
Drought, Omens and the Body Politic: Debates between Rulers and Ministers in the Shanghai Museum Manuscript “Jian da wang po han”

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Established notions on the relationship between rulers and ministers, and between ritual and politics, are being redefined by the study of recently excavated bamboo manuscripts.

The present paper discusses and provides the first western annotated translation of “Jian da wang po han” 簡大王迫旱 (King Jian dispels the drought), a fourth century B.C. bamboo manuscript from Chu staging a debate between ruler and minister over the cause of a drought afflicting the kingdom and the best way to deal with it. The drought is interpreted as punishment, but opinions differ over the nature of its cause: a ritual, moral or administrative failure of the king.

The paper investigates as well prevalent opinions over the relationship between the king and his kingdom in terms of the metaphor equating the kingdom and its people with the king’s own body, and how the sacrificial exposure of the king’s body to the scorching sun might heal the suffering the drought brings upon the kingdom.

The debate over the mode and meaning of such sacrifice is connected with different views about the nature of the kingdom, its proper organization, the crises facing it and the role of previous traditions, both in Chu and in the wider Warring States intellectual history.

Keywords: Chu bamboo manuscripts, drought, divination, sacrifice, rulers and ministers in the Warring States

States too have their stagnations [as human bodies and water]. When the ruler's virtue does not flow freely [i.e. when he is out of touch with his subjects] and the wishes of his people do not reach him, this is the stagnation of a state. When the stagnation of a state abides by a long time, a hundred pathologies arise in concert, and a myriad catastrophes swarm in. The cruelty of those above and those below toward each other arises from this. The reason that the sage kings valued heroic retainers and faithful ministers was that they dared to speak directly, breaking through such stagnations. (*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, 3rd century B.C.)¹

Yet ther ys a nother disease [of the body politic] remenyng behind, wych gretely trowblyth the state of the hole body, the wych — though I somewhat stond in dowte whether I may wel cal hyt a dysease of the body or no — yet by cause (as physycyonys say) the body and mynd are so knyt togyddur by nature that al sykenes and dysease be commyn to them both, I wyl not now stond to reson much herin, but boldly cal hyt a bodyly disease; and, brevely to say, thys hyt ys: — they partys of thys body agre not togyddur; the hed agreth not to the fete, not fete to the handys; no one parte agreth to other; the temporalty grugyth agayn the spyrytualty, the commyns agayne the nobullys and subyectys agayn they rularys; one hath enuy at a nother, one beryth malice agayn a nother, one complaynyth of a nother. The partys of thys body be not knyt togyddur, as hyt were wyth sp[i]ryt and life, in concord and unite, but dysseveryd asoundur, as they were in no case partys of one body.

1 國亦有鬱。主德不通，民欲不達，此國之鬱也。國鬱處久，則百惡並起，而萬災叢至矣。上下之相忍也，由此出矣。故聖王之貴豪士與忠臣也，為其敢直言而決鬱塞也。In Guan Xianzhu 關賢柱, Liao Jinbi 廖進碧, and Zhong Xueli 鍾雪麗, eds., *Lüshi chunqiu quanyi* 呂氏春秋全譯 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1997), 20.767. Translation by Nathan Sivin, in Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early Greece and China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 224.