CHAPTER 1

Tracing the Origins of Chinese Intellectual History in the Three Dynasties (Ancient Times to ca. 6th Century BCE)

Brief Prologue: Remote Antiquity

What is “intellectual history” and what is “Chinese intellectual history?” This is a very complicated question that I can only briefly discuss here. The Chinese characters for “thought” (思) and “to think” (想) both have the radical meaning heart and mind (心), and so intellectual history (sixiangshi) concerns what the Chinese have thought about and how they have thought about it since ancient times. The Chinese character for “history” (史) is said to mean both “fair” or “just” and “to write down” or “to record.” That is to say history is a branch of learning that traces back the past to discover its traditions and origins. “Chinese” intellectual history, then, discusses why, since ancient times, the Chinese thought this way and not that way. Since history is the basic thread of the discipline called “intellectual history,” to trace Chinese intellectual history, I have to begin the discussion with remote antiquity.

I say “remote antiquity” because, when we want to write intellectual history, we tend to feel that ancient times are very far away from us. Chinese history has already gone through several thousand years, and that history has become a stack of books, a few oracle bone fragments, a few bronzes and scattered historical ruins. These historical resource materials originally embodied the thought, feelings and frames of mind of ancient people, and we find it very difficult to understand them today. What ancient people thought, said and did has already disappeared into the past, and so when we want to engage them in an intellectual dialogue, we feel them to be both remote and unfamiliar. This remoteness separates ancient times from the present while unfamiliarity makes it impossible for us to understand ancient people clearly.

As an example, in the 1970s in a Han dynasty tomb in Mawangdui, a silk manuscript text called The Ten Great Canons (Shi da jing 十大經) was discovered. One chapter entitled “Correcting Chaos” (Zhengluan 正亂) tells a story about the legendary Huangdi or Yellow Emperor, previously recorded to be the “progenitor of human culture” (renwen shizu 人文始祖). Traditional accounts of the Yellow Emperor portray him as a paragon of civilization and benevolence, but this document, dating at least to the first century BCE, relates how
the Yellow Emperor captured his rival Chi You, flayed off his skin to make a target, used his hair to make a pennant, made his stomach into a ball and cut his flesh up into mincemeat.

This story involves extreme cruelty and is very different from our general conception, but perhaps it is true to life because quite a few examples of “killing people to bury them with the deceased” (sharen yi xun 殺人以殉) have been found in ancient tombs, and oracle bone inscriptions also record many “human sacrifices” (sharen yi ji 殺人以祭). Not only were commoners and prisoners of war killed and sacrificed to the spirits or ancestors, but in ancient times when there was a severe drought, they would immolate shamans or witches to please the spirits (shenling) and pray for rain.\footnote{The Chinese character \textit{shen} 神 can mean both god or spirit; we will use one or the other or both to suit the context.}

This kind of what we today would regard as barbaric behavior actually continued into eras that are considered quite civilized. Even the paragons of virtue, King Wen (cultured) and King Wu (martial) of the Zhou dynasty, acted in a similar manner. When we read the \textit{Remaining Zhou Documents} (Yi Zhoushu), we learn that they both acted in a cruel and deceitful fashion. When King Wu defeated the last Shang king, Zhou 紂, he acted just like a blood-thirsty barbarian, and the blood of the slain flowed like a river. When he reached the Shang capital, he shot his enemies’ corpses full of arrows; he hacked off their heads with a sword and slaughtered a large number of prisoners of war as a sacrifice. He also took back to his own territory the Nine Cauldrons (jiu ding) that symbolized the power to rule granted by Heaven together with the priests (wu) and invocators (zhu) who transmitted the will of the spirits.

It would seem that an unfamiliar, mysterious, stately and treacherous atmosphere pervaded that time, but we find it hard to imagine today. Being difficult to imagine makes it feel remote. We might well ask: are these stories of barbaric acts true? If these records are true, then is what the people of remote antiquity thought, their mentalité, impossible for us to comprehend today? Why, also, did the ancient people love to discuss these stories as records of the great deeds of heroes? Was their understanding of the terms barbaric and uncivilized completely different from our modern understanding?

History is remote and unfamiliar, then, especially when we want to discuss intellectual history because we have to try to experience remote antiquity by means of the extant historical resource materials. Perhaps we can reconstruct what really happened in history by reference to these materials, but the mentalité, the feelings, of ancient people are deeply concealed behind these materials, and this makes it impossible to grasp them clearly. This task is rendered