transmission of power by Yao to Shun, outside any consideration of kinship or filiation. The most popular Confucian cultural hero is The Great Yu, a ruler famous for his enduring fight against the flooding rivers. He is credited with the invention of water conservancy and irrigation and viewed as a model administrator, but has lost nearly all the truly demiurgic—as well as non-human aspects of his character.
The Account of How Things Began

An account of origins systematically eliminated from the discourse of orthodox Chinese historians, has nevertheless always constituted a favorite theme for the Chinese philosophers. The evolution of political society, which is at the very core of Confucian reflexion, has seldom been treated in a purely speculative way or considered from the point of view of historical evolution—even if the themes of the decay of the institutions and of the rulers inevitably losing their “virtue” in the course of time literally obsess Chinese political thinkers from the start.

The famous opening paragraph in the “Liyun” chapter of the Liji (The Book of Rites) provides the reader with a sketchy characterization of “three stages” in social development, in which later commentators were happy to find a theory of the cyclical evolution of political systems (3), but which might also be read as a typology of political societies. The stage of the “great unity” (datong, an expression with a Taoistic flavour seldom used anywhere else in the whole classical literature) first of all refers to a human society lacking constraints wherein every member is altruistic enough to allow a non-conflictual coexistence between autonomous individuals, ignoring any distinction of sex or age. According to this text, “robbers, filchers and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors were left open.” It is important to emphasize that this stage has much in common with the modern concept of “welfare society.” Hence the definite notion of an affluent society and the complete disappearance of family as an institution supporting “widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease” since “men did not love only their parents, nor did they treat as children only their own sons.” This stage of genuine goodness is to be clearly differentiated from the “stage of rites (li) and justice (yi),” a societal form mainly equated to “family order,” wherein individuals are closely interwoven into a strict hierarchy through the cardinal “ruler-subject,” “father-son,” “elder-younger brother” and “husband-wife” relations but are nevertheless able to internalize “moral constraints.” The third stage can only be defined negatively as the “negation of the rites” (fei li). It is obviously an inverted form of the preceding “ritual order.”

This representation of the social evolution is also an ideal
representation of historical evolution. The invention of “rites” is explicitly attributed to the “six cultural heroes” of the ancient times, from the Great Yu to the Duke of Zhou. The very notion of disorder, or selfish pursuit of “individual interest,” could apply, to those living during the period of the “Warring States,” either to the recent past or the contemporary period. Should we consider the situation described as the stage of the “great unity” as a form of utopia, a moment of excellence when sage rulers put the “great Dao” into practice, or should we rather ascribe it to an historical “before”? It is not easy to answer since, as the Master admits in the opening sentence, he himself “has never seen the practice of the great Dao, and the eminent men of the Three Dynasties.” At any rate, the second interpretation seems to be substantiated by the very fact that the paragraph on dàtōng is followed directly by a paragraph alluding to an “ancient” period during which life was still very primitive. The whole passage is worth quoting at length since it offers a picture of antiquity which we shall find again and again in the classical literature: “Formerly the ancient kings had no houses. In winter they lived in caves which they had excavated, and in summer in nests which they had framed. They knew not yet the transforming power of fire, but ate fruit of plants and trees, and the flesh of birds and beasts, drinking their blood, and swallowing also the hair and feathers. They knew not yet the use of flax and silk, but clothed themselves with feathers and skins.” (4)

Is this section the record of a long disappeared past kept in the collective memory of the Chinese people or is it a picture of a primitive society as a pure intellectual reconstruction? Even if it is possible to believe that the “period of rites” was also a primitive monarchical stage which took place somewhere between the close of the third millennium and the beginning of the Bronze Age, a time which is identified both by tradition and by some contemporary archaeologists with the constitution of a state corresponding to the “legendary” Xia dynasty, the identification of the preceding “pre-ritual” society with a stage of savagery still very close to animality does not really fit with the cultural evidence discovered by the Chinese archaeologists. The images of a “savage” society antedating the invention of the rituals has no more historical foundations than the representatives of a primitive mankind imagined by Lucretius or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to which they
are very close, and which, until a very recent time, were considered in Europe as a reliable substitute for pre-history.

**The Legalist alternative to Confucianism**

The works of the Legalist philosophers are the most sophisticated Chinese representations of historical development. This is especially true of a set of texts which attempt to reconstruct a primitive stage, vividly depicted either as an affluent society or one in which humans and animals are almost the same. They provide rational accounts of the transition from this stage to a more elaborate “feudal” (fengjian) age, a problem hardly touched upon in the few sections of the Confucian classics dealing with these questions. Three tentative reconstructions of the whole historical process offered in four texts, namely the “Kaisai” (Opening Frontiers) and “Huace” (Designing Stratagems) chapters of the Shangjunshu, the “Wudou” (Five Pests) chapter of the Han Feizi and, finally, the less famous “Chimi” (On Luxury) chapter of the Guanzi are particularly interesting (5). The basis of those somewhat sketchy descriptions is, just as in the “Liyun” chapter of the Liji, the idea of a two- or three-stage evolution of Chinese society, the main difference being that their authors definitely envision this social development as an irreversible process.

The notion of a “primitive” society, a stage usually ascribed to the “highest antiquity” (shanggu), a time preceding the founding of the Xia dynasty as well as “civilization, only alluded to in some passages of the Confucian classics or of the early Taoist texts, shares several traits with the description proposed in the section of the “Liyun.” The primitive men were nest builders living in trees, did not know how to light fire, or at best produced fire through friction, had to fight wild beasts with their bare hands, or at best with clubs and very simple weapons. Since they ignored the cultivation of the five grains, the breeding of silkworms and the weaving of textile fibers, they had to live on a diet of “fruit of plants and trees,” herbs or raw meat and cover their bodies with “the skins of birds and animals.” This picture is complemented by some considerations concerning the lack of a clear notion of kinship: “During the time when Heaven and Earth were established, and the people were produced, people knew their mothers
but not their fathers.” On the other hand, these men of old used to live in harmony, “hence neither large rewards nor heavy punishments were used, and the people were naturally in good order.”

The Legalist “primitive society,” which bears some resemblance with the prehistoric society reconstructed through the evidence of archaeology—hence the facility with which these descriptions are taken at face value by many Marxist scholars—makes more sense as a starting point for an evolutionary process; an interesting feature is that it was consistently considered as a period of affluence—“without working there was enough to live”—a theme touched on in various paragraphs of the Han Feizi or of the Guanzi, at best as a “savage world” characterized by a crude and precarious way of living, a stage still very near animality depicted in the Shangjunshu.

The second and third stages, too, show some similarity with the evolutionary model expounded in the “Liyun.” The “feudal” (fengjian) age is characterized by the prevalence of the rites and the importance of kinship. As in the Golden Age of the Confucian classics, people are respectful of their elders, unselfish and avoid competition. There is no necessity to enforce any “law” since the vast majority of men spontaneously adhere to the social order, punishments being of a purely symbolical nature. The third, and last, stage, which is designated in the works of the Legalist school as the “legal” (fa) age, is on the contrary an age of violence, selfishness and competition. People fight with each other showing no respect for their elders or superiors. The political order based on kinship loses its former efficiency. Social order must be enforced through legalized violence. The time has come to rule the people through the institution of legal codes fixing rewards and punishments.

Although the three stage evolution conceived by the Legalist or para-Legalist thinkers has much in common with the process described by the orthodox Confucian—a primitive age, an age of maturity in which social order is achieved through the performance of rituals, followed by a period of decay characterized by the eruption of violence, significantly termed “disorder” (luan)—the Legalist vision of the historical development diverges from the Confucian cycle on two important aspects. The historical evolution, as conceived by the Confucian thinkers, is a purely moral
process. Decay is but the result of the "loss of virtue" of the ruler. In this respect, it is at any moment possible to restore order and go back to the "golden age," whether the age of rites or the utopian stage of the Great Unity. The only requirement would be the "restoration of rites" (fu li). The Legalist conception of the historical development is most at variation with this Confucian vision. First of all, the transformation of one stage into another is an irreversible process. There is no way to come back to the "primitive" age and it is clear that the age of laws is inferior to the preceding "feudal" period. Secondly, the Legalist philosophers cannot accept the idea of a moral character of this evolution. Material powers, not the loss of virtue of the ruler, are at work behind the scene. History can be explained rationally, not religiously. It is not to be explained by the interventions of Heaven. The task of the political thinker is to determine which non-transcendental elements are significant and which are not.

Shang Yang, the famous reformist of the Qin Kingdom and author of the Shangjunshu, Han Feizi and the Guanzi do not agree about the causes of historical change. The first author proposes a purely mechanical explanation of the social and institutional evolution: an irreversible transformation of the whole social fabric is induced by the population growth, so that the introduction of an "institutionalized violence"—the enforcement of law through harsh punishments—becomes necessary. But on the whole, evolution is neutral: "As conditions in the world change, different principles are practiced." Han Feizi pays more attention to a combination of technical progress and demographic change. The beneficial effects of technical progress are annihilated by the growth of population: "The result is that there are many people and few supplies, and that one has to work hard for a meagre return." The post-ritual society is no more an affluent society; moreover, it is irremediably contaminated by the state of fierce "competition" which prevails then. Han Feizi displays a more pessimistic conception of life than his predecessor Shang Yang. To him institutionalized violence appears to be the only reasonable response to an explosion of egoistic interests. The Guanzi, in the "Chimi" chapter develops an entirely different argument. For him, as for Han Feizi, the state of nature is characterized by a weakly organized social order in a comparatively affluent primitive society of self-sufficient individuals; as social relations grow
denser, economic exchanges become more extensive creating a
sense of solidarity among men. According to this view, the de-
velopment of “luxury,” which depends on innovations making
labour more intensive and eventually requires the waste of large
quantities of consumable goods produced at great cost (6), proves
socially beneficial.

Conclusion

Modern commentators of ancient Chinese philosophy very
often view the Legalist thinkers as introducing the “idea of prog-
ress” in opposition to a Confucian school which was stubbornly
turned toward the past. The situation was certainly much more
complex. The notion of a “three-stage” social and institutional
development is basically a philosophical concept common to most
philosophical schools of the time, with the possible exception of
the Taoists who usually refer to a “golden age” in many ways
reminiscent of the Great unity but did not elaborate on the
further social developments. On the other hand, this model had
practically no appeal for the historians of later times, whether
“professional” or “private.” Except for a few general histories
with a strong religious bias, written by Buddhist monks or Taoist
scholars attempting to introduce the notions of the creation of the
world or the illumination of the Buddha as starting points for the
history of mankind, no later orthodox historian was ever tempted
to take the speculations of Han Feizi or of the Guanzi as keys for
the reinterpretation of history in a Legalistic fashion. This is not
to say that these philosophers had no influence on the later
periods. In fact, starting with the encyclopedic school of the late
Tang, Liu Zongyuan and the compilers of the “Ten compendia”
(Shi tong) introduced an institutional dimension into the historical
field. Much has been written, from the Tang dynasty onwards,
about the opposition between “feudal” (fengjian) and “cen-
tralized” (junxian) institutions. Ironically, some Ming reformers
even went as far as claiming a possibility to go back to the more
“primitive” feudal methods, or at least to combine them with a
certain degree of centralization. The lesson of the Legalists had
not been completely forgotten.

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris
NOTES

1. Both legendary ancestors are said to have a miraculous birth. Jiandi, the mother of Xie, having swallowed the fallen egg of a “dark bird” (a swallow?), and Jiangyuan, the mother of Houji, having playfully stepped into the footprint of a giant. It is important to notice that, in contrast to the Korean model, neither Xie nor Houji became king. The effects of these miraculous births are felt much later, especially in Houji’s case whose descendants gain power after several generations.

2. See especially the texts attributed to the “fathers” of the Taoist school (Zhuangzi, Liezi and Huainanzi) and the Shanhaijing.

3. Much attention has been given to this passage and to the notion of “Great unity” (or “Great Harmony”) since its “rediscovery” by Kang Youwei and the reformist school of the late nineteenth century. Emphasis is usually put on the “cyclical” aspect of the “three stage” theory, in accordance with the Confucian interpretation.


5. For a rendering of the most relevant passages in the Shangjunshu and the Han Feizi, see Fung Yu-lan, A history of Chinese philosophy (Vol 1, The period of the philosophers, translated by Derk Bodde, Princeton University Press, 1952, pp. 315, 328, 329. The “Chimi” chapter of the Guanzi has been partially translated in Lewis Maverick’s Economic Dialogues in Ancient China, Selections from the Kuan-tzu, under the title: “Generous rewards.”

6. The text explicitly refers to the elaborate funeral structures of the late Warring States period. A very humorous definition of luxury is proposed: “boiling painted eggs over a fire of carved faggots.”