This chapter, whose title may be rendered ‘Reform of institutions in the Three Dynasties; and substance and pattern’¹ presents a view of China’s pre-imperial dynastic history together with a scheme that explains the correct way in which types of government legitimately vary from one another and accommodate change. The first of these themes is denoted by the expression San tong 三統 with its interpretation of China’s history and scheme of dynastic rule of the distant, mythical past. The second theme—that of the Si fa 四法—sets out four patterns for a monarch’s activities, to be adopted in cyclical fashion as is comparable with the four seasons. The theme of the San tong is entirely independent, and different, from a scheme based on the Wu xing, which is not mentioned in the pian; that of the Si fa shows some affinity with models of the four seasons that are perhaps seen in the Yue ling 月令. The chapter gives its own lines of descent of the mythical rulers, and it appears to have features in common with some of the apocryphal writings (wei shu 緯書). It treats some matters or problems that are also treated in the Baihu tong, thus giving rise to the possibility that, like that text, it gives its own account of the proceedings and conclusions of the officially sponsored meeting of 79 CE, for which Ban Gu’s account was approved. Neither the two schemes of San tong and Si fa nor the contrast drawn in the chapter between zhi, substance, and wen, pattern, match what we know of Dong Zhongshu’s thoughts from other writings.

As suggested elsewhere,² while the concept of the Wu xing had originated and been in circulation from Zhanguo times, it has yet to

¹ Alternatively: Reform of institutions, substance and elaboration in the Three Dynasties. In Yu hai 40.12a, Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–96) gives the title as ‘San dai gai zhi’, and notes the addition of wen zhi [sic] in one version. SBCK and SBBY give San dai gai zhi. For Woo Kang’s consideration of this chapter, see p. 307 below; see also Anne Cheng, Étude sur le Confucianisme Han L’élaboration d’une tradition exégétique sur les classiques (1985), pp. 44–5.

be shown that its grand theory of creation and universal activities had reached official acceptance in Western Han until perhaps ca. 50 BCE. It was Zou Yan 諸衍 (ca. 305–240 BCE), as far as we know, who had enunciated a theory of dynastic rule and succession based on the Wu xing, combined with the active participation of heaven, and this would have been anathema to the First Emperor of Qin who saw his empire as lasting for eternity rather than as being due to end in favour of a successor. There is nothing to show that the Han emperors would have welcomed the theory any more favourably, and it is noticeable that when, in the last years of Western Han, there were at least two occasions at which its re-dedication was being envisaged, succession in accordance with wu xing was not mentioned as a call for a change of dynasty. It is however quite understandable that the theory had a great appeal to Wang Mang as showing his own rightful and legitimate place as a successor to a defunct Han.

‘San dai gai zhi zhi wen’ insists that true rulership devolves from heaven, being imparted and operated with requisite changes of practice and symbol that follow the sequences of time. The process is seen in a cycle whereby three bonds or dispensations (San tong) follow one another, each with its own personalities, characteristics and symbolical colour. The San tong were realised in Yin, being symbolised by white, in Zhou, being symbolised by red and in Lu 魯, in Chunqiu times, being symbolised by black. Each one of these houses affirmed its own ancestry, adopted its own music, displayed its colour in its activities and chose the correct starting point of the calendar year. By identifying Lu, with black, as the third bond or dispensation, the text conveys a measure of respect and even legitimacy to Han; for Han is thereby seen as the successor of a renowned authority of Chunqiu times; it is not seen as a successor of Qin, who is excluded from taking a place in the ordered, cosmological order of being. Further attention to the San tong appears below (see p. 296).

Succession to rulership in this way required that with each change in the cycle, the most remote ancestor in the new line is ceremonially and honourably removed from the sequence and placed in a higher, perhaps transcendent, category. The descendants of those ancestors who have

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3 See HS 11, p. 340, 75, p. 3192, 99A, p. 4094 and Loewe, Crisis and Conflict, p. 279 for the suggestions put forward by Gan Zhongke 甘忠可 and Xia Heliang 夏賀良 and others in the time of Chengdi and later.