

SPECIAL ISSUE: THE ORIGINS OF ANCIENT CHINESE CIVILIZATION AND STATES

Theoretical Reflections on the Formation of Early States in China

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与古代希腊、罗马及日耳曼不同，中国古代国家起源走的是一条构建和谐的道路，即没有打碎氏族制度，而是在普遍存在的氏族组织的基础上滥觞国家的萌芽，国家与氏族长期并存而使早期国家完善与发展。氏族制度的长期存在和发展，这一古代中国独具特色的社会结构是和谐构建之路的深厚社会基础。古代中国早期国家构建过程中，十分关注各个氏族、部落的情、义、利、患等问题。这种关注与社会实践成为构建和谐的基石，也是那个时代的领导者成功的标识。直到古代中国早期国家成熟时，还能够看到构建和谐理念的痕迹。

关键词：早期国家 氏族制度 礼制 和谐

Unlike the ancient Greek, Roman and German states, ancient Chinese states took a path of harmonious construction which did not involve abolition of the clan system. It was on the basis of the existing clan organization that the first shoots of the state sprouted, and the state and the clans underwent a long coexistence which allowed the early state to develop and be perfected. The unique social structure of ancient China—the long existence and development of the clan system—was the underlying social foundation for harmonious construction. The early Chinese states were much concerned with the feelings, opinions about right and wrong, advantages and calamities of the clans and tribes. This concern and social practice was the foundation stone for harmonious construction, as well as the benchmark for success for the leaders of the time. Traces of the idea of harmonious construction are apparent up to the full development of the early state in ancient China.

Keywords: early Chinese states, clans, *lizhi* (ritual system), harmonious construction

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels revealed the path taken

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by the embryonic state on the basis of its development in ancient Greek, Roman and German society. This path involved the total abolition of the clan system and the building up of the state on its “ruins”: “The gentile constitution had outlived its usefulness. It was burst asunder by the division of labour and by its result, the division of society into classes. Its place was taken by the *state*.”¹ That was indeed the path to the formation of ancient Greek, Roman and German states, but Engels did not argue that it was the path for all ancient states in all regions. In his research on ancient Chinese society, Guo Moruo perceptively noted that Engels had not mentioned the situation in ancient Chinese society; nevertheless, Guo’s exploration of the nature of the ancient Chinese society still took the approach that the state was established by abolishing the clan system. Nowadays, a large number of scholars in China have carried out in-depth investigations into the historical facts of the long existence of the clans in ancient China. Most are aware of the differences between the path taken by the ancient Chinese state and that taken by the ancient Greek, Roman, and German states; China did not abolish the clan system, but allowed the first shoots of the state to sprout on the basis of the widespread existence of clan organization. The long coexistence of the state and the clans enabled the early state to develop and be perfected. This was the way of the formation and development of the ancient Chinese states with Chinese characteristics.

What exactly was the path taken by the ancient Chinese states?

According to previous understandings, it was a path taken amid intensifying conflict among social classes and acute class struggle in which it was necessary for the organs of state to employ despotism and repression. In brief, it was a path involving the construction of repression, with the state being the instrument created to this end. That understanding is to some extent justified. The state is indeed an instrument for class oppression and has had the function of repressing opposing classes from the very beginning. It has to be said that this is a correct understanding in line with Marxist theory, but to pay attention only to this point may be not enough, that is, it does not involve a full appreciation of Marxist theory on classes and the state, nor does it entirely tally with the historical reality of the origins of the ancient Chinese states.

Marxist theory on the state not only notes that the state is an instrument for class oppression but explicitly puts forward another aspect as well, that is, the state as a “buffer” for class struggle and an instrument for the construction of social harmony. In *The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State*, apart from the assertion that the state is the product of class conflict, Engels also pointed out:

The state is...the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms, classes with conflicting economic interests, might not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power seemingly standing above society that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within

1 Karl Mark and Fredrick Engels, *Selected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 4, p. 165.

the bounds of “order”; and this power, arisen out of society but placing itself above it, and alienating itself more and more from it, is the state.²

What Engels stresses here is the emergence of the state as a force, with the purpose of “moderating conflicts, and keeping them within the bounds of ‘order.’” This mediation function of the state depends not on repressive measures but rather, in the main, on administration. The objective of the state’s administration should be social harmony. In his *Ancient Society* Morgan stated, “The interests of society are paramount to individual interests, and the two must be brought into just and harmonious relation...Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending. It will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient clans.”³ The ultimate goal of the function of early state is displayed here. Engels concluded his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* with that judgment of Morgan’s which he approved completely. As a matter of fact, the structure of power among phratries, clans, tribes and confederacies already contained goals reached through the administrative function, goals which were inherited and developed in the early state. This could be referred to as the “revival” of past tradition in a new form. The state was of course a force set above the clans; however, shortly after its emergence, its distance from the clans, tribes and confederacies was not very great. This difference, according to Engels, increased “day by day,” and was not some sword of repression hanging over society that got there overnight. In terms of the situation in ancient China, no clear-cut boundary lay between the initial state and the tribes or clans; besides, for the tribes or clans to develop into the state it was a long road of incremental progress. The fact that the clan tradition of maintaining justice and harmony remained in the early state for a long time is by no means inexplicable.

In terms of the origin and formation of early states in China, the state’s function of “moderating conflicts” is demonstrated relatively clearly. On this topic, we need to discuss the influential theory of “chiefdom.” This theory, put forward by American anthropologists in the 1950s, elucidates a new concept in pre-state social development compared to the traditional clans and tribal confederacies, one which has had a certain positive role in complementing and developing the relevant theories of Marx and Engels. Since the 1970s and 1980s, that theory has been adopted in research on early states in ancient China and has brought fruitful results in the form of profound and reasonable interpretations by Zhang Guangzhi, Xie Weiyang, Shen Changyun and others. However, questions remain, leaving space for further exploration. Apart from the important issue of whether ancient China had an era of “chiefdom,” the theoretical direction of “chiefdom” is also debatable, that is, the theoretical direction of stressing the idea that the autocratic state was already germinating during the period of chiefdom. It has been said that this era already had a “hereditary hierarchy,” and that

2 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

3 Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 969.

“elements of absolutism and monarchy had already appeared”; and it has also been said that the outcome of such development necessarily meant that compared with Europe, early states in ancient China were, from the very beginning, heavily tinged with absolutism and lacking in a tradition of democracy.⁴ Consciously or unconsciously, the “chiefdom” theory avoids (or weakens) the fundamental principle that in the primitive ages, the clan was the primary unit of social organization, replacing “clan” with vague terms like “bands.” The clan was the basic organizational unit of society in primitive times, and this principle determines that the elements of absolutism and monarchy could not have been dominant (or important) at that time. Marx stated that the clan as a social unit was essentially democratic, thus the phratry, made up of clans, the tribe, made up of phratries, the confederacy of tribes, and the gentile society...cannot but be democratic, and monarchy was incompatible with clanship.⁵ There are certainly various kinds of social conflicts among clans, tribes and tribal confederacies, as well as tribal wars, and even the barbarous custom of head-hunting, yet the main and dominant content of social organization at each level is democracy and harmony; the clans, tribes, and confederacies cannot be hotbeds of absolutism and monarchy.

The Five Emperors period is recognized as the key period in the origin of the early Chinese states, while the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties can be referred to as the time of its formation and primary development. The relevant historical records and archeological data clearly show how early states took shape and developed along a path of harmonious construction. On this point, we can see at least the following key points.

Firstly, strengthening the close union of clans and tribes on the basis of intrinsic blood ties. The “Canon of Yao” of *The Book of History* compiled in the Warring States period depicts the conditions under which Yao became leader of the confederacy of tribes:

He was sincerely courteous, and capable of (all) complaisance. The bright (influence of these qualities) was felt through the four quarters (of the land), and reached to (heaven) above and (earth) beneath. He made the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of (all in) the nine classes of his kindred, who (thus) became harmonious. He (also) regulated and polished the people (of his domain), who all became brightly intelligent. (Finally), he united and harmonized the myriad states....⁶

What is stated above is that Yao was able to treat others with respect and modesty, and thus his brilliance is spread throughout the country. He was also able to inspire heaven and earth and the gods and spirits, to promote the virtues so as to enable all the families to live in

4 Shen Changyun, “Chiefdom, Early State and the Origin and Formation of States in Ancient China”; Yi Jianping, “Chiefdom and Autocracy,” and “From Morgan to Service: The Formation of the Chiefdom Theory.”

5 Karl Marx, “Conspectus of Lewis Morgan’s *Ancient Society*,” Chapter 2 of Part II: “The Iroquois Clans”; and Chapter 5 of Part II: “Iroquois Confederacy,” pp. 406, 439.

6 James Legge’s translation, see <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/canon-of-yao>.

kindness and harmony, and, on the basis of the kindness and harmony of all the families, to discern the performance of the common people and hence further improve relations among all the states. Here is represented the constitution of society composed of three levels: *jiuzu* (nine families), *baixing* (hundred surnames), and *wanbang* (ten thousand states). “Nine,” “hundred,” and “ten thousand” are words meaning multitudinous, and do not indicate an actual figure. The “nine families” can be taken to refer to the core clan with Yao at its head, a group which played an important role in the early construction of the state; in the period of Shun and Yu there was still a stress on that “the king should clarify the family line and be kind to his kindred, and find competent people to assist him.”⁷ “*Baixing*” can be taken to refer in the beginning to the numerous clan leaders who joined the confederacy and took on certain responsibilities. “*Baixing*” also appeared in the chapter of “Heaven Protects Thee” (*Tian Bao*) in the *Book of Songs*, and as the Mao school rightly annotates it, “*baixing* refers to the surnames of the clan officials.” Later generations often understood *baixing* as the numerous common people, but its original meaning will be revealed in the narratives of ancient times. For example, “Black Robes” (*Zi Yi*) in the *Classic of Rites* records the words of Confucius: “When Yu had been on the throne three years, the humanity of the noble families (*baixing*) was in accordance with his.” “The Announcement of Tang” (*Tang Gao*) in the *Book of History* provides another case in point in the record of historical events at the end of the Xia Dynasty: “The king of Xia extinguished his virtue, and played the tyrant, extending his oppression over you, the noble families (*baixing*) of the myriad regions. Suffering from his cruel injuries, and unable to endure the wormwood, you protested....” In brief, we can get closer to historical reality if we understand the records in the “Canon of Yao” in the *Book of History* that Yao influenced and united all families, clans, and states through his own excellent virtue (instead of violent oppression) as describing the situation in the clans, tribes and confederacy of tribes.

The significance of *li* (ritual) was enormous in the origin and formation of early states in ancient China. The essence of ritual in those days lay in its function as the norm for relationships within and among the clans and tribes. The question of Duke Ai of Lu (the ruler of Lu) to Confucius about “the great *li*” and Confucius’ answer (given below) have been handed down to us:

Then Confucius replied, “According to what I have heard, of all things by which the people live the rites are the greatest. Without them they would have no means of regulating the services paid to the spirits of heaven and earth; without them they would have no means of distinguishing the positions proper to father and son, to high and low, to old and young; without them they would have no means of maintaining the separate character of the intimate relations between male and female, father and son, elder brother and younger, and conducting the intercourse between the contracting families in a marriage, and the frequency

7 Sun Xingyan, *Notes and Commentaries of the Book of History*, Chapter 2: “The Counsels of Gaoyao,” p. 77.

or infrequency (of the reciprocities between friends). These are the grounds on which superior men have honored and revered (the rites) as they did. Thereafter, (having this view of the rites), they taught them to the people, on the ground of their ability (to practice them), not disregarding their general principles or the limitations (that circumstances impose in particular cases). When their object had been accomplished (so far), they proceeded to give rules for the engraving (of the ceremonial vessels), and the embroidering in various colors (of the robes), in order to secure the transmission (of the rites). Having obtained the concurrence (of the people in these things), they proceeded to tell them the different periods of mourning; to provide the full amount of tripods and stands; to lay down the (offerings of) pork and dried meats; to maintain in good order their ancestral temples; and then at the different seasons of the year reverently to present their sacrifices; and to arrange thereat, in order, the different branches and members of their kindred. Meanwhile (they themselves) were content to live economically, to have nothing fine about their dress; to have their houses low and poor; to eschew much carving about their carriages; to use their vessels without carving or graving; and to have the plainest diet, in order to share all their advantages in common with the people. In this manner did the superior men of antiquity practice the rites.”⁸

According to Confucius, *li* had been significant since the beginning of civilization; besides such events as feasts, sacrificial ceremonies, weddings, etc., it also made possible “arranging in order different branches and members of their kindred,” and was a cohesive element as well as a norm for clan relationships. In ancient China *li* was stressed more than law and in many circumstances replaced law, or was referred to simultaneously with law; this is a striking characteristic of ancient Chinese society. The reason is that *li* (rather than law) had grown up as a necessity for the clans and tribes. In the early days it permeated the kinship relations in clans and tribes. In fact, it was by no means just a veil; in real life, it was a spiritual pillar of ancient Chinese society, and its soul. In resolving social conflict, *li* does not adopt violent repressive measures, as its function of “managing the state, maintaining social stability, ordering the people, and benefiting later generations” cannot be accomplished through violent repression.⁹ In the early history of the origin and formation of the ancient Chinese states, *li* was the fundamental instrument for the construction of a harmonious society.

Secondly, in handling the exterior relations of the clans, tribe and confederacies, the main tactic was not war and killing, though they existed, but alliances and unions. In the period of Huangdi, war was waged between the Yandi and Huangdi tribes and the tribe of Chi You,

8 Wang Pinzhen, *Annotations of the Book of Rites Compiled by Dai De*, Chapter 1: “Duke Ai’s Questions to Confucius,” p. 12. This quotation is also recorded in the chapter of “Questions of Duke Ai (*Aigong Wen*)” of the *Book of Rites* and “Questions about Rites (*Wenli*)” in *Sayings of Confucius and His Disciples* (孔子家语). This is James Legge’s translation, see <http://ctext.org/liji/ai-gong-wen>.

9 Yang Bojun, *Annotations of Spring and Autumn Annals and the Tradition or Commentary of Zuo Qiuming*, p. 76. This is James Legge’s translation, see <http://ctext.org/liji/ai-gong-wen>.

which resulted in “Chi You being captured and killed in Zhuolu.”¹⁰ However, problems were not often solved through killings; a more frequent situation was that both sides reached an understanding and established an alliance after the war.¹¹ The case of the tribes of Yandi and Huangdi is typical. The two tribes had thrice fought in part of Banquan, yet they then intermingled and their offspring often intermarried. “A tour of inspection” was a major instrument for strengthening the relationship between all the clans in the early stage of the ancient Chinese states. It is recorded that Huangdi once “reached the eastern sea and climbed Wanshan and Taishan Mountain; reached Kongtong in the west and climbed Jitou Mountain; reached the Yangtze River in the south and climbed Xiongshan and Xiangshan Mountain; in the north he expelled the tribe of Xunyu, and made a treaty of alliance at Fushan, and built a walled city at the foot of Zhuolu Mountain.” Across this vast expanse of country, peace was realized through alliances instead of military expeditions.¹² During the reign of Shun, the tour of inspection was institutionalized: “In five years there was one tour of inspection, and there were four appearances of clan leaders at court,” according to the “Canon of Shun” in the *Book of History*. Shun made a tour of inspection once every five years, and all the tribal chiefs would meet him between the tours. In the Shang Dynasty, “Tang inspected the land to the east and reached the state of Youshen”;¹³ using the opportunity afforded by the inspection, Shang and Youshen were united in matrimony. This shows the relationship between tribes was strengthened in a harmonious way.

Thirdly, the functions of the state are none other than repression and administration. Yet this does not mean that the two functions have always been equivalent since the emergence of the state. In the early stage of the ancient Chinese states, the administrative function far surpassed the function of repression. Ancient China experienced an extremely long historical stage from the origins of classes to their formation and the emergence of the early state.¹⁴ The formation of the state was not the outcome of irreconcilable class conflict, but a product of the need for administration of society. A typical embodiment of the early Chinese states’ administrative function is the story of the Great Yu’s water-control. Yu did his best to unite

10 Huang Huaixin, Zhang Maorong and Tian Xudong, *Variorum of the Book of Zhou*, vol. 6, p. 733.

11 Xu Xusheng pointed out earlier in his book that among the main confederacies “peaceful coexistence was normal, while war was temporary.” See Xu Xusheng, *The Legendary Era of Ancient Chinese History*, p. 107.

12 Sima Qian, “Annals of the Five Emperors,” p. 6.

13 Hong Xingzu, *Complementary Annotations of the Poetry of Chu*, Chapter 3: “Questions to the Heaven,” p. 108.

14 The records of so-called irreconcilable conflict among ancient social classes in much of the past research are unreliable. Foundations consisting of human heads laid in late Neolithic sites are a demonstration of the custom of head-hunting among the clans. Human sacrifice discovered at the Yin Ruins is that of prisoners of war and not of slaves. In the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, when early states were emerging and maturing, no large-scale uprising or war between the oppressors and the oppressed occurred, showing that the class struggle of that time had not intensified. Large-scale uprisings and peasant wars took place after the Qin Dynasty. That complements the idea that the developmental path of ancient China was harmonious construction.

the forces of all tribes to control the floods, “with a view to open up the nine provinces, he made the roads communicable, banked up the marshes, surveyed the hills, told Yi and his band that paddy should be planted in low damp places, and directed Lord Millet and his band, when it was difficult to obtain food, or when food was scarce, to barter their surplus stock in exchange for what they had not, so as to put all the princes on an equal footing. Yu in this way worked for the mutual convenience of the respective districts as regards the distribution of the wealth and resources of the country.”¹⁵ Yu’s water-control fully exemplifies the early state’s administrative function and his enormous achievement in this area promoted the development of the early state; and “throughout the nine provinces a similar order was effected,” and “access to the capital was secured for all within the four seas.”¹⁶ “Princes” here refers to chiefs of tribe or confederacy.

Fourthly, abdicating the hegemony of the tribal confederacy was an important hallmark of the harmonious construction of early states in ancient China. As for the transferal of authority among Yao, Shun, and Yu, the record in the *Book of History* is undoubtedly accurate.¹⁷ The case of Yao’s abdication to Shun is a classic example:

The Di said, “Ho! (President of) the Four Mountains (*Si Yue*), I have been on the throne seventy years. You can carry out my commands—I will resign my place to you.” The Chief said, “I have not the virtue; I should disgrace your place.” (The Di) said, “Show me some one among the illustrious, or set forth one from among the poor and mean.” All (then) said to the Di, “There is an unmarried man among the lower people, called Shun of Yu.” The Di said, “Yes, I have heard of him. What have you to say about him?” The Chief said, “He is the son of a blind man. His father was obstinately unprincipled; his (step-) mother was insincere; his

15 Sima Qian, *Historical Records*, Chapter 2: “Annals of the Xia Dynasty,” p. 51.

16 Sun Xingyan, *Notes and Commentaries of the Book of History*, Chapter 3: “Tribute of Yu” (*Yu Gong*), p. 201.

17 The record of “abdication” in the Five Emperors period is also found in the works of Confucian and Mohist scholars; although the two schools of thought use these records for their own purposes, the record itself is relatively reliable. Related narratives can be seen in *Zhuang Zi*, *The Spring and Autumn of Lv Buwei*, etc. The recently excavated bamboo slips from the Warring States period contain similar stories (e.g., Jingmen Museum, *Guodian Chu Slips*, p. 157; *Chu Slips of the Warring States Period in Shanghai Museum*, vol. 2, p. 250). All these materials can serve as supporting evidence for the abdication stories in the *Book of History*. Some writers in the Warring States period rejected this idea and denied the existence of abdication; they believed that it was only a matter of “Shun forcing Yao, and Yu forcing Shun” or “Shun taking Yao captive.” Their propositions were based on extrapolating to ancient times the frequent seizure of the throne by force in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Such hypotheses are far less reliable than the position taken by Confucian and Mohist scholars. Fan Wenlan has successfully argued that most records in the “Canon of Yao” collected by the archivists of the Zhou period are systematic; the stories of abdication could not have been concocted out of whole cloth in the Zhou Dynasty, where transmission from father to son had long been established; and that the records were generally credible as historical facts handed down from ancient times. See Fan Wenlan, *The Concise Edition of the General History of China*.

(half-) brother Xiang was arrogant. He has been able (however) by his filial piety to live in harmony with them, and to lead them gradually to self-government, so that they (no longer) proceed to great wickedness.” The Di said, “I will try him; I will wive him, and thereby see his behaviour with my two daughters.” (Accordingly) he arranged and sent down his two daughters to the north of the Gui, to be wives in (the family of) Yu. The Di said to them, “Be reverent!” (Shun) carefully set forth the beauty of the five cardinal duties, and they came to be (universally) observed. Being appointed to be General Regulator, the affairs of every (official) department were arranged in their proper seasons. (Being charged) to receive (the princes) from the four quarters of the land, they were all docilely submissive. Being sent to the great plains at the foot of the mountains, notwithstanding the tempests of wind, thunder, and rain, he did not go astray. The Di said, “Come, you Shun. I have consulted you on (all) affairs, and examined your words, and found that they can be carried into practice—(now) for three years. Do you ascend the seat of the Di.”¹⁸

It is mentioned here that Yao called in *Si Yue* to discuss the candidate for succession.¹⁹ Yao was going to pass the throne to one of them, but they refused; they unanimously recommended Shun and introduced him in detail. Yao then examined Shun’s behavior and ability in various ways by himself, and after three years of testing him finally decided Shun should succeed him on the throne. This form of abdication was completely a matter of democratic consultation in which the individual will of the highest leader did not play the decisive role. To seek for the germ of despotism in such a system would be a wild goose chase.

In conclusion, the origin, formation and developmental stages of early states in ancient China followed a path of harmonious construction.²⁰ The long established and well-developed system of clans, a social structure unique to ancient China, provided a deep social foundation for the path of harmonious construction. Confucius had described the ideal archaic society as “all under heaven being one family,” “China as one man,” indicating that the world is like a big family and China is united as one man. He thought that if “Therefore when it is said that (the ruler being) a sage can look on all under the sky as one family, and on all in the Middle states as one man, this does not mean that he will do so on premeditation and purpose. He must know men’s feelings, lay open to them what they consider right, show clearly to them what is advantageous, and comprehend what are their calamities. Being so furnished, he is

18 Sun Xingyan, *Notes and Commentaries of the Book of History*, Chapter 1: “Canon of Yao,” pp. 28-34. This is James Legge’s translation, see <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/canon-of-yao>.

19 *Si Yue* is understood by academics as either four chiefs or one single person. In James Legge’s translation, *Si Yue* refers to the chief of four mountains. But the author of this article holds that *Si Yue* stands for four tribal chiefs.

20 From the germination and origin to the full development of ancient Chinese states there is a long historical process. Generally speaking, it comprises the following stages: origins in the Five Emperors period; development in the period of Xia and Shang; maturity in the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods.

then able to effect the thing.”²¹ In the construction of the early Chinese states, whether in the establishment of institutions or in the choice of measures, such issues as feelings, opinions about right and wrong, and advantages and calamities for the clans or tribes are always involved. Such concern and social practice serve as the keystone for harmonious construction, as well as benchmark for the success of the leaders (known to Confucius as “sages”) of the past. Traces of the idea of harmonious construction can be frequently observed until the full development of early states in ancient China.

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21 Sun Xidan, *Collected Annotations of the Book of Rites*, Chapter 21: “Ceremonial Usages,” p. 606. James Legge’s translation, from <http://ctext.org/liji/li-yun>.

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