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Antiquity in
Chinese Civilization

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THE BELATEDNESS OF THE PRESENT: DEBATES OVER ANTIQUITY DURING THE HAN DYNASTY

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Introduction

In text after text from the Warring States and Han, we read that culture was created in antiquity by sages who modeled themselves upon the larger cosmos. Let us take one example among many possibilities: “Thus, in antiquity (*guzhe* 古者), when the sages were going to act (*zuo* 作), they looked up and prognosticated the Heavenly texts (*wen* 文); they looked down and observed the earthly patterns (*li* 理). This is clear proof that they returned to the root (*fanben* 反本).”¹ This quotation is from the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Classic of Great Peace), although it could just as well have been taken from several other late Warring States or Han texts. The *Taiping jing* authors go on to explain how, in subsequent history, rulers have lost this ability to return to the root. As a consequence, a general decline has set in: “In high antiquity, those who obtained the Way and were able to bring peace to their rule did so only by nurturing themselves and holding fast to the root. In middle antiquity, there was some loss; they made small mistakes in nurturing themselves and lost the root. In late antiquity, plans were not auspicious, and they regarded their body lightly, saying they could obtain another one. Thus, they greatly lost it [the root],

¹ Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 (Collated Edition of the *Taiping jing*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 37.60-61.

and they brought chaos to their rule.”² The moral, of course, is that rulers must now re-learn to return to the root as the ancient sages did.

This general vision of history – that in antiquity sages followed cosmic patterns and thereby ruled properly, that a subsequent decline has set in, and that now we must once again return to following cosmic patterns – is a common one in numerous texts from early China. The debate would then focus on questions such as when the decline set in (after the early thearchs, after the Zhou fell, after the reforms of Shang Yang, and so on), who should be recognized as a proper sage to initiate reforms (Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, and so on), *et cetera*. By the time one gets to the Eastern Han, however, this general vision of history begins to change dramatically, and the nature of the debate over sagehood and antiquity shifts as well.

This paper will be an attempt to point to some features of this shift from the Western to Eastern Han by looking at two texts: the “Fanlun” 汎論 (Wide-Ranging Discussions) chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (The Master of Huainan) and portions of the *Taiping jing*. Although in both cases I have chosen admittedly extreme examples, I hope to show that they point to larger shifts in the conceptualizations of antiquity over this period.

The Sagely Creation of Standards in the “Fanlun” Chapter of the *Huainanzi*

For the authors of the “Fanlun,” sages are, or should be, the creators of the standards according to which all humans live.³ As the authors bluntly state, “Sages create standards and the myriad things are formed within them.”⁴ The history of humanity, therefore, consists primarily of the various sagely creations within which human action occurred.

² *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.61.

³ My understanding of the *Huainanzi* has been helped immeasurably by Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s Claim to Moral Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Harold D. Roth, *The Textual History of the Huainan Tzu* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1992) (Monographs of the Association for Asian Studies; 46); Kanaya Osamu 金谷治, *Rō Sō teki sekai: Enanji no shisō* 老莊の世界：淮南子の思想 (The World of Lao-Zhuang: The Thought of the Huainanzi) (Kyōto: Heirakuji shoten, 1959); Charles Le Blanc, *Huai-Nan Tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought: The Idea of Resonance With a Translation and Analysis of Chapter Six* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1985); and John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁴ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” ICS Series, 13/122/15.

The chapter begins by describing a period in which all of humanity was ruled through virtue, and in which both the human and natural worlds were harmonious: “In ancient times, kings wore caps and rolled-up collars to rule all under Heaven. Their virtue (*de* 德) was of life, not death, of giving, not usurping. None under Heaven rejected their service; all embraced their virtue. In those times, *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 were harmonized, the winds and rains timely and moderate. The myriad things prospered and flourished; nests of birds could be looked into, wild animals could be ensnared and kept compliant.”⁵

This would appear to be a golden age, and one might expect that the ensuing narrative would describe the gradual decline. In fact, however, the next sentences go (or at least at first glance appear to go) in the exact opposite direction. Yes, it was a period of harmony, but the people also lived in caves, had no clothes, and had no implements for plowing. The sages accordingly created inventions to solve these problems:

In ancient times, the people lived in humid lands, hollowing out caves again and again. In the winters, they could not bear the frosts, the snows, the fogs, and the dew; in the summers, they could not bear the oppressive heat, the sultry days, the mosquitoes, and the flies. The sages therefore created for them the pounding of mud and the cutting of trees to make houses; above they placed rafters, and below they made shelters to protect against the winds and rain and to keep out the cold and heat. The hundred families were put at ease. Bo Yu 伯余 was the first to make clothing. He spun the hemp, working the warp with his hand, suspending it through his fingers, forming it like netting. Later generations made them looms for doubled weaves to increase their usefulness. The people were thus able to protect their bodies and drive off the cold. In ancient times, the people sharpened sticks to plough, polished clam shells to weed, cut firewood with wood, and hauled water in jars. The people labored, but their gains were few. Later generations made them ploughs, ploughshares, hoes, axes for cutting firewood, and drawing systems for hauling water. The people were at ease, and their gains multiplied.⁶

The sages in ancient times similarly were concerned that the people had no means of traveling and exchanging goods with other areas, so they made yet further inventions.

In ancient times the great rivers and famed waterways cut across the roads and impeded the comings and goings of the people. They thus hollowed logs and quartered timber to make rafts and boats. Therefore, when a region had something special, it could be exchanged and transported. They

⁵ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/120/3-13/120/5.

⁶ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/120/7-13/120/11.

made shoes from hides and traversed a thousand *li* 里; they labored to carry loads on their backs. They thus created for them the bending of wood into wheels, the constructing of carts, and the yoking of horses and oxen. The people could thus go great distances without becoming tired.⁷

Each of these inventions is clearly presented as being proper: the sages accurately realized what the people needed and created new inventions accordingly. But the result of the new lifestyles that resulted from these inventions is that the wild animals, which in earlier times had been kept compliant, now began injuring people. So the sages invented weapons: “Since ferocious beasts would injure people and there was nothing with which to stop them, they created for them the casting of metal and the forging of iron to make weapons and arms. The animals could harm them no more.”⁸ This too was a wise invention. But, of course, once humans had weapons, violence increased and virtue declined all the more. And rulers had to start using laws and then punishments to keep the populace in order:

In antiquity the people were pure, the artisans skillful, the merchants honest, the women virtuous. This is why the governance and education were easy to transform, the customs easy to alter. Now, the virtue is declining more and more, and the customs of the people are becoming more and more stingy. Wanting to use honest and virtuous laws to put in order a people already corrupted is like wanting to control a horse without a bit and a whip. In ancient times, Shennong used no regulations or commands, yet the people followed. Tang and Shun had regulations and commands but no punishments. The Xia used no false words, the Shang made oaths, and the Zhou made covenants. When one comes down to the present time, people accept shame and think lightly of being disgraced, value taking and belittle giving. Wanting to use the way of Shennong to put things in order would only make chaos inevitable.⁹

In short, history consists of the successive inventions of sages, each of which, according to the authors, were created for perfectly good reasons. But, once a particular invention was instituted, it resulted in new ways of life that created yet more problems, and then yet more inventions were required to solve these new problems. The overall trajectory of this history is a decline from a society in which humans lived in harmony with each other and with the natural world to one in which violence and stinginess prevail. But, even though things were better in antiquity, one cannot hope to return to it: as the text makes clear, to attempt to rule now without pun-

⁷ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/120/11-13/120/14.

⁸ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/120/14-13/120/15.

⁹ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/122/1-13/122/5.

ishments would simply result in chaos. But, and this is the crucial point, even if one *could* return to antiquity, that would not be a good thing: yes, things were more harmonious then, but, since people lived in caves and had no clothes, they also died from exposure to the cold. And sages, seeing this, would have to start making inventions for them, and the whole process would start over again. So the fact that we now need punishments is simply a consequence of the implications of the successive innovations of the sages – each of which was made for very good reasons.

Thus, even if the overall history of humanity since antiquity has in a certain sense been one of decline, one should not wish to return to antiquity. On the contrary, sages must continue to do what they have been doing all along: looking at the problems of the moment and creating what is necessary. What worked in the past can never be a guide to the present:

If one investigates benefiting the people, one does not necessarily imitate the ancients. If one investigates activities, one does not necessarily accord with the old. Now, as for the decline of the Xia and Shang: they did not change their standards, they were destroyed. That the Three Dynasties arose is due to their ruling without imitating their predecessors. Thus, sages set standards with the change of time, set rites with the transformations of customs; their clothes and utensils were each determined according to their use, the standards, the measures, the regulations, the commands accorded with what was appropriate. Therefore, to change from the ancients is not something that can be opposed, and to accord with customs is not something that one should strive to do often.¹⁰

But if sages cannot follow the models of antiquity, how do they create? By following cosmic patterns. The authors argue that a sage models himself on the harmony of the cosmos. Just as the cosmos consists of harmonizing and balancing, so should the sage balance whatever issues are dominant at the time:

As for the *qi* 氣 of Heaven and Earth, none is as grand as harmony (*he* 和). Harmony is the interchange of *yin* and *yang*, the distinction of day and night, and the generating of things. In the period of spring things are born; in that of autumn they are completed; they need to obtain the essence of harmony. Therefore, the way of the sages is lenient yet firm, strict yet kind, pliant yet upright, forceful yet humane. Too much hardness leads to inflexibility; too much softness leads to laxity. The sage properly resides between hardness and softness, and thereby obtains the root of the Way. If one accumulates *yin*, one will sink; if one accumulates *yang*, one will rise. When *yin* and *yang* join, they are thereby able to complete harmony.¹¹

¹⁰ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/121/3-13/121/6.

¹¹ *Huainanzi*, “Fanlun,” 13/122/29-13/123/2.

What the cosmic patterns provide, in other words, is a model of how to balance competing forces.¹²

Considering this argument, the authors strongly oppose scholars who follow the teachings of past sages:

Great men create and disciples transmit. If you understand from whence standards and order arise, then you can respond to the times and change. If you do not understand the origin of standards and order, you end up in disorder even if you accord with antiquity. The standards and edicts of the current age should change with the times; the rites and propriety should be altered with customs. Scholars accord with those who came before, inheriting their practices, rely on their records, and hold fast to their teachings, thinking that there can be no order if it is not thus. This is like placing a square peg into round holes: they hope to obtain a proper fit and a fixed point, but it is very difficult.¹³

One of the things that concerned the authors so much was granting too much authority to a single sage from the past: the teaching of any one sage, no matter how perfect, cannot be a guide for later ages, because the accumulation of subsequent inventions will have led to a completely different type of society and a completely different set of problems. One cannot, therefore, follow scholars who call on rulers to model themselves on antiquity. Only a sage who understands how to balance these forces will know what to do. In short, the text is an argument against ever following any previous authority or model: since no precedent is acceptable, full authority must be given to sages. And the text seeks to explain how a sage must balance the concerns of the day and create anew.

The authors are positing history as one of decline. But the mechanism of the decline is precisely the results (albeit unintended) of the various sages' proper inventions. The sages, for example, were right to invent weapons, for that enabled people to protect themselves from wild animals. But once people possessed weapons, new ways of life involving weapons developed, and the sages had to invent stronger forms of punishments to control the people. But, crucially, this does not mean that the invention of weapons was wrong; the sages were right to do this. History, therefore, consists of an accumulation of these inventions, and each subsequent sage must innovate based upon the new situation he finds himself in – a situa-

¹² For the time that the authors are writing, what this meant was balancing the competing demands of imperial centralization and decentralization. I have already discussed the chapter's political argument vis-à-vis the Han state in chapter four of my *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 161-166, so I will not belabor the point here.

¹³ *Huainanzi*, "Fanlun," 13/122/20-13/122/23.

tion that will be defined in large part by the effects of the previous sages' innovations. Accordingly, the guide for each sage is not the past; it is rather a sense of proper harmony based upon the patterns of the cosmos. And only a sage will be able to see what precisely that would mean at any given time for humanity.

Sages and History in the *Taiping Jing*

Like the "Fanlun" chapter, the *Taiping jing* is committed to a vision of history as based upon the successive teachings of sages.¹⁴ And again like the "Fanlun" chapter, the authors do hold the view that there is a single mode of self-cultivation that is true for all time.¹⁵ One of the key notions is that of *shou yi* 守一: holding fast to the One. In one of the dialogues, when the Perfected (*zhenren* 真人) ask the Celestial Master (*tianshi* 天師) where they should begin, the Celestial Master tells them that they should "hold fast to the One in their thoughts."¹⁶ The Celestial Master then explains: "The One is the beginning of numbers; the One is the way of life; the One is that from which the primary *qi* arises; the One is the order of Heaven. Therefore, if you hold fast to and concentrate on the One, then you can change what is below from above. Now, in general, the greatest error of the myriad things is that in their activities they stay with the

¹⁴ My understanding of the *Taiping jing* has been aided tremendously by: Max Kaltenmark, "The Ideology of the *T'ai-p'ing ching*," in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 19-45; Xiong Deji 熊德基, "*Taiping jing* de zuozhe he sixiang ji qi yu Huangjin he Tianshidao de guanxi" 太平經的作者和思想及其與黃巾和天師道的關係, *LSYJ* 4 (1962): 8-25; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the *Taiping jing*, Part One," *Acta Orientalia* 50 (1989): 133-171; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the *Taiping jing*, Part Two," *Acta Orientalia* 51 (1990): 173-216; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping jing*," *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 3 (1990): 1-41; Barbara Hendrichske, "The Daoist Utopia of Great Peace," *Oriens Extremus* 35 (1992): 61-91; and Barbara Hendrichske, "The Concept of Inherited Evil in the *Taiping Jing*," *East Asian History*, 2 (1991): 1-30.

¹⁵ The extant *Taiping jing* is a heterogeneous collection. In this essay, I will only be referring to those sections consisting of a dialogue between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. However, the majority of the extant text (forty-four chapters of the total fifty-seven) consists of these dialogues between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. The precise date of this portion is difficult to determine, but most scholars agree that the content seems to belong to a later Eastern Han context. See the helpful summary by Barbara Hendrichske, "Early Daoist Movements," in *The Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 143-145.

¹⁶ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.60.

branches and do not return to the root. This error is not being solved; therefore it is all the more important to return to the root.”¹⁷ It is with *shou yi* that they should begin, as it was with *shou yi* that the sages of antiquity began. To return again to the passage with which I opened this paper: “Thus, in antiquity, when the sages were going to act (*zuo*), they looked up and prognosticated the Heavenly texts (*wen*); they looked down and observed the earthly patterns (*li*). This is clear proof that they returned to the root.”¹⁸ In subsequent times, this was lost: “In high antiquity, those who obtained the Way and were able to bring peace to their rule did so only by nurturing themselves and holding fast to the root. In middle antiquity, there was some loss; they made small mistakes in nurturing themselves and lost the root. In late antiquity, plans were not auspicious, and they regarded their body lightly, saying they could obtain another one. Thus, they greatly lost it [the root], and they brought chaos to their rule. Although this was the case, it was not the fault of the men of later antiquity. It arose from the dangers of inherited burden (*cheng fu* 承負).”¹⁹

At first glance, the story told thus far would appear to be a standard one of decline: the ancient sage kings cultivated themselves properly, subsequent generations have failed to do so, and the text is calling on people now to once again cultivate themselves like the ancient sages did. In other words, the text would appear at first glance to be calling for the sort of return to antiquity that the “Fanlun” was opposing. The closing sentences of the passage just quoted, however, demonstrate that the vision of history presented here is far more complex. The central idea in the vision of history presented in the *Taiping jing* is that of inherited burden.²⁰ For the authors, this concept explains why the decline occurred and why the blame for the decline ought not rest on those of today:

The Way of the root is enduringly correct; it would not viciously deceive the people. But when humans have followed the teachings of the former men, rulers, teachers, and fathers, they have slightly lost this correctness. As they lose the correct sayings, they lose the correct way of nourishing themselves. They then learned by imitating each other. For those born later, it daily grew worse, and the result is this. It has been accumulating for a long time. They have been transmitting these teachings to each other, but never obtaining the truth. All under Heaven has become completely depraved, and no one is able to bring this to a stop. Therefore, disasters

¹⁷ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.60.

¹⁸ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.60-61.

¹⁹ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.61.

²⁰ See the exemplary discussion by Hendrischke, “The Concept of Inherited Evil,” particularly pp. 8-22.

arise ten thousand times over – too many to be calculated. This all arose through accumulation over a long, long time. Ignorant people do not understand this, and they turn around and instead blame the rulers of their own time and accuse the people of their own time. How could this not make the sense of oppression form all the more? All under Heaven has become completely depraved, and no one is able to understand it on his own. Even if a ruler had the virtue of ten thousand men, how would he alone be able to do so? As such, with the conduct of today's men, how can there be a solution? ... All of this provides complete proof of inherited burden. Turning around and blaming people of today just makes one unable to pacify one's rule. People of today have been transmitting and receiving depravities for so long; how would they be able to suddenly change and correct things on their own? They have been following along with a constant sense of oppression, and continuing in this way for a long time; Heaven pities them. Thus, the highest august way responds to the primal *qi* and descends.²¹

The cause of the decline lies in the transmission of past teachings. Even if the original teachings were accurate, those who transmitted the teachings made errors. Over the years, these errors have continued to accumulate – to the point that the way has now been almost completely lost.

The implication of this way of reading history is that the blame for the current disorder is placed entirely on the problem of belatedness: men of earlier antiquity were able to analyze the cosmos directly and thereby act appropriately. Because errors have been circulated to the current generation, however, it is now impossible to do so. Thus, the recurrent claim is that the text's contemporaries, the latter-born, should not be blamed for the growing disorder. The blame lies entirely on those who came before – and more explicitly, on the accumulation of their errors. Since the latter born simply inherited this accumulation, it is not their fault. Humans only make the situation worse by continuing to blame their contemporaries for the decline.

Indeed, no human can even save the situation at this point. As the text makes clear, the operation of inherited burden means that the disasters will continue even if one acts properly: “In exerting oneself, if one's actions are good, but one on the contrary receives badness, this is the inherited burden of the transgressions of one's forebears.”²² The accumulation of errors has been going on for so long that the situation has deteriorated dramatically – to the point that disasters are growing to dangerous proportions, and to the point that no human is capable of saving the situation.

²¹ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.59-60.

²² *Taiping jing hejiao*, 34.22.

Because the situation is so dire, Heaven is moved to pity. Elsewhere in the text, however, there are hints that Heaven's desire to help may arise from more than just pity: humans have strayed so far from the proper path that the survival of Heaven itself is in danger:

Heaven, Earth, and Man, the three ranks, require one another in order to be established and form one another in order to be complete. This is like humans having a head, feet, and insides. If one of the ranks is destroyed, the three ranks in turn will altogether perish. This is like man being without a head, feet, or insides. If there is one that is missing, all three are in trouble. Therefore, man's great way can destroy Heaven and Earth. When the three ranks are all destroyed, all will be dark, and the myriad things will accordingly perish. Now, when things are finished, they are not able to suddenly return to life.²³

So how will Heaven save humanity? By giving birth to another sage? The text argues explicitly that this would not provide a solution to the current situation, since it would simply re-create the same problem. For the authors, one of the reasons inherited burden has developed is precisely because particular texts and ideas have been invested with too much authority – with the result that errors have become accepted as truths.

Now, if one teacher taught ten disciples, but his teachings were not in accord with the substance, then the ten disciples would in turn pass them on, each making ten more people expound. This would already result in one hundred people expounding falsities. If these one hundred would in turn pass on the teachings, each making ten people expound, then this would already result in one thousand people expounding perversities. If these one thousand people would each teach ten people, ten thousand people would be expounding perversities. If these ten thousand people were to speak to the four directions, then all under Heaven would be expounding perversities. Moreover, as for these words, the numerous people and many traditions would verify each other, and it would become impossible to oppose them. Accordingly, they would become an enduring teaching. This would originally have arisen from one person failing to speak substance, in turn leading to all men failing to speak substance and thereby bringing disorder to the correct patterns of Heaven. Accordingly, customs would be altered and conventions would be changed. All under Heaven would take this as a great sickness, but no one would be able to stop it. Later, it would even get worse; this is the working of inherited burden. That this is not the fault of later men is clear.²⁴

In this case, the problem of inherited burden would lie with simply one person speaking incorrectly. However, the authors argue further that in-

²³ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 92.373.

²⁴ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 37.58.

vesting *anyone*, even a sage, with too much authority will create the same problems of inherited burden. The reason is that even sages are speaking for particular activities or issues. When these are invested with too much authority, then the followers will fail to see the limitations of any one sagely teaching, and falsities will end up being accepted as truths: “The sages of antiquity and the present have had weaknesses and strengths. Each excelled in one activity. All gave speeches from Heaven and words from Earth, but what each created (*zuo*) was different. Thus, the various sages who have emerged earlier and later have each done different things.... Thus the various sages must not entirely have understood the intentions of Heaven and Earth. For this reason, Heaven and Earth have constantly had horrible illnesses that cannot be stopped.”²⁵ All sages have limitations. But even this would not have been such a problem if none of these sages had been granted such authority. Given the workings of inherited burden, however, these limitations can ultimately lead to growing perversities that literally endanger the entire cosmos. Accordingly, the authors argue, Heaven has no interest in generating yet another sage, as this would ultimately simply re-create the problem. Instead, Heaven has sent down the Celestial Master to teach the Perfected: “If they [Heaven and Earth] were to wish again to give birth to a sage, it would just be the same yet again. Heaven has been troubled for a long time. For this reason it sent me down to give its words as announcements to you, the Perfected.”²⁶

The text never explains precisely who (or what) the Celestial Master is. But the key is that he is a messenger from Heaven: he is not a sage, and he is not creating new teachings.²⁷ On the contrary, the Celestial Master instead teaches that the current generation should instead try to simply collate all previous texts. By doing so, the Celestial Master argues, they will be able to achieve a proper sagely statement: “If the sages of higher antiquity missed something, the sages of middle antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of middle antiquity missed something, the sages of lower antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of lower antiquity missed something, the sages of higher antiquity may have obtained it. If one has these follow one another by category and thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement.”²⁸ Instead of al-

²⁵ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.350.

²⁶ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.350.

²⁷ See the excellent discussion by Petersen, “The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping jing*,” particularly pp. 1-32.

²⁸ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.351.

lowing sages to speak again, the key is precisely to *not* grant any one figure too much authority and to instead collect all previous writings: “Therefore, Heaven does not again make a sage speak, as he would be unable to fully eradicate all of the problems. Therefore, it makes all of the people under Heaven speak, and it makes them collect the ancient writings and study them.”²⁹

What is fascinating about this argument is that it seeks the salvation of humanity in precisely the same vision of history that underlies the potential apocalypse. Just as humanity (and the cosmos) is in danger because of the sheer accumulation of previous history, so the same accumulation now provides for a potential salvation. If no one sage has been perfect, this means that the processes of transmission have allowed those errors to become accepted as truth. But the fact that the current generation is so belated – coming at the end of such a lengthy expanse of history – also means that the totality of all previous writings, once collected, would contain within itself a full, proper, sagely statement. To a greater extent than any time in previous history, therefore, humanity has a potential to place itself on a proper path: the sheer volume of previous writings, while leading to an enormous and highly dangerous accumulation of errors, also provides for humanity a means for following previous sages without granting too much authority to any one sage.

In short, the authors of the *Taiping jing* have built upon the accumulative readings of history that had been so important in the early Han to develop an apocalyptic vision. According to the authors of the *Taiping jing*, the current disorder is entirely a result of history: the fact that the current age is so late in the historical process means that it is the recipient of an enormous accumulation of errors. But if the accumulation of errors over such a lengthy expanse of time is the cause of humanity’s current problems, this same accumulation is also the potential for their salvation.

Conclusions

With both the “Fanlun” and the portions of the *Taiping jing* discussed here, there is a strong sense that a decline has set in since the time of antiquity. And both, albeit in very different ways, present that decline as a consequence of the after-effects of sagely innovations. For both texts, the sages created what they did for particular circumstances, but the accumulation of those particular creations has led to the gradual decline. In general, then, both texts can be said to hold accumulative visions of history –

²⁹ *Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.356.

visions in which history is read as the accumulation of sagely creations and the effects of those creations.

The two texts also share a fear of granting too much authority to the teachings of any one sage from the past. For both texts, any teaching from the past, however strong at the time, should not be followed now: it was at best an accurate teaching for the particular time in which it was created. For the authors of both texts, then, the decline is not to be stopped by returning to any one single sagely teaching from the past.

But the crucial difference between the two texts lies in their treatment of what should be done now. For the authors of the “Fanlun,” the issue is to oppose any attempt to grant too much authority to the teachings of past sages and to instead grant full authority at any given time to a sage who will know what to create in a given circumstance. For the authors of the *Taiping jing*, the concern is the exact opposite: to avoid again granting too much authority to any one sage who might *now* appear and to instead find redemption through a compilation of all previous texts. If the authors of the “Fanlun” want to clear the ground for a sage to act autonomously from the standards created by past sages and to create anew as necessary, the authors of the *Taiping jing* are trying to prevent granting any one person (even a sage) with too much authority and autonomy. Indeed, for the authors of the *Taiping jing*, the fact that sages have been invested with so much authority in the past is one of the reasons for the decline.

What I would like to suggest is that these two texts lie at two ends of an extreme on the debate over sagehood and antiquity in early China. During the Warring States and early Han, the debates focused on claims concerning sages: who should be considered a sage and therefore what sets of teachings we should follow. But almost all texts from this period accepted that sages are the people who should be followed. In making the arguments they did, the authors of the “Fanlun” were positioning themselves within this debate, making a strong argument against investing too much authority in sages from the past. As is well known, those associated with the writing of the *Huainanzi* lost that debate. Over the course of the next century, a set of texts ascribed to Confucius was defined and ultimately supported as the Five Classics.³⁰ And the key claim in this, of course, was that a sage (Confucius) had indeed set a standard that should still be followed – precisely the argument that the *Huainanzi* had opposed. But, even here, the debate was not over whether one should grant authority to a single sage; the debate was over who that sage should be and

³⁰ See the excellent discussion in Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

whether or not it was a sage from the past whose writings should therefore be followed.

By the time one gets to the end of the Eastern Han, however, an increasing concern with granting human sages such levels of authority becomes evident. Such a growing loss of confidence in the ability of human sages to bring order to the world had several implications. To begin with, one starts seeing the emergence of a host of new methods for claiming authority other than sagehood. With the *Taiping jing*, we have seen the claim that we should simply collate all previous texts and therefore refuse to grant significant authority to any one sagely teaching. In other texts of this period, one sees the claim of divine revelation as the basis for textual authority.³¹ What all share, however, is a loss of confidence in granting too much authority to any single human sage.

Relatedly, it is during this period that one first finds fully apocalyptic readings of history. In the case of the *Taiping jing*, the sort of accumulative history we saw in the “Fanlun” was re-cast to emphasize a dramatic sense of belatedness vis-à-vis antiquity. The accumulations of previous history were such that the past was, in a sense weighing down on the living – to the point that it threatened humanity and indeed the cosmos itself.

In short, the shift from the sorts of arguments one finds in a text like the “Fanlun” to those found in portions of the *Taiping jing* points toward some of the larger shifts that occurred in the intellectual history of China over the course of the Han dynasty. Although the particular arguments found in the *Taiping jing* are unique, one sees there a strong sense of belatedness vis-à-vis the sages of the past, an apocalyptic vision of history, and a general loss of confidence in granting too much authority to single human sages. All of these tendencies would only grow in significance over the next few centuries, helping to fuel millenarian and apocalyptic movements, as well as attempts to seek the basis for textual authority in divine revelation rather than in human sages. To paraphrase Yogi Berra: the past just wasn’t what it used to be.³²

³¹ For a fuller discussion of these issues of sagehood and textual authority, see my “The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of the Book in Early China,” forthcoming in *Books in Numbers*, ed. Wilt Idema.

³² I refer here to the famous statement by the baseball manager Yogi Berra: “The future ain’t what it used to be.” See Yogi Berra, *The Yogi Book: “I Really Didn’t Say Everything I Said”* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1998), p. 118.