The Construction of Political Power in the Qin and Han Dynasties—Centered on the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai

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Abstract. The Fengshan Ritual of Mount Tai during the Qin and Han Dynasties constitutes a pivotal phenomenon in ancient Chinese political and cultural history. Its political symbolism and cultural connotations have long attracted academic attention, with existing research amenable to further expansion through additional data and multidimensional analysis. Centering on this ritual, this paper integrates Records of the Grand Historian and Mount Tai-centered archaeological discoveries, adopting a methodology of textual-archaeological mutual validation. It systematically sorts out the ritual's connotations, prerequisites, and evolutionary context, focusing on the practices of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han—while the former emphasized the ritual's role in justifying his reign, the latter prioritized the ideology of grand unification to consolidate power. Through in-depth research, the paper clarifies the ritual's threefold significance: politically establishing regime legitimacy, culturally promoting integration and inheritance, and socially harmonizing the masses. The final section discusses limitations regarding data sources and research perspectives, and proposes future directions—including excavating more archaeological resources, conducting interdisciplinary studies, and exploring contemporary values—to address gaps in existing scholarship.

Keywords: Fengshan Ritual, Mount Tai, Construction of Political Power, Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Emperor Wu of Han.

1. Introduction

Mountains and rivers not only offered the ancient people the much-needed fact of survival through subsistence but also led to the prevalence of mountain and river worship because of their brilliant and mysterious shapes in the context of the low social productivity of the ancient time. Being the first among the Five Great Mountains, Mount Tai gained the central stage among the most outstanding mountains and rivers due to the deep-rooted Fengshan Ritual culture sacrificing a millennium [1]. Fengshan Ritual was the ultimately ranked ceremony within the ancient national sacrificial system as well as numerous political tools used by emperors to build and unify the legitimacy of their regimes, which has a lot of research value. The study is highly important in further elaborating the history of Qin-Han political and cultural history as well as shedding light on the natural relationship between the ancient ritual systems and the imperial power formation. Not only can it fill the weak points in the pertinent research in academia, it is capable of offering a new angle to the political roles and cultural implications of the traditional national sacrifices. The Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai is the center of attention of this research and the main aspects that are to be considered include the necessary meaning of the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai, how the ritual was practically applied by the Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han, and the significant role of the ritual assessment in the formation of the political power during the Qin and Han dynasties.

The methodology adopted in this study will be that of predominantly documentary analysis with some archaeological corroboration elements. It methodically retrieves and examines the traditional texts, Records of the Grand Historian·Bookof Fengshan, Records of the Grand Historian Annals of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Book of the Later Han Treatise on Sacrifices (Part Two), and Book of Documents, and relies on the results of the academic research, namely Wei Zehua Archaeological Analysis of the Fengshan Culture the Mount Tai as well as Fangshi and Confucian Scholars of the Qin and Han Dynasties. Through textual study it is able to sort out the in-lines of the evolutionary path and the practical particulars of the Fengshan Ritual, as well as make known documentary

evidence by archeological discoveries. The strength of this methodology is that it enables an overall integration of textual and material evidence, to excavate historical information properly, and thus to give a concrete support to the research.

The final research problem of the proposed study is to fill these gaps in the past scholarly literature on the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai in the Qin and Han dynasties, that is, the insufficiency in searching and examining Records of the Grand Historian. Book of Fengshan and the overall inadequacy of monographs or articles with comprehensive analysis and discussion. In this perspective, the study shall comprehensively streamline the setting of Fengshan ritual system, carry out a more insightful analysis of the political interest of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han in their officiating the ritual, explain the role of the Fengshan Ritual in building political legitimacy, and consequently contribute to augmenting new scholarly attainments to the literature on the Qin-Han political and cultural history.

2. The Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai

"Feng refers to piling up earth to form an altar, offering sacrifices with fire to inform Heaven of the success of the new dynasty's establishment [2]." Piling up earth to build an altar is called "Feng"; therefore, constructing an earth altar on the summit of Mount Tai to worship Heaven, express gratitude for Heaven's merits, report earthly achievements to Heaven, and pray for blessings is also termed "Feng." In contrast, clearing the ground on a small mountain at the foot of Mount Tai to worship Earth, acknowledge Earth's great benevolence, and repay Earth's blessings is called "Shan." Originally written as "Shan" (denoting a cleared sacrificial ground), the character was later modified to "Shan" (carrying a divine connotation) to enhance its sacredness. As the paramount ritual in the ancient sacrificial system, the Fengshan Ritual was a solemn form in which emperors personally visited famous mountains to worship Heaven and Earth, demonstrate their own virtues and magnificent achievements, and render thanks to Heaven and Earth for their blessings [3].

For ancient emperors to perform the Fengshan Ritual, three prerequisites must be fulfilled: first, being "mandated by Heaven"; second, possessing "merits and virtues"; third, obtaining "auspicious omens" (lucky auguries). Only when all three conditions are met can the ritual be conducted. Duke Huan of Qi once intended to hold the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai but was dissuaded by Guan Zhong on the ground that "without auspicious omens, the Fengshan Ritual shall not be performed." Based on these three prerequisites, the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai held special significance for ancient emperors—to demonstrate the legitimacy of their regimes, glorify their political achievements and merits, and affirm the divine right of kings bestowed by Heaven. Only Emperor Qin Shi Huang, Emperor Wu of Han, and Emperor Guangwu of Han performed the Grand Fengshan Ceremony during the Qin-Han period, which sufficiently attests to its extremely high threshold and profound significance.

Sima Qian stated: "Since ancient times, which emperor mandated by Heaven has not performed the Fengshan Ritual? ... Even if mandated by Heaven, if one’s merits are insufficient; if one reaches Liangfu but one’s virtue is not universally accepted; if virtue is accepted but there is a lack of leisure time—thus, the practice has been rare [4]." Compared with other sacrificial activities, although the Fengshan Ritual was proclaimed to the world and of the highest sacrificial rank, it was held fewer than ten times in two thousand years, with its details kept confidential. People’s understanding of the Fengshan Ritual remains inadequate, and archaeological discoveries have supplemented this understanding to a certain extent. Emperor Qin Shi Huang left Qin stone inscriptions on the mountain top during his Fengshan Ritual, namely the Li Si Stele currently located in the East Imperial Reception Courtyard of Dai Temple. During his eastern inspection tour, Emperor Qin Shi Huang erected stone inscriptions along the route, and the Langya Stone Inscription still survives today. Unfortunately, the Wudafu Pine recorded in Records of the Grand Historian no longer exists, leaving only ancient trees planted in successive dynasties. The phrase "The Fengshan Ritual is rare and extraordinary, and its rituals are unknown" directly proves that there were not many remains of previous Fengshan Rituals

for Emperor Wu of Han to reference; accordingly, it can be inferred that Emperor Wu also left few such remains. However, investigations into Han Dynasty relics around Mount Tai have confirmed that there is still substantial archaeological evidence of the Han Dynasty Fengshan Ritual. Firstly, there are Han cypresses in Dai Temple, said to have been planted by Emperor Wu of Han, and Han Dynasty "Wanqiu Wansui" (Long Live Forever) eave tiles were discovered during renovations near Ren'an Gate [5]. Secondly, scattered Han Dynasty tile fragments are found at the site of the Han Mingtang (Hall of Light), and Qin-Han Dynasty tile fragments have been unearthed at Qingyang Platform and Dongdong Platform, directly north of Mount Tai's main peak. Thirdly, there were ancient cities around Mount Tai at that time, such as Yanyu City, Wenjiang City, Fenggao City, Yanghu City, Wang'er City, and Bo City, where Zhou-Han Dynasty artifacts have been commonly found in modern times. Fourthly, at the Langya Platform site in Qingdao, not only the Langya Stone Inscription but also large-scale rammed earth platform foundation buildings from the Qin and Han dynasties have been discovered [6]. The Huangdi-related texts unearthed from Mawangdui, Sixteen Classics and Ten Questions, contain contents on esoteric techniques such as Yin-Yang, Xingde (Shape and Virtue), and sexual practices. The Huangdi-related works listed in Book of Han·Treatise on Arts and Literature include several works of the "Shenxianjia" (Immortal School) [7]. These archaeological discoveries fill the research gap of insufficient records and unclear rituals of the Fengshan Ritual, providing physical evidence for exploring the true nature of the Qin-Han Fengshan Ritual.

3. The Fengshan Ritual and Emperors Qin Shi Huang & Wu of Han: Practices in Political Power Construction

3.1. The Fengshan Ritual and Emperor Qin Shi Huang

The Qin Dynasty conquered the Six Kingdoms and unified the world through military force. Mei Fu of the Western Han Dynasty stated: "The Qin Dynasty pursued an unrighteous path—eradicating the legacy of Confucius, destroying the norms of the Duke of Zhou, abolishing the well-field system, abolishing the five ranks of nobility, leading to the collapse of rituals and music, and blocking the way of the royal dao. Thus, those who wished to practice the royal dao could not achieve their merits [8]." With a weak cultural tradition, the Qin Dynasty was eager to justify the orthodoxy of its dynasty and establish the legitimacy of its rule in the State of Qi, where its governing foundation was fragile. In the third year after unification, Emperor Qin Shi Huang embarked on an eastern inspection tour along the imperial highways, ascended Mount Tai, and elevated the Fengshan Ritual from a legend to a concrete political practice. He ordered Prime Minister Li Si to inscribe an imperial edict on the summit to commemorate his merits, extolling his feat of "personally inspecting the distant people, ascending this Mount Tai, and surveying the easternmost reaches." From then on, erecting a stone tablet at Mount Tai upon the completion of the ritual became an established procedure for subsequent emperors' Fengshan sacrifices. According to Records of the Grand Historian·Book of Fengshan:

"In the third year of his ascension to the throne, he inspected the commanderies and counties in the east, offered sacrifices to Zouyi Mountain, and praised the achievements of the Qin Dynasty... He then had a road constructed, ascending from the southern foot of Mount Tai to its summit, where he erected a stone to eulogize the virtues of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and affirm his qualification to perform the Feng sacrifice. Descending via the northern foot, he performed the Shan sacrifice at Liangfu [4]."

After the Fengshan Ritual, Emperor Qin Shi Huang traveled to Langya. At that time, Xu Fu, a fangshi (occult practitioner) from the State of Qi, paid homage to Emperor Qin Shi Huang twice in Langya. By imperial command, Xu Fu set sail eastward with thousands of boys and girls—proving the divine mandate while seeking the elixir of immortality. The first voyage is recorded:

"Xu Shi and others from Qi submitted a memorial stating that there are three sacred mountains in the sea—Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou—inhabited by immortals. They requested permission to

observe fasting and seek the immortals with boys and girls. The emperor then dispatched Xu Shi with several thousand boys and girls to sea in search of the immortals [4]."

Emperor Qin Shi Huang's trip to Langya was an extension of his Fengshan Grand Ceremony. On one hand, by forging a connection with immortals, he enhanced the sacredness of imperial power; on the other hand, his quest for the elixir of immortality stemmed from his desire to perpetuate the imperial foundation established through the Fengshan Ritual, ensuring that his rule, blessed by the divine mandate, would endure indefinitely.

Matters related to the Fengshan Ritual—such as sacrificial vessels, offerings, and the rituals of presentation and reception—were the inherent responsibilities of Confucian scholars. Therefore, when Emperor Qin Shi Huang prepared to perform the ritual at Mount Tai, he summoned Confucian scholars to deliberate. Some proposed using carriages with wheels wrapped in cattail grass to avoid damaging the mountain's soil, rocks, plants, and trees; others suggested cleaning the ground for the sacrifice and using chopped thatch as mats. However, their conflicting proposals were deemed impractical, prompting Emperor Qin Shi Huang to dismiss the Confucian scholars. He subsequently ordered the construction of a mountain road from the southern foot of Mount Tai to its summit, sighing, "Is this not what is meant by acting without virtue [4]?"

Records of the Grand Historian Book of Fengshan details: "He then summoned seventy Confucian scholars and doctors from Qi and Lu to the foot of Mount Tai. Some scholars argued: 'In ancient times, the Fengshan Ritual used cattail-wrapped carriages to avoid harming the mountain's soil, rocks, plants, and trees; the ground was swept for the sacrifice, and mats were made of chopped thatch, as it was easy to follow.' Emperor Qin Shi Huang found these proposals contradictory and unworkable, so he dismissed the scholars... As Emperor Qin Shi Huang ascended Mount Tai, a violent storm erupted halfway up the slope, and he took shelter under a large tree. Having been dismissed and barred from participating in the ritual, the Confucian scholars mocked him upon hearing of his encounter with the storm [4]."

Emperor Qin Shi Huang's Fengshan Ritual sparked considerable controversy. At the time, the dismissed Confucian scholars, harboring resentment, openly mocked the ritual. When Emperor Qin Shi Huang was caught in a storm and forced to take shelter under a tree, the scholars seized the opportunity to accuse him of incurring heavenly wrath due to his lack of virtue. Later generations also criticized him for "acting without virtue," arguing that the tyranny of the Qin Dynasty contradicted the original intent of the Fengshan Ritual—which embodied the divine mandate and the requirement that virtue match imperial status. By arbitrarily altering traditional rituals and acting according to his own will, Emperor Qin Shi Huang undermined the sacredness and standardization of the Fengshan Ritual to a certain extent, resulting in his failure to gain recognition for the "upper Feng" (the formal Feng sacrifice).

3.2. The Fengshan Ritual and Emperor Wu of Han

The rapid demise of the Qin Dynasty aroused profound reflection and anxiety in the Han Dynasty, which was founded by commoners. After Emperor Wu ascended the throne, he performed the Fengshan Ritual and, by invoking Confucian theories of the divine mandate, endowed the Han Dynasty with the legitimacy to replace the Qin Dynasty: his governance of the world was a continuation of the divine mandate and a reconstruction of royal rule. Emperor Wu of Han’s Fengshan Ritual not only inherited Emperor Qin Shi Huang’s tradition in ritual form but also integrated the ideological and cultural concept of grand unification. Through this ritual, he strengthened the notion of the divine right of kings, consolidated centralized rule, demonstrated the prosperity, cultural achievements, and military prowess of the Han Dynasty to the world, and enhanced national self-confidence and cohesion.

In 110 BCE, Emperor Wu of Han performed his first Fengshan Ritual. In March, Liu Che led 180,000 troops on an eastern inspection tour from Chang'an. He first offered sacrifices to Songshan, the Central Great Mountain; his entourage claimed to have heard cries of "Wansui" (Long Live) on the mountain, which was silently acknowledged by all present. Emperor Wu regarded this as an

auspicious omen and thus proceeded eastward to Mount Tai. Since plants and trees had not yet sprouted at that time, he ordered a stone to be erected on the mountain top before traveling to the coastal areas. In April, when vegetation began to grow, Emperor Wu returned to Mount Tai to conduct the Fengshan Ritual. Prior to this, he had summoned Confucian scholars to deliberate on the ritual procedures but ultimately formulated his own regulations: first, offering sacrifices to Liangfu Mountain; second, constructing an altar at the foot of Mount Tai to worship Heaven, with a "jade tablet" buried beneath the altar; after the ceremony, he ascended to the summit of Mount Tai with a small group of ministers to worship Heaven again; the next day, he descended via the northern slope and performed the sacrifice to Earth at Suran Mountain. The sacrificial offerings included three-ridged cattail grass from the Yangtze and Huaihe river basins, rare birds and beasts from various regions, white pheasants, and other items. The altar was sealed with a mixture of five-colored soil, and Emperor Wu, dressed in yellow robes, personally performed the kowtow ritual amid musical accompaniment [9].

Most animals used for sacrifices were domesticated and served as essential means of subsistence for human daily life, while rare and exotic creatures were often regarded as auspicious omens. Sacrifices of different ranks employed distinct animals as offerings, forming a complete set of rules and systems. According to Records of the Grand Historian·Annals of Emperor Wu:

"There were white deer in the imperial park. Their skins were used as currency to evoke auspicious responses, and white gold was minted accordingly. The following year, during the suburban sacrifice at Yong, a one-horned beast resembling a stag was captured. The officials stated: 'Your Majesty respectfully performs the suburban sacrifice, and the Supreme Emperor has rewarded you with this one-horned beast—it must be a kylin.' Thus, the beast was offered at the Five Shrines, with an additional ox burned as an offering at each shrine. White gold was bestowed upon the feudal lords to proclaim that the auspicious omen was in harmony with Heaven [10]."

Auspicious omens were Heaven’s response to the emperors’ merits and virtues, and emperors also regarded them as both encouragement and warning. Consequently, Emperor Wu of Han reduced taxes, relieved famines, safeguarded people’s livelihoods, alleviated social contradictions, and thus promoted social development to a certain extent.

Several additional events related to Emperor Wu of Han’s Fengshan Ritual are worthy of record: first, he issued an edict to change the era name to Yuanshou (Primordial Enfeoffment); second, he ordered feudal lords to construct residences at Mount Tai, linking nobles with the mountain to enhance its influence; third, he built a Mingtang (Hall of Light) at Mount Tai. The Mingtang was a venue where ancient emperors summoned ministers and deliberated on state affairs. There had originally been a Mingtang at the foot of Mount Tai, but Emperor Wu of Han had it rebuilt as he deemed it insufficiently spacious.

It was actually the fangshi (occult practitioner) Li Shaojun who led Emperor Wu of Han onto the path of seeking immortals and performing the Fengshan Ritual [10]. He advised Emperor Wu that "performing the Fengshan Ritual leads to immortality", thus inducing the then-young emperor to seek immortals on the sea. Emperor Wu heeded Li Shaojun’s misleading words at that time; he not only "dispatched fangshi to sail overseas in search of immortals such as An Qisheng of Penglai" but also attempted to "refine cinnabar and other elixirs into gold" [10]. His excessive obsession with the Fengshan Ritual and immortal-seeking indirectly triggered the Witchcraft Scandal that destabilized the political arena of the Han Dynasty in his later years.

By contrast, Emperor Qin Shi Huang clearly adopted an imperious stance, proclaiming his will to his subjects with supreme authority. Emperor Wu of Han, however, appeared to adopt a modest attitude, clarifying his aspirations, striving for moral renewal, and aiming for a promising future; he also extended favors to the people. Fundamentally, drawing lessons from the Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty abandoned the latter’s authoritarian and harsh governance that lacked benevolence, and instead treated its subjects with humility and benevolence.

4. The Significance of the Fengshan Ritual for the Construction of Political Power in the Qin and Han Dynasties

The significance of the Fengshan Ritual in the Qin and Han dynasties for political power construction lies in consolidating the governing logic of the divine right of kings and establishing the legitimacy and justification of the regime through this supreme ceremony that integrates both political and religious attributes. According to Baihu Tong·Treatise on Fengshan, after a sovereign founds a new dynasty by changing the dynastic clan's name and brings peace to the world, he must ascend Mount Tai to perform the Feng sacrifice and offer the Shan sacrifice at Liangfu. This act serves two purposes: on the one hand, it is a "declaration of accomplishment" to Heaven and Earth, testifying that he has lived up to the divine mandate, achieved great governance and stabilized the state, and entreating Heaven to "strengthen and consolidate" the foundation of his dynastic rule; on the other hand, it proclaims his magnificent achievements to the world by inscribing them on stone tablets, demonstrating Heaven and Earth's acceptance and affirmation of his regime, and compelling all people to submit to his rule [11].

Mount Tai was regarded as the cradle of all things and the venue for communicating with the divine realm. By offering sacrifices to the lofty Heaven atop this lofty mountain in accordance with the principle of "using the high to pay homage to the high", and performing rituals to repay Earth's great benevolence based on the foundation of Liangfu Mountain, the sovereign bound the legitimacy of his regime to the virtues of Heaven and Earth by virtue of the mountain's unique geographical and symbolic significance. The statement in Xiaojing Wei Gouming Jue—"Offer the Feng sacrifice at Mount Tai to assess merits and burn firewood in ritual; perform the Shan sacrifice at Liangfu to inscribe merits on stone tablets and record the dynastic title"—along with Liu Xiang's account in Five Classics General Meanings that "He who founds a new dynasty by changing the clan name and brings universal peace must offer the Feng sacrifice at Mount Tai and the Shan sacrifice at Liangfu" further confirms that the Fengshan Ritual embodies the divine mandate, signifying that the emperor rules all living beings by the will of Heaven [12].

By performing the Fengshan Ritual to announce universal peace to Heaven and repay the merits of all deities, the sovereign not only claimed credit and sought blessings from Heaven and Earth to consolidate the foundation of his rule but also declared to the world the sacredness and inviolability of his regime. Ultimately, this achieved the goal of uniting popular support and making the people willingly submit to governance, thus providing a legitimacy foundation for the stable construction of the unified Qin-Han regime. To echo the Fengshan Ritual, emperors often implemented people-benefiting measures such as granting rewards, exempting taxes and declaring amnesties to alleviate social conflicts, boost public confidence, and consolidate the social foundation for the stability of the unified regime [13].

At the same time, the successive Fengshan Rituals and sacrificial ceremonies held throughout the dynasties have left abundant cultural relics on Mount Tai, enriching its cultural connotations. Whether it is the titles associated with the Fengshan Ritual, the prayers and sacrificial texts, the routes taken and sites chosen for the rituals, the surviving artifacts such as stone inscriptions, bronze wares and jade certificates, or the indirectly related poems, travel notes and eulogistic steles—all these elements have jointly forged the profound cultural imprints of Mount Tai layer upon layer, ultimately shaping its image as the Eastern Great Mountain that symbolizes national peace and prosperity, national unification and ethnic solidarity. It has attracted the participation of various ethnic groups, promoted ethnic integration and strengthened cultural identity through shared cultural experiences. Its cultural elements, such as sacrificial rituals and stone inscriptions, have driven the inheritance and development of culture, exerting a far-reaching influence [14-16].

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study are as follows: it clarifies the core connotations and implementation prerequisites of the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai during the Qin and Han dynasties as the supreme

national sacrificial ceremony; sorts out its evolutionary trajectory from ancient nature worship to theoretical formulation in the pre-Qin period and subsequent institutionalization in the Qin and Han dynasties; and through an analysis of the Fengshan practices of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han, systematically reveals the multiple values of the Fengshan Ritual at the political, cultural and social levels. On this basis, the study further draws the conclusion that the Fengshan Ritual at Mount Tai in the Qin and Han dynasties was not a mere sacrificial ceremony, but a political and cultural practice deeply integrated with regime construction, serving as a crucial approach for emperors to integrate political resources and consolidate the foundation of their rule.

This study provides valuable references for the research on the political and cultural history of the Qin and Han dynasties as well as the study of ancient ritual systems. It not only elaborates on the intrinsic connection between the Fengshan system and the construction of regime legitimacy, but also addresses the deficiencies of previous studies in the analysis of practical details and multi-dimensional values. Future research should focus on three further directions for in-depth exploration: first, continuously excavate new archaeological data from Mount Tai and its surrounding areas, and combine physical evidence such as bamboo slips and stone inscriptions to supplement the micro-details of the Fengshan Ritual; second, expand interdisciplinary research perspectives, introduce theories from political science, sociology, cultural anthropology and other disciplines, and deepen the interpretation of the underlying operational logic of the Fengshan system; third, explore the modern value of Fengshan culture, integrate it with cultural heritage protection and the inheritance of traditional rituals, and provide historical references for contemporary cultural development.

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