

‘Confucian’ values and practices in Han China

The general assumption that China of the Han empire (202 BCE-9 CE) and (25-221 CE) was characterised as ‘Confucian’ requires review. While certain elements of the beliefs, practices and ideals of the later dynasties owe their origins to Han times or earlier, it is difficult to show that they lay behind or affected the conduct of public life of Han with the same degree of force as may be witnessed in Song, Ming or Qing times. It may well be shown that from Tang times onwards a cohesive and systematized way of thought and practice was determining the decision of a government, the subjects of scholarly activities and the rule of a family, possibly in an obligatory manner; but it is difficult to sustain an assumption that such conditions pertained in Han China. Misunderstandings have arisen partly through anachronism, translation of the term *ru* 儒 and the view that has been taken of modes of thought of Han times.

Consideration of six characteristics of what may be accepted as the ‘Confucianism’ of the later dynasties, with the question of how far they were operative in Han times, leads to the conclusion that major differences may be traced first between the foundation of the dynasty and *ca.* 50 BCE; and secondly between Western and Eastern Han.

(a) Citation of the sayings of Kongzi (Confucius) are rare until *ca.* 50 BCE, with the exception of those in the three responses of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (probably 134 BCE).

References, allusions and quotations from the *Lunyu* (*Analects*) increase in frequency from the time of Wang Mang 王莽. Sacrifices to Kongzi are by no means regular in Han times.

(b) Familiarity with certain approved texts as a means of selecting or training officials cannot be taken for granted. While scholarly attention to these texts may certainly be seen in Western Han from *ca.* 100 BCE, it is only from perhaps 100 CE or later that it gains strength, but how far this affected entry into official service is doubtful. In addition, there is no certainty that the circulation of certain other texts, deemed unsuitable for study, ceased.

(c) Acceptance of *Tian* as the supreme authority whose powers included bestowal of the right to rule and as the objective addressed in the dynasty’s religious cults was not introduced until *ca.* 30 BCE. The proposal to do so aroused controversy and its acceptance was revoked or reinstated from time to time, becoming regular in Eastern Han.

(d) Kongzi and his pupils had recognised the hierarchies and social distinctions that were based on merit or character or were needed for maintaining the social disciplines of *li*. The social

ranks of imperial times derived partly from those considerations and partly from the need to establish a complex system of government and a means of administering the land and the people.

(e) It is only comparatively late in Western Han that there appears a full appreciation of the merits of the kings and kingdom of Zhou or the ideal part played by Zhou Gong. Such ideas attained real strength in the time of Wang Mang.

(f) While there are early references to the importance of *li*, it is only in Eastern Han that this assumes a major part in intellectual activities. It is an open question how far its statements were descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Very few of the accredited specialists of *rujiao* in Western Han reached high office in the government and writings of those who did so do not survive. Specialists in the *Lunyu* are known only from *ca.* 70 BCE. With a few exceptions, it cannot be shown that those who led the emperor's government in Eastern Han had received a scholarly training, particularly in that text. Attempts to induce capable men to serve as officials was by no means always successful, some persons preferring the life of an obscure hermit.

Some of the intellectual ideas of the times did not conform with those of a later 'Confucian' ideal. Those of the *wu xing* 五行 possibly ran counter to that of an almighty heaven. Some scholars were tracing the transmission of imperial authority not to a direct line from Huangdi 黃帝 but by means of a series known as the *San tong* 三統 which allowed for the relegation of an earlier regime to a place of honour. Orders were given in 57 CE for the circulation of certain types of literature known as *chen* 讖 or *wei* 緯 and that were to be banned in 267 and later; in the meantime they had attracted the attention of some of the most famous scholars of Eastern Han. Others were laying stress on the difference between *zhi* 質, substance, and *wen* 文 pattern and the priority that each one deserved.

Reasons for encouraging the acceptance of a 'Confucian' system in later dynasties are not far to seek, when it had become necessary to counter the claims of Buddhism or the leaders of popular movements. For Han times, we may note four stages whereby a 'Confucian' tradition was growing. (1) The later years of Xuandi (reigned 74 to 48) and those of Yuandi (reigned 48-33), which saw a review of some of the scholarly texts in 51; attempts to reduce the strict impact of government; and production of the highly biased account of a debate held at court in 81 BCE. (2) The work of Liu Xiang 劉向 and his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (beginning in 26 BCE) in collecting writings, arranging the imperial library and forming literary traditions and distinctions of modes of

thought. (3) The reign of Wang Mang (9-24 CE) with its studied appeal to the ideals of Zhou. (4) The reign of Zhangdi (75-88) and later with highly intensive scholarly activity, as seen conspicuously in the discussions of 79 CE.