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WANG MANG 王莽 (c. 45 B.C.E.–23 C.E.) AND CLASSICAL LEARNING AS PATH TO SUPREME POWER

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Abstract

This article inquires into the ideological circumstances behind Wang Mang's 王莽 seizure of power, to examine how he built legitimacy at every stage of his career, by establishing a political and symbolic continuum between the role of the minister and that of the sovereign, rather than suddenly wresting power from the Liu clan. His classical learning in general and his references to Zhougong 周公 in particular were fundamental to the success of the process, which took place in three important stages: first, the offering of a white pheasant to the court; second, the bestowal of "Nine Conferrals" 九錫, and third, the composition of "Wang Mang's declaration" 莽誥. However, although the Classics constituted common references for Wang Mang and the scholars supporting him, the Classics were also used by some opponents objecting to the concentration of power in the hands of Wang Mang.

Introduction

As a tribute to the unfailing attention Michael Loewe gives to young scholars, I thought it would be the right moment for revisiting a work on Wang Mang I presented at the very start of my academic career. This work, which dates back almost ten years, was warmly supported by Michael, but for various reasons, I was unable to complete it at the time. The original idea was to examine the progress, or even continuity, that characterizes Wang Mang's transformation from minister to emperor. Far from being a sudden and violent *coup*, Wang Mang's assumption of supreme power was a careful, lengthy, and complex process of increasing his legitimacy first as a man of worth and then as a sovereign, a process that is veiled in some way by the later use of the term "usurpation" to designate this political transformation. This very term, as a judgment regarding the illegitimacy of Wang Mang's actions, tends to divert our

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attention from the processes of legitimization and the construction of a smooth path from the position of minister to the sovereign, which ultimately allows a replacement by a minister of a sovereign. Whether the date given for the beginning of his ascension is his ennoblement as Marquis of Xindu (Xindu hou 新都侯) in 16 or his nomination as Marshal of State 大司馬 in 8, the process took some two decades. His aim was achieved only with the overthrow of the Han ruling house in 9 C.E. and the founding of a new dynasty, the Xin 新 dynasty, which would last until 23 C.E.[1]

The construction of a prestigious genealogy was of particular importance in building the requisite legitimacy Wang needed to ascend to supreme power, a factor already studied in depth by Michael Loewe in his "Wang Mang and his Forbears."[2] That text analyzes how Wang Mang developed his own claim to sovereign legitimacy by establishing a line of ancestors going back to Shun 舜, and ultimately the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, and by erecting an unprecedented ensemble of nine shrines for his ancestors. A second way to fashion legitimacy was through the exhibition and interpretation of bizarre events and *fuming* 符命 ("mystic commands" or "divine omens"), which according to Wang Mang's biography was characteristic of the last stage on his progress to the throne.[3]

Here, I would analyze the method employed by Wang Mang to transform his own political identity as a minister through a quite complex web of references to the Classics and to the major figures therein, especially the Duke of Zhou (aka Zhougong 周公). This speaks to the well-known and highly debated topic of Wang Mang's relation to the classicists (Ru 儒), as experts in the Classics, at the end of the Western

1. All dates B.C.E. unless otherwise noted. The reasons for this rapid fall of Wang Mang's regime have been debated by historians, H. Bielenstein and Yü Ying-shih among others, especially regarding the respective roles played by human factors and by natural factors, such as the floods provoked by two changes in the course of the Yellow River. See below note 7.

2. Michael Loewe, "Wang Mang and His Forbears: The Making of the Myth," *T'oung Pao* 80.4–5 (1994), 197–222.

3. *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 99A.4093: "This year [8 C.E.] the Marquis of Guangrao, Liu Jing, Battalion Commander to the General of Chariots and Cavalry Hu Yun, and a subordinate under the Senior Tutor, Zhang Hong, presented memorials reporting more divine omens." See Clyde B. Sargent, *Wang Mang*: *A Translation of the Official Account of His Rise to Power as Given in the* History of the Former Han Dynasty (Shanghai: Graphic Art Book Company, 1947), 173 (mod.). NB: in all citations of earlier works, Wade-Giles has been changed to *pinyin*, for consistency.

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Han dynasty, and more widely to the relationship between political power and scholarship.[4]

During the nineteenth century, this relationship aroused passionate debate among Chinese intellectuals, following the publication by Kang Youwei 康有為 of a pamphlet denouncing the "forged Classics," the *Xin xue weijing kao* 新學偽經考 (Examination of the Classics forged under the Xin dynasty). Kang accused one of the most brilliant classicists and supporters of Wang Mang, Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. 23), of forging a set of Classics in order to help Wang Mang seize the throne.[5] Kang Youwei himself was eager to push a new interpretation of the Classics, if not a new classical corpus. His radical accusation that Liu Xin forged false Classics to advance a specific political agenda relied on odd and one-sided conceptions of the political use to be made of the Classics: it neglects the fact that the same authoritative text could be used by supporters as well as opponents, and that the wide range of possible interpretations attached to any Classic was broad enough to obviate the need to "forge" a new Classic.

Here, I inquire into Wang Mang's texts themselves, as interpretations or imitations of classical texts, rather than into his possible endorsement of one or another version of the Classics, partly because Wang Mang's most supportive classicists were not uniform in their vocal support of any one particular Classic or line of thought. As Lu Zhao has written, "Although they are often considered old script/new script opponents, Liu Xin and Shi Dan [師丹] were both Wang Mang's affiliates. The conflict is not so much about partisanship among various intellectual groups as the interplay between innovators and conservatives in the same intellectual community. Liu Xin did not wish to do away with the

4. For a collective reflection about the role played by one particular Classic, the *Zhou li* 周禮, in government conception and organization in East Asia, see Benjamin A. Elman and Martin Kern, eds., *Statecraft and Classical Learning: The Rituals of Zhou in East Asian Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). Michael Puett's chapter in that book, "Centering the Realm: Wang Mang, the *Zhouli,* and Early Chinese Statecraft," 129–54, deals with the use of the *Zhou li* as an effort to centralize the Han. Here I focus more on the rhetorical uses of the *Documents* classic as it relates to Wang Mang's rise to power.

5. The notion of a radical division between *guwen* 古文 (an intellectual trend characterized by a strong interest for texts in an older script) and *jinwen* 今文 (which roughly designates the officially sponsored texts written in the current script) has been challenged by several important studies, namely, Hans van Ess, "The Old Text/New Text Controversy: Has the Twentieth Century Got It Wrong?" *T'oung Pao* 80.1–3 (1994), 146–70; Michael Nylan, "The *chin wen/ku wen* (New Text/Old Text) Controversy in Han Times," *T'oung Pao*, 80.1–3 (1994), 83–145.

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new script Classics so much as include a broader range of material in their shared corpus."[6]

Studies of Wang Mang generally focus on judgments about this highly debated figure or the reasons for his failure,[7] with such approaches addressing his value and success as a sovereign more than his significance as a man who built a path bridging the roles of minister and sovereign. Although the historical figure of Wang Mang has been almost unanimously condemned in Chinese historiography, we will study in detail the ideological preparation for his seizure of power. A short description of this process was given by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 in his *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng* 秦漢的方士與儒生.[8] Far from suddenly arrogating the imperial title, Wang Mang built, at every stage of his career, multiple paths to legitimacy so that he appears to have established a continuum between the roles of minister and sovereign. In the process, he masterfully combined ritual elaboration, rhetorical tools, and, more conventionally, physical violence. Pivotal to this process was his emulation of the model presented by Zhougong, which offered a fairly complete plan for creating a continuous path between minister and sovereign.[9] Curiously, from Huan Tan 桓譚 (23 B.C.E.–56 C.E.) on, early denunciations of Wang's ideological policy centers on his use of omens while being largely silent on Wang's strong reliance on classical values and continual reference to the Classics.[10] Omens could be used

6. Lu Zhao, "In Pursuit of the Great Peace: Han Dynasty Classicism and the Making of Early Medieval Classicist Culture," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 111. A book based on the dissertation was published in 2019, but I was unable to consult it.

7. See especially the debate between Hans Bielenstein and Yü Ying-shih. According to Bielenstein, the direct cause for Wang Mang's fall was not the failure of his ambitious reforms but a series of natural disasters, particularly the successive floods of the Yellow River. See Hans Bielenstein, "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty, with Prolegomena on the Historiography of the *Hou Han shu*," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 26.1 (1954), 1–209, esp. 150. According to Yü, Wang Mang's reforms were the main cause for his downfall, since they deprived him of the vital support of the most powerful families (which he seems to equate with the classicists) who had brought him to power. See Yü Ying-shih 余英時, "Dong Han zhengquan zhi jianli yu shizu daxing zhi guanxi" 東漢政權之建立與士族大姓之關係, *Xinya xuebao* 新亞學報 2 (1965), 216–47.

8. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng* 秦漢的方士與儒生 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2005), 60–65.

9. The ambiguities inherent in the figure of Zhougong, especially as regards his loyalty to his sovereign, are analyzed by Michael Nylan in her chapter "The Many Dukes of Zhou in Early Sources," in *Statecraft and Classical Learning*, ed. Elman and Kern, 94–128.

10. In his *Xinlun* 新論, Huan Tan gives various reasons that contributed to the fall of Wang Mang's dynasty. Among them are his very solitary exercise of power and his fondness for omens. See Timoteus Pokora, *Hsin-lun (New Treatise) and Other Writings by*

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and interpreted by different groups, whereas reference to the Classics clearly implied the responsibility of one specific group (notwithstanding its internal tensions): the classicists or the Ru.

With the restoration of the Han dynasty, it was necessary to radically sever the links between Wang Mang and the classicists. Here also, Huan Tan is significant. Huan Tan was involved in Wang Mang's administration and survived the decade of turmoil during the end of his reign and the founding of Eastern Han. He then wrote various analyses of Wang Mang's failure, thus clearly disavowing any earlier support for Wang. Later historiography mentions but does not resolve the problem of the many leading classicists' interventions promoting Wang Mang's political rise. To defend Huan, the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 stresses Huan's lack of support for Wang Mang.[11] Passages in the *Han shu*, however, clearly show that Huan was a very active supporter, at least at one point during Wang Mang's rise to imperial power: "The Counsellor Huan Tan and others were charged with making known the *Declaration* (*Mang gao* 莽誥) [an important piece of Wang Mang's propaganda, see below] and Wang Mang's intention to return the throne to the infant emperor."[12]

Huan T'an (43 B.C.–28 A.D.) (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1975), 10, 25–27, 30–31, 45–50. Huan Tan does not mention the great support by the classicists during Wang Mang's accession to power, nor does he mention Wang Mang's public emulation of Zhougong. For a contemporaneous accusation, see also the "pamphlet" published by Wei Ao 隗囂 (d. 33 C.E.) and his group during the last rebellion against Wang Mang. This pamphlet, which is referred to in *Han shu* 99C.4187 and quoted in extenso in the *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1965), 13.515, focuses on two main accusations, the regicide and the forgery of omens. See Bielenstein, "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty," 124: "The former Marquis of Xindu, Wang Mang, has treated rudely and insulted Heaven and Earth, acted contrary to principles, and opposed order. He poisoned and killed Emperor Ping and snatched away his throne. He pretended to have received the mandate of Heaven and forged writings about verifications [of his receipt of the mandate by auspicious omens]. He cheated and misled the masses and aroused to anger the Lord on High. He turned and twisted ornamental expressions in order to fabricate auspicious omens. He made game of the Spirits of Heaven and Earth and praised misfortunes and calamities in song. The bamboos of Ch'u and Yüe are not sufficient to write down his wickedness" (trans. Bielenstein).

11. *Hou Han shu*, 28A.956: "When Wang Mang was on the verge between regency and regicide, all the classicists in the empire competed to praise him and offer auspicious omens, in order to attract his favor. Only Huan Tan remained in the background, calm and without speaking. Wang Mang appointed him as an official in charge of music, and when Gengshi took the imperial throne, he was appointed Palace Counsellor." 當王莽居攝篡弒之際，天下之士，莫不競褒稱德美，作符命以求容媚，譚獨自守，默然無言。莽時為掌樂大夫，更始立，召拜太中大夫。

12. *Han shu*, 84.3435: 乃遣大夫桓譚等班行諭告當反位孺子之意. A similar mission of propaganda is mentioned in *Han shu*, 99A.4987.

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Another aspect of Wang Mang's ideological push during his ascent to supreme power is worth considering: its strong reliance on the narratives found in the "Zhou Documents" section of the *Documents* classic (*Shang shu* 尚書), and on the political ethics developed therein. This topic contrasts strongly with Wang's use and abuse of omens, which became more prominent in Wang Mang's strategies of legitimization during the last stage before the founding of Wang's "new dynasty," and afterwards, as he consolidated power. Whereas omens were meant to indicate Wang's relation to an anthropomorphic Heaven or cosmic order, the precedents found in the *Documents* classic were mostly used to elaborate the relationship between the sovereign, ancestors, ministers, and people.

The main source of our knowledge about Wang Mang's policy is his lengthy biography in three chapters, or *juan* 卷, which can be compared with the Annals of Emperors Cheng 成帝紀 (*Han shu*, 10), Ai 哀帝紀 (*Han shu*, 11), and Ping 平帝紀 (*Han shu*, 12), the Empress Wang's biography 元后傳 (*Han shu*, 98), and Zhai Yi's 翟義 biography (*Han shu*, 84).[13] The degree of distortion in Ban Gu's narrative history, which was written in early Eastern Han under the "restored" Liu-clan, by Ban or his father, has been continually debated. As Hans Bielenstein put it: "Ban Gu's accusations lack substance and therefore do not discredit Wang Mang. They are a historiographical device to misrepresent a man who for political and philosophical reasons had to be branded as incompetent and morally inferior."[14] Although this issue must be kept in mind, it is not central here. The object of my research is official texts and declarations whose manipulation seems improbable, since they were accessible to all scholars who could consult the imperial archives.

The Foundations for Wang Mang's Seizure of Imperial Power

Before studying the textual elaboration of the transformative path from minister to emperor, it is necessary first to roughly describe the context that made Wang's rise acceptable, especially the intellectual context. Long considered a total betrayal of the Confucian ideal, the ideology developed by Wang Mang has received more balanced assessments in recent studies, notably by Wang Aihe in her *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China*. She writes,

> Wang Mang was the greatest practitioner of the Han Confucian scholars' ideals and theories. … He succeeded in ending the Former

13. On Zhai Yi, see below, note 48.

14. Hans Bielenstein, "Pan Ku's Accusations against Wang Mang," in *Chinese Ideas about Nature and Society: Studies in Honour of Derk Bodde*, ed. Charles Le Blanc and Susan Blader (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1987), 270.

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> Han without a civil war, through "abdication" rather than military conquest. His success was not achieved by his "hypocritical" and "treacherous" plots, as portrayed in the biography in *Han shu*, but was based on the ideological and political preparation of generations of Han scholars.[15]

As Wang Aihe posits continuities between Wang Mang and earlier classicists, it may be worth examining here a long tradition of biting criticism of Han institutions and policy. During one memorable debate held before Emperor Jing 景帝, a certain Master Huang 黃生 expressed, in a transparent metaphor, the idea that the respective positions of the sovereign and the minister were irreversible and absolute: "A cap, even of poor quality, should always be worn on the head, while shoes, no matter how excellent, should stay in their place on the feet."[16] In reality, this unshakable hierarchy could be challenged by the concentration of power in the hands of a member of an imperial or consort clan, but it was also tested, at a deeper level, by Han thought and institutions. Inverting the respective positions of sovereign and subject was an ever-present possibility due to the cyclical conception of dynastic change, which could apply to any dynasty, regardless of its initial success. The main question became when this change would likely happen. Some scholars even proposed a diagnosis of the origin of the rapid decline of the Han dynasty. On this issue, in one of his memoirs to the throne, the great *Gongyang* scholar Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104) wrote,

> 今漢繼秦之後，如朽木糞牆矣，雖欲善治之，亡可奈何。法出而姦生，令下而詐起，如以湯止沸，抱薪救火。
>
> Now, Han having inherited from the Qin may be compared with an edifice made of rotten wood and walls of dung: although you have the desire to improve it, there is nothing you can do. Every new law is followed by a new vice; every order issued to those below elicits deception. It is just like pouring burning water to stop boiling or bringing firewood in armfuls to extinguish a fire.[17]

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15. Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 168.

16. *Han shu*, 88.3612: 冠雖敝必加於首，履雖新必貫於足. In this passage, Master Huang strongly opposes Yuan Gu 袁固, a specialist in the *Odes* classic who argued that a transfer of the *ming* 命 (here, the legitimacy to govern) could occur, thus provoking dynastic change. According to Sima Tan 司馬談 and Sima Qian's 司馬遷 biography in the *Han shu*, a Master Huang (probably the same) taught the "Discourse on the Way" to Sima Tan. See *Shi ji* 130.3288: 太史公 … 習道論於黃子.

17. *Han shu*, 26.2504. On Dong Zhongshu, see Gary Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason: Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115.4 (1995): 585–97.

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These flaws of a legalist empire, which according to Dong Zhongshu could only be exacerbated by Emperor Wu's policies, might have been corrected by giving greater prominence to classical learning at the imperial court during the reigns of Xuan (r. 74–49), Yuan (r. 49–33), and Cheng (r. 33–7), but questions about the legitimacy of the Han continued to be raised by classicists. These questions not only focused on certain legalist policy measures, but also, more fundamentally, on the dynastic mandate's exhaustion and approaching end. Alongside the analysis of Han dynasty weaknesses, court scholars who were hardly marginal figures during the first century B.C.E. provided reflections and predictions about the end of the dynasty. To take one example, following the report of several strange phenomena in 78, Sui Hong 睢弘, who held a position in the imperial administration, took the fatal step of composing a memorial suggesting that the Han dynasty should yield its power to a sage:

> 漢家堯後，有傳國之運。 漢帝宜誰差天下，求索賢人，禪以帝位，而退自封百里。如殷周二王後，以承順天命。
>
> As descendant of Lord Yao, the House of Han is doomed to hand over its lands. The Han emperor should therefore look for a worthy man throughout the realm, and abdicate to him the imperial position, and then he should retire to a fief of one square hundred *li*. In this way, he would comply with Heaven's decree, in the same way as did the descendants of the Yin and Zhou ruling houses.[18]

Another prediction expressed by one of the most brilliant classicists of the time, Liu Xiang 劉向 (d. 8) indicated widespread acceptance of this idea that the ruling house's mandate had come to an end. Following a violent earthquake, which happened in Shu commandery in 26, Liu Xiang formulated a prediction regarding the imminent fall of the dynasty, which is recorded in the omenological treatise entitled "Wuxing zhi" 五行志:[19] "The House of Han took its rise from the region of Shu-Han. … It is thus certain to fall" (漢家本起於蜀漢. … 殆必亡矣).[20] Liu's words do not speak of predestination, because he believes that if the Liu clan pays sufficient attention to Heaven's warnings and reforms its policy accordingly, it could extend the tenure of its mandate. His statement nevertheless contributes to the idea that no dynasty can rest

18. *Han shu*, 75.3154. On the ancient notion of abdication in favor of a virtuous minister, see note 32 below.

19. *Han shu*, 27B.1457.

20. After recording this prediction, Ban Gu adds his proof: 其後三世亡嗣，王莽篡位 "After this earthquake, there happened to be three successive emperors who had no heirs, and Wang Mang then assumed the throne."

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secure in the eternal enjoyment of Heaven's backing; if the omens are not heeded, the House of Han is doomed to fall imminently.[21] At the same time that the idea of the "mortality" of the dynasty once founded by the Liu clan was becoming a widely accepted notion, the power of the Wang clan was dramatically increasing.

Turning to the Wang clan and its position vis-à-vis the Liu clan at court, it appears, from Wang Mang's *Han shu* biography, that Wang's political position at court was both conventional and exceptional. Several major political crises had erupted due to the power of imperial consort clans, such as the Lü 呂 clan after the founder Gaozu's 高祖 death or the Huo 霍 clan after Emperor Wu's 武帝.[22] As a member of Empress Wang's clan, Wang Mang's increasing power in the general context of a succession crisis seems just one more instance of this sort of phenomenon. As Ban Biao described it in the conclusion to the Empress Wang Zhengjun's 王政君 (71 B.C.E.–13 C.E.) biography:

> 漢興，后妃之家呂、霍、上官，幾危國者數矣。及王莽之興，由孝元后歷漢四世為天下母，饗國六十餘載，群弟世權，更持國柄，五將十侯，卒成新都.
>
> From the founding of the Han dynasty, the imperial consort clans of Lü, Huo, and Shangguan endangered the ruling house repeatedly. It was through the Filial Empress Yuan, who during four reigns remained as Mother of the Empire, enjoying authority over the realm for more than sixty years while her younger brothers in their turns controlled the handles of power, with five of them generals and ten of them marquises, that Wang Mang arose and finally became Marquis of Xindu.[23]

For example, Wang Feng 王鳳 (d. 22), the empress' eldest brother, as General-in-Chief (*Da Jiangjun* 大將軍, from 33 to 22) and concurrently Marshal of State (*Da Sima* 大司馬), was largely responsible for imperial

21. On this subject, see also the contributing essays by Liu Tseng-kuei, Shao-yun Yang, and Michael Loewe to *Chang'an 26 BCE: An Augustan Age in China*, ed. Michael Nylan and Griet Vankeerberghen (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

22. Empress Lü 呂雉 (d. 180) took control of imperial power after Gaozu's death and elevated to the rank of king a number of men of her own clan while eliminating kings of the Liu clan and old companions of Gaozu. Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68) was an important adviser to Emperor Wu who was appointed regent of his young successor, the future Emperor Zhao. Huo managed to have both a daughter and a granddaughter married to emperors, and he exerted control over the imperial succession. After his death, his family, suspected of entertaining imperial ambitions, was destroyed.

23. *Han shu*, 98.4035. Wang Zhengjun survived four emperors: Yuan, her husband, Cheng, her son, Ai, and Ping.

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policymaking during the reign of Emperor Cheng.[24] Still, Wang Mang's success, both within the powerful Wang clan and more generally at court, was distinctive because he relied on his cultivation of Confucian values, as his filial devotion to his uncle Wang Feng shows.[25]

Wang Mang was a highly trained classicist himself. According to the *Hou Han shu*, Xu Xuan 徐宣 taught him the *Changes* classic (*Yi jing* 易經), and Chen Qin 陳欽 the *Zuo shi* learning 左氏學;[26] Wang's biography in the *Han shu* adds only that he studied the *Ritual* classic under the guidance of Chen Can 陳參.[27] Conversant with three of the Five Classics, Wang Mang was probably inspired by the precedents he found therein, which supplied the impressive language Wang needed to hone his own rhetorical tools. As Benoît Vermander has written, "The mastery of discourse, once it is usurped by the sovereign, makes the latter the source of all authority."[28] In Wang Mang's case, the combination of his power base within an imperial consort clan and his "mastery of discourse" (i.e., his ability to wield the rhetoric of the Classics and ritual expectations to his advantage), resulted in an unprecedented and formidable concentration of power in Wang Mang's hands. His early dedication to classical learning, combined with his public professions of reverence for the long-hallowed values of humility and filial piety, allowed him not only to acquire a special place within the Wang clan but also support by many scholars who were fellow classicists or even sworn brothers, as was true in the case of Ban Gu's own grandfather, Ban Zhi 班穉.[29] Later, Wang Mang would claim the right to determine which interpretation of the Classics he would impose by fiat, when opponents tried to challenge his

24. The balance of power between Wang Feng and Emperor Cheng was unfavorable for the latter, partly because of Wang Feng's control over omens and over their interpretation.

25. See *Han shu*, 99A.4039.

26. *Hou Han shu*, 44.1500; 36.1230: 莽從欽受左氏學，以欽為猷難將軍.

27. *Han shu*, 99A.4039.

28. Benoît Vermander, "Du rite, de sa production et de ses usages: pratiques et spéculations rituelles en Chine ancienne," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 172 (2015), 147–78, here 150: "La maîtrise du discours, une fois qu'elle est usurpée par le souverain, fait de ce dernier la source de tout magistère."

29. As stated in Ban Gu's autobiography, initially Wang Mang considered Ban Zhi 穉, one of the most brilliant classicists of the time, to be a virtual brother, along with Ban's elder and younger brothers. But later when Ban Zhi failed (or was unwilling) to gather eulogies in praise of Wang Mang among the population of the commandery he governed, Zhi lost Wang Mang's favor and only barely escaped punishment, thanks to an intervention by Empress Dowager Wang. See *Han shu*, 100A.4204.

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rise first to quasi-imperial and then to imperial powers by turning the very same classical references against Wang himself.[30]

Zhougong 周公: Ritual Precedents and a Scheme for Acquiring Legitimacy

Between 1 C.E., when Wang Mang gained complete control over Emperor Ping, and 9 C.E., when he ended his regency and officially ascended to the throne, Wang Mang made repeated references to Zhougong, who constituted a model and precedent allowing a powerful regent to cultivate his reputation for proximity with the figure of the sage ruler. During this period of a decade, references are also made to Huo Guang 霍光 who occupied the same office of regent during the youth of Han Zhaodi 漢昭帝. Such references do not occur, however, in official pronouncements made after 9 C.E., as thereafter Wang's political discourse focused on Wang Mang's descent from the legendary sage-ruler Shun 舜. To understand the rhetoric of this seminal period of eight years, one must see how the figure of Zhougong, minister and regent, was rediscovered and restyled during late Western Han. In his latter-day persona, as we will see, Zhougong successfully merged the roles of ruler and minister, most likely because he supposedly, after seven years, returned his powers to his liege lord, King Cheng, thereby confirming the stark divide between ruler and minister.

In chapter 8 of the *Xunzi* 荀子, entitled "The Efficacy of the Classical Learning" (Ru xiao 儒效), the most influential theorist for the Western Han court, sets up Zhougong as his first example of a truly great and effective classicist. Xunzi focuses his description of Zhougong's achievements on the ways he set policy, acting like a sovereign but never seizing the throne. In one extraordinary passage, Xunzi points out the continuities between the status of sovereign and the status of minister:

> 周公無天下矣。鄉有天下，今無天下，非擅也。成王鄉無天下，今有天下，非奪也。變勢次序節然也。故以枝代主而非越也；以弟誅兄而非暴也。君臣易位而非不順也。
>
> Zhougong did not possess the realm permanently. The reason he held power in the empire at one point before he relinquished it, is not because he abdicated it. The reason that King Cheng did not hold power in the empire at point, but later came to hold it is not because he seized power from Zhougong.[31] Rather, this change in powerholding

30. See below the case of Shentu Gang.

31. *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988), 115–16. Knoblock's translation proposes a very different reading: "Since he (Zhougong) formerly had the empire and

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> was merely the proper sequence in a succession of transformations in accordance with the proper measures. Thus, a branch clan was substituted for the main patriline, yet it was not a transgressive act overstepping proper bounds, and a younger brother Zhougong executed his elder brother, yet this was no act of tyranny. There was a change of places between ruler versus minister and subject, which was nonetheless perfectly *comme il faut*.

Particularly striking is the fact that Xunzi raises the question not of whether Zhougong seized power, but whether or not the young King Cheng had seized the power that was in Zhougong's hands. Xunzi observes a transition, with no special reverence accorded the hereditary transmission; strictly speaking, his formulation does not accommodate discussions about "usurping" or "seizing" power. His main point in the chapter is that, regardless of whether the great classicist is in a position of power, he still accomplishes his ethical political mission.[32]

This celebrated figure of Zhougong went through a certain eclipse in the political discourse from the Qin dynasty onwards, perhaps because this sort of blurring of the respective roles of sovereign and minister was incompatible with the purpose of consolidating the Han empire. According to Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, the figure of Zhougong practically disappeared after the founding of the Qin dynasty, only to emerge again, for obvious reasons, during the regencies of Huo Guang and Wang Mang.[33] Yet, as we will see from several passages, Wang Mang relied on

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he now no longer held it, his actions did not constitute a 'usurpation.' King Cheng formerly had no empire, whereas now he had an empire; hence the Duke's actions had not constituted a 'seizure of power.'" See John Knoblock, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), vol. 2, 69. I follow Eric Hutton, *Xunzi*: *The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 53, and the commentator Yang Jing 楊倞 who remarks here: "*Shan* 擅 means *shan* 禪. The sentence thus means that Zhougong did not abdicate to King Cheng" 擅與禪同。言非禪讓與成王也.

32. On the ancient notion of abdication in favor of a virtuous minister, see Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1989), 292–99. The understanding we have of this notion during the pre-imperial period has been deeply transformed by the discovering of a new set of manuscript texts from the ancient state of Chu, in which the theme of abdication is of particular importance: see Sarah Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

33. Gu Jiegang, "Zhou Gong zhizheng chengwang: Zhou Gong dong zheng shishi kaozheng zhi er" 周公執政稱王: 周公東征事實考證之二 [That Zhougong held the government and was called king], *Wen shi* 文史 23 (1984), 1–30. For this argument, see also Edward L. Shaughnessy, "The Duke of Zhou's Retirement," in *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: State University of New York, 1997), 102.

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the mythical, complex, and debated figure of Zhougong when he sought to bridge the divide between the roles of minister, regent, and supreme sovereign. Having climbed the ladder of executive power, he became supreme sovereign, the first since the mythical Yu the Great 大禹 to gain power neither through inheritance nor through military conquest.

Let us examine, then, a single incident, the offering of an auspicious white pheasant in 1 C.E., during the reign of the young Emperor Ping under Wang Mang's regency, which many took to be the first "sign" of Heaven's favor for Wang Mang's ascendancy. This offering could not fail to evoke a precedent episode attesting the excellence of Zhougong's regency on behalf of the young King Cheng 周成王, in which a pheasant was also offered.[34] The episode is narrated in an early commentary on the *Documents* classic, as follows:

> 交趾之南有越裳國。周公居攝六年，制禮作樂，天下和平。越裳以三象、重九譯而獻白雉。
>
> To the south of Jiaozhi, there was a country named Yuechang. During the six years of his regency, Zhougong instituted rituals and created musical pieces, and the whole realm was at peace. The people of Yuechang then sent envoys, with multiple translators, to offer a white pheasant as tribute.[35]

This story of the white pheasant clearly amplifies the idea of Zhougong's preeminence: his wise government, through the institution of music and rites, is recognized through the humble offering made by a distant land's ruler. Thus, the story does not only record an auspicious event but contributes to blur the distinction between minister and sovereign.

The narrative in Wang Mang's biography introduces the similar auspicious event with a sentence that soberly but unambiguously points to political manipulation.

> 始風[36] 益州令塞外蠻夷獻白雉，元始元年正月，莽白太后下詔，以白雉薦宗廟。

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34. Huo Guang's biography reports that in his final days (in 88 or 87 B.C.E.), Emperor Wu, worried about his young successor's ability to exercise power, encouraged Huo Guang to accept the post of regent, by giving Zhougong's portrait of the earlier sage supporting his young king Cheng. See *Han shu*, 68.2932.

35. *Shang shu dazhuan zhuzi suoyin* 尚書大傳逐字索引 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1994), 17 (assigned by editors to the "Jia he" 嘉禾 chapter). This work is usually attributed to Fu Sheng 伏勝 (second century B.C.E.), the first classical master to transmit the Han-era *Shang shu*, though it bears clear signs of reworking in Eastern Han.

36. The same verb *feng* 風, indicating a manipulation, is used on at least two other occasions with Wang Mang as subject: *Han shu*, 81.3363; 99A.4049.

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> Formerly Wang Mang arranged it so that the Yizhou administrator(s) would make the barbarians outside the barriers present a white pheasant as tribute. Then, the first month of the first year of the Yuanshi era, Wang Mang had the empress dowager issue an edict ordering that the white pheasant be offered to the ancestral temple.[37]

This manufactured omen led the court scholars to request that Wang Mang be honored following the precedent of Huo Guang (如光故事). There followed Wang Mang's polite refusal (sometimes conveyed by the empress dowager and sometimes coming from Wang Mang directly) that then led to a stronger claim, in a process that would be repeated over and over again during Wang Mang's rise to the throne:

> 太后問公卿曰。「誠以大司馬有大功當著之邪？ 將以骨肉故欲異之也？」
>
> The Empress Dowager inquired of her chief Counsellors and Ministers, "Is it really because the Marshal of State has rendered such great services that you consider they should be made known publicly, or is it because of our blood relation that you wish to distinguish him?"[38]

In reply, at this second stage, the Han ministers went beyond the precedent of the Han dynasty to invoke the figure of Zhougong on the basis of the white pheasant.

> 於是羣臣乃盛陳莽功德致周成白雉之瑞，千載同符。「聖王之法，臣有大功則生有美號. . . .莽有定國安漢家之大功，宜賜號曰安漢公，益戶，疇爵邑。」
>
> At this, a crowd of courtiers most forcibly set forth the accomplishments and virtues of Wang Mang that had elicited the auspicious omen in the form of a white pheasant, as in the times of Zhougong and King Cheng, a thousand years earlier. "According to the precepts of the sage kings, if a minister has extraordinary merit, then he should have extraordinary titles of honors during his lifetime. … As Wang Mang has the great merit of having settled the dynasty and of having secured peace for the House of Han, the throne should bestow upon him the title of Duke Who Protects the Han. It should increase the number of his households who support him, and should make his titles of nobility and his lands hereditary."[39]

37. *Han shu*, 99.4046.
38. *Han shu*, 99A.4046.
39. *Han shu*, 99A.4046.

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In the final imperial edict awarding Wang with these honors, issued after several refusals by Wang Mang, the offering of the white pheasant is explicitly mentioned.

The offering of the white pheasant, whether invented by Wang Mang or by one of his eager adherents,[40] provided Wang with a valuable opportunity to produce a court-sponsored text that permitted a new step leading to the recognition of Wang Mang as an exceptionally fine minister. The shift to Zhougong, far from being trivial, represents the abandonment of a Han political precedent in favor of a supposedly more ancient one.[41] The Han equilibrium of power is thus challenged by the reference to ancient statutes and titles. This pattern will continue.

The "Nine Conferrals" (*jiu xi* 九錫) were bestowed on Wang Mang in 5 C.E. This decision, officially announced by the empress dowager herself, responded, supposedly, to the appearance of more than seven hundred auspicious omens, as well as to a memorial detailing in twelve points Wang Mang's political and ritual merits (see below).[42] The definition of these Nine Conferrals varies within the Five Classics corpus,[43] but once again, this form of honorific bestowal had never been practiced prior to Wang Mang's time, except for Zhougong.[44] In the first stage of this process, a long memorial written by Zhang Song 張竦 and submitted to the throne by Chen Chong 陳崇

40. The report of an auspicious omen could prove to be very beneficial for the administrator who was at the origin of it. One must therefore remain cautious as to the attribution of the forging to Wang Mang himself.

41. Although Huo Guang was considered an exemplary regent who successfully protected the continuity of the dynastic line by governing well for the young Emperor Zhao (94–74), he was nonetheless a controversial figure, since members of his clan fomented treason and his clan was eliminated only three years after Huo Guang's death.

42. The number twelve is symbolic of a full totality, as the memorial itself (*Han shu*, 99A.4060) points out: "All these deeds were rarely seen in the past, and even Yu the Great and Hou Ji (Shun's minister) would have found them difficult to accomplish, and yet the Duke [Protector of Han, Wang Mang] has accomplished them in their totality, with an unique and pervasive principle [一以貫之]. This is full completion indeed!"

43. See Chauncey S. Goodrich, "The Nine Bestowals During the Han-Wei Period: A Study of a Ritual Donation as a Prelude to Dynastic Change," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1957).

44. On the contrary, this reward had a great success during the medieval period, when it was frequently used to prepare for a change of regime. On this subject, see François Martin, "Des Faux qui ne trompent personne. Les textes d'abdication sous les Six Dynasties," *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 32 (2010), 13–39; Carl Leban, "Managing Heaven's Mandate: Coded Communications in the Accession of Ts'ao P'ei, A.D. 220," in *Ancient China: Studies in Early Civilization*, ed. David T. Roy and Tsuen-hsuin Tsien (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978).

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in 3 C.E.,[45] supplied a kind of hagiography recounting twelve memorable deeds of Wang, with comparisons made to the deeds of the ancient sages. Each deed was illustrated by a quotation from a Classic, sometimes supplemented or replaced by a quotation from Confucius' *Analects*. The memorial equally recalls how the Han dynasty, from its inception, was able to reward its most important ministers generously. It concludes that Wang Mang, by far the most important of such ministers, should be rewarded as Zhougong was, by offering him the Nine Conferrals and bestowing a fief on his son. The empress dowager discussed the case with the high ministers, but political infighting within Wang Mang's family interrupted the discussion.[46] Two years later, an imperial decree bestowed the Nine Conferrals on Wang Mang.

During the following two years, two revolts challenging Wang Mang's power broke out, the first conducted by Liu Chong 劉崇 in 6 C.E. and the second by Zhai Yi in 7 C.E.[47] The suppression of the first revolt provided the occasion to compose a new eulogy for Wang Mang. The sincerity of the eulogy may be questioned since it was composed by Zhang Song and Liu Jia 劉嘉 (a relative of Liu Chong), who may have been implicated with the leaders and so had to disassociate themselves from the revolt in order to stay alive. The second revolt, far more dangerous than the first, prompted the composition of a long text written in imitation of a chapter in the *Documents* classic.[48]

The memorials and edicts of Wang Mang, when recorded, appear in his own *Han shu* biography, aside from one crucial exception, "Wang Mang's Declaration" (莽誥), composed and published in 7 C.E., which appears

45. *Han shu*, 99.4053–64.

46. After Wang Mang had banned from court the relatives of the young Emperor Ping, Wang Mang's elder son, Wang Yu 王宇, probably concerned about the long-term consequences for their family of such an extreme decision, wanted him to reconsider. He was nevertheless unwilling to remonstrate directly and, knowing his father's faith in auspicious and inauspicious signs, he ordered Lü Kuan 呂寬 to sprinkle his father's doors with blood. The whole plot was discovered, and Wang Yu was forced to commit suicide.

47. Son of Zhai Fangjin 翟方進, an important statesman and classicist, Zhai Yi was the first to accuse Wang Mang of having murdered Emperor Ping. According to his biography in the *Han shu*, he was well aware that the regency of Wang Mang was only the first step towards the overthrow of the dynasty and said so to his nephew ("He now uses the deeds of Zhougong when he was regent for King Cheng, in order to test reactions in the empire. He will necessarily overthrow the House of Han, we can already see the signs"). See *Han shu*, 84.3426.

48. Zhai Yi's biography gives a description of the turmoil caused by this revolt. The crowd of rebels numbered more than one hundred thousand people, local officers were killed, and fires nearly consumed the imperial palace: *Han shu*, 84.3437.

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in the biography of his fierce opponent, Zhai Yi.[49] "Wang's Declaration" is modeled on the "Great Declaration" (大誥), the ninth chapter in the "Zhou Documents" section in the *Documents* classic; tradition held that the "Great Declaration" was composed by Zhougong, when he faced external and intra-familial opposition during his regency. In Zhai Yi's biography, the text of the declaration is preceded by seemingly anecdotal remarks about the behavior of Wang Mang, who constantly holds the imperial infant in his arms, as if to keep the bodies of the minister and sovereign united, while recalling the precedent of Zhougong:

> 莽日抱孺子會羣臣而稱曰：「昔成王幼，周公攝政，而管蔡挾祿父以畔，今翟義亦挾劉信而作亂。自古大聖猶懼此，況臣莽之斗筲！」羣臣皆曰：「不遭此變，不章聖德。」莽於是依周書作大誥.
>
> Wang Mang, daily embracing the Infant, met with the ministers together and declared, "In the past, when King Cheng was too young to reign and Zhougong acted as a regent, Guanshu and Caishu launched a revolt on behalf of Lufu 祿父 [son of Zhoù 紂, the tyrant whose vile deeds had brought down the preceding dynasty]. Today, Zhai Yi causes disorder on behalf of Liu Xin 劉信 [great-grandson of Emperor Xuan 宣帝]. Since antiquity the great sages were afraid of that, all the more so am I, an insignificant man!" All the ministers replied, "If you had not met this difficulty, your sagely virtue would not be made clear." Then Wang Mang relied on the Zhou Documents to compose his "Great Declaration."[50]

The text of the declaration is quite long, and it closely follows the declaration attributed to Zhougong in terms of theme and language. One interesting point is the very expression introducing the "Great Declaration" in the Classic, which had already given rise to much debate among the specialists.

> 王若曰： 猷，大誥爾多邦，越爾御事。弗弔，天降割于我家，不少延。洪惟我幼沖人，嗣無疆大歷服。弗造哲，迪民康，矧曰其有能格、知天命!
>
> The king spoke to this effect: A great proclamation we issue unto you, O princes of the many lands, and managers of various affairs. Unfeeling Heaven sends down destruction on Our house, brooking no delay. Greatly, Our young charge, an inexperienced man, has inherited the throne, with its vast territories and heavy responsibilities. He has not

49. *Han shu*, 84.3428–37. This declaration is only referred to in Wang Mang's biography (*Han shu*, 99A.4087).

50. *Han shu*, 84.3428.

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> yet met with the wise men who would lead the people to peace and security. How much less then may We claim to have attained an understanding of Heaven's decree![51]

Did the opening expression *wang ruo yue* 王若曰 mean that Zhougong spoke as a sovereign or that he spoke in the name of the sovereign? According to Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), the term "king" refers to Zhougong, because as a regent he is charged with the most important affairs and so cannot be considered as a minister. Wang Mang somehow managed to exploit this ambiguity when he introduced his own declaration using the new title of *She huangdi*, "Regent Emperor."

> 惟居攝二年十月甲子，攝皇帝若曰：大誥道諸侯王三公列侯于汝卿大夫元士御事。不弔，天降喪于趙、傅、丁、董。洪惟我幼沖孺子，當承繼嗣無疆大歷服事， 予未遭其明恥能道民於安.
>
> On the day *jiazi* of the tenth month of the second year of his regency, the Regent Emperor spoke to this effect, "We make a great declaration to the princes, the three dukes, and the lords, and to you, the ministers, counsellors, the members of the administration. Unfeeling Heaven sends down destruction on the Zhao, Fu, Ding, and Dong clans. It greatly occupies Our thoughts that Our charge Ruzi, so very young and inexperienced, has come to inherit this throne, with its vast territories and heavy responsibilities. We have not displayed bright wisdom, nor have We been able to lead the people to tranquility."[52]

After the founding of Wang Mang's new dynasty in 9 C.E., at which time he made few references to the precedents contained within the Five Classics, the dramatic progress of the rebellion against Wang Mang's regime gave rise in 23 C.E. to Wang's final attempt to advance on his behalf a persuasive model in the *Documents* classic. That model was found in the "Metal Coffer" (Jin teng 金縢) chapter, which narrates how Zhougong begged Heaven to spare the life of King Wu, then seriously ill. The troops involved in the 23 C.E. rebellion had taken up the accusation once formulated by Zhai Yi, that Wang Mang had killed Emperor Ping. Repeating Zhougong's gesture, Wang Mang made sure to "reveal" his own supplication to Heaven, likewise kept in a metal box since the fatal illness of Emperor Ping. Plainly, this ultimate act of emulation was

51. Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Shangshu jinzhu jinyi* 尚書今註今譯 (Taibei: Taiwan Shangwu, 1969), 89. James Legge (trans.), *The Shoo King or the Book of Historical Documents* (Taipei: SMC, 1991), 362, mod. after the forthcoming translation of the *Documents* classic by Michael Nylan and He Ruyue.

52. *Han shu*, 84.3429.

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meant to demonstrate his innocence proved unconvincing to the rebel troops, who were undeterred and advanced on the capital to unseat him.

Plainly, the Classics were not only used to lend ideological and historical weight to Wang Mang's rise to power, since the Classics were also used to elaborate opposition to Wang's accumulation of power, as we see in Sun Bao's 孫寶 remonstrance in 1 C.E, which also deployed the *Documents* classic to protest the lack of dissenting voices around Wang Mang. Sun Bao, a noted specialist of the *Guliang* 穀梁 commentary for the *Annals* 春秋 classic, was an experienced administrator who frequently faced difficulties and dangers due to his uncompromising character. When Sun vigorously protested the use of portents to claim extraordinary merit for Wang Mang, he was holding the important position of Commissioner of Agriculture (*Da Sinong* 大司農).[53] When we examine his training and career, nothing distinguished him from the majority of Wang Mang's supporters. But when the appearance of a yellow dragon was reported to the court, Sun Bao was struck by the complacent conformity of the high-ranking ministers:

> 太師孔光、大司徒馬宮等咸稱莽功德比周公，宜告祠宗廟。寶曰。周公上聖，召公大賢。尚猶有不相說，著於經典。兩不相損。今風雨未時，百姓不足。每有一事，群臣同聲，得無非其美者。
>
> The Grand Tutor Kong Guang,[54] the Chancellor Ma Gong,[55] and other high officers unanimously praised Wang Mang's virtue as equal to Zhougong's, saying it should be the object of a formal proclamation in the imperial ancestral temple. Sun Bao said, "Zhougong was the supreme sage and the Duke of Shao a great worthy. Nevertheless, they were not always pleased with one another, as it is abundantly clear from the classic.[56] That does not mean they would harm each other.

53. According to Sun Bao's biography, Wang Mang himself had the Empress Dowager recall him to the high administration after Emperor Ai's death; *Han Shu*, 77.3262.

54. A descendant of Confucius and an important dignitary during the reigns of Emperors Cheng and Ai, Kong Guang gave crucial support to Wang Mang, but after 1 C.E., he seems to have been increasingly distant (*Han shu*, 81.3362–63). He left the court and died in 5 C.E. His father Kong Ba 孔霸, grandfather Kong Yannian 孔延年, and great-grandfather Kong Anguo 孔安國, were all eminent specialists of the *Documents* traditions. Kong Guang became Academician during the reign of Emperor Cheng, due to his deep knowledge of the Classics, as well as of Han institutions. He then became Imperial Counsellor (*Yushi dafu*), Chancellor (*Chengxiang*), and from 2 to 1 B.C.E., Grand Tutor (*Taishi*).

55. Ma Gong, a specialist of the Gongyang commentary to the *Annals* classic, became Chancellor in 1 B.C.E. and Grand Tutor in 5 C.E.

56. Here, Sun Bao might refer to chapter "Jun shi" 君奭 in the section "Zhou Shu" 周書, which is introduced as a text composed by Zhougong to answer the Duke of

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> Lately, the winds and rains are untimely, creating want among the people. Faced with such events, all the ministers speak with one and the same voice, to let [Wang Mang] hear nothing but praise."[57]

After this harsh remonstrance, the meeting among the high ministers was interrupted, and Sun Bao was dismissed at the first opportunity. Through this short and efficacious remonstrance, he had used the same weapon as Wang Mang and his supporters: the *Documents* classic. Instead of extracting symbolic precedents from the Classic, however, he exposed the underlying spirit of the text, which is undoubtedly polyphonic and preserves different, sometimes even contradictory, views of the ancient sages. According to Michael Nylan, "those trained in the *Documents*. … portrayed even the wisest of sage-kings as far from omniscient, making them reliant upon the collective wisdom of numerous supporters and allies."[58] Sun Bao, by referring to the fierce rivalry between two sages as recorded in the *Documents*, effectively mocked the monolithic support for Wang Mang, which was probably all the more disappointing to many, because Wang Mang had seemed to be willing to rely on a real collective force for actions.

Shentu Gang 申屠剛, another opponent of Wang Mang, would make use of a similar kind of argument based on the *Documents* classic: Shentu seized the occasion of his recruitment by the local administration to announce his views on good governance and his analyses of Wang Mang's dramatic mistakes, especially as regards his decision to send into exile far from the capital the clans related to the young Emperor Ping.[59] He first denounced the breakdown in political communication

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Shao's criticism. Both were in charge of assisting King Cheng, according to the *Documents* traditions: 召公為保，周公為師，相成王為左右，召公不說，周公作君奭.

57. *Han shu*, 77.3263.

58. Michael Nylan, "The *Documents* Classic as Guide to Political Philosophy in the Early Empires," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 48.1 (2021), 16.

59. *Hou Han shu*, 29.1011–17. A useful piece of research is Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, "Xi Han fankang Wangshi zhe liezhuan" 西漢反抗王氏者列傳 [Biographies of those who resisted the power of the Wang clan]. Rao wrote this text to recover the lost "Xi Han jieyi zhuan" 西漢節義傳 [Biographies of the principled and dutiful during Western Han] originally written by the Ming loyalist Li Yesi 李鄴嗣 (1622–1680). Rao gathered 132 biographies, from diverse sources (*Han shu*, *Hou Han shu*, *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志, *Gaoshi zhuan* 高士傳, among others), organized by four categories (1) "Gentlemen who offered loyal remonstrances" (忠諫之士); (2) "Those Wang Mang dismissed or eliminated" (為莽所黜戮者); (3) "Those who died because of their daring resistance" (舉義抗莽而死事者); and (4) "Officials who refused to serve Wang Mang" (清節之士不仕莽者). See *Rao Zongyi ershi shiji xueshu wenji* 饒宗頤二十世紀學術文集, vol. 6, devoted to Historiography (史學) (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 2003), 693–747.

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provoked by the heavy punishments inflicted on critics, who are too easily likened to creators of unfavorable rumors.

> 臣聞成王幼少，周公攝政，聽言下賢，均權布寵，無舊無新，唯仁是親，動順天地，舉措不失。然近則召公不悅，遠則四國流言。
>
> Your servant has heard that when King Cheng was young and the Duke of Zhou was Regent, the duke listened to the words of the virtuous, and authority and favor were bestowed fairly. It did not matter if they were old or new nobles; the duke grew close to only those who were benevolent. His actions were in line with Heaven and Earth, and his policies never failed. But even then, among his relatives the Duke of Shao was displeased, and far away, there were rumors in the Four Domains."[60]

Here the reference to Zhougong as the *Documents*' central figure preserved the possibility of dissenting voices, whether the voices came from close kin (as with Zhougong's close relative, the Duke of Shao) or from distant states (through rumors or "flowing talk"). To quote Shentu Gang's own words about the failures of the court:

> 今承衰亂之後，繼重敝之世，公家屈竭，賦斂重數，苛吏奪其時，貪夫侵其財，百姓困乏，疾疫夭命。
>
> Now, after a period of decline and instability, following an era of dramatic ruin, the state is bowed and depleted; taxes and levies multiply; harsh officials encroach on the people's time for agricultural work [by assigning them other tasks]; the greedy steal goods, thereby depriving the people of their livelihoods and shortening their lives by epidemics and diseases.[61]

Well aware of the impeccable classical precedents for Shentu Gang's assessment, Wang Mang nonetheless had the empress dowager Wang Zhengjun issue an edict condemning Shentu Gang for "distorting the Classics and producing absurd discourses" (僻經妄說).[62] Soon Shentu Gang left the court and took refuge in an area west of the Yellow River, and later he moved further away to the region of Ba-Shu 巴蜀 (present Sichuan).

The range and richness of the rhetoric adduced to support Wang Mang's seizure of imperial power reflects a new self-conscious awareness by classicists who constituted the decisive force backing Wang's bid

60. *Hou Han shu*, 29.1012. Translated by Lu Zongli, *Rumor in the Early Chinese Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 220), 15 (mod.).
61. *Hou Han shu*, 29.1013.
62. *Hou Han shu*, 29.1014.

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for power. Though it sometimes appears to us as absurd political theater, Wang's dramatic emulation of Zhougong can also be portrayed in other terms: as the eminently successful step-by-step legitimization process achieved by publicly assuming the persona ascribed to the Duke, as laid out in Xunzi's writing. As we have seen, Wang had inherited a long tradition of criticism of Han institutions going back to the time of Dong Zhongshu. Nevertheless, as soon as it became clear that Wang Mang's preoccupation was with founding and preserving his own dynasty, rather than with reforming the Han ruling house and extending its mandate, his *Han shu* biography suggests that he found any reference to the Classics less welcome. In effect, the critical, even radical potential of the Classics made these texts double-edged swords, whose obvious manipulation was no less dangerous for the sovereign than for the minister. The classicists who wanted more power-sharing utilized the Classics to warn Wang Mang and try to impede his road to supreme power; such classicists feared Wang Mang's concentration of power and the breakdown in political communication, with good reason.

王莽經學與奪權之道

羅逸東

提要

本文探究王莽奪權的思想背景，以縷析其在每一階段如何構建合法性。王莽並非驟取劉氏之權，而是在臣與君的角色間建立了連續與統一性。他漸取勝利的關鍵是對於經典的總體學習以及對周公的特意比照，這一過程有三個重要階段：一，獻白雉；二，加九錫；三，作《莽誥》。不過，經典雖然是王莽及其支持者的共同參考，卻也被一些反對者用以攻駁權力集於王莽手中。

Keywords: Wang Mang, Five Classics, Zhougong (Duke of Zhou), usurpation, political communication, Nine Conferrals
王莽, 五經, 周公, 奪權, 篡位, 政治通訊, 九錫

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