

Yielding to the Worthy: The Chinese Abdication Myth as Discourse on Hereditary vs.
Merit-based Leadership

by

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Merit-based Leadership
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the function of the Chinese abdication mythology at three distinct periods of Chinese history. It argues that the abdication myth never truly disappeared even after the book purge of the Qin dynasty. Rather the ideas became engrained in Chinese identity and ideology, manifesting themselves in political rhetoric throughout history.

Forward

Valerie Waksmunski-Starr died on June 29, 2015 after a heroic battle with cancer. She was a dedicated student who worked tirelessly on this material. Her health prevented her from being able to revise her final thesis. This work is a draft of her thesis. Her last chapter submission was in April of 2015.

Here is a copy of Valerie's obituary published in the Columbus Dispatch:

Valerie Waksmunski Starr, November 26, 1986(b) - June 29, 2015(d). Artist, writer, historian. Lover of cats, octopodes, folklore, karaoke, China, Poland, and pineapple. Lovingly remembered by her husband, parents, brothers, friends, and quite a few cats. ¹

Helene J. Sinnreich, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor

¹<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dispatch/obituary.aspx?pid=175223783#sthash.7Aj4tcBi.dpuf>

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Introduction

In ancient China several reoccurring themes emerged in scholarly texts that were aimed toward documentation or debate. One persistent theme is the ideology of China's abdication mythology. Although the book purge of the Qin dynasty destroyed many of the original texts, the abdication myth never truly disappeared. The ideas are engrained in Chinese identity and ideology, manifesting themselves in political rhetoric throughout history. This study serves to prove that the abdication myth is an important element of Chinese identity, on par with the Mandate of Heaven. The abdication myth was such a threat to alternate political themes that it was actively suppressed via purges and historical revisionism. Persistent destruction of the abdication myth texts serve as evidence of its threat to hereditary transmission and dynastic authority and culture.

The only surviving texts known to date were buried in tombs before the Qin purge, and unearthed in the late 20th century. The first known recordings of the myth date back to the 8th century B.C.E. The topic reemerged in scholarly debate throughout the Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn) and Zhanguo (Warring States) periods. Political elites manipulated Chinese history via the abdication legend, either to maintain power over the Chinese people or to assist in subversive acts towards one another in a struggle for control. Even after the written record was suppressed, this manipulation continued

By exploring the function of the abdication mythology at three distinct periods in Chinese history, this thesis will prove that the myth served as a powerful tool for political rhetoric.

In the chapter of his *Shiji* (, *The Grand Scribe's Records*) titled "The Duke of Shao, [Lord of] (Yan), Hereditary House 4," Han Historian Sima Qian (司马迁, c. 145-90 B.C.E.) sets out to record the genealogy of the house of Duke Shi (奭), who gained leadership over the Yan state (燕) for himself and his lineage. While most of content of this chapter is a dry, extensive account of the multiple successions of his descendants over the following 800 years, the overarching structure reads like a fable or a morality tale. Buried at the center of the narrative is Sima Qian's account of Yan King Kuai's (王哱) abdication to his minister Zizhi (子之) in 314 B.C.E. At the end of the genealogical record, the Grand Historian concludes with a poem he composed, which contains the ultimate moral of the story: "Only with the abdication of King (Kuai) of (Yan), was there catastrophe and chaos [in (Yan)]."¹ Sima Qian's narrative is interspersed with a number of factual inaccuracies, many of which contradict his own historical accounts in other chapters of the *Shiji*, or the historical record of other documents and objects. While on first glance they may seem like casual errors, the changes Sima Qian makes to the historical record appear to reinforce the fictional quality of his narrative, and speak to the overarching theme of stability through hereditary succession.

This paper proposes to examine the mythological allusions in the Grand Historian's account. What truths do patterns in the factual inaccuracies, as well as the overarching structure, reveal? Why did Sima Qian construct this genealogy to sound like

¹ Ssu-ma Ch-ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records: Volume 5.1: The Hereditary Houses of Pre-Han China, Part I: Hereditary Houses of Pre-Han China v. 5, Pt. 1*, edited by William H. Nienhauser (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 185.

morality play? The construction and allegory speak to the promulgation of the Abdication Legend, refuting its relevance in contemporary society. Relating the matter to modern context, in early 2013 the Chinese Communist Party-run journal *Qiushi* (求是) published an article on the history of China since 1840. In this article, the author made claims that China has perfected a system of government which follows the same ideals of the abdication legend.² Given the context of Confucian rejection of the myth as reflected in the writings of Sima Qian and other scholars, what does it mean for the CCP to invoke the application of the abdication myth? It appears to be a rejection of traditional dynastic values, and a claim that the government will return to the idealistic pre-Confucian standard. Keeping these questions and observations in mind, this paper will explore the use of ritual, myth, and identity as means to retroactively justify events to line up with national standards of morality and consequence.

There are two lines of modern scholarship relevant to this topic. The first is a regarding those texts leading up through the Warring States Era, during what A.C. Graham describes as the classical age of Chinese philosophy, between 500 and 200 B.C.E. Graham's *Disputers of the Tao* is a foundational that looks at the processes of Chinese philosophers and the debate between rival schools. Another prominent work on the topic is *The Heir and the Sage* by Sarah Allan. In the book Allan examines the lack of traditional supernatural mythology in ancient Chinese literature. She uses a structuralist method to analyze historical records of ancient Chinese texts of the fifth to first centuries

² Song Luzheng, "只有去中国才能看到未来—中国正迎来自信时代," *Qiushi*, January 5, 2013. http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201309/201304/t20130426_226224.htm. Also available in print in *Qiushi*, Issue 2013/09.

B.C.E. Allan concludes that “these accounts are structures (and) serve, like myth to mediate an inherent social conflict—a conflict between the interests of kinship and those of community.”³ *Intrigues: Studies of the Chan-kuo Ts’u* by J.I. Crump, Jr. focuses on *Zhanguo ce* (戰國策, Intrigues of the Warring States Era). Crump looks at the non-fiction texts as “examples of superior Chinese prose,” and compares bits of texts to examine them “for internal evidence of their writers’ habits of mind.”⁴ Like the other texts which perpetuated the abdication myth, the *Zhanguo ce* was rejected by Confucian scholars for its differences in values from standard Confucian morality. Crump stands on the argument that the text is “not history, nor even willfully distorted history, but fiction of a particular class which (he calls) ‘persuasion.’”⁵

The second discussion regards the writings and motivations of scholars after the classical period. Allan believes that the structures of these later works are more difficult to interpret, because Confucianism became the universal orthodox court philosophy, which was “never again debated ... with such intensity and variety of viewpoint,” than it was before the Han dynasty.⁶ In *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian’s Conquest of History*, Grant Hardy discusses the *Shiji* in its entirety, through the lens of literary analysis. Hardy believes that in the *Shiji*, Sima Qian created a microcosm of multiple contradictory voices, as a means of protesting imperial figures of power. Hardy attributes

³ Allan, *The Heir and the Sage*, ix-x.

⁴ Crump, *Intrigues*, vii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶ Allan, 143.

the inconsistencies of Sima Qian's writing to a teaching tool, because they carry indeterminate meanings. He cannot make a decision on whether or not Sima Qian's records were deliberate manipulations of fact, however; he concludes both that the *Shiji* "is not a representation of a personal reconstruction of the past," and that the recurring themes in Sima Qian's model of the world are an indication that "things happen in the *Shiji*...for specific reasons."⁷ Stephen W. Durrant for the most part disregards Sima Qian's inconsistencies in his analysis of the text in *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian*. Instead he focuses on the author's Confucian-inspired motives. Durrant provides a psychological analysis of Sima Qian; he theorizes that Sima Qian wrote the histories because he was frustrated by perceived pressure from spiritual mentors Confucius and Sima Tan (Qian's father) to complete the history. Durrant also compares the *Shiji* to the *Zhanguo ce*. He states that Sima Qian used ahistorical stories from the *Zhanguo ce* in his historical narrative in order to achieve the goal of Confucius, and "correct" elements of history to align them with a Confucian standard.

Given the limitations that Allan describes, the current scholarship regards pre-Han texts for their literary merit, but still views subsequent works through the lens of historical fact. This thesis attempts to continue Allan's mythological analysis into the later eras of the Zhanguo and the Han dynasty through Sima Qian's account of King Kuai's abdication. However, rather than examining Sima Qian's writing for influences of intense scholarly debate on the rhetoric, it follows Durrant's analysis of Sima Qian's

⁷ Hardy, 61. Hardy, 87.

intentions, and focuses on the ways that the creation of a new Confucian myth reinforced the synthesis of state ideology. In *The Everlasting Empire*, Yuri Pines attributes the long-lasting success of the Chinese empire to its exceptional ideological prowess. Keeping that in mind, this thesis examines the structural elements of the legend of dynastic transmission that Sima Qian created within the historical record, and applies methods of mythological analysis to the history constructed by Sima Qian. In contrast with the *Zhanguo ce*, Sima Qian's *Shiji* is first and foremost a history, albeit a distorted one. Rather than attempt to separate fact from fiction, this work will look at how history becomes fiction, and what meanings that transformation carries with it.

The methodological approach on this topic draws inspiration from three sources. The first is Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. In the chapter from which the title was drawn, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," Darnton looks at an account of a bizarre and gruesome event in 18th century France, during which a group of apprentice printers slaughtered a number of cats and then held mock trials for them. The apprentices subsequently revisit the event through mimicry, taking great pleasure and hilarity from their actions. Darnton analyzes both the metaphor scattered throughout the text, and the background and motivation of the apprentices. Through this approach, he attempts to get inside the minds of the apprentices to understand why they found the brutal abuse of animals—an action which in modern times draws feelings of repulsion—to be humorous. Darnton believes that the disconnect between this 18th century humor tale and the modern inability to understand the joke indicates a "point of entry" upon which one can

attempt to understand the culture. "By getting the joke of the great cat massacre," he writes, "it may be possible to 'get' a basic ingredient of artisanal culture under the Old Regime."⁸

The second is *Fiction in the Archives* by Natalie Zemon Davis. The author breaks down French remission letters to not just the content, but also their audiences and authors, the authors' motivations and backgrounds, and the elements which influenced the construction of the narratives contained in the letters. Davis explores the role of ritual and festive ties in the narratives, making note of the frequency with which such connections occur in these documents. She observes in the correlation that "the storyteller uses the ritual or festive frame to help excuse and make sense of what has happened. The feast day guides and judges the action; the action exposes some of the dangers and latent conflicts of the feast."⁹

The final source is *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* by Alessandro Portelli. Portelli examines the functions of memory in oral accounts, particularly the way that remembered events are elaborated, changed, and interpreted in memory, and how the distinctive differences between what is remembered and the actual events reflect upon the culture and society of the people who are remembering these events. "The first thing that makes oral history different," he states, "is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning."¹⁰ Portelli believes that the factual inaccuracies of a statement in oral

⁸ Darnton, Robert, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009) 78.

⁹ Davis, Natalie Zemon, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (California: Stanford University Press, 1987) 29-30.

¹⁰ Portelli, Alessandro, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 50.

history carry a broader psychological truth within it, which can just as important (if not more so) as the factual truth.

Keeping in mind the methodologies of Darnton, Davis, and Portelli, this paper will make a material culture analysis of Sima Qian's account of King Kuai's abdication. It will attempt to extract from the document points of allegory and factual inaccuracy in the historical record which allude to deeper motivation and meaning. Furthermore, it will examine the roles of the Abdication Legend and ritual in framing the Yan civil war an invasion by Qi which followed the abdication event. First, this paper will establish a context for the Abdication Legend, and its effects on and perpetuation within the Zhanguo scholarship. Then it will examine Sima Qian's account of Yan genealogy, examining the content of the text, the external context of the time in which Sima Qian was writing, and his background and motivations. It will compare Sima Qian's narrative to other accounts of the event in both documentary and material record, as well as other sections of the *Shiji*. Discrepancies or reinforcement of statements may allude to the approach Sima Qian takes to tailor his account to motivations beyond a simple documentation of historical record. As much of the original history is likely influenced by oral accounts, the way contemporary scholars remember this event can also reveal the overarching attitudes towards the ideals perpetuated in the Abdication Legend. Further analysis of the text in comparison with the legend will seek out the ways in which Sima Qian's document mirrors the rhetoric of mythology, and the fictional qualities with which he constructs a non-fictional narrative.

Finally, this work will conclude by drawing the allusions to the Abdication Legend into a modern context, by examining the re-invocation of the myth by the

Chinese Communist Party in 2013. The author will provide a translation of the CCP article, along with a brief contextual analysis of the author, audience, goals of the document, and the political climate in which the CCP published it. Keeping in mind the context in which remembrance of King Kuai's abdication was used to refute the contemporary relevance of abdication myth and meritocratic-based succession, what does it mean for the modern government to make claims of a return to those ideals? What does it say about the goals and national identity of the CCP, that they assert their acceptance of principles which were previously rejected by Confucian scholars supporting hereditary dynastic rule? By exploring the invocation of the Abdication Legend's meritocracy in a document on modern China's exceptionalism and the contrast with how China's government is actually perceived, one may gain a point of entry into the nationalist identity of CCP leaders.

Chapter 1

Foundations of Kinship, Ancestral Worship, and Ritual in Connection with Succession Patterns

Ritual arises from the affections, but also elevates them. It is tailored in accordance with what is proper for each occasion. As for its prioritizing of first and last, this is the way of propriety. There is that which lends rhythm to this prioritizing, and this is refined patterning.¹

The preceding excerpt from the *Xing Zi Ming Chu* text, one series of Guodian bamboo slips discovered in 1993, emphasizes the importance of ritual in Chinese society. It was designed primarily as a means to demonstrate music as a ritual to manipulate the “heart-minds” of people in order to lead them to proper social behavior and mores. In relation to this study, however, the key point of the text is that it places ritual as the pivotal guide to direct human nature to propriety.

Adherence to ritual and propriety are pervasive themes in scholarly debates on acceptable succession patterns throughout the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Regardless of the opinion of the scholar who penned each text on the subject, each individual framed the question in relation to its adherence to social propriety. Furthermore, when the advisors to King Kuai of Yan convinced the monarch to offer abdication of his throne to his minister Zizhi, it was under the pretense that he would be ritualistically emulating of the ancient sage-kings of legend.

The central focuses of ritual was ancestral worship and filial piety. These practices elevated select deceased individuals above others based on perceived virtuous characteristics. They also framed kinship as the fundamental structure upon which the

¹ *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 18-20, in Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian II*, 714-715.

remainder of society functioned. It is therefore important to trace the origins of these concepts to their Neolithic roots. Understanding the development of kinship, ancestral worship, and ritual in the Neolithic period provides a background for the ideas and values which intermingled when those ancient cultures came together to form the shared identity of what came to be known as the Zhongguo (the Central Kingdom/China). This foundation is crucial in order to explore the deeper context of conflicting narratives crafted by scholars during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States eras, as well as the Han historians who later responded to them.

Yangshao and Longshan Peoples

The major Neolithic cultures that came to form later Chinese identity in the northern region were the Yangshao and Longshan. The Yangshao tribes lived in the Central Plains area between 5000 and 3000 B.C.E. They overlapped slightly with the Longshan tribes, which overtook them and continued to develop cultural identity in the northern and eastern regions up through 2000 B.C.E. Although the Longshan civilization was war-like, known for building defense structures like village walls, scholars believe that it overcame the Yangshao people not through military endeavors but instead through cultural exchange.² Therefore, Yangshao culture did not disappear entirely, but rather folded into the larger body of Longshan culture. Through archaeological examination,

² Harold M. Tanner, *China, A History Volume I: From Neolithic Cultures through the Great Qing Empire*, 25.

modern scholars came to view the Longshan as the cultural descendents of the Yangshao.³

Yangshao people were agriculturalists who supplemented rough farming and animal husbandry practices with foraging and game hunting. Their slash-and-burn agriculture approach made them semi-nomadic. They built villages and lived in them until their resources were depleted, and then moved on. Based on burial sites, archaeologists believe they were primarily egalitarian for the majority of their existence, but showed signs of early class division as time progressed.

Yangshao society centered on clan structure. Objects found in burial sites indicate the practices of shamanism and ritual. Historians and archaeologists speculate that these objects signify some of the earliest traces of ancestor worship in the area.⁴ The evident distinction between individuals that constituted ancestors to be honored and those who did not also reveals that Yangshao people differentiated between the worthy and unworthy. Through the emergence of ancestral reverence, historians can trace the emergence of societal morality in Neolithic China, and its connection to revered individuals.

The exact balance of power structures in the subsequent Longshan society is unknown. However, archaeological evidence indicates that the Longshan people arranged themselves in a variety of communities that may have been rival states. Each state appears to contain a major town surrounded by smaller villages and other smaller

³ Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): 256.

⁴ For further elaboration on this matter, see Li Liu, "Ancestor Worship: An Archaeological Investigation of Ritual Activities in Neolithic North China," *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 2, Issue 1 (2000): 129-164.

settlements. Burial sites show an increase in social stratification, both between individual clans and within them. What is now seen as traditional Confucian hierarchy—elder above younger, male before female—is represented in the graves of the Longshan people. Individuals who were higher up in the social strata had more elaborate graves of larger size. Burial processes expose ancestral worship and kinship as institutional aspects of Longshan society.

Ritual, Succession, and Human Nature

The emergence of ritual as an important element of Chinese society appears to have a connection with the societal importance of hereditary succession. As mentioned above, the *Xing Zi Ming Chu* text is pivotal for modern scholar's understanding of the development of Warring States Era discourse on human nature. It emphasizes the cultivation of proper human nature through practice and education. It also serves as a potential bridge between the abdication model and hereditary succession. The opening strips of the text read:

In general, although all people possess [human] nature, their heart-minds have no fixed inclinations, [which instead] depend upon [external] things to arise, depend upon gratification to take action, and depend upon practices to become fixed. ... [Human] nature comes via mandate, and [this] mandate is sent down from Heaven.⁵

This passage uses the character 命 (ming) to represent the mandate that regulates human nature. Contemporary scholars use this same character to refer to the mandate given to rulers by heaven, which bestows upon them the right to rule. The connection

⁵ *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 1-3, in Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian II*, 700.

between the two reveals that the mandate of heaven was not simply a bequeathal of divine authority separating superiors from the subservient. It was a framework for all of society to follow, by which the very nature of human existence was based. This connection is crucial to the understanding of the fierceness of the arguments during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Era over the legitimacy of abdication-based succession in contemporary times. The foundation of human nature and its perpetuation rested on the means by which authority was passed down between rulers.

What is the Mandate of Heaven?

The Mandate of Heaven is one of the most persistent elements of the Five Classics, and the most well-known remnant from the Zhou dynasty's influence on Chinese culture. The *Shu jing* tells of the first proclamation of the Mandate, which Chinese elites then retroactively applied to leadership throughout the country's history. The Zhou king Wen went to war with the Shang dynasty leaders around 1053 B.C.E., and in 1045 his successor King Wu defeated them. When the Zhou overtook the Shang, they established an innate cultural reasoning for their authority: that it was bestowed upon them by Heaven itself, through an unquestionable Mandate.

In this case, "Heaven" does not refer to a distinct deity akin to Western religion. Rather, it is a concept of natural order inherent in the universe. The world under Heaven's authority changes constantly, but it is governed by an intrinsic set of rules and characteristics which maintain balance and return it to a state of order when chaos erupts. Chinese elites considered the Mandate of Heaven to be immutable by any except Heaven itself. The length of time for leadership was limitless, and the age of a ruler unrestricted.

The stipulation was that the king was to put service to his people as his primary priority.

The *Shu jing* compared kingliness to familial intimacy in its description of advisor Yi

Yin's guidance of Shang king Tai Jia when he took the throne:

All depends on how you commence your reign. To set up love, it is for you to love your relations; to set up respect, it is for you to respect your elders. The commencement is in the family and the state: the consummation is in all within the four seas.⁶

If Heaven was the ancestral creator of all natural order, then the Chinese king was father to all worldly bodies in the physical realm. He was to serve the Chinese citizens as a patriarch, and they in turn were to support him in a display of filial piety and devotion.

Transmission of Heaven's Will

If the mandate of heaven served as the approval of heaven's will, then the original responsibility for translating its instruction for maintaining that approval rested on the ancient sages. *Xing Zi Ming Chu* traces the emergence of ritual patterns to the virtuous individuals who developed them:

The sages compared their types and arranged and assembled them; observed their succession and reordered them into better accord; gave embodiment to their propriety and provided it with regularity and refined pattern; ordered the affections [they expressed by] drawing them out and reimplanting them; and then returned [this all] back [to the people] so as to instruct them. Instruction is that by which one gives rise to virtue within.⁷

In the past, researchers of this text sometimes translated "sages" in this text into the singular form "sage", believing that this was a reference to Confucius. This was a highly debated point of contention, however. The modern school of thought refutes such

⁶ *Shu jing*, in Clae Waltham, editor, *Shu Ching: Book of History: A Modernized Edition of the Translations of James Legge* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1971):75.

⁷ *Xing Zi Ming Chu* 16-18, in Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian II*, 712.

an attribution.⁸ Rather, the author appears to refer to the virtuous predecessors of contemporary society. Based on the context of the text, this study theorizes that “sages” in this case refers to one of the legendary figures of Neolithic history, if not the fabled sage-kings themselves.

Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors

In Chinese legend, the last one thousand years of Neolithic Longshan culture, between 3000 and 2000 B.C.E., was ruled by what are known as the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. The Three Sovereigns were demi-gods who bridged heaven and earth to guide mankind and pass on knowledge and technology. Their earthly descendant was the Yellow Emperor, who ushered in the period of the Five Emperors (c. 2697-2070 B.C.E.). Yao and Shun were the last two emperors of the legendary period. After Shun’s reign ended he passed the throne on to Yu, who founded the Xia dynasty in approximately 2070 B.C.E.

Legends regarded the Five Emperors for their staunch morality and adherence to the values of traditional Chinese society. Yao, Shun, and Yu themselves served as the mythological “sage-kings” of this period. The abdication legend details the pattern of succession and transmission of authority between them. One of the most remarkable qualities of the myth is that none of the kings is related to the others. Each individual was selected to rule in favor over the king’s hereditary heirs, due to his “kingly” qualities which made him a better candidate for the throne.

⁸ For more on this matter, see Scott Cook’s footnote comments in Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian II*, 711.

Disaster themes and the Mandate of Heaven

Though a ruler was said to possess the mandate of heaven, heaven's authority could take it away just as easily as it could bestow it. The support of heaven rested on a king's virtue and worthiness; should he be lacking in those qualities, his divine authority would suffer. In myths as well as throughout history, the Chinese people saw their leaders' failure to prevent crises as divine evidence that they lost the mandate of heaven and the authority to rule. Suppression of these bad omens represented reinforcement of the kings' virtuous characteristics. In the same section of the *Shu jing* mentioned above, the story tells of the downfall of the last king of Xia, King Jie:

He said, "Oh! of old the former kings of (Xia) cultivated earnestly their virtue and then there were no calamities from Heaven. The spirits of the hills and rivers likewise were all in tranquility. The birds and beasts, the fishes and tortoises, all realized the happiness of their nature. But their descendant (Jie) did not follow their example and great Heaven sent down calamities, employing the agency of our ruler who received its favoring appointment. The attack on (Xia) may be traced to the orgies in (Ming Tiao), but our attack on it began in (Bo)."⁹

King Jie had a reputation for corruption, drunkenness, and tyranny. Public records reference a heightened number of natural disasters and phenomenon during his reign, which documenters attributed to the king's lack of moral virtue.

In the tale, calamities served as Heaven's warning call that nature was out of balance. It then sent war in the form of the Shang armies to overthrow the Xia king, and establish the Shang king in his place. Historian Mark Edward Lewis best described the relationship between warfare and ritual when he said, "First, they were both modes of taking life, and taking life is a vivid expression of power. Second and more important,

⁹ *Shu jing*, in Waltham, *Shu Ching: Book of History*, 74-75.

these activities were recognized as the primary means of serving the ancestors and the gods of locality, a service which consisted of both the physical feeding of these spirits and the ‘feeding’ of their honor.”¹⁰ In ancient China, war served as an extension of the punishment system, as a tool used against improper governments who did wrong against their subjects.¹¹ The role of war was to stamp out such oppressive governments and liberate the affected people, just as the role of punishment was to stamp out improper behaviors to redirect the misguided.

Therefore, according to the tale of Shang succession, when King Jie acted outside the accordance of kingly behavior, Heaven recalled its Mandate and bestowed it upon Da Yi, the Shang king. Da Yi then led his armies to victory over Jie, and restored the true kingship under his rule. When all under Heaven was restored, "our king of Shang brilliantly displayed his sagely prowess; for oppression he substituted his generous gentleness and the millions of people gave him their hearts."¹² This was the same logic that the Zhou employed to explain the legitimacy of their succession over the Shang. Shang king Di Xin was corrupt, according to the Zhou record. Heaven removed the Mandate from him and bestowed it upon Zhou king Wen. Wen’s son Wu finally conquered the Shang and reestablished Heaven’s order.

¹⁰ Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990): 20.

¹¹ Karen Turner, “War, Punishment, and the Law of Nature in Early Chinese Concepts of the State.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 53, no. 2 (Dec. 1993): 292.

¹² *Shu jing*, in Waltham, *Shu Ching: Book of History*, 75.

The Mandate of Heaven that the Zhou insisted on—and which countless leaders after them employed to establish their authority—eventually justified its ultimate downfall when the Western Zhou dynasty collapsed in 771 B.C.E.

The Revision of History Through Myth

In the same vein that disasters were used to revise history to justify the downfall of a leader or his dynasty, they were also erased in order to uphold the virtuous reputation of a king. Returning to the Neolithic narrative, the mythological period of Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors was supposedly one of peace and prosperity. In truth, the archaeological record shows that this was a time of increased violence and decreased health.

Higher population levels led to an increased reliance on millet as a staple element of the common diet, and lower quality food overall.¹³ Based on skeletal analysis, the Longshan people suffered from increased bouts of tooth decay, porotic hyperostosis (swollen spongy tissue in the cranium), and a decrease in adult stature.¹⁴ The earliest evidence of direct violence against people in Chinese prehistory also comes from this period: skeletons with signs of blows to the skull and scalping, decapitations, and live burial were all unearthed in Longshan settlements.¹⁵ Human sacrifice is a suspected

¹³ Tanner, *China, A History*, 25.

¹⁴ Ekaterina A. Pechenkina, Robert A. Benfer Jr., and Zhijun Wang, "Diet and Health Changes at the End of the Chinese Neolithic: The Yangshao/Longshan Transition in Shaanxi Province," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 117 (Jan 2002): 15-36.

¹⁵ Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 270.

element of Longshan culture. Archaeologists uncovered the remains of human skeletons in house foundations and believe them to be part of rituals for house-building.¹⁶

¹⁶ Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 273.

Chapter 2

The Abdication Doctrine as a Subversive Tool Used by Warring States Era Scholars

Confucius said, “Formerly, they did not pass (the rule) hereditarily. The good gave (the rule) to another good (person). Therefore they were able to bring order to all-under-sky/heaven, and make the myriad lands peaceful, regardless of whether they were large or small, rich or lean; they ensured that all obtained their altars of grain and had common people and reverentially guarded them. Yao saw that Shun’s virtue was that of a worthy and therefore he ceded (the throne) to him.”¹

The above abdication legend tells the story of one of the three legendary sage kings, each of whom voluntarily gave up his authority to rule to a man he deemed more worthy. Ancient Chinese scholars upheld this myth as an ideal standard. However, in 314 BCE when King Kuai of Yan attempted to abdicate his throne to Zizhi, a minister whom he saw as a worthy sage, his actions spurred a subsequent civil war resulting in an invasion by Zhongshan, occupation of the state by Qi forces Zizhi’s execution, and the reestablishment of the hereditary line by Prince Ping. King Kuai’s failed abdication to Zizhi exemplifies that the abdication myth served as a tool and not an example in an oscillating power struggle between ruling and scholarly classes.

Records by contemporary scholar Xima Qian relay accounts of the coercive efforts of Kuai’s advisors, as well as scholars from neighboring provinces, to influence his actions. The first attempt at coercion was made by Su Dai, an envoy from Qi and friend to Zizhi. While Su Dai was on a visit to Yan, King Kuai asked him about the king of Qi, to which the man replied that the king of Qi would never become an ideal ruler, because he did not trust his ministers. This was an attempt by Su Dai to get Kuai to honor Zizhi, who served

¹ Sarah Allan, “Not the Lun Yu,” 148.

as Yan's prime minister. According to Xima Qian, Zizhi returned the favor to Su Dai by giving him money and a promise to listen to and follow his guidance.²

The second account of subversion was by Lu Maoshou, who advised the King of Yan to yield the state to Zizhi. Lu suggested that Kuai follow the example of the legend of Yao, and offer control of the state over to Zizhi. The *Zhangguo ce*, which Xima Qian used as a reference for his histories, tells of the account as follows:

Lu Mao-shou said to the king of Yen, "The best thing your majesty could do would be to hand over his country to Tzu-chih. Men speak of Yao's virtue because he yielded his state to Hsu Yu. Hsu Yu did not accept it, of course, so Yao acquired a name for passing on his throne to the most virtuous; but in fact he never lost control of the empire. If your majesty should yield his state to his minister Tzu-chih, Tzu-chih surely would not dare accept it, but this act would demonstrate your majesty's behavior is the equal of Yao's."³

In Xima's account, the offer was intended to be as a ritual rather than an actual abdication.

In legend, before Yao abdicated his throne to Shun, he offered up ruling power to the sage Xu Yu, who repeatedly refused. In this tale, Yao did not lose his authority, but both Yao and Xu Yu were highly regarded for the selflessness they expressed through their interactions. Lu Maoshou planted the idea in Kuai's head that he should follow in Yao's footsteps.⁴ He assured the king that Zizhi would honorably refuse the offer, and thus both Kuai and Zizhi would gain stature through their virtuous conduct in the interaction.

Instead of turning down the offer, however, Zizhi instead accepted it and gained control as head of the state. Control of the officials was still in the hands of the hereditary lineage, though, so a third advisor—unnamed in Xima Qian's documentation—

² Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Edited by William H. Nienhauser, Jr. et al. Vol. 1 of *The Hereditary Houses of Pre Han China, Part 1* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 177.

³ J. I. Crump, *Chan-kuo ts'ie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970) 518.

⁴ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 177.

approached Kuai with his recommendations. This scholar recounted the tale of the sage king Yu of the Xia dynasty, who saw the adviser Yi as more worthy successor than his son Qi. He gave Yi control of the administration, but allowed Qi's advisors to become officials. When Yu eventually tried to completely abdicate his throne to Yi, Qi took advantage of the power he held through his subordinates serving as state officials to attack and seize control of the throne. In the spirit of this historical account, the advisor urged Kuai to allow Zizhi to appoint his own officials, lest history repeat itself. Kuai heeded the advice, and passed on the seals of all high-ranking officials of the state to Zizhi. Thus, Zizhi ultimately gained total control of state affairs.⁵

Despite the advisor's assurances to the contrary, Kuai's total relinquishment of state control to Zizhi ultimately triggered a civil war in Yan. Xima states that within three years of Zizhi's rule, the capital fell into chaos.⁶ Kuai's hereditary heir Prince Ping plotted with Yan general Shi Pei to attack and reclaim the throne from Zizhi. The king of the Qi province took advantage of the situation, and offered his assistance to Ping to reestablish hereditary succession in Yan. Ping accepted, and was inspired to launch the attack. General Shi Pei stormed the palace along with the families of the officials that were supplanted by Zizhi's men, but failed to take control. In the face of their failure, they betrayed Prince Ping by turning to attack him instead. Shi Pei was killed in the process—his body displayed as a warning—and the two factions fought for months with high casualties on both sides. While the civil war raged on, the King of Qi seized the opportunity and sent in his troops on an expedition against Yen. Qi gained easy victory

⁵ Ibid., 177-178.

⁶ Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, 178.

over Yan; in the process Kuai died, Zizhi fled, and Ping was established by the people of Yen as ruler, taking the name King Chao.⁷ The result of Kuai's failed abdication was the restoration of hereditary rule and Yan's defeat and submission to the kingdom of Qi.

Xima Qian accounts the subversive efforts of three other scholars in addition to Zizhi in this event, suggesting that this was not simply just the efforts of one man trying to further his own cause, but rather a group effort to overthrow the current leadership. Scholars invoked multiple accounts of the abdication legend to sway the actions of Yan's king towards Zizhi's favor. Each scholar in turn stood to benefit from Zizhi's appointment as head of the state, through owed favors and his ability to instate them as court officials. This coercive rhetoric was employed not only by scholars in the kingdom of Yan, but by officials operating in Qi as well, as was the case with Su Dai. The openness with which scholars of multiple kingdoms adopted the approach of using abdication mythology as a tool for redirecting authority implies the possibility that this was a standard approach.

Modern scholars have long sought to explain the discrepancies between the policies advocated in the abdication myth, actual political process, and opposing philosophical thought; many approach the question by looking for explanations as to why that this course of philosophical reasoning emerged. The debate has been divided between two lines—those who view the abdication myth and subsequent Confucian thought as an effort to explain philosophical contradictions in the changing political environment, and those who see it as a tool of coercion bent on influencing the balance of power in society.

⁷ Ibid., 178-179.

Angus Graham is one of the forerunners of the former school of thought. He implied that allusions by Warring States Era scholars to an alternative to hereditary rule were just the “tip of the iceberg.”⁸ In the 1960s, Graham looked at Chinese philosophy as a response to a "social and metaphysical crisis" stemming from the contradictions of the concept of the Mandate of Heaven and the breakdown of and change in dynastic rule.⁹ When a dynasty such as the Zhou claimed the right to rule, they did so on the authority of Heaven. Therefore, when such a dynasty collapsed and another stepped forward or took hold of the leadership position by force, it created a political dichotomy which triggered social crisis. Graham argued that through philosophy Confucian scholars attempted to explain and correct the contradiction.

Yuri Pines builds upon Graham’s work, using recently unearthed texts to attempt prove that the abdication doctrine was used as a means by which proponents attempted to point out and correct the weaknesses of hereditary rule.¹⁰ He views the contemporary philosophical perspective of Confucian scholars as a result of a shift that occurred during the Spring and Autumn period, wherein the concept of Heaven went from being seen as congruous with human affairs to an elusive being whose will is incomprehensible.¹¹ The motive during this time, he believes, is to “avoid direct conflict with (Heaven’s) laws.”¹² Like Graham, Pines sees Chinese philosophy as a reactive response to inexplicable

⁸ Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 293.

⁹ Heiner Roetz, Review of *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* by Angus C. Graham, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 54, no. 2 (1991): 410.

¹⁰ Yuri Pines, “Disputers of Abdication: Zhangguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign’s Power,” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series, 91, Fasc. 4/5 (2005): 243-300.

¹¹ Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722-453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 66.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

political shifts, which put the Chinese at odds with their previous perspective on the will of Heaven.

However, historian Wai-yee Li criticizes Pines for looking at early rhetoric on the sanction of Heaven too literally in his comparison. She cites Pines' brief reference to the political motives of Lord Zhuang of Zheng as an example of a case in which the invocation of Heaven was used to "legitimize aggression and pose veiled threats."¹³ Her argument implies that the dramatic shift in philosophical views over this time period was actually much more subtle. The texts of Confucian scholars and the historical applications of its philosophy imply a more active role, and an intention to effect change in the political structure of China rather than searching for a passive means of explaining its changes.

Daoist scholar Chuang Chou (355?-275 BCE) lived during the period when Kuai made his attempt at abdication. As a contemporary scholar he is well suited to assess the political and societal environment during the time when the abdication legend was highly regarded by many of his peers. His comments on the accounts of King Kuai and Zizhi can be found in his parables of the Chuangzi text, where he writes:

Long ago, Yao yielded his throne to Shun and the latter became emperor, but when Kuai yielded his throne to Zizhi they were both cut down. Tang and Wu became kings through contention, but the duke of Po contended and was destroyed. Viewed in this light, the etiquette of contending and yielding, the conduct of Yao and Jie, may be either prized or despised in accord with the times, but may not be taken as constants. A beam or a ridgepole may be used to breach a city wall, but it cannot be used to plug a hole, which is to say that implements have specific purposes... The emperors and kings of old had different modes of abdication, and the rulers of the three dynasties had different

¹³ Wai-yee Li, Review of *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722-453 B.C.E.* by Yuri Pines, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 65, no. 2 (2005): 510.

modes of succession. He who acts contrary to the times and contravenes custom is called a usurper; he who accords with the times and conforms to custom is called a disciple of righteousness.¹⁴

Chuang describes the abdication system of legend as a tool, with an appropriate time and place for usage. He attributes its failure in the case of King Kuai to an environment that was not receptive to the use of a non-hereditary, meritocratic abdication system.

There was not only divergence with Confucian abdication ideals among scholars of other philosophies; Contemporary Confucian scholar Xunzi also disagreed with the appropriateness of abdication-based government above hereditary succession. He criticizes the abdication legend in his early writings:

In accord with popular opinion, persuaders offer the thesis: "Yao and Shun abdicated and yielded their thrones." This is not so. Consider the Son of Heaven: his position of power and authority is the most honorable in the empire, having no match whatever. Further, to whom should they yield? Since their Way and its Power are pure and complete, since their wisdom and intelligence are exceedingly perspicacious, they had only "to face south and adjudicate the affairs of the empire" Every class of living people, each and all, would be stirred up and moved to follow after them and submit in order to be transformed and made obedient to them. The world had no "hidden scholars" and there was no "lost goodness." What was identical with them would be right, and what was different from them would be wrong. Again, why would they abdicate the empire?¹⁵

Xunzi did not just disagree with the ideas promoted in the legend; he disagreed that the history translated to an event of actual abdication. The contrasting theory to the abdication legend is a tale of failed hereditary succession; after Yao's death, his son attempted to succeed him, but was rejected by the people. It was the people who looked to Shun, after Yao had recommended him to Heaven. At Yao's recommendation, and the

¹⁴ Chuang Chou, "Chuang Tzu, Chapter 17 and Other Passages," In *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair, et al, 22-32, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 25-26.

¹⁵ *Xunzi*, 18.5a, in John Knobloch, *Xunzi : A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 39-40.

people's acceptance, Shun received Heaven's approval.¹⁶ Therefore there was no true abdication, according to Xunzi—Yao had carried out his rule until his death, and Heaven had chosen a new successor in light of Yao's son's unworthiness.

Xunzi goes on to refute the principles advocated in the legend: that a ruler has the ability to pass the Mandate to someone else, that he should renounce his descendants' claims to the throne at death, and that in old age the king may be unfit to govern and should pass on his right to rule to another. Firstly, Heaven alone carries the right to bestow and transfer the Mandate. Second, there is no reason for a sage king to denounce hereditary successors. "If the sage kings had already died, and there was no other sage in the empire, then most assuredly there was no one of sufficient stature to whom the empire should be yielded...Given the situation in which there is no sage among his descendants, but there is one among the Three Dukes, then the empire will turn to him naturally as though he were restoring and reviving it."¹⁷ Xunzi explains that if there are no sages to take on the role, hereditary transmission would not be of consequence; and if there is a sage as hereditary successor, the status quo remains the same. Alternatively, if a sage exists outside of the hereditary line, Heaven will pass the Mandate onto him naturally, as Xunzi feels happened in the case of Shun. No intervention is necessary on the part of the ruler to choose the next carrier of the Mandate; to do so runs counter to the will of Heaven. Thus, the moral of the abdication myth is at best, irrelevant, and at worst, sacrilegious.

¹⁶ *Mengzi*, 5a.4, referenced in Knobloch, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, Vol.2, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988) 18.

¹⁷ *Xunzi*, 18.5b, in Knobloch, *Xunzi*, Vol. 3, 40.

One of the most controversial aspects of the abdication myth is the concept that a ruler in possession of this Mandate may become less worthy than another man over time, either in terms of merit or age. Regarding the notion that a ruler may become so aged or infirmed as to necessitate abdication to a younger, healthier person, Xunzi refutes the idea as “the contention of one who is afraid of work.”¹⁸ He argues that a ruler's position as the Son of Heaven offers his body the most perfect leisure, as he lives in abundance and splendor and answers to no superior. “The feudal lords get old,” he says, “but the Son of Heaven does not.”¹⁹ This is not to say that Xunzi was naïve enough to believe that the body of the sovereign ruler never ages. Rather, Xunzi refers to the Son of Heaven’s position as eternal and undying. Even if the figurehead that is the king dies, his model for government and the body of the state survives him, undisturbed.²⁰ The Mandate of Heaven was supposed to be absolute. Qualifications based upon age or physical fitness suggest that the reign of a ruler was not unconditional, but based on the limitations of his ability. Furthermore, the idea that another “worthier” candidate could exist while a different person held the Mandate went against Heaven’s authority.

One of the chief arguments against Xunzi’s philosophies, and an explanation for his disagreement with other Confucianists, is that he was actually a supporter of the Legalist doctrine, and attempted to shape Confucianism towards its favor. This is a sharp accusation from contemporary dissenters, which some modern historians disagree with. Sungmoon Kim and Paul R. Goldin both provide analyses on what Sungmoon refers to as

⁴⁵ *Xunzi*, 18.5c, in Knobloch, *Xunzi*, Vol. 3, 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ Sungmoon Kim, “Confucian Constitutionalism: Mencius and Xunzi on Virtue, Ritual, and Royal Transmission,” *The Review of Politics* 73 (2011): 395-396.

Xunzi's "negative Confucianism": his difference in opinion from the aspects of Confucianism centered on humanity's righteousness. Both historians discuss different issues surrounding the scholar's emphasis on *li*, or ritual, above benevolence, or *ren*, which played into his views on the Mandate of Heaven and royal transmission based on individual merit. While Sungmoon and Goldin differ in the specific details of their attributions to Xunzi's variance from standard Confucian theory, they essentially agree on one point: Xunzi was not trying to steer China towards a Legalist society, nor was he attempting to support the methods of the Qin rule with his writings.

In fact, while Xunzi dissents from the idea of supporting abdication as a legitimate means of succession, he shows signs of support towards the concept of meritocratic promotion that is an underlying theme in the abdication doctrine. He denies the concept of fixed social classes, in favor of promoting individuals to positions that best reflect their abilities and merits, and demoting those who are unworthy:

But heredity cannot be a permanent rule of procedure. Though a man were formerly of ducal rank and the descendant of ministers of state, he must be relegated to the common ranks if he do not display the gifts of truth and courtesy: and the son of the soil must be advanced to the position of a minister of state if he displays fitting qualities.²¹

According to Xunzi, the foundations of a good ruler are built upon those he appoints to office. This is one of the king's chief purposes, to "select the virtuous, and the able for office, (and) to advance honest and reverent men in power."²²

²¹ Hsun Ch'ing, "Kingly Government," in *Guide to Wenli Styles and Chinese Ideals: Essays, Edicts, Proclamations, Memorials, Letters, Documents, Inscriptions, Commercial Papers*, edited and translated by Evan Morgan, 1-35 (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society For China, 1912): 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

In the same argument used to contend the importance of social mobility promoting men based on their merits, Xunzi ascertains the significance of preserving both the distinction of social classes and the undisputed role and authority of a king. “It is the sure decree of Heaven that one man cannot serve another when they are both of equal standing.”²³ Xunzi’s concept of the socio-political structure of China is founded upon two pillars: first, the assurance that each citizen will be placed in a position based upon his virtues, so that the state will be run by those possessing only the best qualities; second, the immutable role of the king as supreme authority over his subjects, possessing an authority bestowed upon him by Heaven. If either of these pillars falters, the state will collapse. The concept of kingship and the ruler’s supreme position is, according to Xunzi, the central foundation that holds together Chinese society. He does not challenge the abdication legend’s notion that Yao could have abdicated his position to a worthier sage as a means to promote Legalist philosophy. Rather, the idea that another, worthier candidate existed to challenge the authority of the sage-king contradicts the concept of the supreme Mandate of Heaven, and destroys one of the crucial pillars of society.

A few questions come to mind when considering the opinions of modern and contemporary scholars. If the abdication myth was indeed crafted as a means to explain the changes in dynastic rule, as modern scholars theorized, then why was there such discourse between Confucian scholars regarding it? If either Chuangzi’s or Xunzi’s assertions are correct, and the ideals expressed in the abdication doctrine are either inappropriate for the time or contradict the core foundations of both Confucianism and Chinese society, then how did it become such a prevalent and reoccurring theme among

²³ Hsun Ch’ing, “Kingly Government,” 6.

not only Confucian scholars, but scholars of other philosophies as well? What factors contributed to the dichotomy between philosophers?

In order to understand the evolution of Chinese scholarly methodology and its adoption of various practices, it is beneficial to investigate their societal functions and the framework in which scholars operated. Recently, Albert Galvany underwent a psychological approach to the recurrent elements in Confucian thinking, to analyze what he sees as the true role of scholars during the period. The role of nobleman emerged in Confucianism, and was fashioned, as a response to an old social anxiety towards saying anything that is not followed immediately with corresponding action. Confucian doctrine was built on the foundations of this anxiety, and the socio-political context obsessed with the persuasive effects of language.²⁴ Confucius strived to separate the notions of moral quality, sincerity, and credibility from the concept of eloquence—or being "appealing in words"—in the term "ren," as the latter quality signals danger and runs counter to the ideals of moral aspiration.²⁵ He sought to remove the stigma surrounding orators in this regard. Even students of the Confucian doctrine were sometimes prone to falling into "smooth-talking,"²⁶ and Confucius responded to such abuse of language with contempt.²⁷

In spite of his contempt for eloquence, Galvany points out that Confucius himself sometimes used the power of language as a tool in adverse situations.²⁸ While this use of

²⁴ Albert Galvany, "Sly Mouths and Silver Tongues: the Dynamics of Psychological Persuasion in Ancient China," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 34 (2012): 15-16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Galvany provides the example of Zi Lu, who, in a dispute over the appointment of Zi Gao, attempted to turn Confucius' words and teachings against him rather than responding to nuances of the Master's argument. Their exchange in the matter is documented in the *Lunyu*, XI.25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

language was counter to his ideals, Confucius begrudgingly recognized the occasional necessity and usefulness of falling back on the inherent subversive qualities of language in order to diffuse possibly dangerous situations.²⁹ As a time of heightened political tensions between numerous states, the Warring States period demanded the use of such a skill frequently. Galvany writes: "In a time of intrigues, discourse becomes one of the pillars of the political mechanism on which the stability or instability of the different powers depends...at once adviser, spy and double agent, the itinerant orator becomes the true protagonist of the almost infinite succession of risky, complicated and astute machinations through which the state's destiny is now being decided."³⁰

Throughout his analysis, Galvany compares the art of persuasion to the principles of war, with the scholar serving the role of a "mercenary of words."³¹ He paints a psychological portrait of a ruling class and a scholarly class that are at odds with one another, battling through oration and psychological subterfuge. Often the sole target of the orator is the sovereign, for, only through convincing him, the scholar's will can be enacted. However, the scholar treads on dangerous ground, because such interactions with the ruling figure can as easily lead to the scholar's death as they can his praise.³² It is therefore important that a scholar knows his target audience well enough, and is clever enough to construct an argument that is not only thoroughly convincing, but also flattering enough to the ruler so as not to agitate him or appear threatening. The first obstacle of a successful scholar is to win over the sovereign's trust. After that is

²⁹ *Lunyu* VI.14. Confucius is quoted as saying, "Without the eloquence of the priest Tuo or the beauty of prince Chao of Song, it is difficult to succeed in today's world."

³⁰ Galvany, "Sly Mouths and Silver Tongues," 20-21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

accomplished, he must break the link between language and reality, so that he may "exploit all the possibilities of attraction and charm that are to be found in hollow, self-referential discourse that shuns any obligation to reality."³³ If he is successful, he will have complete influence over the ruler without question. With Galvany's outline of scholarly tactics in mind, it is no wonder how Zizhi and his peers were able to seduce King Kuai so thoroughly, that they were able to take control of the state from him without a doubt of their motives.

Interestingly, the abdication legend contains a number of controversial themes, which at times contradict the political structure of the time in which the legend was highly regarded. However, many of the potentially-provocative elements are carefully worded so as to deflect their dangerous nature, much in the spirit of Galvany's psychological framework of a "silver-tongued orator." In addition to the overlying message which speaks in favor of merit-based transmission of rule over hereditary succession, recently unearthed texts relating to the myth introduce ideas of limiting the span and extent of a ruler's reign under the pretense of serving his best interests.

In antiquity, the sages were capped at the age of twenty; at thirty they married, at fifty they orderly ruled All under Heaven; and at seventy they handed over the rule. As their four limbs were exhausted, sharpness of hearing and clarity of sight weakened, they abdicated the world and delivered it to a worthy; and retired to nurture their lives.³⁴

This account in the *Tang Yu zhi dao* establishes a timeframe by which a ruler can succeed the throne, and then step down in later years. The minimum age before a person is deemed fit to rule is around 50 years old, and the age by which he should abdicate is

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ *Tang Yu zhi dao*, in Yuri Pines, "Disputers of Abdication: Zhangguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign's Power," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, 91, Fasc. 4/5 (2005): 260.

approximately 70. This provides a twenty-year limit on a king's reign. The reason given for this age-based abdication is that in his older age, the ruler should go on to live a happy, peaceful life, and focus on the preservation of his health rather than the affairs of the kingdom.

The minimum age for kingship is an even more peculiar aspect of the myth. The legend accounts that in antiquity those who were intended to rule first served in lesser affairs of the state, as sages and scholars; this period occurred between the ages of 30 and 50 years old. The *Rong Cheng shi* manuscript documents such an instance in which these guidelines were followed, by a monarch preceding Yao: "After he exercised his rule in All under Heaven for nineteen years, he became the king over All under Heaven; after [another] thirty-seven years he died."³⁵ In addition to the age restriction, the qualification that a ruler must first serve as a sage also bears weight. It provides an allusion that rulership should ideally come from the scholarly class, or that ruling power is a natural extension of academic merit. This directly contradicts Xunzi's view of kingship as a pillar of society in position alone; according to the *Rong Cheng shi*, a king is tasked with the role of earning his position by first performing governmental tasks.³⁶

Regardless of the reasons provided for age limits or the question of their altruistic nature, these restrictions carry with them additional implications. Limiting the length of rule also limits power, the extension of authority, and the spread of influence that a king may achieve in his lifetime. It also establishes a guaranteed end to a regime. Not only does the abdication legend advocate for a meritocratic system of leadership selection, but

³⁵ *Rong Cheng shi*, in Yuri Pines, "Political Mythology and Dynastic Legitimacy in the Rong Cheng shi Manuscript," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73, No. 3 (October 2010): 508.

³⁶ Pines, "Political Mythology and Dynastic Legitimacy in the Rong Cheng shi Manuscript," 508.

it also sets up a failsafe through age guidelines by which abusers of power would be theoretically restrained. While twenty years is arguably a long time for a ruler to hold power, it is but a small fraction when compared to a lifetime. Furthermore, through the probationary period of government service, guidelines assure that a ruler rising to power will ideally be one of a scholar's peers.

The phrasing in several ancient Chinese texts notably implies that the abdication myth favors political appointment based upon human will and selection. Often times this is explained as an extension of the will of heaven, representing acceptance by the public as a sign that heaven has granted divine right of government to an individual; such was Xunzi's interpretation of it. However, there are references in Guodian texts to the Mandate being given to the ruler by the people. The *Rong Cheng shi* states, "Thus in the territory of one hundred *li* squared (Yao) led the people from All under Heaven, and they arrived, respectfully establishing him, regarding him as Son of Heaven."³⁷ While Xunzi explained this concept as the natural predecessor to the will of Heaven, it is interesting to note that even he did not disagree with the role that the will of the people plays in the succession of rulers. Furthermore, the language in the *Rong Cheng shi* indicates an active role on the part of the people, with Heaven serving as the passive reinforcement of the people's decision. This rhetoric in the abdication doctrine is powerful, for it establishes the notion that a ruler is bound to the will of his subjects; a potential consequence for disobeying the societal framework established in the legend is losing the faith of the

³⁷ *Rong Cheng shi*, in Yuri Pines, "Political Mythology and Dynastic Legitimacy in the *Rong Cheng shi* Manuscript," 508.

people, who possess the ability to approve or disapprove of a monarch's right to carry the Mandate.

These restrictions and fail safes resonate with the theories of world historian William H. McNeill on Confucianism. McNeill uses the perspective of environmental history to postulate that Confucianism was designed as a means to suppress those who would abuse their power of authority. He refers in his writing to what he calls the macroparasitism of humans within society. His theory is that when societies evolve into larger structures, some people establish themselves as leaders in an attempt to exercise power over, control, and ultimately feed off of the masses. McNeill states that Confucianism was developed in attempt "to regulate and control the macroparasitism of the upper classes by defining a decorum that would restrain the exercise of power."³⁸ Confucianism is, to him, less of a framework to explain the shift in political environment, and more a means to shift it.

Following the events of King Kuai's failed abdication, the Mandate of Heaven was again used around 200 years later by Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu in order to restrain his own ruling house and control the direction of its leadership. Between 195-115 BCE, the scholar attempted to use the Mandate of Heaven as a tool to restrain his own ruling house, and push leadership back to the era of the Sage-King. He was previously regarded as a subservient tool of the reigning leader; his use of Warring-States Era Confucianism and alterations to it were translated as efforts to distort Confucian philosophy in order to obscure the faults of the new government. Evidence, however, actually shows extensive efforts of subversion on the scholar's part. Dong has been

³⁸ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 110

instead criticized by other scholars as intending to "control and limit the emperor rather than pander to him."³⁹

Historian Gary Arbuckle investigates Dong Zhongshu's motivations and his influences upon philosophical developments in great detail. While the Han dynasty saw a period of peace, freedom, and abundance during Dong's time, it was also marked by sources of tension. In 81 BCE, Confucian scholars were agitated over the Han government's monopolies over salt, iron, and brewing. While liquor controls were relaxed, those over salt and iron remained.⁴⁰ In addition, Han rulers saw frequent challenges to the legitimacy of their rule. These two facts reflected the ongoing struggle between both parties—Confucian scholars, and dynastic rulers—where each was at odds with the other. Han grand marshal Huo Guang had "always considered (the scholars) his enemies."⁴¹ Not only were orators put into the position of resorting to subversion, as Albert Galvany pointed out, persons in a position of authority were constantly exposed to such instances of cunning and falsity. They therefore found it necessary to be aware of scholars' subversive techniques—and even master them—so as to cancel out their powers of persuasion.⁴² Subsequently, scholars and the ruling regime constantly felt at odds with one another.

Dong, and other Confucian scholars, advocated the idea of "cyclical history". His theory was developed as a response to Emperor Wu's question: "if the Way was one and

³⁹ Gary Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason: Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1995): 586.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁴¹ *Han shu*, 68.2954.

⁴² Galvany, "Sly Mouths and Silver Tongues," 29.

eternal, why were the teachings of the three kings (of the Xia, Yin, and Zhou dynasties) not identical?"⁴³ Dong's explanation was that the Kings were not perfect—their ways were biased and undeveloped, and variations between their teachings were due to implementation of their biases as a way to repair the deficiencies of their predecessors.⁴⁴ Each alteration to the Way was not a fundamental transformation, but rather modifications that were governed by the same basic rules. "They followed the cycle of three differing qualities, or ruling virtues, each of which was an antidote for the vices engendered by the over-application of its predecessor."⁴⁵ Dong developed a 3-fold cyclical history based on this over-application of virtues by each of the three kings: wholeheartedness by the Xia, reverence by the Yin, and refinement by the Zhou. If the Han were to follow their proclaimed path as successor to the Zhou, they should ideally follow the way of the Xia to counteract their predecessor's emphasis on refinement with an accentuation of wholeheartedness. The three sage-kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu, fit into Dong's cycle as predecessors to the Xia, wherein the Xia dynasty is an extension of Yu's virtue; therefore, the three sages fall under the "wholehearted" category of virtues.

Furthermore, Dong elaborated the distinction between those who came to the throne without violence—Shun, Yu, and the Xia dynasty—and those who came to the throne with violence and changed the way of their predecessors—the Yin, the Zhou, and the Han. Arbuckle points out that by placing the Han as the catalyst at the beginning of a new cycle, Dong Zhongshu put the Han emperor Wu in a place parallel to the sage Yao.

⁴³ Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason," 590.

⁴⁴ *Han shu*, 56.2518.

⁴⁵ Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason," 591.

His expectation is for Wu to therefore "initiate another period of sage rule after the 'great disorder' subsequent on the fall of the Zhou." ⁴⁶

The unspoken implication of following in Yao's footsteps was the implication that one day Wu would also have to emulate his pattern of merit-based abdication. Under the guide of the cycle he would have no choice but to do so, if he were to adhere to the Heavenly Way and usher his state from a period of disorder into one of order. Arbuckle speculates that Dong Zhongshu saw himself as a candidate for succession. His actions parallel those of King Kuai's advisors, in using superstition of the abdication legend and his construction of a historical cycle to further his own position. In fact, Dong was from Guangchuan, in northeast China near the borders of Zhao and Yan. It is possible, if not likely, that he was inspired by the historical instance of abdication by King Kuai in crafting his historical cycle, and his theories on abdication. ⁴⁷

Not only did the interactions between Kuai and advising scholars immediately affect the affairs of his state, they also had a long-lasting effect on future scholars and subsequent Confucian philosophy. Their influence did not stop with Dong Zhongshu and Emperor Wu, though. Other cases of scholarly attempts to push out hereditary transmission in favor of the Way of the Sages have peppered Chinese history, such as Ge Kuanrao in 60 BCE. The most recent call upon the myth of abdication of the sage-kings is much more recent, however.

In early 2013, the Communist party of the Chinese government made claims that it has perfected a system of government which follows the same ideals of the abdication

⁴⁶ Arbuckle, "Inevitable Treason," 592.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 596.

legend.⁴⁸ In order to purport the legitimacy of communist rule in a single-party system, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims that its system follows the historical “abdication system” by which each generation of leaders hands over the “crown” voluntarily to the next generation. They go further to claim that their system is successful, more so than the democratic systems of developed nations and the hereditary rule of developing nations, because it strikes a balance between both.⁴⁹ While it is quick to lay claim to the purported successful structure of the legendary system of leadership, it is interesting to note that the CCP overlooks acknowledgement of the continued failure of the abdication doctrine throughout Chinese history, and the dire effects that abdication attempts have had on the structure of the state.

Abdication doctrine institutes a series of restrictions and consequences upon rulers via a controversial social framework. It was established within the context of an ongoing power struggle between rulers and scholars, each of whom was versed in the use of oratorical tactics to maintain or shift the balance of control over state affairs. In this struggle, the myth was invoked throughout history as a means to subjugate leaders to the whims of scholars. Through the claims of the CCP, the abdication legend continues to serve as a tool for subversive influence in modern times. Modern voices echo the same criticism of Chuang Chou, that the abdication doctrine has no place in modern society

⁴⁸ Song Luzheng, “只有去中国才能看到未来—中国正迎来自信时代,” *Qiushi*, January 5, 2013. http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201309/201304/t20130426_226224.htm. Also available in print in *Qiushi*, Issue 2013/09.

⁴⁹ Cary Huang, “Idea that Modern China Practices Abdication of Leadership Greeted with Skepticism,” *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2013. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1277406/idea-modern-china-practises-abdication-leadership-greeted-scepticism>. Published in the print edition of the *Post* under the title “Emperors Without Clothes.”

because it is an outdated philosophy.⁵⁰ What these voices fail to add is that history indicates it has always been an outdated philosophy, used only as a means to justify political redirection.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 3

The Narrative of Yan King Kuai's Abdication Event

When Sima Qian wrote the chapter of the *Shiji* on Yan King Kuai, one of the primary texts he used as a reference was the *Zhanguo ce*. Aside from minor stylistic choices, he changed very few details from the previous narrative. The limited changes that go beyond the superficial appear to interject elements which draw the text away from a story of intrigue by the school of Horizontal and Vertical Alliances, and place it closer in line with Confucian mores.

This chapter contains a section by section analysis of English translations of the narrative.¹ Through this analysis, it asks four different questions of the text. First, in what ways does this history reflect traditional elements of mythology? Second, in what ways does the narrative diverge from known history? Third, how do the answers to the previous two questions reveal a euhemerized lens on historical events by the scholars that recorded them? Finally, what significant changes did Sima Qian make to the text, and how do they reflect the continued euhemerization of the historical account into a Confucian parable?

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this chapter are the author's. The translations of these texts was based upon the foundational translations within the works of J.I. Crump, Jr., translator, *Chan-Kuo Ts'e* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 517-520, and William Nienhauser, Jr., editor, *The Grand Scribe's Records* Volume V.1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,), 176-179. Both works are of great merit; however, for primary source materials that are so close in their original *hanzi* text, the translations of each scholar contain a substantial amount of stylistic variation between the two of them. The primary goals of this retractions were to succinctly get as close to the original language of the text as possible, and to delve into the nuance of changes in word choice between the two texts.

This analysis finds that the fictionalized and euhemerized elements of the tale support hereditary succession with reinforcement of ritual and the disaster narrative. By framing the Yan civil war and the subsequent Qi invasion from the point of King Kuai's abdication, Chinese historians established a "cause and effect" scenario. Yan's downfall came as a result of Kuai's deviation from ritual propriety, his adherence to Mohist values, and his divergence from traditional kinship roles and hereditary transmission. Simply by writing down the history in this manner, scholars solidified Chinese identity by framing the past through their own lenses of memory.

In the introduction to his translation of the *Zhanguo ce*, J.I. Crump, Jr. comments on the fictional qualities of the historical figures portrayed in the text:

When a certain *Chan-kuo Ts'e* character is wicked, apparently he is so in the fashion that best suits Chinese taste; when another is heroic he is a perfect Chinese hero; when a third is quick-witted it is exactly the kind of nimbleness of wit the Chinese reader would like to have ... The *Chan-kuo Ts'e* is unquestionably a major vehicle for Chinese values, self-images, and icons.²

Crump attributes this Sinification of history to the impending threat of Qin, a "slightly non-Chinese state", in contrast with the Six States (Zhao, Wei, Han, Chu, Qi, and Yan), which considered their own cultures identity to be authentically Chinese.

In the Spring and Autumn period, Qin was a small principality located on the western fringe of the collection of Chinese states. It bordered the Asian steppes, and the majority of its population was made up of descendants from nomadic barbarian tribes called the Rong—two main Rong groups were the Xirong and the Quanrong. Their cultures were aggressive and warlike. This bore a strong influence on the adoption of

² J.I. Crump, Jr., translator, *Chan-Kuo Ts'e* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 8.

Legalism by the Qin monarchy as it swept through China, overtaking all other states and unifying them under the strict rule of the Qin dynasty.

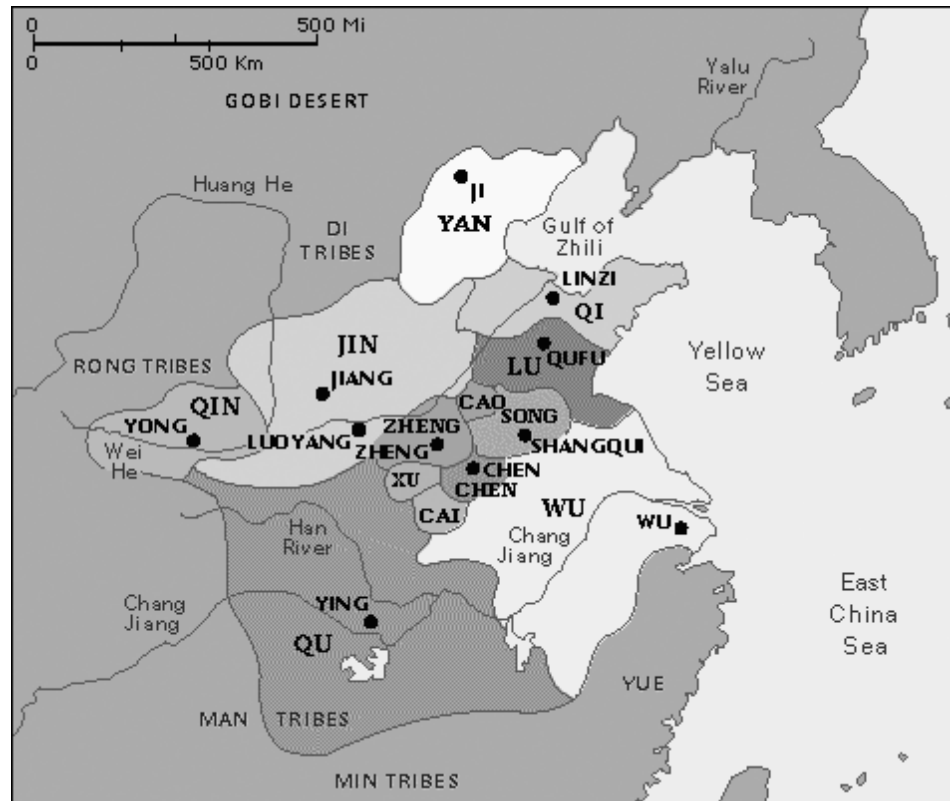


Figure 1 Map of Warring States Era China, circa 500 B.C.E.³

Crump also details the controversy of the *Zhanguo ce*, and its role and reception in the increasingly Confucian society. He compares it to Machiavelli's *Prince*, as both are part of a "limited group of book titles ... the mere mention of which greatly stimulates the flow of choleric humours in proper guardians of public morality".⁴ **(more on this)**

³ Scholastic, Inc., *Grolier Online Atlas* <<http://go.grolier.com/atlas?id=mh00036>> (accessed April 19, 2015).

⁴ Crump, Jr., *Chan-Kuo Ts'e*, 2.

King Kuai's abdication narrative in the *Shiji* begins in the middle of Sima Qian's chapter on the genealogical history of Yan's Zhao family. The analysis of this narrative starts with the twenty-first passage of this chapter, as that is where Sima Qian begins to directly draw from the text of the *Zhanguo ce*. It begins:

When Yan Kuai was established as king, the people of Qi killed Su Qin. While Su Qin was in Yan, he became related by marriage to minister Zizhi, and afterwards Su Dai and Zizhi became friends. As soon as Su Qin died, then Qi King Xuan replaced him with Su Dai. In Yan Kuai's third year, Chu and the Three Jins attacked Qin together, then returned without victory. Zizhi served as minister to Yan, as a valuable, head judicial figure.⁵

The beginning of the tale identifies most of the key players in the narrative, and establishes a network of relationships between them. Su Qin was an advisor to the king of Qi, Xuan. After his death, his position was filled by one of his older brothers, Su Dai. Both Su Qin and Su Dai had a connection with Yan King Kuai's minister, Zizhi. Furthermore, this portion of the text establishes the conflict between rival states Yan and Qi as the setting and framework for the events of the story which played out from it.

Here, Sima Qian alters the text in a few small but important ways. First, he changes Su Qin's death from a passive event to an active deed on the part of the Qi people. The *Zhanguo ce* merely states that Su Qin passed away while in the state of Qi.⁶ This emphasizes the consequences of Su Qin's subversive actions in Qi. The Yan government had previously sent Su Qin to Qi to become an advisor to the Qi monarchy, but also to serve as Yan's agent to create disorder in Qi. While the *Zhanguo ce*

⁵ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1555.

⁶ *Zhanguo ce*, “燕一：燕王噲既立”.

disassociates Su Qin's death with his role in the court, the *Shiji* brings it back to implicate the event as the punishment for political intrigue. The change reinforces the new role of the original *Zhanguo ce* stories as warnings against following the mentality of the Horizontal and Vertical Alliances.

The second change Sima Qian made is in the word use in the sentence on Su Qin's relation to Zizhi. The original text in the *Zhanguo ce* uses the term “為患難” (*wei huannan*), which means “to face adversity”. In contrast, Sima Qian uses “為婚” (*wei hun*), meaning “to become related by marriage”. The *Zhanguo ce* later confirms in a separate anecdote that Zizhi and Su Qin did in fact become related by marriage.⁷ However, it does not mention the nature of their relationship specifically in this narrative. Instead, the word usage implies that the translation should read something more like, “he faced adversity together with Zizhi, and afterwards Su Dai and Zizhi became friends.”

In the account written from the perspective of the Horizontal and Vertical Alliances, the role of kinship was less important than emphasizing the role of intrigue. It implies that the friendship between Su Dai and Zizhi was not necessarily motivated by Zizhi's familial relationship with Su Qin. Instead, it was forged through shared conflict. Framing their relationship in this manner establishes that, through the events that followed, they allied with one another to conspire against the ruling monarchies and garner benefits for their selves.

⁷ *Zhanguo ce*, “燕一”:

Sima Qian's rephrasing of this part of the text presents kinship, rather than intrigue, as the central motivation for the future actions of both Zizhi and Su Dai. The narrative according to the *Zhanguo ce* is of a classist, political struggle between ministers and monarch elites. Sima Qian's recreation of the narrative is, in contrast, a conflict between families over control and power. He changes the focus of the story from class to kinship.

This refocus of the nature of their relationship is significant to the context of the next segment of the text:

Su Dai served as Qi's envoy to Yan, and King Kuai asked him: "What is the Qi king like?" He replied: "He will certainly not be a dominating force." The Yan King asked: "Why is that?" He replied: "He does not trust his ministers." Su Dai wanted to provoke the Yan king to honor Zizhi. Consequently, the Yan King greatly entrusted Zizhi. Because of this, Zizhi bequeathed to Su Dai one hundred gold, and he thereafter heeded his position as envoy.⁸

This section begins to establish the catalyst for King Kuai's abdication. The king looked for information on the rival Qi king from his spy, Su Dai. The spy in turn was motivated by his own desires. He manipulated the king by appealing to Kuai's desire for hegemony. In a desire to set himself apart from the Qi king, Kuai was tricked into placing all of his trust in his minister Zizhi. In exchange for his deception, Zizhi bribed Su Dai and gave him influence over the matters of Yan state.

Sima Qian makes two significant changes to the text here. In the sentence immediately following "He does not trust his ministers", he replaces the *Zhanguo ce*'s use of "濟" (*ji*, "to help/to aid") with "激" (*ji*, to incite, to stir up), and "厚任" (*hou ren*,

⁸ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1555.

(a) generous appointment/office) with “尊” (*zun*, honor, respect). By replacing the end goal of a better position with the more intangible honor, he shifts the motivation from a desire based in self-interest to one more in line with traditional Chinese values. The individual desires power or connections to that power, but the collective kinship seeks respect. The narrative therefore becomes more about collective action of a family unit than about an alliance between individuals.

Sima Qian also removes the tone of subtle intrigue from the text, by changing the manipulative implications of the passive verb to one of direct action. The original text folds Su Dai's actions into his role as envoy to King Kuai. By altering the verb from “assist” to “incite”, Sima Qian makes Su Dai's intentions blatant and straightforward. The change seems minute, however it is in this change of tone that Sima Qian shifts blame for Yan's downfall from the manipulation of Yan's ministers to the mistake of its king, Kuai. The narrative in the *Zhanguo ce* is a cautionary tale about the influence of advisors. In contrast, the *Shiji*'s narrative is about the propriety of kingly deeds.

A second voice, Lu Maoshou, chimed in with advice to King Kuai:

Lu Maoshou said to the Yan King: "It would be better to take the kingdom and offer it to Minister Zizhi. People say of Sage Yao, despite offering All Under Heaven to Xu You, Xu You refused. There was an abdication by name, however Yao did not lose All Under Heaven. Now, if the king offers the kingdom to minister Zizhi, Zizhi certainly will not dare to accept, and the king and Yao will be peers." The Yan King therefore subordinated the kingdom to Zizhi, and Zizhi became a prominent figure.⁹

⁹ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1555-1556.

Lu Maoshou invoked the legends of the sage kings in this passage, to appeal to King Kuai's sense of virtue and ritual. In the original story, Yao offered his throne to the hermit Xu You three times, and Xu You in turn refused all three times. This reflected the selflessness and honor of both men. Lu Maoshou convinced the king that if he offered his throne to Zizhi, he would also refuse, and then King Kuai would be emulating Yao's actions. The narrative does not detail the specific interactions between King Kuai and Zizhi, but the implications of the final sentence are that Zizhi in fact accepted the offer, and became the dominant leader over the state.

Sima Qian left this passage intact from its original text in the *Zhanguo ce*. This is perhaps because the message can be interpreted in a variety of ways, to uphold either a Confucian perspective, or from a position of political intrigue. Lu Maoshou mentions that Yao's interactions with Xu You was an "abdication by name". From the Vertical and Horizontal Alliances perspective, he seems to imply that Yao's fake abdication garnered him benefits without any loss of power. He gained the respect of the people and a reputation for humility, while still maintaining control of All Under Heaven. However, from the Confucian standpoint, this event reads as a form of ritual etiquette.

The legendary sage kings are again invoked in the next passage:

It may have been said: "Yu recommended Yi, although he had already made Qi an official. And when Yu was old, he wondered whether or not Qi was insufficient to serve as leader over All Under Heaven, and he instead transmitted that position to Yi. Afterwards, however, Qi attacked Yi with his faction, and seized the position. All Under Heaven says that in name Yu transmitted All Under Heaven to Yi, however in reality he forced Qi to take it for himself. Now, the king says that he submits the kingdom to Zizhi, however the officials only belong to the prince. In name they submit to Zizhi, but in actuality it is the prince who uses them as well." Because of this, the king collected the seals from officials who received three

hundred shi salaries, and it thus validated Zizhi. Zizhi traveled to the southern border for kingly affairs. Then old Kuai no longer held court or looked after the ministers. All political matters were decided by Zizhi.¹⁰

Someone reminded King Kuai of the story of sage King Yu, the founder of the Xia dynasty. Yu abdicated to Yi, but Yu's hereditary heir Qi overthrew Yi and retook the kingdom. As a result of hearing the anecdote, King Kuai felt inspired to give Zizhi authority over high-ranking officials to Zizhi. Zizhi became king, and Kuai retired from courtly affairs.

Neither Sima Qian's record nor the *Zhanguo ce* attribute this final piece of advice to a single individual. Instead, the speaker is an anonymous individual, and the truth of whether or not it was actually said is left to ambiguity. In one of his edited volumes of the *Shiji*, William Neinhauser Jr. speculates that this passage is designed to round out the mythical aspects of the narrative by creating a pattern of three, a common framework found in mythology.¹¹ Recalling the legend of Yao offering the kingdom to Xu You, he made the offer three times before receiving the merits of virtue. In this narrative, King Kuai's advisors also make their recommendations three times, creating a parallel with the legend. Although Kuai heeds the advice of his ministers in each successive account, it is not until the third suggestion that the narrative recognizes Zizhi as overseer of kingly affairs.

Three years later, the Yan kingdom was in chaos, and the masses were afraid. General Shi Bei and Prince Ping schemed together, and prepared to attack Zizhi. All of the generals told Qi King Min: "If you thusly travel to Yan, it will certainly

¹⁰ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1556.

¹¹ William Neinhauser Jr.,

fall apart." The Qi King therefore decreed a servant to call on Yan Prince Ping with a message: "We hear the prince is righteous, and intends to abolish selfish acts while upholding public interests, keep in order the proper meanings of monarch and minister, and correct the positions of father and son. We are a small country, thought to be inconsequential. However, we will follow only in accordance with the Prince's orders."¹²

This part mentions nonspecific disarray in Yan a few years after the abdication to Zizhi. King Kuai's hereditary heir, Prince Ping, plotted with Yan General Shi Bei to overthrow Zizhi. Taking advantage of the chaos, the king of Qi contacted the prince to offer his support. Up to this point the story has alluded to the political tension between Yan and Qi, and it mentions previous conflict between them, but this is the first point in which the rivalry directly plays out in the series of events relating to Kuai's abdication.

The *Zhanguo ce* describes the time period of this section of text as "Zizhi's third year," paralleling the military conflicts in "Yan King Kuai's third year" which were detailed in the first section of the narrative. Sima Qian removes this designation in the *Shiji*, subtly denouncing the legitimacy of Zizhi's reign. He also changes the attribution of the advice to attack Yan. In *Zhanguo ce* it is Prime Minister Chuizi who offers the advice, but Sima Qian changes this to "all of the generals". This shift from the political to the military implies the role of warfare in divine punishment. In early Chinese writing, war served as an extension of the punishment system. Military action stamped out

¹² Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1556-1557.

improper government officials in the same manner that corporal punishment redirected the misguided behavior of the public.¹³

Furthermore, Sima Qian changes the name of the Qi king from Xuan to Min. This is important to note, for two reasons. First, it highlights potential errors in chronology in the *Shiji*. The *Zhanguo ce* states that Xuan was king through the entirety of the events in King Kuai's abdication narrative. However, Sima Qian implies a transition in rule from Xuan to his hereditary successor Min somewhere during this time. There is some disagreement as to actual timeline of King Min's rule. In his translation of the *Shiji*, Crump places Min's reign at 323-284 B.C.E. However, earlier in the narrative, Sima Qian states that King Xuan was the ruler shortly after King Kuai's enthronement, and Crump places Xuan's rule from 319 to 301 B.C.E. In other parts of the *Shiji*, Sima Qian places King Xuan's rule at 342 to 324 B.C.E., and King Min's at 323 to 284 B.C.E.

Confusion regarding these dates may be due to Sima Qian's distortion of the timeline in his records. Edward L. Shaughnessy attributes the issue to "the *Shiji*'s failure to recognize the (illegitimate) reign of Tian Hou Yan (383-375 B.C.), which for five years ran concurrently with the reign of Qi Kang Gong (404-379 B.C.) ... eventually producing a twenty-three-year error in the dates of reign for King Xuan (whose dates of reign are actually 319-301 B.C.)."¹⁴ This introduces the second point of importance for

¹³ For more on the relationship between violence and politics, see Karen Turner, "War, Punishment, and the Law of Nature in Early Chinese Concepts of the State", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 53, no. 2 (Dec. 1993): 285-324.

¹⁴ Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Calendar and Chronology", in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.

this change. Sima Qian's unwillingness to accept the reign of kings deemed illegitimate by traditional standards—both Tian Hou Yan, or in the case of this passage, Zizhi, alters his perception and record of history. It is in discrepancies and alterations such as these that he reveals his lens through his writing.

It is impossible to know for certain whether or not Su Dai's actions at the beginning of the tale were motivated by political intrigue on behalf of Qi. However, both the *Shiji* and the *Zhanguo ce* mention Su Qin was a Yan spy manipulating the Qi king. He was caught by Qi and executed, and Su Dai took his place. It is therefore not out of the realm of possibility that the Qi king sent Su Dai to Yan in retaliation. The structure of the narrative reinforces this theory; the series of events is framed in the context of the relationship between Yan and Qi. However, in both versions of the story, the writers disassociate the Qi king's actions from the catalyst of the overarching narrative by making them reactive, rather than active.

Depending on the perspective of the writer, this disassociation can be interpreted in a couple of ways. Through the lens of Vertical and Horizontal Alliances, it emphasizes the importance of taking advantage of an opportunity, and creating alliances to take down an enemy. The Qi king allied himself with Prince Ping, in order to target Yan at a pivotal moment. The prince was in a disadvantaged situation, and the Qi administration claimed to be of insignificant authority. However, by combining their power to overtake the Yan throne, they proved the merits of weaker states unifying to overtake a stronger one—perhaps alluding to the role that the *Zhanguo ce* writers felt the Six States should play against the Qin state.

From Sima Qian's perspective, though, Qi's reactive role plays a different purpose. By placing the abdication event at the fore, the narrative serves as a Confucianist cautionary tale about the cause and effect relationship between improper action and immediate ruin. Here, disaster, downfall, and chaos are Heaven's divine punishments for breaking up the proper relationship roles between king and minister, father and son. The Qi king and Prince Ping are not co-conspirators in this iteration, but restorers of the natural order.

This lens is reinforced by the chapter commentary that Sima Qian leaves in the concluding sections of the *Shiji*:

When King Wu captured the Zhou kingdom, All Under Heaven was not harmonized and so it collapsed. Since King Cheng was young, Guan and Cai doubted him and the Huai River barbarians turned on him, and so the Duke of Shao upheld morality, secured and collected the royal family, and quieted the eastern indigenous tribes. Yan King Kuai abdicated, only resulted in disaster and disorder. To honor the poem "Gan Tang", I produced "Yan's Fourth Family House".¹⁵

"Gan Tang" is a poem honoring the virtues of the Duke of Shao. By calling on the spirit of the poem, and comparing and contrasting King Kuai's history with that of King Wu and the Duke of Shao, Sima Qian reveals his motivations and establishes the theme of the chapter as inheritance and succession. King Wu was able to overthrow the Shang dynasty and create the Zhou because corruption removed the Mandate of Heaven from the present government; thus, King Wu restored balance to the country. The Duke of Shao prevented a coup from King Cheng's brothers and maintained order. In contrast, King Kuai's abdication destroyed the harmony of All Under Heaven and threw the state into chaos.

¹⁵ Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 130.3307.

This chaos and disaster is embodied in the next segment of Kuai's abdication narrative:

The Prince then ordered his supporters to muster, and General Shi Bei surrounded the palace. They intended to attack Zizhi, but could not. General Shi Bei and the masses turned back to attack Prince Ping; General Shi Bei died, and was martyred. Afterwards, there were several months of disaster. The dead numbered in the tens of thousands, everyone was afraid, and the masses wished to flee.¹⁶

Through this passage it is clear that the consequence of Kuai's actions is civil war. The prince and the general combined forces to overthrow Zizhi. When that proved difficult, General Shi Bei betrayed the prince. He was killed in the ensuing conflict.

It is interesting to note that here the fear of the masses is repeated verbatim, as in the previous segment of text. This literary repetition, the themes of chaos and unrest, serve as bookends for the story of Yan's civil war. By marking the events in this way, the authors divided the narrative into three parts: cause, effect, and resolution. The cause of the conflict was Kuai's abdication to Zizhi. The effect was unrest and civil war. The resolution, contained in the last portion of the narrative, is the restoration of order to Yan.

As mentioned above, the resolution to the chaos in Yan comes in the final passage of the text:

Meng Ke¹⁷ said to the Qi King: "Attack Yan now, and this season of Wen and Wu cannot fail." The king then decreed Zhangzi general over all five armies, and dispatched them northward on an expedition against Yan. The soldiers did not put up a fight, and the city gates were not closed, for Yan's lord Kuai had passed

¹⁶ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1557.

¹⁷ Mencius.

away. Qi was victorious. Zizhi was killed two years later in Yan, then the Yan people upheld the noble son Ping, who became Yan King Zhao.¹⁸

The forces of Qi finally intervened in Yan to overthrow Zizhi. In the end, King Kuai died, Zizhi was killed, and Prince Ping was established as Yan King Zhao. Though two of the major players in the tale die in this passage, the overall conflict reads as generally peaceful and non-confrontational. This is a sharp contrast to the violent rebellion which ensued in the previous section of text. This idea plays into the themes of the disaster narrative, and Heaven's role in restoring balance when the corrupt actions of men interfere with its will.

As was previously discussed, military action in China served as punishment, especially in the reinterpretations of history. A military invasion was the extension of Heaven's will; that was the method by which it enacted its authority through the interactions of men. Chinese society understood warfare through the same lens that it viewed natural disasters such as famine or plague. One might interpret that the reason the Qi forces did not face any opposition when they invaded Yan was because they had the will of Heaven on their side. Here, the Qi forces are used as a tool to restore order to a state in chaos.

The disaster narrative is a common theme in ancient Chinese history. It was used as a tool to steer government officials toward the designated proper path of traditional values. Kuai's abdication tale became one such method of warning in numerous non-Mohist scholarly texts. For example, in the *Chuangzi*, Daoist scholar Chuang Chou

¹⁸ Sima Qian, *Shiji* 34.1557.

(355?-275 B.C.E.) uses Kuai's story of abdication, alongside the Duke of Po's rule by contention, as to illustrate how ancient methods of governing have a time and place. He remarks, "A beam or a ridgepole may be used to breach a city wall, but it cannot be used to plug a hole, which is to say that implements have specific purposes."¹⁹

Chuang Chou essentially argues that the methods of succession for the rulers in the dynasties preceding the Western Zhou period are outdated, and therefore destined for disaster. "He who acts contrary to the times and contravenes custom is called a usurper; he who accords with the times and conforms to custom is called a disciple of righteousness."²⁰ By his logic, the methods of the sage kings in the abdication legend are not in themselves unrighteous. They are, however, the product of societal values of their time; those values have evolved as society changed over time, and therefore belong to an antiquated tradition that has no time and place in the contemporary period.

One can read deeper into the text and also see that through the rivalry between Yan and Qi, the contest between Mohism and Confucianism plays out.

19 Chuang Chou, "Chuang Tzu, Chapter 17 and Other Passages," In *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair, et al, 22-32, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 25-26.

20 Chuang Chou, "Chuang Tzu, Chapter 17 and Other Passages," In *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Victor H. Mair, et al, 22-32, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 25-26.

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