CONSTRUCTING LINEAGES AND INVENTING TRADITIONS THROUGH EXEMPLARY FIGURES IN EARLY CHINA

BY

MARK CSIKSZENTMIHALYI and MICHAEL NYLAN
(University of Wisconsin) (University of California at Berkeley)

One major obstacle to understanding the early history of China is the still-prevalent notion that discrete schools of thought contended in the Warring States and Han periods, and that these schools of thought were text-centered. A second is the propensity to conflate quite separate accounts of the same events, institutions, concepts, and taxonomies, for the purpose of devising a neater record. Some historians of early China, recognizing these obstacles, have sensed that the word 家 does not mean only “schools” or “scholastic lineages” (as it is typically translated). Still more argue against the notion of a China that is homogeneous and unchanging. A majority, however, continue to treat the terms “Ru” and “Dao” as direct and unproblematic references to two scholastic “isms,” Confucianism and Daoism, and to ignore discrepancies among the rhetorical constructions in the early sources. This essay aims

1 This essay derives from two papers on similar topics presented at the workshop “Intellectual Lineages in Pre-imperial China” organized by Paul Goldin at the University of Pennsylvania, September 27-28, 1997. The authors would also like to thank Martin Kern, Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, Nathan Sivin, Kidder Smith, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts.


© Brill, Leiden, 2003

Also available online – www.brill.nl
to disentangle several layers of historical writing composed during the Han and post-Han periods, reading the three standard histories for the Han as discrete rhetorical constructions. It argues that, if extant materials are any guide to that distant past, the impulse to assign early beliefs to academic “schools” predicated on text-based traditions corresponds more closely with the genealogizing tendencies of the Eastern Han and post-Han periods than with early Han realities. It begins necessarily with the Shiji 史記, since the ascription of text-centered “schools” to early Western Han is usually justified by reference to a few passages in that work, including Sima Tan’s 司馬談 (d. 110 BC) “Essentials of the six jia” (liujia zhi yaozhi 六家之要指).

The Shiji, possibly more than any other single work, has shaped our current understanding of the intellectual world of early China. After all, the Shiji provides a wealth of information, exceptional in its scope and depth, regarding the methods and motives of famous classical scholars, the major theoretical approaches to government policy, and the political postures, types of behavior, and associations of particular persons—even if the propensity to see the Shiji as a direct and unproblematic counterpart of Ban Gu’s 漢書 monumental Hanshu 漢書 inspires as many misapprehensions as insights. In particular, the Shiji’s use of the term jia (literally, “family,” “household,” or “expert”) to denote a given approach to policymaking has exerted a profound influence. Because later writers used the same term to denote traditions defined by the ritual transmission from master to disciple of authoritative texts and their associated teachings, modern scholars have all too often assumed that the

Sources,” Monumenta Serica 43 (1995), pp. 1-52; and Kidder Smith, “Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, ‘Legalism,’ et cetera,” The Journal of Asian Studies 62:1 (2003), pp. 129-156. Siwin’s article, in some ways, recalls arguments put forth earlier by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 on the relation of the Ru to the fangshi 方士. See Gu Jiegang, Hanshu xue 2nd ed. (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996 rpt. of 1935 ed.). Regarding the “majority”: for this statement, we have reviewed the majority of textbooks written recently by Chinese historians. Readers should note also that in such textbooks Daoism is typically said to represent the single source for the three streams of philosophical Taoism (dao jia 道家), HuangLao 黄老, and religious Taoism (dao jiao 道教).