

# The Ambivalence of Creation

*Debates Concerning  
Innovation and Artifice  
in Early China*

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## Conclusion

I opened the first chapter of this book by quoting from Xu Shen's description of the origin of writing. Xu Shen presented sages as "lifting up" patterns from the natural world and bringing them to the world of humanity. Cultural artifacts were presented as linked to the world of nature. Such ideas were connected to elements of classical scholarship that had become dominant at the time, and they were connected as well to notions of authorship that were developing in literary theory.

These ideas concerning continuity played an important role in scholarship on early China, and statements concerning continuity were frequently contrasted in this scholarship with statements from early Greece, or "the West" more broadly. In this book, I have suggested an alternative approach, in which such statements like those found in the *Shuo wen jie zi* are treated as claims within a larger debate. I believe that the goal of the analyst should be to reconstruct the debate within which such claims were made and to explicate why the claims were made and what their implications were at the time.

To this end, I have traced the debates concerning innovation and artifice over the course of the Warring States and early Han. The context from which these debates grew was the rise of centralized, bureaucratic state structures defined apart from, and largely in opposition to, the feudalistic rule of the Bronze Age kingdoms. As these institutions became increasingly removed from those of the Western Zhou, concerns arose over whether the new institutions could

still be linked to the past and to the divine. It was from this context that the issues of innovation and creation became an overt topic of discussion.

I traced the history of these debates and analyzed their permutations over the course of their development—from arguments in the emergent philosophical literature, to the developing narratives of the origin of statecraft, to the actual creation of empire and the attempts to present empire as the new norm, and, finally, to a penetrating critique of such a presentation by an early Han historian. Much of what is interesting lies in the nuance, in the ways that specific individuals defined and redefined terms for particular purposes, in the types of narrative models chosen to tell particular stories, and in the reasons that individual rulers chose to emphasize particular interpretations of sagely figures.

I have argued that the specific claims of continuity that influenced Xu Shen emerged only at the end of the Warring States period, and for intellectual and political reasons achieved prominence only in the early Han. Even then, claims of continuity were highly controversial, and Sima Qian's work was in part written as a critique of such notions.

More specifically, I argued that Sima Qian's claim is that the introduction of discontinuity is an inherent part of the emergence of something new. Sages do not simply replicate and distill patterns; they create. And the act of creation, for Sima Qian, is ambivalent: necessary for the emergence of anything new, but always involving discontinuity. On the issue of empire, he chastises other members of his culture for denying the dependence of empire on transgression: even if empire, he implies, gains full legitimacy, it could never have been introduced without transgression, and as a result, it will always be dependent upon transgression. There could have been no empire without the first emperor, and as a result, the empire that had been rightfully consolidated was also, and would continue to be, despotic.

It is not true, then, that early Chinese thinkers assumed continuity between nature and culture, between past and present. Neither is it true that sages were assumed to be inherently linked to the natural world. On the contrary, Sima Qian's point seems more accurate, namely that the very attempt to claim continuity implied a strong concern with discontinuity.

The comparatively interesting point, then, is not that early Chinese figures assumed a continuity denied in Greece. What is interesting is the similar concern with discontinuity and transgression, and the historical implications of the different ways that such an intellectual and political debate played out.