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The Historiography of Utopia: Images of Moral Rule in Early Chinese History

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During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), the desire to return to a Golden Age, a state governed in perfect accordance with the Way, was expressed in widely disparate literatures. In particular, the Five Pecks of Rice and Yellow Turban movements drew upon such evidence as was available—especially that regarding Daqin, an idyllic state vaguely located on China's northwest frontier—in attempting to realize a more perfect government and society.

Reference to Daqin is made in several texts, notably the Hou Hanshu and the Wei Liè quotations preserved in Pei Songzhi's commentary to the Sanguo Zhi. Although the Daqin political ideal was drawn upon heavily by the above-mentioned Daoist movements and, to a lesser extent, by subsequent Daoists, its imagery and political structure can also be seen as part of the rich literature on statecraft—"real" and "imagined"—which developed in Han times.

In the first decades of the Qin and Han dynasties, especially during the formative period from Qinshi Huangdi to Han Wudi, the crucial problems of statecraft—solidifying rule, centralizing political institutions, protecting borders—were more than mere "political" problems attached to the creation of a centralized state. They were religious and philosophical problems as well. What was being constructed, alongside a vast centralized monarchy, was a way of conceptualizing government in China, with special attention focused upon the "One Man", the Son of Heaven, and his place within government, society, and the cosmos.

Early Han attempts at such synthesis constituted an eclectic blend of yin/yang and five elements theory, ancestral rites, calendrical symbolism, magic, and prophecy. During the first century of the imperial period, the neat divisions later erected between "Confucianism" and "Daoism" were quite hazy. Nor were symbolic systems based on yin/yang and the five elements as sophis-
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The utopian imagery surrounding Daqin, although contained in later Han texts, partakes of this eclecticism; it is difficult to divide "Daoist" concerns from "Confucian" ones in the Hou Hanshu and Sanguo Zhi accounts. The central intellectual concern of early Han Daoists, no less than Confucians, was the definition and formation of a strong central government. In spite of the fascinating uses made of the Daqin accounts by later Daoist movements and sects, the historical texts above testify to concern over the proper forms of governing, a concern which lay at the very heart of early Han political thought.

It is this—the depiction of a blueprint for social order centered on the position of the ruler—that is, I contend, at the heart of the Daqin narratives contained in Han and later texts. The Daqin accounts are not merely a collection of factual statements concerning far-away lands, a "model of" a distant reality. It is, though exceedingly terse, a strategy, a "model for" perfect rule.

Daqin and China's Northwest Frontier: A Discursive Historiography

The Hou Hanshu locates Daqin in China's extreme west; it is spoken of as one of the westernmost countries in the world. It lay in the land where the sun sets, the area of Mt. Kunlun, and the realm of Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. The Hou Hanshu and Sanguo Zhi accounts portray Daqin as a highly civilized state in which political institutions functioned smoothly and social order prevailed. It was spoken of as a place, although distant, which travelers could reach (unlike the utopian realms in the eastern seas) without superhuman techniques or divine intervention. It was, in short, portrayed as a real state, much like, but perhaps improving upon, the Middle Kingdom itself.

Despite this, however, locating Daqin by making use of the directions given in Chinese accounts would seem impossible, since the texts are extremely inconsistent on these points. Yet Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars have devoted a great deal of research to precisely this problem, seeking to account for Daqin and its institutions—even its flora and fauna—based on the received texts. F. Hirth's nineteenth-century work, China and the
Roman Orient, is perhaps the best-known example of this kind of scholarship. Placing Daqin among the Roman provinces, Hirth carefully bases his argument, in true Rankean style, on the "facts" as they appear in the Chinese historical records. He writes:

The mystery connected with that country in the Far West, described by ancient authors under the name of Ta-ts'ìn, has occupied the sinological world at intervals since the beginning of the last century. The task which I thought had still to be performed in connection with this interesting subject was:

1. The collection of all Chinese texts embodying information on the subject;  
2. The translation of these texts...;  
3. The identification of facts contained in these Chinese texts.

My interpretation of these records leads to the conclusion that the ancient country of Ta-ts'ìn...was not the Roman Empire with Rome as its capital, but merely its oriental part, viz., Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor; and Syria in the first instance. If applied to the Roman Orient the greater part of the facts mentioned by the Chinese can be traced, and a reasonable explanation may be found for them without resorting to improbabilities...'

Kurakichi Shiratori, however, disputed Hirth's account of Daqin, seeking instead to interpret details culled from the Chinese historical record in light of several broad Chinese governmental ideals, some of which were embodied in the myths of the Three Dynasties.

Shiratori points out that scholars of Daqin have "been misled in believing that all the details given in the records were faithful representations of what the Chinese had witnessed as facts...not suspecting that the narratives were a conglomeration of facts interspersed with mere products of fancy engendered by the peculiar Chinese tradition." He continues,

[Daqin] illustrates two features of the Chinese—their racial vanity, and their faith in the existence of earthly paradise. Thus we may anticipate that their description of the community would be an idealized one. In depicting the country, there was ample chance and inducement for the author freely to ascribe to it what would seem most desirable to his own nation, while representing such information about it as might be available from actual observation.

The name Daqin itself has been a source of confusion. Many
scholars have wondered why the Chinese would give such a name as "Great Qin" to a barbarian nation located at the far ends of the earth. Shiratori, however, proposes that Han Chinese perceived Daqin as a Chinese state inhabited by a lost band of Chinese. He moreover provides a convincing argument that the character da may well have referred to the stature of the inhabitants, and not to the grandeur of the state as such. Far from giving an imposing title to a barbarian nation, then, the name Daqin itself appears to reflect the utopian strains found in Han historical texts.

Nor is Daqin an isolated utopian state on an otherwise bleak and "realistic" Chinese intellectual landscape. Utopian realms figured prominently in Daoist immortality cults; Penglai and Fusang were perceived as realms occupied by xianren, or "transcendents," in the eastern seas. Even the more staid Confucian thinkers often referred to the idyllic age of antiquity found in the Three Dynasties era.

The basic details of the Daqin narratives are as follows. First, the state had no permanent ruler; rulers were, rather, appointed on the basis of merit and validated by the public. In times of calamity and omens—exhibited by winds and rains—a worthy man was selected king, while the earlier ruler was dethroned, daring not, moreover, to feel rancor over his fall. Second, there were thirty-six generals who formed a council of elders which had to reunite with the king to deliberate upon any matter of consequence to the state. Lacking even one member, business could not be conducted.

Third, when the king went on his inspection tours of the realm, he was followed by an attendant with a leather bag, into which petitioners tossed statements critical of the state's government or of disputes between parties. When the king returned to the capital, each piece was examined according to its merit. In some texts it is noted that a "drum for criticism" was placed alongside the road for dissatisfied citizens to strike. Fourth, although fierce tigers and lions roamed the countryside, requiring travel in groups, the roads were free of marauders and other forms of social disorder. Finally, the country was filled with auspicious objects, metals, and rare plants; sericulture prevailed in the countryside.

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The Daqin practice perhaps most foreign to Chinese conceptions of government and society noted above would seem to be that concerning dethronement of the ruler. By Han times, hereditary succession had become an established fact, seemingly "given" in the nature of imperial government. The obvious question arises—why did Chinese authors assume such a radical practice as dethronement of the ruler in Daqin?

Shiratori contends that the practice appears less opaque when viewed in light of Chinese political ideals from the Three Dynasties. In fact, many aspects of Daqin's social and governmental structure can be interpreted in this manner. In this perspective, the Three Dynasties could be regarded as a utopia temporally separated from Han China, just as Daqin was spatially distinct.

According to the Shujing, Shun, a commoner who, by force of his virtue and filial actions, held together a fragmented family, was chosen by Yao as ruler over Yao's own son. Shun, in turn, selected Yu on the basis of his ability alone. In spite of the enormous importance placed on hereditary succession in Chinese history, then, there stands at the beginning of "recorded" history a practice fundamentally opposed to it. Far from being a radical departure from Chinese ideals, the Daqin practice of dethronement was well in tune with the idealistic view that rulers ought to be chosen for their merit alone, and ought only to rule as long as they were in accord with the will of heaven and the needs of the people.

Like all utopian constructs, then, Daqin's contains within its description a criticism of contemporary government and society. It is more than merely a picture of an idyllic state; it is, as well, an argument for a better-ordered society and government.

Remonstrance and public criticism were another fundamental aspect of Three Dynasties government found in Daqin. Shiratori contends that such "mechanical contrivances" as attendants with leather bags, "drums for criticism," or "trees of scandal," represent the pre-Confucian ideal that anyone, from high officials down to the common people, had the right to voice his opinion about the state's governance.

In spite of the efforts by historical rulers, notably Qinshi Huangdi, to silence all forms of criticism, the remonstrance ideal
had great resiliency in Chinese, and particularly Confucian, thought. The Song dynasty historian Sima Guang wrote in the eleventh century:

The ancient sage-kings worried lest they have faults and not know it themselves. Thus they set up roadside tablets of criticism and they placed "remonstrance drums" outside of the main gate. How could they fear that the people would hear of their errors?

Sima continues, "He who acts as a sovereign certainly does not take an absence of error as virtuous...rather, he looks upon correcting his errors as a thing of beauty."

Finally, under the Three Dynasties (we are told) there were no brigands; no one dared even pick up lost items along the roadside. Even in the midst of great natural dangers—tigers and lions attacking stray travelers—the Daqin state mirrored the Three Dynasties as a realm where social order reigned.

What the above utopian imagery provides, then, are mirrors of Three Dynasties social and political ideals mixed with data drawn from travelers' accounts from China's northwestern frontier. The texts (in a striking parallel to More's own description of *Utopia*) present us with a portrait of a state in which the ruler is accountable, specifically to thirty-six representatives, and more generally to the populace as a whole. He is, in short, a ruler whose function is not to decree, but to mediate—a king who is no more than "first among equals" in governing the state.

*Daqin and the Symbolism of the Center*

Space was ordered in Daqin, and none more so than that of the royal capital. Far from constituting merely a catalogue of idealistic institutions, meritorious rulers, and exotic wildlife, the Daqin which emerges from the *Hou Hanshu* and *Sanguo Zhi* accounts is a world with a structure—hierarchically ordered, from the ruler down to the people, and spatially ordered, with outlying cities radiating in every direction from a conceptual center. This theme has been rather less emphasized by Hirth, as he struggled to account for the physical placement, name, and institutions of Daqin, or Shiratori, who sought to explicate the social and political ideals contained in the accounts.

My perspective is different; I argue that the utopian strains
found in the Daqin narratives owe a great deal to the architectural structure of the state and its capital, and that temporal and spatial order derive from the physical construction of Daqin itself. Daqin is described as follows in the *Hou Hanshu*:

...the middle section of the [capital] city, containing the central royal palace, occupied an area ten li square; the four other sections, each ten li square, and each with a royal palace, were arranged so as to adjoin the middle section on one side respectively. In each case, the palace stood at the center of the square, which separated the central palace from every other by ten li.[K]

Rolf Stein, in his discussion of the role of Daqin themes in Han Daoist movements, describes the outlying regions and the king’s movements as follows:

...le roi a cinq palais, distants de dix li l’un de l’autre. Il en fait le tour en cinq jours, demeurant un jour et une nuit dans chacun d’eux pour s’occuper des affaires. Selon le Wei-chou, c’est la capitale qui est divisée en cinq “villes”; chacune occupant un carré de cinq li de côté, le pourtour de l’ensemble mesurant soixante li. Le roi réside dans la “ville” du centre. Dans les autres “villes” sont nommés huit ministres qui règnent sur les quatre ouest. Huit autres ministres sont encore nommés dans la “ville” (centrale) du Roi; ils règnent, eux, respectivement sur les quatre autre “villes”.

The above two accounts present us with a structured realm in which four outlying cities are linked to a central city where the king resides. At the center rests the king, immobile, as his officials carry out the work of governing. In personifying the center of the utopian realm, the Daqin ruler guides through moral force as the work is carried out by the “ears and eyes” that are his officials. He serves at the pleasure of the populace—more specifically at the pleasure of the thirty-six generals who make up the council of elders. The key point is this: the centrality, the importance of the ruler, lies not in the person of the king, but rather in the position itself. The Daqin ruler becomes, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, the center of the unstilled world—politically weak, yet of
enormous symbolic and mimetic importance.

This importance of the royal center is an ancient idea in Chinese thought and cannot be linked directly to any single philosophical tradition. Perhaps the best-known statement of the axial importance of the ruler was made by Confucius:

Performing rule with virtue is, by analogy, like the Pole Star, which resides in its place while the multitudinous stars encircle it. [L] 9

Symbolic immobility was only one aspect of the Daqin imperial ideal, however. The Daqin ruler, the center of the center, moved throughout the realm to palaces in each of the outlying cities, and again on a general tour every three years. The calendrical symbolism in the royal movement quoted above is unmistakable—the king traveled to one palace each morning, held court until evening, remained overnight, and moved on, making the complete circuit in five days.

As Shiratori and Stein make clear, the physical structure of Daqin is one of "radiating fives," extending outward from the royal palace toward each of the cardinal points. There is, moreover, an obvious connection between Daqin's five major cities and the five sacred peaks of China, in which the mountains stretched out in each of the cardinal directions, the sacred peak of Mt. Song at the center. The movement of the Daqin king on his tours thus mirrors the legendary travels and sacrifices of the emperor Shun from Mt. Song to each of the four sacred peaks during his reign. 10

This circumambulation of the realm is of vital importance in any conception of the Han ruler. On precisely this theme of imperial movement, Marcel Granet wrote:

D'autre part, les légendes relatives aux formes premières du culte du Ciel nous font voir les souverains mythiques sacrifiant, à la saison voulue, sur les montagnes des quatre points cardinaux. Or, précisément, un des poèmes qui nous renseigne le mieux sur le prestige du suzerain...explique aussi (et de façon caractéristique) le titre de Fils du Ciel. «En temps voulu, je me rends dans les principautés!—L'Auguste Ciel, voilà qu'il me traite en fils!» La tradition affirme que le poème se rapporte aux parades des quatre grandes chasses saisonnières, grâce auxquelles, «en circulant dans l'Empire>>, le Roi «toute ensemble cultive et répand sa Vertu».
And of the mingtang, built for royal déplacement on a considerably smaller scale, Granet continues:

...Ces ordonnances ont pour but de faire concorder les occupations des hommes et les habitudes de la nature, régies par le Ciel. Le Ciel ordonne les saisons, le mingtang est une Maison du Calendrier. Le Roi agit en Fils du Ciel lorsqu'il promulgue les ordonnances mensuelles. Il doit pour cela circuler dans la Maison du Calendrier qui est carrée (comme la Terre) et orientée, mais qui doit être couverte d'un toit de chaume circulaire (comme le Ciel). La circulation du Fils du Ciel dans le mingtang est assimilée par la tradition à la circulation des souverains mythiques dans l'Empire...Maître unique du Calendrier et, à ce titre, animateur de toute la Terre chinoise, tel apparait, dans la tradition des Han, le Fils du Ciel.**

The ruler, then, remained the master image of Daqin government. Despite the limits on his actions, he remained the center of the center, the mediator between heaven, earth, and man. There is more than empty mysticism behind such words. The ruler, in Han China no less than Daqin, did far more than "symbolize" the center. In a very real sense, the ruler's movements actively embodied, in miniature, the relationship between man and nature, the microcosm and the macrocosm.

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Movement of the center, however, is meaningless unless the center itself is imbued with sacrality. One fundamentally important aspect of the sacred center in Chinese cities is its relation to the pole star.** Having constructed a capital of "radiating five," one need only imagine that capital's relation to the heavens—a heavenly column connecting the central palace with the pole star and, by extension, the earthly plane with the heavenly.

Sacrality, then, is diffused not only through movement of the center, the king, as he moves calendrically throughout the realm, but also through the architecture of the capital itself. The ordering of space can thus be seen as intimately connected to the ordering of government and society. The calendrical mimicry of imperial movement diffuses sacrality; but sacrality is also diffused architecturally—from the pole star, down the heavenly column, into the palace, and out of the capital in the cardinal directions.
through the city gates.

Similarly, the physical structure of Daqin—the central capital (itself divided into five sectors) and four outlying cities stretching in each of the cardinal directions—as well as the hierarchical structure of the state apparatus, were ordering themes in this utopian state.

At the heart of the distinction is the ruler's inherent connection with heaven, hence the sacred. It was the ruler's function to adjust the rhythm of his rule to the cosmic rhythm, thereby expressing the complex texture of relations between heaven and human society. This was carried out through the ruler's tours of the cities in each of the cardinal directions, mirroring the sacrifices to the five heavenly peaks.

Like the mingtang ideal, in which the ruler physically traced, in miniature, the movement of the calendar, the architecture of Daqin was a powerful symbol in itself, whether or not the ruler physically played his mimetic role.

Even as the ruler's position in the Daqin state weakened to the point of impotence, his mimetic and symbolic role took on an enormous importance. In short, his symbolic role as the center justified the presence of a ruler. Just as in the early political struggles of the Qin and Han periods, symbols and mimetic actions were not mere footnotes to the "real" happenings in Daqin. In all aspects of government—from gaining it, to running it, and eventually to losing it—the symbolism of the center was the key dimension in a universe of meaning.

Space, Time, and the Imperial Ideal in Daqin: Notes from Marcel Granet's La Pensee Chinoise

It has become apparent that, in the Daqin utopian framework, far greater emphasis rests in the ruler image (and the spatial dimensions contained therein) than on the placement of the image in time. I would argue, following Granet, that the very description of Daqin found in Han historical texts has a consummately social foundation. Daqin, it would seem, is an architectural manifestation of a complex social idea—that of the ordering power of society's center.

Through the very structure of Daqin, then, emerges a scheme for the fusion and maintenance of harmonious time and space.
The linchpin of the entire scheme remains the person of the ruler, for it is only through his actual physical movements that such order can be effected. Note the striking similarity to the Daqin ideal of the following passage from La pensée chinoise:

"Every society has a center," writes Edward Shils, "and centers link peripheries." The image of the Daqin state, and Granet's expositions of the above themes, provide an example of just how this important social concept has been given form in a Chinese utopian framework. Granet, moreover, points us toward an extremely important fact to which Shiratori, Stein, and others seem to have given less attention—the grounding of these themes of centrality in society itself.
Far from being an abstract concept, space in Daqin is expressed morally, and morality emanates from the center. Granet notes that the ruler's tours of the empire—commencing with the east and following the march of the sun—make the concepts of time and space cohere. By circumambulating the periphery of the realm, and following the sun's path, the son of heaven integrates not only the social order, but the temporal as well. "Ils indiquaient alors," writes Granet, "le centre de l'Espace après en avoir tracé les pourtours. Ils avaient aussi défini le cycle des saisons, tout en commémorant la foundation d'un ère." At the center of the realm was the mingtang—the "hall of light," a house of the calendar, and microcosm of the world at large—representing the center of the social order and the calendar. The rhythm thus expressed imposes on the life of society a periodic need for repair, writes Granet. The tours thus represent congregation, the coalescing of social elements within the realm. This takes place in two ways—movement of the center around the periphery, and movement of the periphery to the center. In both cases we have examples of what Granet calls "une sorte de temps concentré, équivalent à la durée entière de l'année." In this way, society recreates itself. This recreation is expressed through the concepts of center and periphery, but its meaning is grounded in society itself—not a society of well-defined individuals, but a collectivity, a group of moral beings connected to a center and having a collective reality far removed from that of the individual himself. Even the ruler is not individualized in Daqin, but is, as it were, a concept attached to a position. "Society" in Daqin is expressed through a limited number of roles, but it is not less real for that. Time is expressed by the physical déplacement of these roles—actually or symbolically.
With the aid of Granet's perspective, the quinary arrangement of space in Daqin appears to be far more than a static picture of a utopian state—a skeletal structure linking center to periphery and the earthly center to heaven. The structure is, so to speak, set in motion with the periodic movement of its elements. But perhaps the most important theme to remember—a theme all too often neglected by sinologists interested in ideas for their own sake—is that these ideas are grounded in Chinese society. Armed with this notion, we can see Daqin as a complex expression of social and temporal order, a powerful blueprint for the well-governed society.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 94.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 96.
20. Ibid., p. 97.

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