The archaic system: the politico-cosmic structuring of society by means of sacrifice

The meat-eaters

If we are to believe the rather impolite remark of one Cao Gui when speaking to the dignitaries of the state of Lu during their deliberations, in ancient times, high officials (dafu 大夫) were called “meat-eaters” (roushizhe 肉食者): “Meat-eaters are idiots.” In a highly ritualized society like that of the Zhou, characterized by a diffused religiosity, a meat diet was not only the mark of status, it had a religious significance. It must be understood in the context of blood sacrifice. According to his biographer, Sima Qian, Confucius resigned from his position as minister of justice not when the sovereign, occupied by the beauties sent him by the kingdom of Qi in order to separate him from the sage, neglected to attend the council of ministers, but when he forgot to give the dignitaries their share of meat after the great suburban sacrifice to Heaven. It would seem that, for the statesman convinced of the centrality of rites, the distribution of sacrificial leftovers was more important than the deliberations of the council, because it touched on the very foundations of government.

The distribution of sacrificial meat was institutionalized; it was the duty of a specific officer. When Duke Wen of Lu, in order to enlarge
his palace, wanted to raze the house of the officer Hu Jingzi, the latter sought to dissuade him from so doing by recalling his functions:

My ancestor received the order of the ward chief to occupy this site, and it is now many generations that it has been our job to distribute the sacrificial leftovers of our lords after the chang 祭, di 祀, zheng 神, and xiang 享 sacrifices.³

The word zuo 豕, which refers especially to gifts of meat, is glossed by the word “good fortune” (fu 福). The distribution of sacrificial meat is sometimes referred to as “distributing good fortune” 致福 or “distributing beneficial meat” 致膳; the character which refers to the distributed parts, shan 禧, is composed of the meat radical 肉 and a character meaning “beneficial, good” 善. Not only does the ritualist refer to this practice, he codifies it. The rite of the distribution of shares is embedded in its own ceremonial sequence.⁴ Used together with the word lu 禄 to refer to official positions in archaic Chinese, the character fu 福 represents a sacrificial vase. By metonymic derivation, it came to mean the portion of meat in the vessel given by the king to his courtiers and then, by extension, the material advantages that these gifts implied, as well as the benediction of the gods they brought. As for the word zuo 豬, it has the verbal sense of giving a territory or a fief.⁵ All of these terms must be understood in the context of a system of gifts and counter-gifts made through the mediation of the gods or the ancestors. Thus the expression “meat-eaters” is not an idle one. It refers to a system of the distribution of symbolic goods and noble office whose key is the sacrificial practice that decides who belongs to the ruling circle.

It is the system of cultic affiliations which determines the sacrifices and their distribution of meat and thereby ensures the equivalence of political and sacrificial activities. The responsibilities incumbent on members of the aristocracy were determined by their place in the hierarchical cult of agnatic ancestors. The more individual ancestors to whom he had the right to sacrifice, the higher was his rank. Thus the king had seven rooms in his ancestor temple, in which he honored his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, the kings