

## “People as Root” (*min ben*) Rhetoric in the *New Writings* by Jia Yi (200-168)

*La rhétorique de la « Primauté du peuple » (min ben) dans les Nouveaux Écrits de Jia Yi (200-168)*

“民本”：論賈誼（前200年-前168年）《新書》之修辭

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/261>

DOI: 10.4000/extremeorient.261

ISSN: 2108-7105

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Vincennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 2012

Number of pages: 167-194

ISBN: 978-2-84292-352-5

ISSN: 0754-5010

### Electronic reference

Elisa Sabattini, « “People as Root” (*min ben*) Rhetoric in the *New Writings* by Jia Yi (200-168) », *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* [Online], 34 | 2012, Online since 01 November 2015, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/261> ; DOI : 10.4000/extremeorient.261

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## “People as Root” (*min ben*) Rhetoric in the *New Writings* by Jia Yi (200-168)

Elisa Sabattini<sup>1</sup>

### The origins of the question

The ancient Chinese expression *min ben sixiang*, usually translated as “the idea of the people as root,”<sup>2</sup> experienced a revival in China starting from the early twentieth century, when it was introduced into the debate on democracy, and later into that on human rights, as a useful tool in the context of a modern political discourse.<sup>3</sup> Seeking democratic seeds<sup>4</sup> in past Chinese political thought, modern-day reformers and revolutionaries reinterpreted the idea of good government derived from “the people as root” (*min ben*) concept. The common interpretation of this expression, which usually has a positive connotation, is that it concerns the ruler’s responsibility for the people’s welfare and satisfaction. However,

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1. This paper was first presented at the conference “Rhetoric as a Political Tool in Early China,” Jerusalem, May 2011. I want to thank the conference participants, especially Romain Graziani and Yuri Pines, as well as Carine Defoort, Maurizio Scarpari and the two *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* reviewers, for their incisive comments and remarks on earlier drafts of this paper.
  2. In modern times, many Chinese expressions and neologisms are related to *min ben*, for instance *minben zhuyi* meaning “democracy.” This connection with the modern idea of democracy has led to a misunderstanding of the original use of the *min ben* concept.
  3. There is extensive literature on the controversial Confucianism and democracy debate. See, for example, Xu Fuguan [1953] 1988; Mou Zongsan 1961; Jin Yaoji (= Ambrose Y.C. King) [1964] 1993; Fukuyama 1995: 20-33; Bloom 1998: 10; Ching 1998: 67-82; Judge 1998: 193-208; Hall and Ames 1999; Zhao Suisheng 2000; Tan Sor-Hoon 2003; Yang Qingqiu 2005. On related topics, Billioud and Thoraval 2009. On the notion of “the people as root” (*min ben*) in Chinese intellectual history: You Huanmin 1991; Xia Yong 2004: 4-32; Zhang Fentian 2009. See also Liang Qichao 1996.
  4. It is interesting to underline that Liang Qichao’s use of *min ben* was translated as “democratic ideas” by Chen in the translation of his *History of Chinese Political Thought during the Early Tsin Periods*. Liang Qichao 1930: 150-152.

even though the belief that the people are the country's underpinnings is part of pre-imperial and imperial thought, it was only in the early twentieth century that Chinese scholars raised "people as root" to the status of key concept in the country's early political thinking.<sup>5</sup> Even today, many scholars analyse the ideas of the "people as root" and "government for the people" in the context of the idea of popular sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary scholars also affirm that the existence of the notion of "people as root" might even testify to the existence of a sort of embryonic or potential democracy in ancient China.<sup>7</sup> It is important to underline

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5. Pines 2009: 187. See also Zhang Fentian 2009: 1. In the late Qing period, journalists from the *Shanghai Daily Shibao* (*The Eastern Times*) discussing the topic of "right thinking," equated China's "ancient constitutionalism," or the classical theory of the "people as root," with modern Western constitutionalism. See Judge 1998: 193-194. Judge says that the *Shibao* journalists did not write extensively or explicitly about human rights (*renquan*) *per se*. They "advocated the assertion of *minquan* which they related to the principles of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man' and the urgent need to develop constitutional rights in China." Judge 1998: 193. These journalists were trained in Western social and political theory but they also studied Chinese classical texts, and were not alienated from the Chinese cultural tradition. They injected traditional precepts with Western ideas based on constitutional principles. According to Joan Judge, the result was tension rather than fusion, and there were many contradictions between the inherited ideal of harmony between ruler and ruled, and the promotion of a new form of public policy. See Judge 1998: 193-194. This approach was a response both to the failure of late Qing policies and to the invasion of the country by Western powers who introduced their social and political theories.
  6. Some scholars go so far in their mental and linguistic acrobatics as to associate one of the Chinese translations of "democracy," *minzhu* or *minquan*, with the notion of *min ben*, skipping the logical step in their reasoning that would make the equation plausible. For instance, Viren Murthy claims that "The Chinese term for democracy, *minzhu*, is a combination of two characters: *min* meaning people, and *zhu*, meaning rule or ruler. Although this is a modern term, a related word, *min ben*, 'people as root,' existed since at least the Han dynasty and the idea was ascribed to Confucius [Kongzi] (551-479 BC), developed and refined by Mencius [Mengzi] (372-289 BC)." Murthy 2000: 33. Joan Judge also states that "their [*Shibao* journalists] understanding of *minquan* as a synthesis between the age-old *min ben* ethos of the unification of ruler and ruled, and new foreign-inspired ideas of democracy (*minzhu*) based on constitutional principles, gave rise to a new form of political dualism which would serve to maintain the state structure (*guoti*) while formalizing and rationalizing its operation (*guozheng*)." Judge 1998: 198.
  7. See, for example, Murthy 2000. Tan Sor-hoon 2003: 132-156. Gung-Hsing Wang even maintains that Mencius was "the first scholar in China who instilled the democratic spirit into our humanistic thought." In the work edited by Zhao Suisheng, Enbao Wang and Regina F. Titunik, much is made of the democratic value of the concept of *min ben* and a section is even entitled "Mencius's Notion of Democracy." Moreover, Wang and Titunik

that the modern use of the term “democracy” is anachronistic and misleading not only because political and social conditions have changed since ancient Greece, but also because scholars tend to apply the modern and contemporary Western meaning to ancient China.

The debate is very lively even today, both in the West and in the East, and one of the results is that the “people as the root” of the country is considered one of the key concepts in Chinese political culture if not the most important.<sup>8</sup> However, most scholars of ancient Chinese political thought are reluctant to endorse these equations.<sup>9</sup> I aim to show that the notion of *min ben* can easily become a rhetorical device and a catchphrase used by persuaders from the past. The improper use of *min ben* today distracts from the varied and interesting nuances of its meanings, especially in early Han (206 BCE-9 CE) political rhetoric. With few exceptions neither the late Qing (1644-1911) revision of the notion of the “people as root” nor the contemporary analysis consider the work of Jia Yi (200-168 BCE).<sup>10</sup>

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interpret Sun Yat-sen’s political philosophy expressed in the concept of *san min zhuyi* (the three principles of the people—nationalism, democracy and people’s livelihood) in terms of “continuation and development of the traditional political philosophy of *min ben*.” Wang and Titunik 2000: 80. Although in their analysis of the uses of the *min ben* concept in Chinese thought from ancient texts to the modern period, Wang and Titunik go so far as to assert that, “the concept of *min ben* may be understood in several interrelated respects: the centrality of the people in politics, the equality of the people as regards their potential to be chosen by Heaven to rule, the importance of the popular legitimation of leaders and the validity of withdrawing that approval through rebellion” (2000: 80), they conclude by admitting: “In conclusion, though *min ben* is a theory that emphasizes the importance of the people in a state, this does not entirely equate with a theory of governance that champions participation and governmental decision making by the people. [...] Thus the view, according to which *min ben* anticipates modern democracy, is erroneous in certain respects. Yet though these two theories of government diverge, there are some points of convergence of which we also take note.” (2000: 84) Others have seen the notion of *min ben* as bearing the imprint of meritocratic thought and it is often linked to traditional Confucian theories, although it lacks one core element of liberal democracy—a concept of procedural rules applying to the executive arm of government, underpinned by a concept of the role of the legislature. See Fröhlich 2008.

8. Pines 2009: 187. See Xia Yong 2004: 4-32; see also Zhang Fentian 2009: 13.

9. See, for example, Zhang Fentian 2009.

10. For example Murthy 2000, focuses on Jia Yi. However, in my paper I dispute his analysis. Sanft has devoted the first chapter of his PhD dissertation to the idea of people in the *New Writings*. See Sanft 2005a. For Jia Yi’s biography, see *Shiji* 84 and *Hanshu* 48. See also Emmerich 2007. According to his biography, Jia Yi, born in Luoyang, became famous in his home commandery for his talent in composition and his skill in reciting the *Shi* and *Shu*. Jia Yi was also a specialist of the *Zuo:chuan*. At that time, the administrator of

I will refrain from joining the discussion on “Confucian democracy,” and I will focus on the rhetorical expression of *min ben* in the “Great Command, Part I” (*Da zheng shang*) and “Great Command, Part II” (*Da zheng xia*) chapters of the *New Writings (Xin shu)*<sup>11</sup> ascribed to Jia Yi, *enfant prodige* active at the court of Emperor Wen (r. 179-157 BCE). The conclusion shows that in the *New Writings* the appeal to “the people”<sup>12</sup> was due to its “emotive connotation”<sup>13</sup> rather than signifying a concrete set of people-oriented policies. It is my contention that the rhetorical strategy of changing the context or details, thus introducing a new “emotive meaning,” can be applied to the use of the term “people” as proposed by Jia Yi, viewing it as an instrument he uses to reassess the young Han imperial interests. The end result of these reflections is the rebuttal of the view that in some sense “the people” can be considered as prefiguring democratic ideals.

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Jia Yi’s commandery was Honourable Wu. He heard of Jia Yi’s abilities and promoted him to a position in his entourage. Honourable Wu was a student of Li Si (d. 208 BCE), the famous Qin minister. Li Si himself had been a student of Xunzi (ca 313-238 BCE). These connections allow us to allocate Jia Yi, who was in favour with Honourable Wu, within the Warring States’ intellectual heritage. When Emperor Wen ascended the throne in 179 BCE, he heard of Honourable Wu because his administration was at peace and his commandery was the best in the realm. Wu became commandant of justice and once at court he recommended Jia Yi’s learning to the emperor, who as a result appointed Jia Yi to the position of court savant.

11. In this paper I use the *Jiazi Xin shu jiao shi* 1974. Hereafter, I will refer to the text as *Jiazi*. As for the claim the *New Writings* is a forgery, I have confidence in a number of studies proving that the contents of the text can be attributed to Jia Yi; see, for example, Svarverud 1998. Luo Shaodan 2002 and 2003: 270-299. For a study on the *Xin shu*, see Sanft 2005a. As for the texts contained in this œuvre, some of them were memoirs or records written by Jia Yi and addressed to Emperor Wen (alias Liu Heng, r. 179-157 BCE). The title of this compilation, *Xin shu*, does not refer to the content of these texts, but simply denotes a new edition with annotations. See Cai Tingji 1984: 23-27. In this paper I translate the title as *New Writings* with the meaning of “New Edition of Jia Yi’s Writings.” In early Han, the practice of naming written works with “new edition” (*xin shu*) was common.
12. There is a vast body of literature on the meaning of *min* (people) in ancient China. For two recent studies, which differ from one another, see Gassman 2000 and Pines 2009: 190-191.
13. Carine Defoort introduced into sinology the concept of “emotive meaning” developed by Stevenson 1937: 18; 1938. See Defoort 1997 and 2003: 393-413. See also Schaberg 2001.

## Rhetoric and its strategy

In ancient China, the period of the Warring States (453-221 BCE) led to a highly rhetorical form of argumentation that was practised by political counsellors and strategic advisors.<sup>14</sup> Freedom of argument was commonplace and persuasion was thus a popular rhetorical pursuit. This period, which is considered to be the golden age for the production of written materials, was characterised by free expression and critical thinking. Right after the unification of the various states under the Qin empire (221-207 BCE), this situation, characterised by interstate diplomacy, no longer existed. From the former Han empire onwards, rhetoric as persuasion and argumentation was part of the reflections made by political counsellors’ on state policies and of the remonstrations made by ministers to their emperors. After the first decades of the Han empire, “intellectuals”<sup>15</sup> were transformed from independent thinkers into state bureaucrats. It is in the early Han that intellectuals began to elevate the emperor above the rest of humanity.<sup>16</sup> The power of the emperor directly affected the rhetorical style, so rhetoric was often an art of “criticism by indirection.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, rhetoric as the art of “criticism by indirection” used by many official writings argues or praises with the intention of influencing the audience. We might surmise that those trying to persuade the emperor had to tread carefully: rhetoric could become a dangerous game or a death trap.

Jia Yi was a young erudite politically and intellectually active at the beginning of the Han dynasty. He was both the heir of pre-imperial discussion and one of the main figures in the rhetorical argumentation of the early imperial period. According to the *Record of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) and *History of the Han* (*Hanshu*), Jia Yi was an expert of the *Odes* (*Shi*) and *Documents* (*Shu*).<sup>18</sup> The *History of the Han* also notes that his speciality was the *Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuozhuan*)<sup>19</sup> and classifies Jia Yi’s works under the *ru* (classicists, erroneously translated as “Confucians”) umbrella.<sup>20</sup> Thus, later scholars usually labelled his thought as “Confucian,” and mainly related it to that of Mengzi (*ca* 379-304 BCE). However, the *Record of the Grand Historian* also registers that Jia Yi fully understood the ideas of Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE) and Shang Yang (d.

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14. Kao [1986] 2003: 121.

15. On the term “intellectuals” in ancient China, see Cheng 1996.

16. See Liu Zehua 1992: 72-73.

17. Kao [1986] 2003: 121.

18. *Shiji* 84: 2491. *Hanshu* 48: 2221.

19. *Hanshu* 88: 3620.

20. *Hanshu* 30: 1726. On the meaning of *ru*, see Zufferey 2003.

338 BCE).<sup>21</sup> Jia Yi's political phraseology, which was close to the thought of Xunzi and also to that of statesmen like Shang Yang, Shen Buhai, Han Feizi (d. 233 BCE),<sup>22</sup> must be considered under this heterogeneous light.<sup>23</sup> This is not a contradiction, but rather shows that is impossible to apply strict criteria for attributing a text from the early Han to a certain tradition.

Although Jia Yi inherits the Warring States rhetorical formulation and wording, he is part of the political discussion of the Former Han and thus his political goal differs from the pre-imperial one: before imperial unification the main concern was how to pacify and unify the states under one government, while during the early decades of the imperial era the question was how to retain imperial power. In the *New Writings*, both the longevity of the dynasty and the centralisation of political power are crucial topics: the Han imperial house was only a few decades old and questions of political stability and legitimacy of the Empire were given priority.<sup>24</sup> The centre of Jia Yi's political thought and system is the ruler, and his discourse concerns the emperor's political actions. The political nature of the *New Writings* lends itself to a focus on the rhetoric of the texts. However, studies on Jia Yi's rhetoric usually focus on his *fu* poems, a genre

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21. *Shiji* 130: 3319. The *History of the Han* modifies this passage and refers instead to Shen Buhai and Han Feizi. See *Hanshu* 62: 2723.
  22. The *New Writings* share ideas also with *The Pheasant Cap Master* (*He Guanzi*) and the *Wenzi*, especially in the appeal for fear and caution before the ruler's responsibilities. In addition, many ideas are similar to those theories developed in the text discovered at Mawangdui and known as the *Silk Manuscript of Huang-Lao*. On these texts, see Peerenboom 1993. On the similarities with Jia Yi, see also Sabattini 2009.
  23. In pre-imperial China and in the early years of the imperial period, clear distinctions between so-called "schools" result in simplifications.
  24. According to the *Shiji*, one of the urgent matters pressed on Emperor Wen by his ministers was to establish the crown prince early. *Shiji* 10: 419. It is possible that these ministers stressed the need to establish the heir because the hesitant attitude displayed formerly by Gaozu of Han in installing his successor had let power drift into the hands of the Empress Lü. These ministers were also interested in influencing Emperor Wen's decisions since they played the chief role both in toppling the clan of Empress Lü and in the crowning of Emperor Wen himself. Jia Yi took part in this discussion and formulated his theory of foetus instructions (*taijiao*) of the heir and moral education of the crown prince. Education *in utero* and the moral training of the crown prince were both related to the selection of good tutors and imperial assistants. Jia Yi singled out foetus instruction as the earliest possible opportunity to mould the moral fibre of the crown prince. This emphasis on the crown prince is part of his political strategy and is related to the need for stability and the avoidance of political and social disasters. On the analysis of the idea of *taijiao* in Jia Yi, see Sabattini 2009.

characterised by its display of epideictic discourse<sup>25</sup> and whose purpose was to advise, or on his discursive genres such as *lun* (discourse) chapters. Nevertheless, in Jia Yi the art of persuasion addresses political and psychological problems not merely through this prose-poetry genre or his *lun*, but it is intrinsically part of his phraseology. Giving emotive expression to words is part of Jia Yi’s declamatory style. His discourse is redolent of that canonical literature, full of allusions and archaism, which would be developed in later political literature. His prose adopts an impersonal style, whose goal is critique and correction.

Another cardinal principle of Jia Yi’s political technique is the emphasis on selecting good officials and assistants for the state to be ordered and secured. The emperor’s responsibilities include precisely this task of attracting and promoting competent aides and officials in order to gain their loyalty: loyal officials and assistants may be able to dominate and control the multitude. The idea that capable and virtuous people should be employed rather than the ruler’s relatives, first appears in the political discussion of the Springs and Autumns (770-453 BCE) period; it is fully developed during the Warring States period and inherited by the early Han. During the Warring States, the “elevating the worthy” (*shang xian*) debate was linked to the social mobility that led to the end of the pedigree-based social order and to a profound change in the ruling elite.<sup>26</sup> The state of Qin contributed to social mobility by introducing new principles of promotion based on military merits and high tax yields.<sup>27</sup> This social mobility reached its peak with the first rebellion against the Qin led by the farmhand Chen She (d. 208 BCE) and the later accession to the throne of Liu Bang (alias Gaozu, r. 202-195 BCE), the first Han emperor, who was born in humble circumstances but nevertheless successfully ascended the throne. Not long after, during the early decades of the Han dynasty, the idea of “elevating the worthy” still was a key problem: the court was dominated by those who had risen to influence

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25. See Knechtges 1976. The *fu* was the dominant poetic genre during the Han dynasty and it is variously translated “rhyme-prose,” “rhapsody,” “verse-essay,” “prose-poetry.” It originated from a type of chanting used by officials of the Zhou dynasty to present political plans at court; at the end of the Warring States period it evolved into a genre. The earliest received *fu* is the “*Fu* Chapter” of the *Xunzi*. Starting from the Han dynasty, the purpose of the *fu* was to present “criticism.” According to Lewis, rhapsody was an example of attaining mastery through written language. See Lewis 1999: 317-332.

26. The idea of promoting upright persons, which is first discussed by Confucius and his disciples, is beneficial for the upward mobility of the *shi* (literati, political persuaders). It is the “Elevating the Worthy” chapter of the *Mozi*, another major text from the Springs and Autumns period, that proposes a list of measures for attracting and promoting the worthy and good *shi*. This idea, and its internalisation, marked the end of the pedigree-based social order. On the rise of the *shi*, see Pines 2009: 115-135.

27. Pines 2009: 123.

through military merits and not intellectual ones<sup>28</sup>: Liu Bang ascended the throne after a civil war and needed a dependable political environment, so he awarded his followers with territories, and during his rule fiefs were given to collateral relatives. The end result was that for the first decades, the Han empire was not directly administered by the central government. Economic and political problems arising from this administrative and political situation led Jia Yi to recommend abolition of the fiefs<sup>29</sup>: political power had to be centralised in order to be controlled.

The early Han court milieu was characterised not only by the struggle of scholars wishing to improve their position within the new order, but also by the tension between scholars and leading military veterans who supported the ascension of Liu Bang. During the time of Jia Yi, the tension increased: Emperor Wen ascended the throne thanks to a sort of *coup d'État* led by Liu Bang's old retainers.<sup>30</sup> These military followers, who led the overthrow of the Empress Lü's clan<sup>31</sup> and placed Emperor Wen on the throne, were still very influential. Jia Yi was part of this scenario and aimed to persuade the Emperor to attract and promote competent ministers. Although in previous times scholars were more generally opposed to hereditary transmission in the name of "elevating the worthy," I believe that Jia Yi merged the two: in order to achieve political stability, the Empire needed to make clear rules both on succession to the throne and on the selection of ministers and aides. Establishing the crown prince early,<sup>32</sup> on one hand, could prevent another *coup d'État* and maintain the control of succession; on the other, counsellors had to be selected because they were worthy and loyal,<sup>33</sup> and had to take part in the heir's education. I think that Jia Yi's idea comes from necessity—and a career objective—not only from paternalistic observation.

Jia Yi's political phraseology is strongly influenced by this court conflict: he uses the expression "people as root" in a negative and cynical manner, alerting the emperor to the possible danger posed by the people—the grassroots of the

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28. Qian Mu 1978: 174-175.

29. The economic reason was that in the areas controlled by the court, much of the tax income went to holders of fiefs. Both Jia Yi and Chao Cuo (d. 154 BCE) note this problem. On this topic see Lewis 1999: 340-342. For Chao Cuo biography, see *Shiji* 101; *Hanshu* 49.

30. For Wendi's biography, see *Shiji* 10. On the "coup d'État," see *Shiji* 9: 399-411.

31. On the construction of the stereotype of Empress Lü as a cruel usurper, see Sabbatini in press. On Empress Lü, see also van Ess 2006 and Schaab-Hanke 1999.

32. *Shiji* 10: 419.

33. The idea of foetus education developed in the *New Writings* deals with this matter. See Sabbatini 2009.

empire—and suggests controlling the masses. Moreover, I believe that the rhetorical formula of *min ben*, which is constantly reiterated in the text, is used to contrast people to scholars and convince the Emperor to “elevate the worthy” from a civil and intellectual point of view. The need to clarify the rules of court competition based on civil meritocracy is urgent: the government cannot be influenced by its grassroots, rather it has to control them in order to prevent any revolts.

In the “Great Command, Part I” and “Great Command, Part II,” the idea of the “people as root” is based on the debates of good government and military success. The overthrow of the Qin was still a vivid memory and for this reason Jia Yi focuses on the vital influence the people have in determining stability or instability of the ruler, also in battle. Indeed, according to Jia Yi, the role of the people and their motivation in times of war are both fundamental in ensuring a stable position for the ruler. The term “people” for Jia Yi becomes part of political phraseology and it carries a distinctly political connotation. Jia Yi offers another interpretation of the “people”: they are an unstable mass to be controlled and kept in order.

In contrast with previous texts underlining the idea of “cherishing the people” (*ai min*) and “benefiting the people” (*li min*), the *New Writings* stress the danger which the people themselves represent: the people are many while the ruler is one man.<sup>34</sup> The formula “people as root” becomes a persuasive definition used by Jia Yi with the purpose of changing the direction of the emperor’s interest from the people-oriented policy to the ruler-oriented one. Therefore, in the *New Writings* the term “people” addresses *emotive* impact.

## Domesticating the people

According to the traditional reading of the “people as root” concept, the key to genuine leadership is the manifestation of virtues that benefit the people. The origins of the notion of good government deriving from “people as root,” normally first associated with the *Commentary of Zuo*,<sup>35</sup> is usually related to the philosophy of Confucius (Kongzi, 551-479 BCE) and Mengzi. The idea of the people as the root, or foundation, of political stability is also related to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*), an idea probably generated in Zhou times to justify their overthrow of the Shang, but later acritically applied to any historical period in China. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that the idea that popular rebellion is justified in terms of Heaven’s Mandate is of

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34. This concern is also part of Han Feizi’s reflection. See Han Feizi 16.5a. Cf. Creel 1974.

35. Liu Jiahe 1995 and Zheng Junhua 1983.

marginal relevance during the Qin and early Han period.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Jia Yi clearly states that the fall of the reign is the consequence of the ruler's faults and does not depend on Heaven's Writ.

Contrary to the common interpretation of the "people as root," in *Envisioning Eternal Empire. Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era*, Yuri Pines shows that the idea of the people as the most important component of the polity is not exclusive to Mengzi, but reflects a common thread found throughout Zhou-period thinkers.<sup>37</sup> Pines writes that the belief in the exceptional political importance of "the people" is traceable to the earliest layers of the Chinese political tradition.<sup>38</sup> To guarantee political and social stability, the ruler has to protect the people (*bao min*) and benefit them, which amounts to cherishing the root of the state.

Jia Yi was probably the first to develop the Chinese expression *min ben* in a systematic manner in his *New Writings*, where the notion of the "people as root" is clearly developed in the chapters "Great Command, Part I" and "Great Command, Part II." Scholarly interpretation generally considers the notion developed in this text in the light of Mengzi's thought. For instance, Wang Xingguo links Jia Yi's idea of *min ben* to Mengzi's notion of "government by benevolence" (*ren zheng*).<sup>39</sup> From a first reading of the *New Writings*, we might catch a glimpse of this connection:

Among virtues, nothing is higher than universally cherishing the people, and in policy nothing is higher than universally benefiting the people. Therefore, in policy nothing is more important than truthfulness, and in governing nothing is more important than benevolence.<sup>40</sup>

However, when we pick over Jia Yi's thought, this statement responds more to a rhetorical use of social virtue rather than to a real people-oriented idea. Virtues become techniques for governing the masses, because they are acceptable moral precepts which function as means of persuasion. This approach to virtues is

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36. See Pines 2009: 217. See also Loewe 1994: 85-111.

37. Pines 2009: 187-197. Cf. Ames 1994: 154-164.

38. Pines 2009: 189.

39. Wang Xingguo 1992: 141-143. See also Cai Tingji 1984: 141-143. The expression *ren zheng* finds ten matches in the entire *Mengzi* and it is well developed. On the contrary, it never occurs in the *New Writings*. As for the term *min* (people) in the *Mengzi*, Gassman considers that the translation "people," while it might work for the Han period, is too vague and inaccurate for the Eastern Zhou period. In the kinship-based social organization, *min* could not designate the ruling clan but only other clans and their members.

40. *Jiazi*, "Talks on Political Reforms, Part I" ("Xiu zheng yu shang 修政語上"): 1044.

much closer to statesmen like Shang Yang and Han Feizi than to classicists like Mengzi. For instance, Han Feizi, who follows Shang Yang, states that “Profit is what [the sage] uses for winning over the people.”<sup>41</sup>

Even so, according to Wang Xingguo’s analysis of Jia Yi’s *min ben*, the power of the people stems from their weight of numbers and position as the basis of material production.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Jia Yi never argues that the ruler’s authority comes from the people.<sup>43</sup> To rule with benevolence is a tool used by the ruler in order to prevent uprisings from the base of the state. On the contrary, according to Mengzi, “benevolence is the distinguished characteristic of man” (*ren ye zhe ren ye*)<sup>44</sup> and practice of a benevolent government is the key to making people happy:

When the ruler practices a benevolent government, the people will feel related to their superiors and will die for their leaders.<sup>45</sup>

Mengzi’s notion of “ruling by benevolence” is expressed throughout his text. Moreover he says that “the people are most important; the altars of soil and grain come next; the ruler is the least,”<sup>46</sup> meaning that while the people will exist eternally, the ruler is replaceable. For this reason, the ruler needs to win the people’s support in order to keep his position stable. How to gain the trust of the people? Mengzi is very clear and claims that the ruler has to “attain the people’s heart”:

Jie and Zhou [xin] lost the throne through losing the people. To lose the people means to lose their hearts. There is a way to attain the throne: if you attain the people, you attain the throne. There is a way to attain the people: if you attain their hearts, you attain the people. There is a way to attain the people’s hearts: collect for them what they desire and do not do what they despise. The people turn to benevolence as water flows downwards or as animals head for the wilds.<sup>47</sup>

According to Mengzi, the way to keep the throne safe is to “attain the people’s heart”: if the ruler cherishes the people and satisfies their desires, there is no way the people will be disloyal to him. If they are loyal, the ruler can use them. In Mengzi’s view, being benevolent to the people is the key to keeping the political

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41. 夫利者所以得民也。 *Han Feizi*, “Dishonest Officials” (“Gui shi 詭使”).

42. Wang Xingguo 1992: 124-126. Cf. Sanft 2005a: 35.

43. Sanft 2005a: 36.

44. 仁也者人也。 *Mengzi* 7B.

45. *Mengzi* 1B.

46. 民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕。 *Mengzi* 7B.

47. *Mengzi* 4A.

power.<sup>48</sup> Mengzi persuades his audience to respect the people's needs in order to keep them loyal. In his political phraseology, the relationship between the ruler and the people is encouraging and positive. Nevertheless, the idea of "cherishing the people" and recognising their merits rather than using punishments to keep the position of the ruler stable is not a prerogative of Confucius<sup>49</sup> or Mengzi. Also Mozi (ca 460–390 BCE) is clearly against the pedigree-based order, and in his writings urges for meritocratic principles for choosing the leaders. Mozi shares the idea both of "cherishing the people" and the one of the ruler's influence over them. In Mozi's political theory, the idea of "inclusive care" (*jian ai*),<sup>50</sup> usually opposed to the "Confucian" view of hierarchical love that begins with one's relatives, is the basis of good government. Disorder in society is caused by egoism; only caring for each other can recover the state. To care for others is thus the cure, and the good ruler, who is benevolent and right, has to set the example.

The ideas of "cherishing the people" and "benefiting the people" are also found in the *New Writings*, but they become a technique the emperor can use to motivate the people and then govern them. Jia Yi's idea of the "people"<sup>51</sup> is not a positive one: the people are the "unstable" foundations of the state.<sup>52</sup> In his political thought, the theme of giving importance to the welfare of the people has a political motivation: manipulating the human propensity for self-interest.<sup>53</sup> Let us consider how Jia Yi describes the people:

"People" as a term means "blur." "Seed" as a term means "blind." [...] Therefore I say that "people are seeds." The meaning immediately follows from the name. People have talents making them either competent or inept. Both the competent and the inept are present among them. Thus, you get competent people among them, but the inept are [also] hidden among them. The ability to perform a job will be

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48. *Mengzi* 7A.

49. According to *Lunyu* 2.3. Confucius said: "If the people are led by laws, and the order sought is given to them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, and have no sense of shame. If they are led by moral virtue, and the order sought is given to them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good." 子曰：「道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥；道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。」

50. *Jian ai* is variously translated as "universal love," "impartial caring," "inclusive care." On this topic, see Defoort 2007.

51. In early Han dynasty, the "people" (*min*) generally identified four groups: scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants. See Ch'ü T'ung-tsu 1972: 101. Jia Yi refers to the "people" designating those commoners who were not scholars. This is shown by many instances where Jia Yi refers to the *shi min* (scholars and people). See also Sanft 2005a: 29.

52. See Sanft 2005a: 28-91.

53. This idea is similar to the thought of Shang Yang and Han Feizi.

assessed by the people, and loyal ministers will be exemplary to them. The people are an accumulation of foolishness. So, although the people are foolish, wise rulers select officials among them, and they necessarily make the people follow them.<sup>54</sup>

By redefining the crucial term “people,” Jia Yi warns the emperor to beware of the masses. The importance of fear as a political emotion is clearly expressed in his thinking: “the people are a blur” and they are an “accumulation of foolishness.”<sup>55</sup> Jia Yi does not use positive terms to describe the “people”: they are a sort of shapeless entity that comprises both the wise and the wicked. His purpose in referring to the people in these negative terms is to alert the emperor to the instability of the “people”: they are unworthy and unreliable, and must be ordered and controlled. The emotive stress on fear reiterated in these paragraphs aims at warning the audience about the potential danger the people represent. Jia Yi’s language of wariness and fear, which aims to stress the ruler’s political responsibilities, is much closer to Han Feizi’s and other statesmen rather than “Confucian” benevolence. According to Jia Yi, people are like dogs: “cherishing the people” means taming them.

Therefore I say that punishments cannot be a means of endearing the people and indifference cannot be a means of courting good advisers. For this reason, attempting to endear the people by means of punishments is like trying to domesticate a dog by means of a whip: even after a long time, you will not get close to it. Attempting to court good advisers by means of indifference is like attracting a bird by means of a bow: even after a long time, you will not catch it. As for advisers, if the [ruler] does not respect them, then he will not attract them to him. As for the people, if the [ruler] does not cherish them, then they will not honour him. Thus it is only with respect and deference, loyalty and trustworthiness that you can obtain good advisors and expect the people to honour you. This has not changed from ancient times to the present. Just as swamps have water,<sup>56</sup> states cannot be without soldiers. But if the ruler is unskilled in seeking soldiers, there is no way that soldiers can be obtained. If officials have no ability to control the people, there is no way that the people can be controlled. When the ruler is wise, officials are talented; when officials are talented, people are controlled.<sup>57</sup>

In the passage quoted above, using punishment to endear the people is compared to inability in finding retainers.<sup>58</sup> The people are like dogs: they must be domesticated. Punishing the people is like taking a whip to a dog. This is not

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54. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part II”: 1011-1013.

55. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part II”: 1011.

56. Emending *shui* 水 for *mu* 木. See *Jiazi*: 1005 (fn: 5).

57. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part II”: 1003.

58. On Jia Yi and punishments, see Sanft 2005b; Sanft 2005c.

the right way to control them, because sooner or later they will rebel against it. In order to control the masses, which are an accumulation of foolishness, the emperor has to cherish them while officials have to control them. Similarly, indifference towards good retainers is not the proper way to keep them loyal.<sup>59</sup>

The Han were born from the remains of the Qin dynasty whose debacle was brought about by the rebellion of the commoners, and Jia Yi wants to prevent such situations and his ideas about people are close to Xunzi's. The chapter "On the Regulations of a King" (*Wang zhi*) of the *Xunzi* contains the well-known observation:

If a horse is frightened by the carriage, then the superior man cannot ride safely; if the common people are frightened by the government, then the superior man cannot safely occupy his ruling position. If the horse is frightened of the carriage, the best thing to do is to quiet it; if the common people are frightened of the government, the best thing to do is to treat them with generosity. Select men who are worthy and good for government office, promote those who are kind and respectful, encourage filial piety and fraternity, look after orphans and widows and assist the poor, and then the common people will feel safe, then the superior man may safely occupy his position [as ruler]. The tradition says: "The lord is the boat; the commoners are the water. Water supports the boat and water overturns the boat." This explains my meaning. Therefore, if one who rules over people desires stability, there is no alternative to governing wisely and cherishing the people.<sup>60</sup>

According to Xunzi, "cherishing the people" is an instrument for government, not its purpose. Quoting a traditional saying, Xunzi is keen to highlight that the power of the people can overthrow the ruler: in terms of power given by numbers, it is an unequal match. Moreover, the use of the term "commoners" (*shu*) emphasises the sheer mass of ordinary people compared with the single

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59. In this regard, several passages of Jia Yi's *Xin shu* take as their example Yu Rang, who sought revenge against Xiangzi, the killer of his sovereign Zhi Bo. Yu Rang becomes the model of the loyal retainer: he served other rulers first, but his talent and loyalty were not recognised. In contrast, Zhi Bo displayed great respect and support for him. In the *Xin shu*, Yu Rang is mentioned in the following chapters: "Jie ji" 階級 ("Levels and grades"), "Huai nan" 淮難 ("Huai is difficult"), "Yu cheng" 諭誠 ("Explaining earnest"). Yu Rang is a well-known example in Chinese texts. His story is mentioned in the *Intrigues of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策), *Han Feizi, Record of the Grand Historian, The Springs and Autumns of Mr Lü* (*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋), *The Garden of Persuasion* (*Shui yuan* 說苑), *The Master of Huainan* (*Huainanzi* 淮南子), *The Balanced Inquiries* (*Lun heng* 論衡). On the story of getting *shi* (retainers), see Pines 2002: 35-74.

60. *Xunzi* 9: 152-153. The translation is by Watson and Sato, with my corrections. See Watson 1963: 36-37; Sato 2003: 261-262.

sovereign. The might of many is stronger than the resolve of few. This hardly seems a vision of ungrudging co-operation and appears rather to strike a note of warning. While on one hand Xunzi agrees with Mengzi on governing by cherishing and caring for the people, on the other he reveals mainly the potential danger posed by people. Enriching the people and governing them by exercising a benevolent policy is the key to keeping power:

If a ruler reduces land taxes on fields for both agricultural products and natural resources, establishes a standardised tariff to be imposed on those crossing the border and selling commodities in the market places, reduces the number of merchants and traders, refrains from moving his subjects to [heavy construction works] and from robbing the peasants of agricultural labour in their busy seasons, his country will become rich. This may indeed be called “enriching the people through the exercising of a policy.”<sup>61</sup>

Xunzi’s argumentation warns the ruler of the danger of the people’s discontent: rebellion and destruction can be the natural response to a government based on tyranny. Xunzi’s reflection on the potential danger of a massive number of people is prophetic of the rebellions that led to the downfall of the Qin dynasty. A few years later, Jia Yi recognises the power of the people and shares not only Xunzi’s insight, but also the idea of Han Feizi, old student of Xunzi, of using the people for the ruler’s interests. I think that the sentiments of Jia Yi cannot be considered pro-people. His rhetoric and political phraseology apparently belong to the discussion of people-oriented thought and share the concern of mass poverty. However, his political thought is more ruler-oriented. “Cherishing the people” is an instrument in the hands of the ruler. Jia Yi uses moral principles for manipulating the natural human devotion to self-interest in referring to the idea of protecting and loving the people from a “Confucian-Mohist” point of view. This opportunistic resort to moral values suggests the “emotive force” of the people-oriented discourse. In this sense, we can see injections of the thinking of Shang Yang: the people need to be ruled in order to avoid anarchy and violence. Harsh laws are necessary to attain political and social stability.<sup>62</sup> Shang Yang says that if the basis is not solid, people are like beasts and the basis of the people is the law.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Jia Yi states that: “benevolence, duty, affection, and magnanimity are the blades of the lord of men. Power, force, law,

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61. *Xunzi* 10: 179. The translation is by Watson and Sato, with my own minor corrections. Watson 1963: 38; Sato 2003: 264.

62. On Shang Yang’s people-oriented influence, see Pines 2009: 201-203.

63. 本不堅，則民如飛鳥走獸 (...) 民本，法也。 *Shang jun shu* (*The Book of Lord Shang*), “Policies” (“Hua ce” 畫策).

and regulations are the adze and axe of the lord of men.”<sup>64</sup> “Confucian” virtues are just techniques to maintain power not only for the emperor, but indirectly also for those scholars who are employed at court. Understanding the needs of the people is a mere political instrument.

### The people as root

According to Jia Yi, although the people are a “blur,”<sup>65</sup> there are some who are wise. The task of the enlightened ruler is to select those who are wise and promote them as officials and ministers so they act as intermediaries between the people and the emperor. To have political support, the emperor should select those who are praised by the people so even the incompetents will trust them, because they feel them to be close. The idea to search for officials among the people and promote them is not novel in Chinese political thought and it is not peculiar of classicists: on the contrary many thinkers from the Warring States period share the awareness of finding competent assistants.

According to Jia Yi, the “people” are a shapeless entity, nevertheless officials should be selected according to the people’s wishes in order to govern them. This idea is close to the one of “utilize the masses” (*yong zhong*), which allows the ruler to marshal the physical and intellectual resource of the state in order to maintain stability. As a result of doing so, the ruler acquires power and vision, essential for leading the country.

Extremely vile though the people are, yet you have to allow them to choose officials from amongst themselves, and they will certainly choose those whom they love. Therefore, if ten people cherish and hold allegiance to [someone], then he is the official for those ten people. If one hundred people cherish and hold allegiance to [someone], then he is the official for one hundred people. If a thousand people cherish and hold allegiance to [someone], then he is the official for a thousand people. If ten thousand cherish and hold allegiance to [someone], then he is the official for ten thousand. Then the officials for ten thousand select high ministers from their number.<sup>66</sup>

Jia Yi explains that the people, with all their limitations, are many in number and the emperor has no choice but to choose his officials from among them,

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64. 仁義恩厚者，此人主之芒刃也。權勢法制，此人主之斤斧也。Jiazi, “On the Faults of Qin” (“Guo Qin lun” 過秦論): 213-214. On this paragraph see also Sanft 2005a: 36-37.

65. Jiazi, “Great Command, Part II”: 1011.

66. Jiazi, “Great Command, Part II”: 1013. This text is reproduced almost *verbatim* in the forged *Yuzi* 鬻子.

selecting those who are put forward by the people themselves. The argument remains within the discourse of grasping the people’s sentiments and not of activism from below. Jia Yi persuades the audience to listen to the people and not to dissatisfy them in order to receive their loyalty as a response. He does not promulgate nor hope for activism from below, but expresses the importance of selecting officials loved by the people to make them feel secure and, in turn, control them. The people are numerous and the emperor’s task is to make them feel secure, thus there is clearly recognition of the potential of the masses to subvert the empire. The people do not have political authority, but they are far more numerous than the ruler’s aides and thus more effective in case of rebellion. Using the many, however is a great treasure for the ruler. Since the stability of the state is ultimately dependent upon the will of the people, the good ruler has to win over the people and rely upon their support.<sup>67</sup>

In the “Great Command, Part I,” Jia Yi reiterates that in government the people are the root of everything:

I heard that in political affairs the people are the root of everything. The state views them as a root; the ruler views them as a root; officials view them as a root. For this reason, the state takes the people as the [root] of being secure or endangered; the ruler takes the people as [the root] of awe or humiliation; officials takes the people as [the root] of being noble or base. This is what is meant by “The people are the root of everything.”

I heard that in political affairs, there is no case where the people do not function as the determinant. The state views them as the determinant; the ruler views them as the determinant; the officials view them as the determinant. For this reason, the state’s preservation or ruin depends on the people; the ruler’s blindness or clear-sightedness depend on the people; the officials’ worthiness or ineptitude depend on the people. This is what is meant by “There is no case where the people are not the determinant.”

I heard that in political affairs, there is no case where the people do not function as the achievement. Similarly, the state views the people as the achievement; the ruler views the people as the achievement; the officials view the people as the achievement. The state’s prosperity or destruction depends on the people; ruler’s strength or weakness depends on the people; officials’ ability or the lack thereof depend on the people. This is what is meant by “There is no case where the people do not function as the achievement.”

I heard that in political affairs, there is no case where the people do not function as the strength. Thus, the state views [the people] as the strength; the ruler views the people as the strength; the officials view the people as the strength. For this reason,

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67. This approach is very similar with the one of the *Spring and Autumn of Mr Lü*, see for instance 4/9b. Cf. Ames 1994: 142-143.

victory in a battle depends on the people's desire for the victory. The success of the attack depends on the people's desire for success. The ruler's safety depends on the people's desire for his safety. If this is the case, when you lead the people in a defensive action, but the people do not wish to defend, then nobody will be able to use [them] in the defence. Similarly, if you lead the people in an attack, but this is not the people's wish, then nobody will be able to use [them] in the attack. Therefore, if you lead the people in battle, but the people do not intend to succeed, then nobody will be able to use [them] for the victory.<sup>68</sup>

In this long passage quoted above, Jia Yi persuades the audience of the importance of the people's will. By repetition of terms, symmetrical lines and definition, Jia Yi aims to release the emotional force of words. In Jia Yi's rhetorical sequence, the justification for the argument precedes it: people are described in terms of root (*ben*), determinant (*ming*), achievement (*gong*), and strength (*li*). Definitions occur throughout the passage and the last instance constitutes the conclusion<sup>69</sup>; the text starts from the people as "root" and ends with the people as "strength." The final emphasis on strength focuses on the vital role of the people during a war. The success of the battle, the safety of ruler and state, all hinge on the people's motivation. Jia Yi persuades the emperor of the importance of the people's role with a series of symmetrical sentences focused on the origins of the people's strength. The outcome if the people show determination in defence of their sovereign and the state is described a step at a time. This is the full meaning of the people as the root, the determinant, the achievement, and the strength of the state, the ruler and his officials. There is no way to succeed in war unless the people share in the effort. The people are the root of the state because success in war and the safety of the ruler depend on them: the people's motivation is crucial. Political power and stability are dependent upon the multitude.

The ambivalence represented by the people mitigates and combines the idea of the people as a danger—coming from political ideas of statesmen like Han Feizi—with that of the people as foundation of the state—inherited from classicists like Mengzi. Again, Jia Yi underlines that the people have to be motivated to defend the country, only then the ruler will retain power – an apt precept considering that the Han dynasty was freshly established and owed its position to military victory.<sup>70</sup> The political landscape had changed and power was centred on the ruler. The people's role in support of this central authority

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68. *Jiazi*, "Great Command, Part II": 981-983.

69. On the central position of redefinitions, especially in *The Pheasant Cap Master*, see Defoort 1997: 145-147.

70. See also Sanft 2006: 36.

and the bond they felt with the emperor were fundamental. Jia Yi concludes this argument as follows:

Therefore, when people support their superiors, [in battle] they willingly move closer to the enemy and advance without flinching; the enemy will certainly fear [them] and from this point onward the battle will be won. For this reason, calamity and good fortune [in war] do not depend on Heaven; they necessarily depend on the soldiers and the people. Take heed, take heed! The people’s will is crucial. Take heed, take heed!<sup>71</sup>

In this paragraph, Jia Yi distances himself from the concept of Heaven’s Mandate: success or defeat in battle do not hang on Heaven’s blessing or curse, but on the people themselves. According to Jia Yi, the ruler himself is responsible for the people’s lack of motivation. It is vital for him to have the right attitude towards the people:

If your virtuous conduct is excellent, you will have good fortune; if your conduct is morally bad, you will have misfortune. Therefore, it is not thanks to merits from Heaven that one receives good fortune; likewise, those who suffer calamities should not blame Heaven. Good fortune and misfortune depend on one’s own actions. Knowing virtuous conduct but not following it is “unwise.” You will certainly court natural disaster, if you indulge in morally bad conduct and do not change it. Heaven’s blessings are constant and are bestowed on people who are virtuous; Heaven’s calamities are constant and are bestowed on those who rob the people of their seasons. Therefore, however base these people may be, they cannot be disregarded; however stupid these people may be, they cannot be cheated. For this reason, from antiquity to the present, [in battle] the one who becomes a mortal enemy of the people, sooner or later the people will surely overcome him.<sup>72</sup>

Jia Yi admonishes the emperor saying that fortune and misfortune do not come from heaven, but they are the natural response to good and bad conduct respectively. Regardless how dull-witted they are, the people respond to their sovereign’s good or bad conduct. If the state enjoys good fortune, the people are happy; on the other hand, when misfortune strikes, the masses may rebel and in such cases they will always be victorious. Again, that is to say, in benefiting his people the ruler is benefiting himself. This idea is not novel, however Jia Yi emphasises the unreliability of the people in order to insist on the importance of fear as a political emotion. The power of the people in terms of strength is a political emotion that aims at convincing the emperor to motivate and to fear the masses and attain their loyalty. From this point of view, the people have power:

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71. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part I”: 982-984.

72. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part I”: 984-987.

Thus the people are plenty in strength and should not be resisted.<sup>73</sup>

[...]

When the ruler is virtuous, the officials will also certainly be virtuous. When officials are virtuous, the people will also certainly be virtuous. For the same reason, it is the fault of the officials when people are morally bad; and it is the ruler's weakness that causes officials to be immoral. Take heed, take heed!

[...]

When the ruler is morally good in this respect, then the people have no difficulty in being morally good, they are just like the shape and the image of his shadow. If the ruler is morally bad with the people, he simply destroys the agreement. If the people are all bad with him, they are just like the sound of his echoes.<sup>74</sup>

The masses respond like echoes to the ruler's decisions and behaviour: if they do not respect the moral laws, one has only to check the ruler's attitude. Again the rhetorical techniques of repetition and fluid definition recur to guide the reader to the final step in the reasoning: the ruler's moral conduct is the model for his people. This reiteration on moral values is an opportunistic discourse: moral values are a technique for safeguarding political power. Considering moral values as political instruments belongs to the rhetoric and to the strategy of those statesmen like Shang Yang and Han Feizi. For instance Han Feizi states that "the things which [the people] like and dislike are controlled by the ruler. [...] When the ruler manipulates the people's likes and dislikes in order to command their strength, there is no reason for him to fail in his undertakings."<sup>75</sup> The appeal for virtue is a technique in the hands of the ruler.

The redefinition of the notion of the "people as root" plays on the emotive meaning of the term "people." According to the argument developed in the "Great Command, Part I," the people are a formless entity and an "accumulation of foolishness," basically a loose cannon on the ship of the state. Jia Yi develops a paternalistic and elitist argument, but at the same time he is very well aware of the people's power. Jia Yi's strong emphasis on the role of the people stresses the ruler/subject reciprocity. Jia Yi views the people as the "root" of political affairs, focusing on the vital influence they have on the stability of the government and, most importantly, on victory in battle. In ensuring the stable position of the ruler, the role of the people and their motivation are fundamental not only in times of war, but also in times of peace. The people still are an unstable mass to be controlled and kept in order.

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73. *Jiazi*, "Great Command, Part I": 995.

74. *Jiazi*, "Great Command, Part I": 996-997.

75. 而好惡者，上之所制也 [...] 上掌好惡以御民力，事實不宜失矣。 *Han Feizi*, "On Ruling and the Assignment of Responsibilities" (Zhi fen 制分).

The argument of the “people as root” focuses on the techniques used to control and marshal the people to win the battle and secure stable government, with the final point concerning the officials. Jia Yi explains the importance of the people as follows:

The people are the root of regional lords, teaching is the root of policy, moral conduct is the root of teaching. If you have moral conduct, then you have teaching; if you have teaching, then your policy will be ordered; if your policy is ordered, then the people will be diligent; if you have diligent people, then and only then will the state be prosperous and thriving.<sup>76</sup>

Jia Yi’s political rhetoric connects fundamental concepts to set up a sequence from “the people as the root of regional lords” to a “prosperous and thriving state.” However, his justification of controlling the people through moral conduct insinuates the “emotive force” of the idea of the “people as root.” Social virtues aim to use the people’s strength. In a time when the court was dominated by those who had risen to influence through military action, Jia Yi resorted to the use of fear as a political emotion in order to restrain the social mobility of the “people,” the unreliable grassroots support for the government.

## Conclusion

The common interpretation of Jia Yi’s idea of *min ben* in terms of Mengzi’s thought needs more careful analysis. While Mengzi underlines the importance of adopting a policy of magnanimity and munificence towards the people in order to have their support, Jia Yi warns of the potential threat they represent: in his view, the people are basically dangerous. Indulging the people is a way of controlling them; it is instrumental for success in war and the stability of the ruler. For Jia Yi, “cherishing the people” and “benefiting the people” are techniques used by the best of rulers.<sup>77</sup> Jia Yi wants to consolidate imperial power, and this is why he emphasises the need to control the unreliable root of the state. Failure to control on the ground leads to unstable government and the collapse of the dynasty. Jia Yi’s reasoning regarding the “people as the root” of policy is based on persuasion through the redefinition of terms. The ultimate goal is to convince the ruler of the threat the people—the grassroots of the empire—can represent. Jia Yi elaborates different Warring State’s ideas, often contradictory, and accommodate them in order to smooth out the authoritarian

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76. *Jiazi*, “Great Command, Part II”: 1015.

77. See also Sanft 2005a: 37.

and repressive nature of Han institutions, which the Han dynasty was soon to put into practice.

Finally, modern ideas of democracy and human rights are far from the ancient Chinese meaning of “the people as root,” and the importance of the people in the political scenario must be considered in a different way. Such is the emotive content packed into this expression that it is still used for effect today and although it does not apply to true people-oriented politics, it does offer a convenient formula that can be adapted to serve the needs of intellectuals and policies of any period. Even so, while it is true that in modern times the term “people” has usually strongly positive overtones, in Jia Yi’s day it conjured up visions of an uncontrollable rabble, which only a short time before had joined forces and brought down the Qin dynasty. In view of the numbers involved, it is hardly surprising the term was loaded with negative associations.

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## GLOSSARY

ai min 愛民  
ben 本  
Chao Cuo 晁錯  
Chen She 陳涉  
Da zheng shang 大政上  
Da zheng xia 大政下  
fu 賦  
Gaozu 高祖  
gong 功  
guoti 國體  
guozheng 國政  
Han (dynasty) 漢  
Han Feizi 韓非子  
*Hanshu* 漢書  
*He Guanzi* 鶡冠子  
*Huainanzi* 淮南子  
Huang-Lao 黃老  
Jia Yi 賈誼  
*Jiazi* 賈子  
Kongzi 孔子  
jian ai 兼愛  
li 力  
li min 利民  
Liu Bang 劉邦  
Lü (Empress) 呂  
*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋  
lun 論  
Lun heng 論衡  
Mawangdui 馬王堆  
Mengzi 孟子  
min 民  
min ben 民本  
minben sixiang 民本思想  
minben zhuyi 民本主義  
ming 命  
minquan 民權  
minzhu 民主

“People as Root” (*min ben*) Rhetoric in the *New Writings* by Jia Yi (200-168)

Mozi 墨子  
Qin (dynasty) 秦  
Qing (dynasty) 清  
renquan 人權  
ren zheng 仁政  
ru 儒  
Shang (dynasty) 商  
*Shang jun shu* 商君書  
shang xian 上賢  
Shang Yang 商鞅  
Shen Buhai 申不害  
shi 士  
shi 詩  
shibao 時報  
*Shiji* 史記  
shi min 士民  
Shu 書  
shu 庶  
*Shui yuan* 說苑  
taijiao 胎教  
tian ming 天命  
wangzhi 王制  
Wen (Emperor) 文  
*Wenzi* 文子  
Xiangzi 襄子  
*Xin shu* 新書  
Xunzi 荀子  
yong zhong 用眾  
Yu Rang 豫讓  
Yuzi 鬻子  
Zhanguo ce 戰國策  
Zhi Bo 知伯  
Zhou (dynasty) 周  
zhu 主  
*Zuo zhuan* 左傳

