CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DENOUEMENT: SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE ZHOULI

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The Rituals of Zhou (Zhouli 周禮), like other objects, has a social life. This involved having a social standing within a given historical and textual framework that changed over time; it had a particular interaction with its readers, including the parameters set for it by official intervention. It also offered a normative anchor for a wide variety of options of thinking and acting: from sycophantic applause for present-day reality to harsh remonstrance from a perspective of conservative dissidence; from supporting the bookworm’s innocent pleasures in undermining the validity of the canon through philological research to offering a hub for networking among people sharing an interest in this text and in some version of its reading.

The status of the Zhouli was highly unstable. As a text in “old script” (guwen 古文) that might have existed since early in the second century BCE, it was made accessible only through the efforts of Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE). It had to fend off strong challenges from established scholarship, which could draw on Liu’s involvement with Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23 CE) to buttress charges that the text had been faked in whole or in part to support Wang Mang’s reach for the throne and his strong reliance on the Zhouli for his “New” Dynasty, Xin 新 (9–23 CE). Any late-nineteenth-century reader would have to come to terms with the historical uses made of this text by Wang Mang or Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), not to mention Hong Xi-qüan 洪秀全 (1814–1864), and would have to defend its value as a canonical text against the presumed misuses by such people.

The Zhouli was, at least for most, part of a canonical corpus from pre-Qin times. Together with the Five Classics and other texts that became canonical, it substantiated a deep historical pessimism permeating Chinese historical thinking. With Confucius, the last of the sages had died, and while history since has waited for a “latter-born sage” (housheng 後聖), and while others down to the twentieth century wondered whether they themselves were the expected one, no one had
managed to become a generally accepted figure of that rank, although Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), during the darkest days of the Mongol conquest, came the closest. These sages were the only human beings able to understand the intricate workings of the universe and society. What they bequeathed was a set of writings that on a superficial level might seem anecdotal and even trivial but that were elevated to the “subtle” evocation of truth through their association with the sages.

The Zhouli, with its emphasis on “setting up a state” (jian guo 建國) and its association with the efforts of the Duke of Zhou 周公, who allegedly left a handbook for setting up and managing a universal state for those who came later, dealt with institutions as well as the state’s effort to transform and civilize a people considered in constant danger of moving off the proper track. Sun Yirang’s 孫詒讓 (1848–1908) claim that “the structure of government institutions” (zheng 政) and “moral teaching” (jiao 教) were the pillars of the Zhouli reproduced earlier appeals to its analytical substance.1

Because the sages understood the complex truth, all of their thinking was de-individualized into the claim that “the system of earlier and later sages is the same!” (先聖後聖，其揆一也。). Accordingly, the political institutions and moral teachings of the Zhouli reverberated in other canonical texts and had a secondary reflection in the later writings of the philosophers of the “Hundred Lineages” (bai jia. This provided a legitimate basis for drawing on these other records as an echo of, or a different formulation for, Zhouli passages so as to establish a homogeneous record and a unified reading strategy, which emphasized the unity of the canon rather than the diverse origins of its constituent parts. This reading of the Zhouli as part of a homogeneous canon and as filled with metatextual and intertextual references, dominated reading down to the end of the Qing 清 (1644–1912).

The Zhouli became a normative text for an ideal state that had achieved the “Great Peace” (taiping 太平) during the rule of the sages in the Three Dynasties. While later ages constantly tried to live up to this high ideal, it was an effort that was bound to remain just that, albeit with different degrees of success or failure. The Zhouli was thus a core part of what Castoriadis once called the “imaginaire de la société,” that set of ideas and ideals that form a common and shared substratum of what state and society should be and could be, and to which every-

1 Zhouli zhengyi 1.1.