



E-ASIA
university of oregon libraries

<http://e-asia.uoregon.edu>

© *Peggy Dull*, 2006

CHAPTER XII: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter consists of two parts. The first pertains to Chinese history and to legitimation as a major theme in the history of China. The second deals with the analytical categories we have used in this study and, although drawing upon Chinese materials, seeks to throw light on the more general issue of legitimation.

The "bad last emperor" idea may now be seen as largely irrelevant to the legitimation of most Chinese dynasties. Certainly it is deeply imbedded in the Confucian classical tradition, for it "explains" how the Chou was justified in overthrowing the Shang and presumably why the earlier Hsia dynasty was cast aside by the rising Shang forces. The idea was probably important throughout Chinese political history in the form of a cautionary tale which statesmen could raise or suggest in order to dissuade their emperors from undesirable action. But as a legitimating factor in justifying the end of one house and the rise of another, it was of no consequence in the imperial period. The immediate reason for this irrelevance may be seen in the notion of abdication as the long-preferred means of effecting a transmission of power from one ruling house to the next.

Abdication, like the "bad last emperor" syndrome, was classically attested; indeed, since it was the earlier form of transmitting power it was presumably the better way of doing it. Those who participated in the abdication process found themselves analogized to Emperors Yao and Shun and Yü who had not engaged in bloody warfare when passing the throne from one ruler to another of a different family. The abdication process should be seen as closely associated with the cycle of cosmic

page 931

forces as it came to be understood in the last years of the Former Han dynasty. It was at that time when the order of the elements in the five part cycle were definitively fixed in the generative mode; that is, each cosmic force created its successor. When applied politically that meant that each ruling house should create its successor, not be conquered by its successor. Creation of the rising ruling house took the form of abdication. Thus, there was a near perfect match between the generative movements of the cosmic forces and the abdicational process of dynastogenesis. Last rulers tended not to be bad but to be generous and reverential. Thus, the last ruler of the Later Han was given the posthumous title Hsien, to proffer, and what he proffered was the throne to the next ruling house. During the next thousand years, the posthumous title most commonly granted to last emperors was Kung, meaning respectful and deferential. In the specific context of a posthumous title, one of the meanings of the word is "to honor the worthy and respectfully to defer." The word "defer" here translates *jang* which in other contexts is commonly translated "to abdicate." Six emperors between the Eastern Chin and the end of the Sung dynasty were designated Emperor Kung (*Morohashi*, 4: 10596, 94), and all of them abdicated to founders of new dynasties. A morally bad ruler, the typical "bad last emperor," would not have had the credibility or the suitability to create by abdication a new dynasty. To be the equivalent of an abdicating Emperor Yao or Shun one had to be morally acceptable and sufficiently wise to choose a fitting successor. Hence, abdication was fundamentally incompatible with the idea of a bad last emperor. The growing stature of the imperial institution is probably closely related to the foregoing observations. We have seen that by the time of the

page 932

founding of the Ming dynasty the Mongol emperors were not held accountable for the social and political problems that existed in China at the time. This attitude is a far cry from the writings of

Wang Fu who, in the Later Han, tried to hold Han emperors responsible for the social and political decay that, he felt, characterized his age. Thus, the founder of the Ming dynasty and some of his advisers seem to have felt not only that there were no bad last emperors but also that there were no bad emperors. Whatever the faults of the Mongol age, they could not be attributed to imperial acts of commission or omission.

The Yung-lo emperor's usurpation can be seen as a violation of that principle, but it is at least as likely that he was guided less by feelings about the imperial institution in any abstract sense than he was by his own drive to power within the context of his family. Put another way, the Yung-lo case draws attention to another feature of dynastic creation, viz., the succession crisis which typified all major Chinese dynasties. In spite of filial piety as a primary Chinese value and in spite of primogeniture as the principle governing imperial succession, the passage of the throne from the founder to the second ruler was not likely to be smooth. There was a familial and political dynamism operating in such situations that the studies in this volume do not fully elucidate. More work is needed on this topic before we can grasp firmly the forces that led to these dynastic crises and, ironically, to long term stability of these successful ruling houses.

The studies presented here provide the data needed for a periodization of legitimating ideologies in Chinese history. The Shang and earlier entities, we are probably safe in assuming, can be treated as traditional, in the sense that things had always been this way and

page 933

should be this way. Relative absence of sufficient data makes this first stage of Chinese legitimation rather provisional. The second period begins with the Chou dynasty but was retroactively made to apply to the transition from Hsia to Shang; the use of a moral argument to legitimate the Chou conquest of the Shang is what distinguishes this period from the earlier one. A ruling house has moral obligations which must be discharged if that house is to continue to occupy the throne. T'ien (God or Heaven) tests the moral suitability of the occupant of the throne and if it is found wanting then the mandate to rule will be withdrawn from that ruling house and granted to another. Although this concept had lost its viability by the founding of the Ch'in and Han dynasties, it was rejuvenated under the growing Confucian influence of the Han period, fused with the omenology of that period, and remained thereafter a part of the symbolism of dynastic creation. Our studies indicate, however, that its importance in Chinese history has probably been overemphasized. Wang Mang and others of his age were the first to manipulate consciously the Mandate of Heaven and omens and signs of the decline of one ruling house and the rise of another. With that era, we can say that an ideology of dynastogenesis had been discovered. This assertion is not intended to diminish the role of Han Wu-ti in creating a Confucian orthodoxy, but it makes Wang Mang's era stand in sharp contradistinction to the foundings of the Ch'in and Han dynasties when there was so very little articulated ideology.

The idea of abdication as a factor in dynastic founding did not die, but it did lose much of its potency. Li Yüan, the founder of the T'ang dynasty, argued that abdication was a sham, that it was recognized as a sham, and that he did not want it applied in the founding of his

page 934

dynasty. His advisers, however, persuaded him to accept the symbolism of abdication and the last ruler of the Sui was dutifully allowed to abdicate. It might be noted that because of the political divisions of the time there were two last Sui rulers, in different parts of the empire, and that both were given the posthumous title Kung. In the founding of the Sung dynasty, abdication was an afterthought and played no part in the decision to found the dynasty nor in the process of founding it. Thus, in the founding of Chinese dynasties, abdication had become little more than a hollow

symbol by the founding of the T'ang. The reason for saying "Chinese dynasties" is that as late as 1527, the Mac dynasty was founded in Annam on the abdication of the last Le ruler (see DMB, 1032). Aside from dynastic foundings, the most noteworthy application of the idea of abdication was as the fig leaf it provided for the usurpation of the Yung-lo emperor, as that usurpation was reinterpreted in the latter part of the Ming dynasty.

The period in which abdication was most prominent corresponds in a very general way with the period in which omens were reported and manipulated in the rise of dynasties. Such signs of Heaven's desire to create a new ruling house, as with the notion of abdication, never lost completely their potency. The last major recourse to such Heavenly indicators occurred not at the time of a dynastic founding but in the *Heavenly Books (T'ien-shu)* of the Northern Sung; it was felt that additional legitimation was needed in view of the international and domestic situation. As in the case of the founding of the T'ang, there was opposition to this patent manipulation of symbols. It is clear that much of the Chinese world no longer placed much faith in either abdication or politically inspired revelation texts. Hence, we may mark

page 935

the beginning of the Sung at the very latest (and in many respects: the beginning of the T'ang) as the end of the period in which omens and abdication were important factors in the legitimation of regimes in China.

The debates that arose in the Northern Sung over *cheng-t'ung* mark a crisis in legitimational ideology. When omens and abdication became little more than vestigial political ideas, what was to replace them in legitimating Chinese regimes? *Cheng-t'ung*, frequently rendered into English as legitimate succession and probably as close as one can come to saying legitimacy in Chinese, provided an answer, even if not a very good one. *Cheng-t'ung* was usually understood to consist of two elements: the moral right to succession (*cheng*) and the unification of the empire (*t'ung*). As Professor Hok-lam Chan has recently pointed out, the concept "did not involve the Northern Sung court in any discussion of its own legitimacy" (*Legitimation*, 40). In other words, the concept was most important, not in legitimation of an extant regime, but in its application in history writing. Thus, by Northern Sung times, there was no articulated ideology of legitimation. Some scholars and officials might argue, for example, on ethnic grounds that no foreigner could legitimately rule China, but foreign rulers and Chinese rulers could signal their implicit ideology of legitimation by their commitment to Confucianism. The moribundity of omens and abdication and the absence of a supplanting set of ideas perhaps facilitated both Mongol and Manchu rule in China, for there was no explicit metric of legitimation that could be applied to find them wanting. And in the case of the Manchus, acceptance of established institutions and commitment to Confucian values provided the implicit legitimational ideology.

page 936

The role of Confucianism throughout imperial Chinese history, and in spite of the different emphases within that doctrine, is impossible to overemphasize. We have introduced two cases of apparent non-Confucian legitimation: the Taoism of the Northern Wei and the Buddhism of Empress Wu. But the key word is "apparent," for in both cases the alternative ism was no more than a facade. The Taoism of K'ou Ch'ien-chih was, at base, a conservative social and moral Confucianism. The Buddhism of Empress Wu, as revealed in the commentary to the *Great Cloud Sutra*, was little more than familiar Confucian political symbolism. We had not expected either of these findings. They attest to the bedrock fundamentalism of Confucian moral, social and political ideas in Chinese culture.

We may summarize these observations on the periodization of Chinese concepts of legitimation as follows. The first period, from earliest times to the Shang, appears to be an era in which questions were either not raised about legitimation or, if they were raised, the answer was, This is the way the dynasty has always been. The continuing interaction between the Shang rulers and the gods and ancestors was enough to maintain the legitimacy of the Shang house. The second period, limited essentially to the founding of the Chou dynasty, is characterized by the feeling that not just the gods but man's moral behavior accounts for the fall of one ruling house and the rise of the next. In the development of mankind in China this constitutes an important change in the relationship between mankind and the world in which he lives. There has been a profoundly important reconceptualization of the *nomos* and man's relationship to it. The third period, beginning with Wang Mang, is marked by the twin elements

page 937

of abdication and omens. Abdication allowed a gentlemanly transfer of power from one member of the elite to another, presumably without recourse to civil war. Omens provided the divine testimony to the wisdom of the transfer. By the Northern Sung both of these elements had become hollow shells, and the fourth period begins. The last period, consisting of the Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties, is less easy to characterize. We can, first, eliminate the Yuan from consideration, for its legitimation was, in large measure, not based on Chinese ideas, but on a distinctive Mongol faith in the charisma of Chenggis Khan. The Ming and Ch'ing dynasties have in common no recourse to abdication and no significant reliance on omens. Neither did they invoke the *chengt'ung* idea. Both seem to have relied heavily on purging society and polity of the abuses that had accumulated in the preceding dynasty. There was, thus, the explicit idea that the system was sound or could be made sound and the implicit assumption that he who restored that soundness was legitimate as a dynastic founder. In an earlier era the emphasis was, e.g., on the omenistic testimony of dynastic selection; in the fourth period, the imperial institution, the bureaucratic network, and Confucian values were so firmly implanted that commitment to those structures and values, in the ideal, was sufficient to garner legitimacy for a dynastic founder. The rise of Neo-Confucianism may well have contributed to this situation in that its more authoritarian values would have diminished the possibility of questioning the legitimacy of those in power. Neo-Confucianism also enhanced the position of the emperor with the probable consequence that not only the emperorship but also any reigning emperor was, by long established custom, *ipso facto* legitimate. Not until the early twentieth century was there any

page 938

questioning of the emperorship and the current ruling house; the ease with which they were cast aside testifies both to the lack of a carefully articulated justification of the system and to the power of the new republican principles of legitimation.

The analytical categories taken, with modifications, from David Easton's work have proved extremely useful in surveying Chinese cases of legitimation. We turn now to a discussion of those categories, drawing together the observations and hypotheses that we have generated from these cases.

Leadership obviously stands out in the process of dynastic founding, and it is most conspicuous in the creation of the Han and Ming dynasties where the founders had little but their skills upon which to draw. That is, they were not part of the established political or military structure nor were they members of the social elite. The T'ang and Sung founders were members of the elite but like the other two cases they came to power via the military, and, in the case of the T'ang, after an extended civil war. The civil wars provided the arenas in which these men demonstrated their leadership skills. The dynasties founded by abdication likewise provided an arena for the dynasts except that under the circumstances of abdication the arena consisted of the civil and military

structure of an on-going regime. The most important aspect of all these cases is the extent to which these founders were tested and retested on their rise to the throne. They confronted numerous opportunities in which to demonstrate to the world that they were leaders of outstanding merit--leaders who deserved the allegiance of the people who counted, that is, those people of social and political

page 939

prominence who would confer upon them the legitimacy that they needed in order to secure their dynasties. The Han, T'ang, Sung, and, to a much lesser extent, Ming founders share another characteristic, namely, they felt that it was their own human qualities, not divine intervention that had brought them to the throne and they consistently delegated responsibility for religious observances to their officials. Their utterly human merit was mirrored in their secular assessment of the imperial role they played. This observation is closely related to the issue of charisma in Chinese history.

The studies in this volume lead to a tripartite approach to charisma: pure, marginal, and posthumous. Pure charisma, limited in this discussion to political charisma, is rare in human history and so too in Chinese history. The true case we have is not of a Chinese dynastic founder but of the Mongol Chenggis Khan. His perceived charisma grew out of the traditions of the steppe, not out of Chinese culture. This does not mean that there could be no charismatic leaders in China, but in a search for them we should probably look to the leaders of religious sects; such leaders may then take on a political role (Hung Hsiu-ch'üan comes to mind), but in the broad sweep of Chinese history the significant point is that there were no Chinese leaders who founded dynasties on the basis of charismatic appeal.

Marginal charisma refers to those leaders who founded regimes during the period when omens and abdication were the predominant characteristics of dynastogenesis. The omens, fabricated according to political schedule and made to fit within a preconceived framework, were signs that the forthcoming abdication was to occur with Heaven's approval and presumably at Heaven's instigation. They did not aim at

page 940

indicating a direct connection between Heaven (or God) and the chosen leader; in this sense, they were quite weak as marks of charisma. Rather, they revealed a winding down of one cosmic force and the rise of another. There was less an attempt to demonstrate God working in harmony with a chosen leader than an attempt to show man working in harmony with cosmic forces. Furthermore, in many cases the omens revealed not a chosen individual but a chosen house. The omens spoke to the founding of a dynasty, to the supplanting of one family by another, not to the gift of grace of a single dynast.

The third feature of charisma in the Chinese political context is its posthumous nature. On numerous occasions after the death of the founder, and not necessarily immediately after his demise, his descendants and their collaborators created a charismatic aura that was not present in the lifetime of the founder himself. We suggest that the reason for this derives from two factors. First, the founder himself could rely upon his merit to legitimate his position. Second, the death of the founder left unanswered the question, how was his ruling house to be legitimated? The issue seems to have been resolved by crediting him with powers and marks of divine will that were unknown in his own lifetime. The situation bears a strong resemblance to the omen manipulation that marked abdication. In both cases, the basic issue seems to be dynastic legitimation by the conscious fabrication of symbols of sacred intervention in the political process. In the abdication process, the symbols were used before ascending the throne; in the other, after the dynasty was

founded. We have not attempted to measure the impact of this symbol manipulation nor have we attempted to

page 941

determine who was influenced by the process. This is not to say that these questions are not worthwhile asking.

Charisma, in sum, turns out to be a very complex issue. We feel that more work is needed on the political beliefs touched upon here. And we also note that the process of generating and using charisma can run in a direction opposite to the one in which it is usually construed. In place of posing the question, how is charisma converted into institutional stability, the issue becomes, how to create (posthumous) charisma in order to assure continued institutional security.

Structural legitimation is a powerful concept in dealing with legitimation in Chinese history. The greatest shock to the structural system occurred in the Ch'in-Han period, and although there were brief experiments in restoring the pre-imperial institutions in the Period of Disunion and in the Tsang, structural legitimation seems generally to have become easier with the rise of each dynasty. This observation suggests only that there was no fundamental structural change in Chinese history; thus, each ruling house could rely upon the accepted institutions of the preceding dynasty while purging them of their accumulated weaknesses and making marginal improvements. At the same time, regimes intentionally cloaked themselves in structural legitimacy by perpetuating, often only nominally, the structures of the earlier regime. With the passage of time, it was probably easier to do this. This perception of structural legitimacy helps to account for the success of the Manchu rulers, for their foreignness was of less consequence than their willingness to accept, with improvements, a well-established system that because of its long familiarity to Chinese society was not only legitimate itself but also aided in the

page 942

legitimation of those who, though not Chinese, were sufficiently wise to continue it.

There is a hint here of crossing the line between traditional legitimation and structural legitimation. At the risk of confusing the two issues, it is worth commenting on the similarities. Structural legitimation focuses on the structures and the norms and procedures according to which they operate, but the feeling that such structures were traditionally correct must be seen as an aspect of their potency. That is to say, structural and traditional legitimation may be separated for analytical purposes, but each tends to partake of the other. A commitment to the old and familiar structures bespeaks a commitment to the old and familiar values (and presumably to the ideology of which those values are a part).

Finally, in the category of structural legitimation, we may raise the following question: what is the relationship between structural legitimacy, which emphasizes continuity, and changes in the nature of Chinese society? Were changes in both so slow that minor but adequate changes were made in political structures so that there was no clash between the two? Did those structures exist with such autonomy that social change occurred under them? We have not tried to answer these and related questions, but they do appear to be worthwhile asking.

Ideological legitimation was found in this study to be of surprisingly less significance than the other two categories. Ideology appears in two forms, implicit and explicit. In the case of Han Kaotsu, for example, his ideological inclinations are manifested in his moral actions and attitudes, but not in inspiring declamations of ideological principles; indeed, as compared with Wang Mang or the

founders of the Ts'ao-Wei dynasty, Han Kao-tsu was an ideological innocent. Han Kao-tsu and others who had to fight their way to the pinnacle of power were generally much less concerned with conspicuous ideological identities than they were with the accumulated merit, their personal leadership skills, that had led them to that point. Conversely, the weaker dynastic founders, those who came to the throne by abdication, were explicit in their ideological commitments (and manipulations). The major historical role of ideology in the longer lasting dynasties was to stabilize and secure the dynasties after the death of the founders. The regimes had to convince the intellectual world that they shared the values and the ideology of that section of the populace. The process often began before the ascent to the throne, as the future emperor sought to attract intellectuals to his cause, but the policy commitments to an ideology characteristically occurred later in the life of the dynasty. In sum, an articulated ideology was relatively unimportant at the time of dynastic founding in the cases of the major dynasties.

Our studies suggest a possible comparison between the functional role of premodern ideologies and their modern counterparts. At the extremes, the difference is one of stasis versus revolution. In the case of many modernizing nations, the ideology is an import that seeks to replace a traditional ideology (which may or may not be highly articulated). Appeals are made to the new ideology in order to mobilize the populace for economic development, social transformation, and political change. While those aims may not be completely lacking in premodern ideologies, the foremost concern was to pacify the subjects, to restore what was assumed to be a desirable socio-political order.

These differences probably account for the fact that ideology appears as less significant than either leadership or structural legitimation, for the ideology was implicit in the leader's attitudes and in the familiar structures he fought and labored to restore.