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# The Heavens are High and the Emperor is Near: An Imperial Power System that is Open to the People

*The Interaction and Representation of the Complicated Relationship  
between the Emperors and the People in Qin and Han Dynasties*

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## Abstract

When we say that “the Emperor is near,” we are referring not to his nearness to the officials below him but rather to the people. It has always been an indispensable element of the emperor’s authority that he is able to establish a clear relationship with the populace and allow them to directly feel his presence in their everyday lives—both materially and morally—and even more importantly, feel the emperor’s concern for the people on a regular basis. Fostering the people’s sense of coexistence with the emperor is essential to solidifying the emperor’s position and maintaining the emperor’s almost holy image. The development of the imperial power structure through the Qin and Han Dynasties can thus be seen as the continuous development of the relationship between the emperor and his subjects. The main agents in the imperial society can be defined as the emperor, his officials, and the people; it can not be limited simply to the political dynamics between the emperor and the officials. Through his autocratic rule, the emperor has the ability to build a personal, transcendent connection with the people. Imperial rule is by definition autocratic, but the entire imperial power structure necessarily includes the people and his personal relationship with them. By citing multiple historical examples, we can begin to see how the emperors established such personal relationships with the people and why they were important to his rule.

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## Keywords

Qin Dynasty – Han Dynasty – imperial power – autocracy – relationship between emperor and populace

### I The Logic Behind the Ideas of Valuing the People and Endearing Oneself to the People in the Politics of Imperial Power

Since the pre-Qin era, the mainstream attitude towards the people has been quite clear. As early as the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Duke of Zhou raised a systematic political guiding principle of “respect the heavens (*tian*) and protect the people (*min*).”<sup>2</sup> In the Spring and Autumn Period, the people were given a more prominent position in the ruling ideas. The people were connected with the heavens in that the heavens follow the will of the people and “the heavens love the people dearly.”<sup>3</sup> The people were connected with the divine in that “the people are the lords of the divine.”<sup>4</sup> The people were also connected with the state in that “a state in rising comforts its people like treating wounds on its own body, for that is where its fortune lies; a state in decline sees its people as nothing, and that is where its crisis lies.”<sup>5</sup> By the time of the Warring States Period, Mencius further theorized the idea of valuing the people. His notion that “the people are more important than the King and the state,”<sup>6</sup> signifies the high point of the idea of “people as the root” in Chinese classical times. Compared with Mencius’ highly theorized idea of “people as the root,” some more specific and policy-oriented measures and propositions also showed the ideas of valuing the people and endearing oneself to the people. For example, the legalists advocated training certain peasants as soldiers in times of conflict, the Mohists proposed exalting the virtuous, and the Confucians proposed ruling by benevolence. In summary, both the regimes of the Eastern and Western Zhou Dynasties emphasized the importance of the people. Whether for strategic motives like having resources for war, or for promoting ethics, or for the solidarity of the political foundation, both the regimes and the ruled acknowledged the ever-increasing importance of the people.

2 Records in *Shangshu* show that this had become the political consensus among the Western Zhou kings, especially in the chapters of *Zicai* and *Kanggao*.

3 See 14th year of *Xianggong* in *Zuozhuan*.

4 See 6th year of *Huangong* in *Zuozhuan*.

5 See 1st year of *Aigong* in *Zuozhuan*.

6 *Jinxinzhongjuxia* chapter of *Mencius*.

However, when applied within a political system, both the kingly power and monarchial power lacked specific conceptions and practices in the following aspects: how to properly regulate and confirm the identities of the people, and how the monarch or the king connects with people in their daily lives so as to earn their trust. The factors can be many, but I argue that a key cause might be that both kingship and monarchy as political systems lacked a self-conscious and mature systematic design.<sup>7</sup> As for this matter, the later emperorship undoubtedly worked better. I propose that, based on the ideas of valuing the people and endearing oneself to the people, the later emperorship created a unique conception, social institutions, rituals, and discourse through the idea that “the heavens are high and the emperor is near.”<sup>8</sup> Given this, I argue that the notions of “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away” and “the heavens are high and the emperor is near” are two different conceptions of political relations in the long course of ancient Chinese despotism.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that “the heavens are high and the emperor is near,” does not mean that the emperor is close to the officials, but rather is close to the people. Since the people are always at the lowest level of a society and thus the farthest from the emperor, an emperor who is near the people can be seen as with the people. Of course, in this process the possibility of nearness and the will to come close lie with the emperor. Therefore, it became imperative for the expansion of imperial power that the emperor endear himself to the people, to let the people know that the emperor is with them, and to let the people experience the emperor’s care and the divinity of his imperial benevolence. The expansion of the imperial power in the Qin and Han Dynasties followed this idea of connecting the emperor and the people,<sup>10</sup> which resulted in the establishment of an imperial power system.

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7 Undoubtedly, the reason for this was that the kingly power existed in the earlier phase of Chinese history while the political mind was still shallow; the monarchial power was in the Warring State Period when all the princes were too busy fighting wars to think otherwise.

8 Translator’s note: The title of this article is a play on words using the often quoted expression 天高皇帝遠, meaning the heavens are high and the emperor is far away.

9 If I can borrow the western terminology, we might say that “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away” is like Deism, while “the heavens are high and the emperor is near” is like Pantheism.

10 If we subdivide, there should be another idea which is the integration of the individuals and the state. Therefore, the construct of the imperial power system actually includes two models of integration: the emperor and the people, and the individuals and the state. If the post-Warring States era started when Qin Shi Huang established a direct relation between the emperor and the people, then the new-empire era that started with Wu

From the perspective of social regulation in an imperial power political system, the “registration of commoner households” was a stable and effective measure for control.<sup>11</sup> However, every wise ruler understands that controlling people’s hearts is different from controlling them physically. The imperial regime’s understanding of the people only became deeper and more mature after the theoretical enlightenment which was the result of the contention of the hundred schools of thought and almost a thousand years of kingly and monarchical power politics. The highly effective administrative skills developed by the bureaucracy also enabled the imperial court to closely connect the people with the land. Even though in earlier times there were kings ruling vassal states, people of that time generally thought that “these kings only

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emperor of Han Dynasty established a direct connection between the individuals and the state. Theoretically speaking, each individual became somewhat related to the state once the state came into existence. However, what I’m emphasizing here is that an individual only started to gain initiative and activity after the establishment of the imperial power system based on “the heavens are high and the emperor is near.” Or in other words, an individual gains more space between him/herself and the state and shoulders more state responsibility only after the establishment of a conceptual reciprocity between the emperor and the people. Therefore, the relation between the emperor and the people in an imperial power system was the prerequisite for the relation between the individuals and the state.

- 11 “Registration of commoner households” was to weave everybody into the huge web of the imperial power system, which would then become a new social-political order that omitted nobody. The imperial power then naturally became self-evident. New order, new identities, and new conceptions became the cultivated new system. This could be seen as a systematic construction: “registration of households just means to put every household in documented order” (*Hanshu. Gaodijixia*). It could also be seen as a symbol of people: “To equalize means there is no superior and inferior. All common people are equal people” (*Hanshu. Shihuo zhixia*). Generally speaking, “registration of commoner households” had two features. On one hand, from the perspective of ruling form, the dictatorial blade already divided the whole country into individual households, each becoming the direct object of dictatorial rule. On the other hand, the imperial power ideology emphasized the reciprocity between the emperor and every person. It made the historical trend of equal punishment and etiquette for the nobles and the lower classes a reality. From then on, Chinese history entered the “equal household and each person era” (Chao Fulin, *Study on Pre-Qin Social Situations*, 59, Beijing Normal University Publishing Group). Personal relations became collective instead of private. No longer was there any private human relation that was absolutely outside of the control of the state. Instead, every individual belonged to the state and thus belonged to the emperor. Therefore, the equalization of all social members was also the enslavement of all people under the imperial system.

possess the land but not the people.”<sup>12</sup> In the imperial era, all the people were the emperor’s people.

When it comes to regulating and controlling the people, although in Chinese history the notion of “the emperor and officials rule together” existed, this does not deny that the emperor shouldered the ultimate responsibility for the people’s welfare and education. This conviction was viewed as a higher truth with sufficient classic references.<sup>13</sup> As derivative from the imperial power, the power of officials was not independent. Since officials were appointed by the emperor, they could only represent the orders of the emperor, but not the will of the people. It was a taboo and also a crime for an official to arbitrarily act on

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12 *Houhanshu*. Biography of Dourong.

13 For example, during the time of Emperor Wu, “Academician Xu Yan as an envoy went to inspect customs and civility of outside commanderies. He asked the people in Jiaodong and Lu commanderies to cast iron and evaporate brine, falsely claiming that was the emperor’s order. After returning to the capital city, he reported what he did and was transferred to the position of Assistant to the Minister of Ceremonies. The Imperial Counselor Zhang Tang impeached Xu for falsely claiming the court’s order when he was acting as an envoy. Zhang called Xu a great harm to the state and said that Xu should be sentenced to death, according to the law. Xu Yan argued that according the great ideas in the *Chunqiu*, when an envoy is out of the frontier, he can make decisions himself when he see opportunities to pacify the people and benefit the state.” Zhong Jun then argued against every point Xu made. Zhong’s counter-argument had two key points. First, “in the older time, all the kingdoms had different customs and rarely communicated with each other, therefore the envoy was empowered to make decisions if he sees crises and knows how to solve the problem. However, now it is different. Unlike the Spring and Autumn period, now the whole country is one unified state and every place belongs to the emperor, how can you say you were outside of the frontier?” Zhong Jun thus pointed out the biggest difference between the imperial system and the enfeoffment system. This difference was highly valued by the Han people, and therefore Zhong Jun was very sharp to point at that difference as a foundation. Second, “Xu had already suggested three times to the emperor that people in those areas should be allowed to cast iron and evaporate brine, but the emperor did not reply to him. If an official wants something but does not get an approval from the emperor, then falsely claims an imperial order to give what the people want so that he can get the reputation, a wise emperor must punish and kill such an official” (*Hanshu*. Biography of Zhong Jun). Here Zhong Jun pointed out the nature of the imperial bureaucracy. In front of the people the officials can represent the emperor, but in front of the emperor the officials can’t claim they represent the people’s will. If an official follows the people’s will without having the emperor’s order, by doing so he affronts the emperor and should be punished severely. Therefore, we can see that the so-called people’s heart and people’s will are all just excuses by the emperor, who has the real power to compose and interpret the content. If an official thinks of himself as representing the people’s will, he is challenging the emperor’s power.

the people's behalf without asking for the approval from the emperor first. This shows that within the imperial power system, the relation between the officials and the people was subordinate to the relation between the emperor and the officials, which itself was in turn subordinate to the relation between the emperor and the people. An official is first the emperor's subject, and only then is he empowered to represent the emperor to rule the people. If he self-assertively speaks for the people, he violates not only the harmonious relationship between the emperor and the people, but also the trust that the people hold for the emperor. By doing so, he puts himself in opposition to the emperor.

Therefore, in the imperial social political conception, the main political body contains three parts—the emperor, the officials, and the people—rather than just the emperor and the officials. The imperial power system left a position for the people, although the location, value, and function of this position need re-evaluation. People tend to emphasize the relationship between the emperor and the officials over the relationship between the officials and the people, and also tend to ignore the relation between the emperor and the people. The key factor that differentiates the imperial power from kingly and monarchical power is this three-pronged structure. Among the three parts, it seems the relationship between the emperor and the people is more indicative of the dictatorial nature of the imperial power. In other words, the dictatorial nature lies not only in that the emperor is immune from bureaucratic restrictions, but also in that the emperor transcends the bureaucratic group and shoulders responsibility for the people's welfare and education. Given this, the imperial power seems to possess a natural tendency towards transcendence. It always wanted to establish a kind of transcendent relationship with the people, and it is also where the transcending characteristic of the emperor is shown. As the son of heaven, the emperor can communicate with the divine beings; at the same time, as the emperor, he also communicates with the people on the earth. These are the two surfaces that show the transcendent feature of the imperial power. However, as a system that is designed to be open to the people, what is more important to the imperial system is to connect the emperor and the people. The necessary conclusion is that the transcendence of the connection between the emperor and the people, and the dictatorial nature of the emperor are not in opposition to each other. It is fair to say the emperor becomes transcendent because of his dictatorial nature; it is equally fair to say that emperor can be a dictator because of his transcendence. These two factors are mutually supportive. The emperor relies on his dictatorial power to realize his transcendent connection with the people; he also gains stronger support for his dictatorship because of his transcendent connection with the people. Seen in this light, a dictatorial emperor was always in

need of and eager to show his intimacy with the people. It is necessary that the imperial dictatorship be concerned with the people and represent the people. The more dictatorial an emperor is, the more he wants recognition from the people, and the more he hopes to strengthen his connection with the people.

Following this logic, a wise ruler has to be a dictator, for if he is not, he is not fulfilling his duty. This means the widely-applauded Chinese ideal of a wise ruler is actually based on the prerequisite of a dictatorship. At the same time, a wise ruler needs to be virtuous, for without virtue he becomes tyrannical. The Chinese define a tyrant as one that lacks virtue, not one that is a dictator. That is to say, lack of virtue leads to tyranny, but dictatorship does not. On the contrary, dictatorship enables an emperor to do his job and fulfill his duty, and thus become a good emperor.<sup>14</sup> Imperial power does not exclude dictatorship but emphasizes virtue, because a dictatorship combined with virtue can directly connect the emperor and the people, and enable the emperor to spread his favor and kindness among the people. This is the ideological basis of an imperial system that pays special attention to connecting with the people, listening to the people's will, and trying all sorts of ways to shorten the distance between the emperor and the people. It also gave birth to the conception and practices of "the heavens are high and the emperor is near," which constructed an imperial power system that was open to the people. Looking at the history of Chinese dictatorship, "the heavens are high and the emperor is near" is the rational construct of the imperial power system that ran through and dominated the whole of Chinese history since the Qin and Han Dynasties.<sup>15</sup>

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14 A dictator should follow the rules of the system but he can also transcend the system. Theoretically speaking, no matter what a dictator does, he won't face disapproval from the dictatorial system. No matter what he does, the system will support him and provide him sufficient systematic guarantee. That means that since the dictatorial system provided a dictator the ultimate power and freedom, there is no actual difference between a dictator and a tyrant in terms of the system. Although a dictatorial system does not necessary like a tyrant, it is not designed to prevent tyrants from existing, for in that case both the dictator and the system will lose legitimacy. To make this clearer, a dictatorial system has two prerequisite conditions: First, this system is designed solely for the sake of the dictator; second, all the power of the system belongs only and absolutely to the dictator. That means it is totally legitimate for a dictator to use the power to seek benefits for himself. And people have no legitimate reasons to accuse a dictator for enslaving the whole country and squandering social wealth for his own pleasure. Therefore, legitimacy could not be used as a foundation for people to denounce a dictator's misconduct or to deny him of his power.

15 See Lei Ge, *Suowei lishi*, pp. 265-266, Xi'an Publishing House, 2013.

## II Visiting the People and Returning to the People

### i *Tours of Inspection*

In the 15th year of the Qin Dynasty, the emperor made 6 tours of inspection. As a ceremonial and political ritual, tours of inspection were meant to establish a new kind of direct relationship between the emperor and the people. On his frequent tours of inspection, the emperor needed to show the people his ultimate authority and power, and also his reciprocal relationship with the people. The reciprocal relationship means that the emperor is the only legitimate ruler of the people and also the spokesman for their interests. The achievements of the emperor were widely acknowledged by the people in the process of building the connection between them.

The real purpose for emperors to take tours of inspection was not to regulate the emperor-officials relation in a narrow sense, but to establish the emperor-officials relation in a wide sense. For this reason, we do not see records of emperors meeting with local officials during tours of inspection in historical documents, but we can find records of emperors meeting the people, which seems like a kind of institution. For example, the first emperor of Qin Dynasty (Qin Shi Huang) “visited Kuaiji and crossed the Zhe River. Both Xiang Liang and Xiang Ji went to see him.”<sup>16</sup> It seems that anybody could go and see the emperor. The Tang Dynasty commentator Yan Shigu explained that when Liu Bang “freely went to see the emperor,” in this sense, “Free means indulging. When the emperor is on tour, the people are indulged and encouraged to watch.”<sup>17</sup> This shows that Qin Shi Huang took tours of inspection to initiate connections with the people, and try to get a close-up interaction with the people in many places. The real purpose was to subtly create a political environment in which the emperor gets close to the people and even fits in among the people.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the adage “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away,” is not absolutely true. It is possible for an energetic emperor to develop intimate relationships with the people.<sup>19</sup> The far-away emperor therefore can be nearby. “Qin Shi Huang made frequent tours of inspection. Wherever he went, his image of ‘being a high, exalted ruler who is just an arm’s length

16 *Shiji. Xiangxu Benji.*

17 *Hanshu. Gaodiji Shang.*

18 Lei Ge, *Qinhan zhiji de zhengzhi sixiang yu huanqan zhuyi*, pp. 436-439, Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2006.

19 Yang Liansheng, *Guoshi tanwei*, p. 151, Liaoning Education Publishing House, 1998.



away' became established within the hearts of the masses."<sup>20</sup> It is not hard to imagine that for the people who were there with the "amiable and approachable" emperor, it must have been unspeakably visually striking and mentally shocking.

Theoretically speaking, once the emperor steps out of the palace, he is with the society and the people. The emperor then becomes the center of attention and also a political entity with tremendous access. The common people who stood along the streets for thousands of miles became the free audience for the emperor's dignified manner. Among all the emperors in the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu was the most enthusiastic about tours of inspection. "He went as far north as Shuofang, went to the east and offered sacrifices on Mount Tai, went on the sea, and returned from the north."<sup>21</sup> Emperor Wu went to more places than any other Han emperor. "Emperor Wu went to forty-nine counties for tours of inspection."<sup>22</sup>

The emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty made more frequent tours of inspection all over the empire. "Emperor Suzong started to cultivate the ancient ritual and took tours of inspection around the empire."<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that only until the time of Emperor Zhang (Suzong) were there formal tours of inspection, but that Emperor Zhang followed the classics and made further revisions to the ritual, so it became more normalized and authentic. This means Emperor Zhang, compared to Emperor Wu and Emperor Ming, assumed a more serious attitude towards tours of inspection. If seen in this way, it is fair to say that tours of inspection in accordance with classic rituals started with Emperor Zhang. Therefore, the so-called east, west, south, and north tours of inspection were endowed with authentic classic meaning in the Zhongxing era.

Emperor Zhang made an authoritative statement and clarification about the purpose of tours of inspection in a directive to several ministers. Among the six purposes that Emperor Zhang mentioned, the most important was to publicize the imperial kindness and eliminate people's complaints. Two other purposes were also about the people: one was to offer sacrifices to ancestors and gods and pray for the people, and the other was to learn about the society by getting in touch with the people, or what was called "visiting the elders."<sup>24</sup>

20 Xing Yitian, *Zhongguo huangdi zhidu de jianli yu fazhan; Tianxia yijia: huangdi, guangliao yu shehui*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2011.

21 *Hanshu. Shihuozi Xia*.

22 *Hanshu. Xia Housheng Zhuan*.

23 *Houhanshu. Cui Yinlie Zhuan*.

24 *Houhanshu. Suzong Xiaozhangdi Ji*.

With this in mind, the encounter between Emperor Huan and the nameless elder man from Jiangyin during the emperor's tour of inspection has profound meaning. The story goes like this:

During the regnal year of Yanxi, Emperor Huan took a tour of inspection and arrived in Jingling. He crossed Yunmeng Lakes and arrived at the bank of Mian River. All the local people went to watch the emperor, except one old man. He just kept doing agricultural work. Zhang Wen, an imperial secretary who comes originally from Nanyang, felt it very strange and sent a person to ask the old man: 'Everybody else went to see the emperor, but you don't stop working. Why?' The old man smiled but didn't answer. Zhang Wen stepped into the field to talk with the old man in person, and the old man said to him: 'I'm not an educated man, and don't understand big words. May I ask you, does the emperor exist in a chaotic world or an orderly one? Does the emperor exist to take care of the people or is it the case that he just makes the people to support him? In the old days, the sagely kings lived in houses made of straws and twigs and all the people enjoyed a stable and peaceful life. Now this emperor disturbs the people and travels around with no scruples. I feel shame for him on your behalf, how come you still want everybody to go and watch him?' Zhang felt very ashamed and asked the old man his name, but the old man left without saying one more word.<sup>25</sup>

This story reveals several very interesting points. First, the message that the emperor was going on a tour of inspection was widely spread; many people knew it and went to watch. Second, some of the people were not interested. Third, officials and even the emperor himself hoped that more people would come to watch. Fourth, the accompanying officials were paying attention to people's attitude toward the emperor's tour. Fifth, common people along the way could and dared to directly express their opinion of the emperor to officials. Sixth, the emperor's tour of inspection did not only receive compliments, but sometimes it received criticism from the people. Seventh, officials were very tolerant of the people's criticism. All these happened during the emperor's tour and it is hard to imagine that similar scenes could appear in other occasions. But we can be sure that this is only a small example of similar scenes that happened during the emperor's nearly one hundred tours of inspection. During all these long tours, on one hand, the emperor learned about the people and society far more than what he could learn from his ministers' reports

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25 *Houhanshu. Yimin Liezhuan.*

or official documents; on the other hand, although the direct contact between the emperor and the people helps to cultivate the emperor's image in people's heart, it is not automatic.

## ii *Returning to the Hometown*

In the 12th year of his reign, Han Emperor Gaozu, Liu Bang, "passed by Pei, booked tables in Pei Palace, and invited his hometown people to come and drink with him."<sup>26</sup> By returning to his hometown, the emperor became directly connected with the people. A common person became the son of heaven, and then returned to the common people. This made people feel that while the emperor is so far away from them, the emperor is also right beside them. It is a key characteristic of imperial power ideology to emphasize the connection between the emperor and the people, instead of the connection between the emperor and the heavens. In the kingship political ideology, the King reaches the heavens but does not get close to the people; in the monarchial political ideology, the monarch does not reach the heavens and does he connect with the people; and in the imperial political ideology, the emperor not only reaches the heavens but also connects with the people.

"He (Liu Bang) then recruited 120 young kids from the town, and taught them to sing. Getting drunk, he hit the lute and started singing: 'A big wind blows and the clouds fly, I come back to my hometown now that the world is under my sway, where are the brave men to help me guard the four frontiers?' He asked all the kids to learn and sing with him."<sup>27</sup> This song was Liu Bang's improvisational performance, and it became Liu's most famous poem. Liu's political and military rival Xiang Yu once commented that a man who won the world but did not go back to his hometown is like a person who wears fancy clothes in the darkness of night.<sup>28</sup> Liu not only returned to his hometown, but also made the visit a big scene that would be remembered for thousands of years. He was both a director and also an actor. This dual role satisfied his emotional needs. He made the return to his hometown a perfect drama, with "elder people drinking and laughing and talking about old times," and he himself "feeling so touched and sentimental, tears were rolling down on his face." All these showed his homesickness and sadness like a travelling son who was away from his hometown. "A travelling son always feels sad when thinking of his hometown. Although I am now the emperor in the capital city, after ten

26 *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji xia.*

27 *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji xia.*

28 *Shiji. Xiangyu Benji.*

thousand year my soul will still be thinking of Pei, my hometown.”<sup>29</sup> As the son of heaven, the emperor still felt like a travelling son away from home. The son of heaven travels all over the country, but in his heart he still misses his hometown. This natural expression of human emotion reveals two layers of meaning: the reciprocity between the hometown and the capital city, and between the travelling son and the son of heaven. This kind of reciprocity is based on an intertwining structure between the government and the people. It shows the unity of the relationship between the emperor and the people, which means that the emperor has the absolute power over all people, but also means that the people absolutely need an emperor to protect their interests.<sup>30</sup>

If Liu Bang returned to his hometown with a single purpose—a homesick man returning home—when Liu Xiu returned to his hometown he had a two-fold purpose: to offer sacrifices to his ancestors and to show his closeness with the people. Since Emperor Guangwu, emperors of Zhongxing era started to return to their hometowns multiple times to offer sacrifices and enjoy time together with local people. In the 3rd year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu “arrived in Chongling, offered sacrifices in the ancestors’ hall, set up a feast and invited local people to enjoy together with him.”<sup>31</sup> By inviting officials and local people to his family house and having a good time together, and by offering sacrifices to his father, Emperor Guangwu thus cultivated his hometown as a sanctum of ceremonial rituals. From then on, a new ritual of national sacrifice came into being, and emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty after Guangwu often went back to their hometowns to offer sacrifices to ancestors.<sup>32</sup>

Undoubtedly, this pulled the emperor and the people closer to a large extent and established a direct connection between them. In the 19th year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu

arrived in Nandun County of Runan Province. He invited local officials and people to a feast, and also offered to exempt Nandun County from a year’s agriculture taxation. The people all kowtowed to thank the emperor and said: ‘your highness’s father lived here for a long time, and you are familiar with all the government buildings here. Every time you come here, you offer us gracious favors. Please exempt us from 10 year’s

29 *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji Xia.*

30 Lei Ge, *Qinhan zhiji de zhengzhi sixiang yu huangquan zhuyi*, pp. 474-476, Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2006.

31 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 8, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

32 See biographies of the emperors in *Houhanshu*.

taxation.' The emperor replied: 'I'm in constant fear of being incapable of shouldering my great power. One day passes after another, how can I have such wild wishes that I still have ten years of power?' The officials and people there said: 'Your highness simply does not want to exempt our taxation, what is the need to talk so humbly to us?' The emperor laughed at their reply and added another year of exemption.<sup>33</sup>

On this kind of occasion, the emperor's political needs and the people's wishes were in a harmonious relationship, and the emperor would unconsciously reveal his governing ideas. In the 17th year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu,

arrived in Zhangling. He repaired the ancestor's hall, offered sacrifice in the old family house, visited the country fields, set up a feast, and offered favors to locals. His aunts, enjoying the time and feeling a bit drunk, said to each other: 'when he was young, his highness was very serious and scrupulous. He never treated people softly, but was a straightforward man. Now look at him!' Hearing that, the emperor laughed hard and replied: 'I'm in charge of the world now, and I want to do it in a soft way.'<sup>34</sup>

When returning to his hometown, an emperor was able to offer his thoughts to ancestors and enjoy family time, get close to learn about grassroots politics and watch how local officials work, and also temporarily relieve himself from governmental work. In the 3rd year of Yongping, Emperor Ming

arrived in Zhangling of Nanyang. He visited old houses and summoned two old friends Yin and Deng. He then met with local officials in his own place, announced their bestowment, then walked instead of taking his carriage to watch the local military array. He spent the first half of the night reading books, and the second half sleeping. He got up before the fifth watch before dawn. This is how he usually spent his day there.<sup>35</sup>

This record also showed a harmonious scene between the emperor and his officials. In the 10th year of Yongping, Emperor Ming "arrived in Nanyang and offered sacrifices to ancestors. On the day of summer solstice, he went to the old family residence and offered sacrifice again. After the ceremony, he

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33 *Houhanshu. Guangwudi ji xia.*

34 *Houhanshu. Guangwudi ji xia.*

35 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 57, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

summoned a group of soldiers to play the melody of Luming. The emperor also played instruments to amuse the audience.”<sup>36</sup> With the emperors’ frequent appearance at old family residences and offering performances, the old residences were endowed with a sacred meaning. By returning to the hometown frequently to offer sacrifices and treat local people with feasts, the emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty consciously made their return a grand ceremony to celebrate the fact that the emperor was with the people and having a good time together with the people. Both the emperor and his ancestors thus became the object of people’s respect and worship. For this reason, the emperors in the Eastern Han Dynasty became more and more inclined to expand the scope of the national sacrifice ceremony. Geographically, this expansion came to include sacrificial ceremonies being held at all the small counties where Emperor Guangwu’s father, Liu Qin, had ever held office,<sup>37</sup> and also made more ancestors the recipient of the sacrifices, which included all of Emperor Guangwu’s ancestors since Liu Fa.<sup>38</sup>

### III The Multiple Forms of Interaction between the Emperor and the People

Before the emergence of an emperor, it was unimaginable for a ruler to have direct contact with the people, although there had been such fantasies.<sup>39</sup> The feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty placed the son of heaven far above the common people. These rulers had no chance to get in touch with people from the lower social classes. Even in the Warring States Period, the kings did not have much chance to interact with common people. While there was occasional contact, they should not be counted as real interaction. The kings in the Warring States were not the son of heaven; they were just princes of individual states. Therefore, only after the imperial system was established did the son of heaven start to get in touch with the common people. This is a key difference between the imperial system and the kingship and monarchial systems. The integration between the emperor and the people was the general basis of

36 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 57, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

37 *Houhanshu. Xiaoandi ji.*

38 *Houhanshu. Xiaoandi ji.*

39 For example, there is a description in *Guoyu* about spectacular scenes when the King summoned people from all classes and listened to their opinions. However, such description was just a political fantasy.

the imperial power system. The diversity and extensiveness of the integration between the emperor and the people became a key factor for the long-term stability under the rule of imperial power.

The emperor's love of the people was clearly shown in the ritual of offering sacrifices to the sky and earth and mountains and rivers. For example, one of the major reasons the emperors frequently offered such sacrifices was to pray for the people. "I humbled and purified myself. I offered sacrifices to pray for good luck and a fruitful harvest for the common people."<sup>40</sup> "(I ordered) revision of the temples of the Taiyi God, the five emperors and Houtu Goddess to pray for the welfare of the people."<sup>41</sup> These show a political idea that integrated the destinies of the emperor and the people. Since the people are the emperor's subjects, it became the emperor's natural duty to pray for their fortune. Therefore, we can see that the Feng Shan ceremony in which the emperor offered sacrifices to the heavens and the earth at Mount Tai was different from other ceremonies of offering sacrifices. The Feng Shan ceremony at Mount Tai was a grand ceremony to tell the world about the emperor's great achievements, while other ceremonies of offering sacrifices were more ordinary rituals in which the emperor acted as the son of heaven and prayed for the fortune of the people. "The emperor went to the outskirts. He bowed to the sun in the morning and to the moon in the evening. His imperial command read: 'The people are suffering hunger and coldness, therefore I'm here to offer sacrifice to Houtu Goddess to pray for a year of harvest. I'm very concerned that this year the people haven't harvested much, so I ritually prepare myself for the sacrifice and will humbly offer the sacrifice in the outskirt at the hour of *dingyou*.'"<sup>42</sup> "There was a flood and the harvest was severely affected, therefore the emperor offered sacrifices to Houtu Goddess to pray for a harvest for the people."<sup>43</sup> Praying for harvests showed that the emperor was in fact pleading on the people's behalf when offering sacrifices to the gods. "All the oceans, big rivers, and mountains have temples. The officials in charge of sacrifices are ordered to offer sacrifices to all these rivers and mountains on a yearly basis and pray for harvest years." This shows that offering sacrifices to mountains and rivers was also meant as a prayer for the people. "Therefore, it became a ritual that the five mountains and four rivers are offered sacrifices."<sup>44</sup> This means

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40 *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi xia.*

41 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

42 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

43 *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi Shang.*

44 *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi xia.*

that the emperor sent people every year to offer sacrifices to the big mountains and rivers to pray for good weather and a good harvest for the people.

As a matter of fact, the emperor's interaction with people was not just a completely symbolic gesture, but included many specific regulative measures. For example, in years of famine emperors usually would issue an edict of apology and announce that he would stop hunting, going to theater, listing to singing, wearing new clothing, and he would even eat less meat to share the people's suffering and to get through the hard time together with them. "This year produces a bad harvest, I have sent a messenger to help relieve the suffering. I have also ordered Taiguan (the official in charge of the emperor's diet) to reduce the meat in my meals, and the music bureau to hire fewer musicians, so they can return to agricultural work."<sup>45</sup> "The North China Plain has suffered a series of natural disasters. People are suffering hunger and coldness and epidemic, dying at early ages. The emperor ordered Taiguan not to kill animals everyday and prepare only half of the food compared what his highness used to have. He also would not take his carriage except for serious matters. And he also gave up several kinds of entertainment."<sup>46</sup> Another example is that when the emperor took tours of inspection, he usually would give some substantive favors to people along the way. "(The emperor) exempted the local people from taxation."<sup>47</sup> "(The emperor) endowed every local household along the way five thousand coins; he also gave the old and the single ones a bolt of silk." "During the tour (the emperor) went to several places including Bo, Fenggao, Sheqiu, Licheng; he offered exemption to the locals who owed tax. He also endowed those older than 70 each two bolts of silk." Sometimes the emperor would also "bestow all people a level one title and wine and cows to a hundred households with women."<sup>48</sup> These all show the concreteness of the interaction between the emperor and the common people. Therefore, the notion that the heavens are high and the emperor is near is not just a conception and self-image of the imperial power ideology, but is also embedded in the social life and daily experience under the imperial power system. The direct contact between the emperor and the people can be summarized in the following fourteen forms.<sup>49</sup>

First, the emperor invited the people into his palace. For example, Wei Bo, the minister of Prince Qi, was from a poor family and his father "went to see

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45 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

46 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

47 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

48 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

49 There should be 16 forms if including the tours of the whole country and returning to hometown to offer sacrifices to ancestors.



the Qin Emperor because he was good at playing music.”<sup>50</sup> “Four hermits from Shang Mountain” went to the palace and persuaded Liu Bang to give up the idea of abolishing the crown prince.<sup>51</sup> Another example is the story of Wang Sheng, who was a hermit “good at talking about Laozi’s ideas” in the Han Dynasty. “He used to be called to the court,” as an “old and vulgar” man and helped the chief judge Zhang Shizhi in front of other ministers.<sup>52</sup>

Second, the emperor and the people enjoyed entertainment together. During the era of Yuanfeng, Emperor Wu twice announced edicts to invite common people to come to the capital city to enjoy all sorts of entertainment performances together. The first time was in the spring of the 3rd year. People from a radius of three hundred *li* came to the capital city to watch performances. “A performance of fighting was put up, and people within 300 *li* all came to watch.”<sup>53</sup> The second time was in the summer of the 6th year of the Yuanfeng era, when Emperor Wu invited people living in the capital city to come to his royal garden to watch wrestling. “People living in the capital city arrived in the Pingle hall in the palace to watch wrestling.”<sup>54</sup>

Third, the emperor met with representatives recommended by local officials from different places. Emperor Wu once issued an edict which said “The Sanlao officials should be filial and fraternal and behave as a teacher for the people; they should also recommend people of virtue to meet with the emperor.”<sup>55</sup> This means no matter where the emperor is, whether he is in the palace or out for tours of inspection, he can always meet with people’s representatives recommended by local officials. In the time of Emperor Zhao, “(The emperor) summoned Han Fu because of his outstanding virtue, and gave him an official position and a bolt of silk when he returned to his hometown.” After that the emperor issued a special edict: “I endowed you with this position; please cultivate reverence and fraternity so you can educate the local people.” The emperor then asked the officials along the way to offer him “residence, wine, meat, and riding horses.” The emperor then specially asked commandery administrators and county prefects to show concern towards these national moral leaders. “The county official showed concern and gave gifts of a lamb

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50 *Hanshu. Gaowuwang zhuan.*

51 *Shiji. Liuhou shijia.*

52 *Hanshu. Zhangshizhi zhuan.*

53 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

54 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

55 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

and two bottles of wine. If someone dies, his family will be given higher-level quilts and offered a sacrifice.”<sup>56</sup>

Forth, the emperor issued edicts to praise the common people. A man named Bu Shi made a fortune as a shepherd. He heard that the kingdom of Nanyue wanted to subvert the emperor and then, “wrote to the emperor saying that he is willing to die for the emperor. The emperor issued an edict to praise him to the whole world.”<sup>57</sup> Another time, “all the rich people were trying to hide their fortune, but only Bu was especially willing to help the government. The emperor praised his loyalty, gave him the position of Zhonglang, gave him ten *mu* of land, and praised him to the whole world so that people can learn from him.”<sup>58</sup> Bu was thus established as a moral example who was rich and generous, loyal, and concerned with the country. Another example is that Emperor Xuan once issued an edict which read: “of the officials in Yingchuan, those who act upon propriety will be given a title. The people will be given the second rank, and those who work in the fields will be given the first rank.”<sup>59</sup>

Fifth, the emperor bestowed titles on the common people. Occasions like royal weddings, royal festivals, national ceremonies, and auspicious signs from the gods could all become reasons for bestowing titles to common people. For example, “when the rain finally came, the emperor bestowed a second rank to every official and a first rank to every commoner.” “(The emperor) bestowed a first rank to people.” “Every man was bestowed a first rank title.”<sup>60</sup> According to statistics, the emperors of the two Han Dynasties bestowed titles ninety times, which means it happened once every four or five years. So if a man of that time lived to sixty years old, he normally would have ten chances of getting a new ranked title.

Sixth, the emperor used titles as a reward for rich people who helped the poor. For example, “those who helped feeding the poor and donated to the government to help relief work were rewarded. A person who donated more than a million will be rewarded with the 14th rank of Yougeng, and if he wants to hold an official position of county head, he needs to donate another 300 *dan* of food. If a person is already an official and donates a million, his official level will be raised two levels. If a person donates more than 300,000, he will be rewarded with the 9th rank of Wudafu. If he wants an official position, he can be given the position of Guanlang. If he is already an official and donates

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56 *Hanshu. Gong Sheng Zhuan.*

57 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

58 *Hanshu. Bu Shi Zhuan.*

59 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

60 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

300,000, his official level will be raised two levels. If a person donates 100,000, he will be exempt from paying tax for three years. If he donates 10,000, he will be exempt from tax for one year.”<sup>61</sup>

Seventh, the emperor directly granted rewards to the people. The Yuan emperor once issued an edict: “To the elders: the filial will be granted five bolts of silk; the younger brothers who are fraternal and those who work hard in the field will be granted three bolts of silk; the elders with no children and the single persons will be granted two bolts of silk.”<sup>62</sup> Emperor Wu’s edict was even more obviously concerned for the people. “To the elders of the county: the filial will be granted five bolts of silk; the younger and fraternal men will be granted three bolts of silk; the people older than ninety and the childless and the single will be granted two bolts of silk and three kilos of cotton; those older than eighty will be granted three *dan* of rice.” Emperor Wu also thought that the rural part was remote and people could not gather together easily. He commanded the local officials to “visit the places and do not ask the people to gather,” which means the officials needed to visit the people’s households to give away the emperor’s grants. “Just go where they live and give them the gifts, do not have them gather.”<sup>63</sup> The emperor meant to free the people from inconvenience, to prevent them from traveling too much, and more importantly to show that he cared very deeply about the people.

Eighth, the emperor sent officials to visit the countryside to learn about people’s life and to comfort the poor. Emperor Xuan specially asked the heads of commanderies to supervise local officials to take care of the poor people’s lives. “The childless elders, the widows and widowers, and the poor are whom I have sympathy for. I already issued an edict to lend such people land and goods and food. The childless and the widows and widowers and the old should also be granted silk. Local officials should treat this as a regular job and should not fail to fulfill this duty.”<sup>64</sup> Emperor Yuan from the time he took the throne asked twelve ministers, including even the Imperial Minister of State, to “travel around the country and learn about how the childless, the widows and widowers, the old, the poor, and the jobless are doing, recruit the talented and virtuous, and enhance the social atmosphere.”<sup>65</sup>

Ninth, after a natural disaster, the emperor sent officials to affected areas to comfort the victims, reduce taxation, and convey the emperor’s care.

61 *Hanshu. Chengdiji.*

62 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

63 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

64 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

65 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

For example, in the time of Emperor Ai, many counties had earthquakes and Henan and Yingchuan had floods. “The people were killed and houses were damaged.” Emperor Ai sent “the Imperial Minister of State to visit the victims. He would give money for coffins for the dead and the survivors three thousand coins. In all the places that were affected by the flood, the local households with assets no more than 100,000 will be exempted from the year’s taxation.”<sup>66</sup>

Tenth, the emperor sent envoys to inform and pacify the people. When the government decided to launch a large-scale military operation, or implement new economic policies, or launch large-scale hydraulic engineering projects or social projects, it was highly possible that the people would not be happy with such decisions, sometimes resulting in mass unrest. Therefore, at such times, not only did the local officials have to pay extra attention to people’s feelings and reaction, but the imperial court was also extra attentive by sending envoys to different places to look into the local situations and pacify the people. For example, when Sima Xiangru was the imperial envoy to the Bashu area, he made good use of his talent as a poet and wrote articles and poems so that “people knew the intention of the emperor well.”<sup>67</sup> When a local official offended people with tyrannical behaviors and caused mass disturbances, the emperor had to send a special envoy to warn the local official and pacify the local people. Although the envoy was supposedly warning the misbehaving official, his real purpose was to contact the people. The envoy first made clear the official’s bad conduct had nothing to do with the emperor, and then he would reprimand the people for not fulfilling their duty as the emperor’s subjects. Finally the envoy would represent the emperor and ask that “those living around the county should come to hear the imperial message; those who live afar should receive official documents with the imperial message.” The envoy thus made wide contact with local people and spread the imperial grace on behalf of the emperor. For the people who lived in remote mountain areas, the local official would be delegated the responsibility to send them the written message. Whether an oral or a written message, it was meant to make an impression of the imperial grace in the people’s heart. Obviously, in this process the “close-to-people” county officials were given the important responsibility of spreading the message, and they would be responsible if “people living far way in the mountains and valleys did not learn about the imperial message.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, spreading the imperial messages became the county official’s important responsibility.

66 *Hanshu. Aidiji.*

67 *Hanshu. Sima Xiangru zhuan xia.*

68 *Hanshu. Sima Xiangru zhuan xia.*

Eleventh, the emperor asked officials from central to local levels to recommend “people-loving model officials.” For example, “the Imperial Chancellor, Marquises, generals, governors, and commandery administrators each should recommend one filial and righteous model who knows about politics and cares about the people.”<sup>69</sup> And, “(the emperor) asked each province to recommend moral and people-loving officials.”<sup>70</sup> This shows that the emperor wanted to create an emperor-loving-the-people atmosphere thorough this system of recommending people-loving models. The message here is that because the emperor loved the people in the first place, he encouraged such recommendations and praised those officials who also loved the people like their own family.

Twelfth, the emperor visited the soldiers in person, which is also a people-loving demonstration of the emperor. In the sixth year of Emperor Wen (158 B.C.), the Xiongnu tribe invaded the frontier. The emperor visited the soldiers in person to check their combat readiness. He visited three military defenses in Bashang, Jimen and Xiliu.<sup>71</sup>

Thirteenth, the people could write directly to the emperor to relay their feelings and needs. The common people who wrote to the emperors came from a diverse background, even including soldiers. In the time of Emperor Yuan, a low-ranking soldier named Zun from Changan wrote a letter to the emperor praising the achievements of the convicted minister Bingji and pleading for his son.<sup>72</sup> The most famous such story was that of Tiying. In the time of Emperor Wen, “Chunyu from Shangdong who used to be in charge of looking after the imperial barn was convicted and sentenced. He was put into prison in Changan.” His youngest child, Tiying, followed him to Changan and wrote to Emperor Wen pleading for her father. “I’m willing to become a slave to redeem my father’s conviction. Please give him a chance to re-start a life.” Emperor Wen “was touched by her sincerity,” and ordered that “corporal punishment should be cancelled and replaced by other kinds of punishment. Those convicted and imprisoned should be released after a set number of years according to the severity of their crimes.”<sup>73</sup> Following the emperor’s order, the Imperial Chancellor Zhang Cang and Imperial Counselor Feng Jing drew up a systematic plan of legal reforms. This story shows that a direct dialogue between the emperor and the people was quite extensive. In this case,

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69 *Hanshu. Aidiji.*

70 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

71 *Hanshu. Zhou Bo zhuan.*

72 *Hanshu. Bing Ji zhuan.*

73 *Hanshu. Xingfa zhi.*

a common girl's letter to the emperor led to the reform of criminal punishment system. That a commoner or even a criminal's daughter could write to the emperor so easily reveals that the connection between the emperor and the common people was quite close. The important thing here is that this kind connection came from a rational and systematic design. For example, the imperial government encouraged people to express their ideas or even criticize the government when erratic natural phenomenon or disasters happened. During the era of Xuanzhao, it was very popular for people to write to the emperor, and some of the writers even received an official position because of it. For example, in the time of Emperor Xuan, Xu Fu from Maoling County did not like that "the Huo family lived a luxurious life." He wrote to the emperor and warned that, "The Huo family is enjoying prosperity and wealth. If your highness does care about them, you should ask them to refrain from living so luxuriously so that they won't go into decline." Xu "sent the letter three times and finally heard back from the emperor." Later, the Huo family was convicted and all sentenced to death. Everyone who complained about them was rewarded, except Xu. Some people felt that was unfair and wrote to the emperor about it. The story ended when "Xu was granted ten bolts of lucky silk and later was appointed the position of Gentlemen Cadet."<sup>74</sup> Sometimes some people even wrote in false names just to get a position or reward. Since writing to the emperor became such a common phenomenon in the Han dynasty, "numerous people all over the country took great efforts to write to the emperor expecting rewards of money or titles."<sup>75</sup>

Fourteenth, people's representatives wrote to the emperor. The county officials titled Sanlao seemed to keep an unusually close contact with the emperors. Sanlao officials represented the local people's will. Although they themselves were not commoners, they were seen as the representatives of people's will because they were in charge of educating and edifying people. For the same reason, the emperors would pay special attention to the Sanlao officials' opinions. For example, the Prefect of Xiaohuang County, Jiao Gan, "cared for and treated his officers and local people very well, and Xiaohuang County was a moral and amiable place. Since Jiao did such a good job, he received very high reviews and was appointed for a promotion. The Sanlao of the county wrote to the emperor and said he would like Jiao to stay. The emperor then issued an edict asking Jiao to remain the Prefect of Xiaohuang County with a raised salary."<sup>76</sup> Here are another two examples to prove that the special connection

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74 *Hanshu. Huo Guang zhuan.*

75 *Hanshu. Mei Fu zhuan.*

76 *Hanshu. Jing Fang zhuan.*

between the emperor and common people was embedded in a systematic structure. First, Emperor Wu was misled by Jiang Chong, who made wrongful accusation about the Crown Prince Li. The pressure on Li was so great that he started a military revolt. Linghu Mao, the Sanlao from Huguann County, wrote to the imperial court pleading for the Crown Prince. His letter was so well written and well argued that Emperor Wu finally changed his attitude towards the Crown Prince Li.<sup>77</sup> Second, local grassroots officials sometimes wrote directly to the emperor to praise good officials, and thus changed the emperor's decision about demoting a good official. The Sanlao of Hu County were the most famous. They wrote to the emperor pleading for the accused capital city mayor Wang Zun. The letter was such a well supported argument it could be seen as an excellent defense for Wang Zun. "The Sanlao of Hu County wrote an excellent letter praising Zun's achievements in the capital city."<sup>78</sup> This was a big case at the time, and whether an important official like Wang could be given a fair ruling was an important matter. This case revealed the following political messages: first, that the county level Sanlao could write directly to the imperial court shows that grassroots officials had open access to communicate with the emperor; second, the content of the letter shows that local grassroots officials knew very well about big cases in the capital city; third, that the local officials dared to express opinions about important cases concerning much higher officials shows that the communication system from bottom up to the top was working very well.

#### IV Between Words and Actions: The True Relationship between the Emperor and the People

It should be acknowledged that at the level of words and conversations, the emperors of the Han Dynasty showed praiseworthy kindness and humanitarianism. The emperors' edicts all showed an urgent heart that loved the people like family. Whenever there was a natural disaster, the emperor's first thought of was the people's welfare. "Now the flood has moved to the southern area, and the winter is getting close, I am worried that people won't live through such hunger and coldness."<sup>79</sup> "During this period the *yin* and *yang* lost the balance, and the five phases lost the order, and the people suffered hunger."<sup>80</sup>

77 *Hanshu. Wu wuzi zhuan.*

78 *Hanshu. Wang Zun zhuan.*

79 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

80 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

Although the emperors all spoke with a condescending tone, it was not meant to be arrogant. The edicts of the Han emperors had a humble and humane style. "(I) feel nervous day and night, for I'm afraid I can't fulfill this great responsibility."<sup>81</sup> "I have been very cautious and diligent, and I never dare to take it easy; I'm aware of my lack of virtue and intelligence."<sup>82</sup> "So unwise am I that I don't recognize the wise."<sup>83</sup>

Besides this, some key words like "given nature," "ethical relationships," and "edification of the people," frequently appeared in the Han emperors' edicts. From the perspective of rhetoric, texts made of these key words and phrases have a certain style and send the same messages. They try to tell the people all over the country that the emperor cares and worries about them, and also expects and demands much of them. The form of the edicts embodies such a style and emphasizes the wise emperor's kindness, sympathy, and strong sense of responsibility. Therefore, when the imperial edicts were promulgated among the masses, they were imparting the emperor's values and concern.<sup>84</sup> The direct result was that more common people could hear the emperor's voice.

However, even if the people could hear from the emperor every day, what good did it do? Could that really change the people's lives or help solve their difficulties? That is why we think the connection between the emperor and the people was just a lasting process of the construct of the imperial power system. Its nature was the subtle integration of the dictatorial power and transcendence of the imperial power. It did not exclude the other forms of imperial power. For example, imperial power politics suppressed and enslaved the people politically, exploited the people economically, controlled or fooled the people ideologically, distrusted and discriminated against the people legally, and set boundaries and limits for the people in their daily lives. The people of the Han Dynasty themselves claimed:

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81 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

82 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

83 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

84 Although we do not have direct evidence to prove that the common people could obtain and possess edicts, we can find examples of officials collecting edicts. The minister of Wei "liked to read stories and edicts of emperors," and collected "23 such documents," which included "old stories of the Han Dynasty, and words by famous ministers like Jia Yi, Chao Cuo, and Dong Zhongshu" (*Hanshu. Weixiangzhuan*). These documents are like "collection of cases and policies" of today.



The common people will flee and become homeless for seven causes: first, flood and draught out of imbalance of *yin* and *yang*; second, severe taxation from the county officials; third, corrupted officials incessantly asking for profit; fourth, local powerful households insatiably preying on the poorer ones; fifth, bad harvest and heavy taxation and labor levies; sixth, the tribal alarms ringing for thieves, so the men and women have to run away all the time; seventh, the robbers taking hold of people's property. These are the seven causes for fleeing. Furthermore, there still are seven causes of death for common people: first, cruel officials beating a person to death; second, the officials giving severe sentences at trials; third, innocent people being wrongly accused and killed; fourth, robbers everywhere; fifth, those who hold animosity killing each other; sixth, hunger in bad years; seventh, uncontrollable epidemics. These are the seven causes of common people's death.<sup>85</sup>

Compared to the emperor's stylish edicts, maybe this describes more accurately the reality of people's life. Therefore, we can see that the imperial power system is actually a system of absolute oppression and exploitation of the people.

For the exactly same reason, it was impossible for the imperial power system to be completely open to the people. The so-called access to power for common people had its internal and specific logic. For example, in the policy of "promoting the worthy men to official positions," where do the worthy men come from? Of course they come from the common people. Thus the political idea of valuing the worthy is embedded in the logic of valuing the people. In a large sense, different policies and programs like promoting the worthy and recommending the reputable gentlemen to official positions can be seen as an important part of the people's access to the imperial power. Even more so was the imperial examination system. In fact, so long as the bureaucratic system is not based on blood but on individual capability or knowledge or virtue, then most officials could come from the common people. However, this should not be seen simply as the imperial power trusting the people or recognizing their capability. It would be naïve to think that selecting officials from the common people is equal to the power being open and accessible to common people.<sup>86</sup>

85 *Hanshu. Baoxuan zhuan.*

86 Qian Mu held this opinion, that all the officials of the imperial court used to be common people: "the government and the common people therefore were a unified one, and the government's opinion was the people's opinion." This is what Qian called "the unification of the government and the people" and "the direct power of the people" (see *Zhengxue*

The reason is very simple: the imperial power will not be imperial power once it is completely open and accessible. The idea here is that the imperial power was never open to the people, but the structure of the imperial power system would leave some positions for the people. The imperial power forbade the people to share the power, but the system gave the people opportunities to file complaints and cry for justice.<sup>87</sup> While the imperial power was the form of the power operation, the system of the imperial power was the operational space for power. The more space, the more effective the power.<sup>88</sup> In that sense, the imperial power system absolutely did not exclude the people but embraced the people. The more people included, the more effective and dominant the imperial power.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the closed aspect of the imperial power and the openness of the power system are not contradictory, but are in fact complementary.

The monopolizing imperial power surely is a sign of dictatorship. The seemingly accessible power system is also a sign of dictatorship, although in a transcendent way. Transcendence and dictatorship are two sides of the same coin of imperial power. We need to not only recognize the charming discourse, values, and practical effectiveness of the transcendence of the imperial power, but also need to make an accurate judgment as to the essential connection between the transcendence construct and the dictatorial nature of the imperial power. Needless to say, a denial of either would be a severe misunderstanding of early Chinese history.

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*siyan*, p. 9, Jiuzhou Press, 2010). Put in simple words, it means that the government was made of common people and therefore was a government of commoners. Qian failed to realize that the essence of politics is power, and the essence of power was the division and limits of power, therefore he often made absurd arguments about history and politics.

- 87 For example, the administrator of Huaiyang, Tian Zhongyun, arbitrarily sentenced people to death and caused great anger among local people. "Local officers and people all went to the imperial palace to ask for justice" (*Hanshu. Kuli zhuan*). This might be the only example of people in the Western Han dynasty being forced to appeal to the emperor so that a cruel local official would be punished.
- 88 From the Qin and Han Dynasties to Ming and Qing Dynasties, it seems people were given more and more space or access to the imperial power system; but at the same time, the control of people from the imperial power also became more and more tight.
- 89 The more powerful the emperor becomes, the more depressed the people become. Therefore in designing its system the imperial power paid special attention to making the people feel satisfied with the status-quo.