FOREWORD

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ANTHROPOLOGY provides many instances of societies which have no centralized political organization but achieve a large measure of cohesion through common forms of religious ritual. In such cases it often happens that a number of autonomous groups agree in according a unique ritual status to the chief of a particular group without in any way accepting his secular executive authority. According to Mr. M. Fortes,[1] who has made a special study of the Tallensi of West Africa, "the Tale settlements have no permanent political relations with one another. . . . Traditionally and to this day the heads of clans co-operate in certain contingencies or in certain periodically recurrent ritual situations only. For the rest local autonomy is absolute." The Tallensi thus lack political unity, yet for "certain periodically recurrent ritual situations" they recognize the primacy of a particular local chief whose "executive authority reaches only to his own settlement".

Such a type of "monarchy" is suggested in words used by M. Granet of the earliest emperors of China in his great work, *La civilisation chinoise*: "Les Souverains que l'histoire traditionelle a le mieux réussi à intégrer, sont présentés comme des sages plutôt que comme des héros. . . . (Le Souverain) est, essentiellement, l'auteur d'un calendrier exact et bienfaisant. Ses ministres agissent, inspirés par sa Vertu. Quant à lui, il règne, sans penser à gouverner. Il s'emploie à créer, ou plutôt à sécréter, l'ordre."

The picture of the earliest age of China which M. Granet presents to the reader is one which he has made intelligible in terms of modern scientific anthropology. By reference to the study of contemporary primitive peoples, he is able again and again to give a satisfactory interpretation to passages in the oldest Chinese texts which defied explanation in the tradition of Chinese classical scholarship and which remained obscure to the early European translators of the Chinese classics. In particular, M. Granet succeeds in penetrating through what the German sinologue Hirth has called "model emperor lore"[2]

[1] " Ritual festivals and social cohesion in the Hinterland of the Gold Coast ", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 38, no. 4, Oct.–Dec., 1936.

[2] *Ancient History of China*, p. 33. See also Miss M. J. Gates, *The Chinese Model Emperor Lore*, a thesis submitted for a degree at Columbia University.

and bringing to light the traits of an older conception of kingship in China—a conception similar in type to that which is familiar to us from many primitive societies, though also marked by certain characteristics peculiarly Chinese.

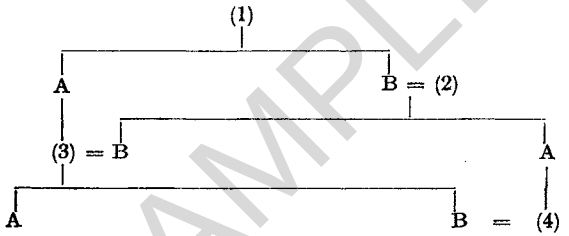
The work of the late Professor W. E. Soothill, which is now posthumously published, provides a most valuable supplement to the researches of Granet and others in this field. Soothill lived as a missionary in China under the old régime of the Ch'ing dynasty, and was deeply impressed by the persisting priestly character of the Chinese monarchy, as displayed most clearly in the annual sacrifice at the Altar of Heaven, which only the emperor could perform. As a student of the Confucian classics, he also became increasingly aware of the existence therein of elements which could not adequately be explained in terms of the later orthodoxy, and which pointed back to older and more primitive modes of thought and belief. His interest was aroused especially by the traditions relating to the ancient royal temple-observatory known as the Ming T'ang or "Hall of Light", an institution which, according to these traditions, still survived at the Chou capital in the time of Confucius, but afterwards disappeared and became a matter for much learned speculation and controversy among scholars. The traditional accounts of the Ming T'ang are confused and often contradictory, but after a careful critical examination of the relevant literary texts Soothill was convinced that they can be made to yield a genuine knowledge of that institution; and in this book, which he had all but completed at the time of his last illness, he has set forth his conclusions not only on the original form and religious purposes of the Ming T'ang, but also on the early development of the Chinese monarchy with which it was by tradition so intimately associated.

In the Chinese "model emperor lore" the earliest series of rulers, ending with Yü, the founder of the Hsia dynasty, are distinguished by two striking characteristics; first, they rule, not by force but by "virtue" (*tê*) and "non-assertion" (*wu-wei*),[1] and secondly, each of them is followed, not by his son in hereditary succession, but by the most meritorious of his subjects to whom he cedes (*jang*) the throne. The second of these characteristics is represented as a corollary of the first; it is the emperor's virtue which causes him to pass over his own offspring and give precedence to merit wherever it may be found. Yü, however, *was* succeeded by his son, and thereafter

[1] Rendered by A. Waley "actionless activity", a translation which brings out both the positive and negative aspects of the meaning.

the dynastic principle prevailed; this was regarded as a degeneration from the standards of the Golden Age, but it was accepted as the norm for later times. The primeval emperors, especially Yao and Shun, were held up as patterns of kingship by political theorists, but their renunciation of dynastic right was considered to be a perfection of virtue unattainable by ordinary mortals.

M. Granet, however, has argued very convincingly by analysis of genealogical material that the traditional belief in a practice of succession by merit in pre-Hsia times represents—or rather misrepresents—an actual succession system whereby the royal dignity alternated between two families united by cross-cousin marriages. In such a system the title descends not from father to son, but from father-in-law to son-in-law; the son is excluded from the throne, but *his* son succeeds in the next generation because he becomes the second king's son-in-law.[1] A succession of this kind is not really undynastic, but



since it involves transmission of rank through a daughter instead of inheritance in the direct agnatic line, it is profoundly repugnant to the canons of a patriarchal morality, such as had prevailed in China for many centuries before Confucius. The pre-Hsia system was, therefore, either misunderstood by the scholars of the classical age or, more or less deliberately, rejected by them as incompatible with the perfection of the model emperors; and the cession of the royal power outside the direct agnatic line was explained as a promotion accorded to merit.

If Granet's theory is correct, the non-dynastic character attributed to the pre-Hsia monarchy is merely a misrepresentation of a primitive succession system which had nothing to do with the recognition of merit. It remains, however, to account for the qualities which in the model emperor lore are summed up

[1] Granet, *La civilisation chinoise*, pp. 242–251. The regular form of the system is given by the following genealogy, in which a number represents a reigning emperor while A stands for a son and B for a daughter.

in the phrase *tê hua hsüeh shuo*[1] or "the principle of transformation by virtue". These qualities cannot have been derived simply by inference from the supposed practice of cession-to-merit, for a willingness to subordinate family interests to the public weal is quite compatible with a very active and harsh kind of virtue, as in the republican heroes of ancient Rome. The inactive and uncoercive type of sovereignty ascribed to the pre-Hsia rulers must be referred—unless it is a pure invention—to a special kind of monarchy existing in very early times. Even if it were nothing but a reflection of a philosopher's ideal without any historical ground, the model emperor lore would still be of great importance because of its effects on the political theory and practice of China during the last two thousand years. But there is no reason for denying any historical foundation to this lore; on the contrary, the traditions, if treated critically, enable us to define the character of the earliest Chinese monarchy with some degree of confidence.

On a general view of the evidence it is reasonable to suppose that the early Chinese monarchy was of the kind indicated by the analogy already quoted from the modern Tallensi of West Africa. Stripped of the special ethical meaning imparted to it by Confucian doctrine, the phrase *tê hua hsüeh shuo* aptly describes the widespread influence which can be exerted by a priest-king whose actual executive power remains strictly local. The deeds of the early "emperors" recorded in the traditions are not so much acts of government as ritual performances and observations of signs and omens. The traditional material appears in its most crude and primitive form in the opening chapters of the *Annals of the Bamboo Books* which provide a key to the moralistically revised versions approved by the Confucian school. The "virtue" of the early rulers in the *Bamboo Books* is quite obviously not ethical, but magical; *tê* in later times certainly meant "virtue" in a moral sense, but its earlier meaning was roughly equivalent to that of the Polynesian *mana*, which has been adopted as a technical term in anthropology. In this book it is usually interpreted as "potency".

The unique ritual status of the emperor appears in two of his traditional prerogatives—his exclusive right to make astronomical observations and his exclusive right to issue a calendar. In the Chou feudal system both the emperor and the barons maintained observatory-towers in connection with

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religious rites, but the observation of the stars was reserved to the emperor or officials specially appointed by him, the barons only being allowed to observe cloud formations. Similarly, the emperor alone had the right to determine the calendar, and refusal to accept it from him was an act of rebellion, a decisive rejection of his sovereignty. In later times the acceptance of a calendar from the Chinese emperor was one of the acts by which neighbouring tribes and kingdoms entered into a relation of vassalage to China. Nor is it as trivial a matter as it may seem at first sight; for to a primitive people a calendar is the systemization of life, it establishes a framework both for economic and for religious activity, and it marks the person who promulgates it as the supreme law-giver.

As the responsibility attached to his privileged position, the Chinese emperor had the task of regulating the cycle of months and seasons for the benefit of mankind. He was essentially a "corn king" with the duty of ensuring a good harvest through the magical control of natural forces. The loess and alluvial lands of the Yellow River basin form one of the most fertile agricultural areas in the world, but they are subject to disastrous famines from two opposite kinds of catastrophe—drought due to the failure of the spring rains, and floods due to excessive rainfall in summer. The great variability of the rainfall is, indeed, one of the most important climatic features of North China, and it has impressed itself deeply through ages of experience on what may be called, for want of a better term, the mind of the race. To an exceptional degree it focused the attention of the Chinese in the formative period of their cultural evolution on the cycle of the seasons and the relation of the time-periods of the month and the year; at the same time it encouraged a notion of the cosmos as an order of things normally beneficial in operation, but liable to catastrophic breakdowns, as an equilibrium of forces always in danger of becoming unbalanced. For preserving the harmony of these forces, however, mankind had an effective agency in religious ritual. No amount of toil in the fields would avail the farmer if the spring rains were lacking, but he was not entirely helpless; he had a representative and mediator with the powers of the sky, a Wise Man who was the Son of Heaven and endowed with the power of the rain-bringing dragon. By performing the proper ceremonies at the proper times, according to the calendar which it was his business to formulate, the emperor promoted the harmony of the productive forces of nature and assisted them in their work.

With the development of political organization and of power

based on military force the character of sovereignty in China gradually changed, and in the Period of the Warring States the prestige of the old priestly kingship sank to a very low ebb. But after the climax of secularizing and militarist tendencies in the political convulsions of the third century B.C. there was a movement of return to earlier tradition, a fresh search for legitimacy in government and an attempt to give stability to the new imperial system through a reinterpretation of ancient beliefs. From that time until the Revolution of 1911 the Chinese monarchy never lost its sacerdotal character; for Confucian orthodoxy the emperor was a person of cosmic significance, the Unique Man (*I jên*),[1] who could not be related to any other earthly ruler except as suzerain to vassal. The ancient imperial sanctuary, the Ming T'ang, the origin of which was assigned by tradition to the pre-Hsia age, had disappeared with the Chou dynasty, and the details of its plan and specific uses were forgotten, but its essential purposes were served in later times by other holy places connected with the imperial capital, notably the *T'ien-t'an*[2] or Altar of Heaven and the *Ch'i-nien Tien*[3] or Temple of Prayer for the Year. In the present century the great winter solstice ceremony at the Altar of Heaven remained as the most striking manifestation of the high priesthood of the Chinese emperor. As Soothill wrote in 1912,[4] when the monarchy had already been overthrown but was still so recent as to appear contemporary:

> This supreme act of worship, with its accompanying sacrifices, is the sign and symbol of the imperial office. Only the emperor, the High Priest of the world, the Son of Heaven, may perform this great sacrifice, which has existed from all historic antiquity. . . . It falls to his lot to pay his duties in the depth of winter and the dead of night. Then the cold is so intense that, as one who has often officiated there told me, even high wadded boots and the thickest furs fail to keep strong men from chilling to the marrow, and in some cases going to their graves. It is at the winter solstice that the sovereign sheds the blood of sacrifice, when the dying sun has reached the lowest ebb of its vitality and is again to renew its youth.

[1] 一人 [2] 天壇 [3] 祈年殿

[4] *The Three Religions of China*, p. 274.