

Subversion Unearthed: Criticism of Hereditary Succession in the Newly Discovered Manuscripts *

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The concept of a monarch's yielding the throne to a worthier candidate is one of the most puzzling topics in Zhanguo ("Warring States", 453–221 BCE)¹ political thought. On one hand, references to abdication, particularly to the legend of Yao's 堯 abdication to his meritorious minister, Shun 舜, and of Shun's later abdication in favor of Yu 禹, are ubiquitous in Zhanguo writings. On the other hand, not a single received Zhanguo text discusses this issue systematically. Angus Graham asserted that such muted discussion may reflect thinkers' reluctance to engage in the politically sensitive issue of questioning hereditary rule, but expressed confidence that the extant examples of advocacy of ruler's abdication were "likely to be the tip of the iceberg".²

Graham's insight has been confirmed within less than two decades since the publication of his seminal *Disputers of the Tao*. Three heretofore unknown texts, one discovered at the site of Guodian 郭店 (namely "Tang Yu zhi Dao" 唐虞之道) and two published by the Shanghai Museum ("Zi Gao" 子羔 and "Rong Cheng shi" 容成氏), deal extensively with the issue of abdication. Although the three differ in their emphasis, each displays a remarkably favorable attitude toward abdication as an appropriate way of placing the worthier ruler on the throne. Elsewhere I suggested that these texts may be a missing link between the nascent discussions of the abdication in the *Mozzi* and the critical reaction to pro-abdication sentiments in a series of late Zhanguo texts, beginning with the *Mengzi*.³ Here I shall focus on each of these texts and analyze their distinct argumentation and the subtle ways in which the authors tried to promulgate their highly controversial criticism of hereditary succession, which was then and later the only acceptable way of fixing the ruler on the throne. I hope that the discussion will highlight the exceptional importance of the three texts for improving our understanding of the subtle under-currents of Zhanguo discourse.

1 The Background: Early Evolution of Abdication Discourse

In a seminal study published in the 1930s Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) opined that the concept of abdication and the Yao-Shun-Yu legend were introduced into Zhanguo discourse

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1 Hereafter, all dates are Before Common Era, unless indicated otherwise.

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

3 See Pines, "Disputers of Abdication: Zhanguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign's Power," *T'oung Pao* 91 (2005), 243–300.

by the followers of Mozi 墨子 (c. 460–390).⁴ While some of Gu’s assertions, particularly his unequivocal identification of the abdication doctrine with Mozi’s followers may be called into question, the basic thrust of his argument, namely, the relatively late origins of the concept of abdication, appears to be valid. The *Mozi* is indeed the earliest text which unequivocally mentions Yao’s elevation of Shun as a manifestation of “Elevating the Worthy” (*shang xian* 尚賢) policy, and is also the first text to mention explicitly Yao’s yielding the throne to Shun. None of the earlier texts deals with the abdication legend, and even Yao and Shun themselves appear to be relatively marginal figures in pre-fourth century BCE discourse.⁵

Less than a century separates Mozi and Mengzi 孟子 (c. 379–304), but this century was one of the most turbulent in the history of the Chinese world. The profound change in all walks of life, the emergence of the centralized bureaucratic state with its hyper-active administrative machine, the demise of the ancient pedigree-based aristocratic order – all these effected a series of remarkable intellectual breakthroughs. In particular, the idea of meritocracy, powerfully proposed by Mozi, became almost ubiquitously accepted. As persons of relatively humble background began replacing their nominal superiors, the descendants of the Chunqiu 春秋 period (771–453) nobles, at the top of the government apparatus, some thinkers began pondering over the possibility of implementing the principle of “Elevating the Worthy” at the peak of the ruling pyramid. The idea of abdication consequently gained popularity, as expressed in a saying cited by Mengzi’s disciple, Wan Zhang 萬章:

萬章問曰：「人有言『至於禹而德衰，不傳於賢而傳於子』，有諸？」

People have a saying: “By the time of Yu, virtue had declined; [hence] he did not transfer the power to the worthiest, but to his own son.” Do you agree?⁶

Prior to the recent discoveries this anonymous saying had been a major indicator of the possible high tide of pro-abdication sentiments in the middle Zhanguo period. As is well known, these sentiments had significantly subsided in the aftermath of the notorious attempt of King Kuai of Yan 燕王噲 (r. 320–314) to follow the footsteps of Yao and Shun and to yield the throne to his minister, Zi Zhi 子之 in 314. The resultant internal turmoil and foreign occupation caused many thinkers to reconsider the practicability of abdication and its desirability. Late Zhanguo texts frequently display negative views of abdication, and even those texts which generally endorse the idea of yielding the throne usually confine their support to endorsing the unique acts of Yao and Shun, without posing further challenges to the principle of

4 See Gu Jiegang, “Shanrang chuanshuo qi yu Mozia kao” 禪讓傳說起於墨家考, repr. in *Gu Jiegang gu shi lunwenji* 顧頡剛古史論文集, ed. Pian Yuqian 駢宇騫 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1988), vol. 1, 295–369.

5 Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 (comp.), *Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1994), “Shang xian, shang” 尚賢上 8: 67; “Shang xian, zhong” 尚賢中 9: 77. The “Shang xian” chapters of the *Mozi* belong to the so-called “core chapters” of this text, which were convincingly dated by Wu Yujiang to the period close to Mozi’s life-time (see his “*Mozi* gepian zhenwei kao” 墨子各篇真偽考, in *Mozi jiaozhu*, 1025–1055). Significantly, Yao’s abdication is mentioned only in the B and C versions of the triple “Shang xian” chapters, which seem to be of later origin than the A version (see Karen Desmet, “The Chronological Sequence of the Mohist Core Chapters: A New Approach”, paper presented at the 15th EACS Conference, Heidelberg, 25–29 August 2004). For the discussion of references to Yao and Shun in pre-*Mozi* sources, see Pines, “Disputers of Abdication,” 245–248.

6 See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, (annot.), *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1992), “Wan Zhang, shang” 萬章上 9.6: 221.

hereditary succession as Wan Zhang did.⁷ It is on this background that the three unearthed texts with their overt pro-abdication views become particularly valuable. Being roughly contemporary with Mengzi's and Wan Zhang's life-time, they open a window into a heretofore largely unknown strand of the elite public opinion of the fourth century BCE.⁸ As such, they allow us to analyze both the ways in which proponents of abdication tried to bolster their controversial concept, and the flaws in their argumentation which may explain the quick subsidence of abdication discourse by the later half of the Zhanguo period.

2 Heaven's sons serving a human son: Meritocracy of the "Zi Gao"

The first of the recently discovered texts to be dealt with here, the "Zi Gao", which survived on fourteen (or less) mostly damaged slips, is the shortest and least sophisticated, but perhaps the most blatant. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, the late director of the Shanghai Museum and the first editor of the slips, suggested that the text is divided into two parts, the first of which focuses on Yao and Shun, while the second deals with the divine origin of the progenitors of the "Three Dynasties" (Yu of the Xia 夏, Xie 契 of the Shang 商 and Hou Ji 后稷 of the Zhou 周). Later, several scholars proposed a rearrangement of the slips, using part of a slip currently found in the Hong Kong Chinese University collection; now a new consensus is emerging which places the portion of the Three Royal Progenitors at the beginning of the text, while the section of Yao and Shun is placed at the later part.⁹ In the newly arranged form the text reads:

7 Among major late Zhanguo texts which display reserved or overtly critical attitude toward abdication, one can mention the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Xunzi* 荀子 and *Han Feizi* 韓非子; for detailed analysis of their arguments, see Pines, "Disputers of Abdication," 282–293. For the impact of the Yan affair on changing attitudes toward abdication, see e.g., Li Cunshan 李存山, "Fansi jing shi guanxi: cong 'Qi gong Yi' shuo qi" 反思經史關係：從“啓攻益”說起, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 3 (2003), 75–85; Peng Bangben 彭邦本, "Chu jian 'Tang Yu zhi Dao' chu tan" 楚簡《唐虞之道》初探, ed. Wuhan daxue Zhongguo wenhua yanjiuyuan 武漢大學中國文化研究院, *Guodian Chu jian guoji xueshu yantao hui lunwenji* 郭店楚簡國際學術研討會論文集 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin, 2000, hereafter *Guoji hui*), 261–272.

8 The first to raise the impact of the three texts on our understanding of the abdication legend is Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, "Xin chutu Xian Qin wenxian yu gu shi chuanshuo" 新出土先秦文獻與古史傳說, in Qiu Xigui, *Zhongguo chutu gu wenxian shi jiang* 中國出土古文獻十講 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue, 2004), 18–45 (especially 30–38). There is little agreement regarding the dating of the Guodian texts, and even less regarding those published by the Shanghai Museum, as their provenance is unknown. In any case, the majority view holds that the date of Qin's 秦 occupation of the ancient Chu 楚 heartland in 278 should serve as a *terminus ante quem* for the tombs, where the texts were found. Since it is highly unlikely that the texts were composed only on the eve of their interment in the tomb, we may plausibly assume that they were composed in the later half of the fourth century BCE, i.e. roughly during Mengzi's (and Wan Zhang's) life-time. For an alternative scenario, see Wang Baoxuan 王葆琰, "Shi lun Guodian Chu jian ge pian de zhuanzuo shidai ji qi beijing – jian lun Guodian ji Baoshan Chu mu de shidai wenti" 試論郭店楚簡各篇的撰作時代及其背景—兼論郭店及包山楚墓的時代問題, *Guodian Chu jian yanjiu* 郭店楚簡研究 [= *Zhongguo zhixue* 20] (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu, 1999), 366–390.

9 For the original publication, see "Zi Gao" 子羔, edited and annotated by Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, in *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, Vol. 2 (Shanghai: Guji, 2002), 181–199. The name "Zi Gao" is written on the back of the fifth slip, which suggests that this is an independent text; but since it was written by the same hand and on similar slips as two other Shanghai Museum texts, namely *Kongzi Shi lun* 孔子詩論 and *Lu bang da ban* 魯邦大旱, some scholars suggested that the three manuscripts may be parts of a larger composite text. See Fukuda Tetsuyuki 福田哲之, "Shanhai hakubutsukan zō Sengoku So chikusho *Shi Kō no saikentō*" 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書《子羔》の再検討, in *Shin shutsudo shiryō to Chugoku shisshi* 新出土資料と中國思想史, ed. Ōsaka Dai-

子羔問於孔子曰：「三王者之作也，皆人子也，而其父賤不足稱也與？殿（抑）亦成天子也與？」孔子曰：「善，而問之也。久矣，其莫[?]9} <禹之母……之女>也，觀於伊而得之，娠三{11, upper part}年而畫（？）於背而生，生而能言，是禹也。契之母，有媯氏之女{10}也，遊於央臺之上，有燕銜卵而措諸其前，取而吞之，娠{11, lower part}三年而畫（？）於膺，生乃呼曰：{Hong Kong slip}『欽（？）！』是契也。后稷之母，有郃氏之女也，遊於玄咎之內，冬見芡，收而薦之，乃見人武，履以祈禱，曰：『帝之武，尚使{12}[]是后稷之母也。三王者之作也如是。』子羔曰：「然則三王者孰為[]{13}。」¹⁰

Zi Gao asked Kongzi: “When the [progenitors of the] Three Dynasties were created, each of them was a son of a human; were not their fathers in a humble [position] which was not worth talking about? Or did they also become Sons of Heaven?”

Kongzi replied: “It is a good question! Long ago, when there was no.... <Yu’s mother was XX’s daughter>; she was watching the Yi river and became pregnant; after the pregnancy of three years [the fetus] was imprinted (?) at her back, and then [the child] was born; at his birth he began to talk: this was Yu.

“Xie’s mother was the daughter of the Song family, she traveled on the Yang terrace when she saw a swallow laying an egg. She put the egg in front of her, took it and swallowed it. She was pregnant for three years after which [the fetus] was imprinted (?) at her chest; then [the child] was born and shouted “Qin!” This was Xie.

“Hou Ji’s mother was the daughter of the Tai family. She walked within the Xuan palace (?), when, in the winter, she saw the *yao* plant; she picked it up and made it an offering. Then she saw a human’s footprint. She stepped into it, and prayed, saying: ‘This is the Thearch’s footprint, let him...’ This was Hou Ji’s mother.¹¹ In this way the Three Kings were created.”

Zi Gao asked: “So, among the Three Kings who is ...?”

gaku Chūgoku tetsugaku kenkyūshitsu 大阪大學中國哲學研究室, Chūgoku kenkyū shūkan bessatsu 中國研究集刊別冊 33, 2003, 82–90. Cf. Lin Zhipeng 林志鵬, “Zhanguo Chu zhushu ‘Zi Gao’ pian fuyuan zouyi” 戰國楚竹書《子羔》篇復原芻議, in *Shangbo guan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu yanjiu xubian* 上海館藏戰國楚竹書研究續編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2004, hereafter *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*), ed. Shanghai daxue gudai wenming yanjiu zhongxin 上海大學古代文明研究中心 and Qinghua daxue sixiang wenhua yanjiu suo 清華大學思想文化研究所, 53–84; Li Rui 李銳, “Shilun Shangbo jian ‘Zi Gao’ zhu zhang de fenhe” 試論上博簡《子羔》諸章的分合, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 85–96. Fukuda’s proposed rearrangement was however superseded even before its publication by a careful study by Chen Jian 陳劍 (first published on www.jianbo.org/Wssf/2003/chenjian01.htm), “Shangbo jian ‘Zi Gao’, ‘Congzheng’ pian de zhujian pinhe yu bianlian wenti xiaoyi” 上博簡《子羔》、《從政》篇的竹簡拼合與編連問題小議, *Wenmu* 5 (2003), 56–59, 64. Chen’s research served as a foundation for further similar rearrangements proposed independently by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, “Tan tan Shangbo jian ‘Zi Gao’ pian de jian xu” 談談上博簡《子羔》篇的簡序, in *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 1–11; Li Xueqin 李學勤, “Chu jian ‘Zi Gao’ yanjiu” 楚簡《子羔》研究, in *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 12–17; Liao Mingchun 廖名春, “Shangbo jian ‘Zi Gao’ pian shi bu” 上博簡《子羔》篇釋補, *Zhongzhou xuekan* 11 (2003), 85–90 (published also on the net: www.hnass.com.cn/zxk/200306/6-24.htm). Generally, I follow Qiu Xigui’s arrangement, which integrates most of the earlier studies.

10 The numbers in scrolled brackets indicate here and elsewhere the slip number according to the sequence proposed by the original publishers; the characters are invariably written in their modern form according to the editors’ or later scholars’ suggestions. Additions in <> stand here and elsewhere for the reconstruction of the missing or illegible characters.

11 The portion of Hou Ji’s mother contains several characters the content of which is hotly contested; in my reconstruction I relied heavily on the article by Zhang Fuhai 張富海, “Shang bo jian ‘Zi Gao’ pian ‘Hou Ji zhi mu’ jie kaoshi” 上博簡《子羔》篇“后稷之母”節考釋, www.jianbo.org/Wssf/2003/zhangfuhai01.htm.

Zi Gao's first question sets the tone for the subsequent dialogue. His blatant emphasis on the humble origins of the progenitors of the Three Dynasties displays a radical meritocratic spirit. Indeed, if the founders of the royal dynasties were so humble that their position "was not worth talking about", then either their descendants lack the divine right to rule, or, more probably, every humble person can aspire to become a dynastic founder sooner or later. To this provocative question Confucius replies in the way which at first glance is supposed to protect the sacralty of the royal power. By emphasizing the alleged divine origins of the royal progenitors, Confucius seems to disprove Zi Gao's questioning of the dynastic legitimacy. Yet, the second part of the dialogue is due to overturn the initial impression, as the discussion shifts from sons of Heaven to a "son of a human", Shun. After a lacuna caused by the broken slip, the narrative continues:¹²

曰：「有虞氏之樂正瞽瞍之子也。」子羔曰：「何故以得為帝？」孔子曰：「昔者而弗世也，善與善相受也，故能治天下，平萬邦，使無有、小大、肥瘠遍皆{1}得其社稷百姓而奉守之。堯見舜之德賢，故讓之。」子羔曰：「堯之得舜也，舜之德則誠善{6}與？伊（抑）堯之德則甚明與？」孔子曰：「鈞（均）也。舜奮於童土之田，則{2}...

... said: "[Shun was] the son of the Musical Master of the Yu lineage, Gu Sou." Zi Gao asked: "Why was he able to become the Thearch?" Kongzi replied: "In antiquity there was no hereditary [succession], but the good transmitted [the throne] to each other. Hence they were able to rule properly All under Heaven, to pacify myriad states, to let those who have and those who have not, the large and the small, the abundant and the scarce – each one to attain its altars of soil and grain and the hundred clans, and to respectfully preserve them.¹³ Yao observed that Shun's virtue was [that of a] worthy [person]; hence he yielded [to Shun].

Zi Gao asked: "That Yao obtained Shun, was it because Shun's virtue was truly good, or was it because Yao's virtue was extraordinarily clear-sighted? Kongzi answered: "Both. Shun was plowing in the wastelands, then..."¹⁴

之童土之黎民也。」孔子曰：「□¹⁵{3}...吾聞夫舜其幼也，敏；以孝持其言{4}...或以閔而遠。堯之取舜也，從諸草茅之中，與之言禮，說博{5}...□而和。故夫舜之德其誠賢矣！由諸畎畝之中而使君天下而稱。{8}

...is [one of the] black-headed people from bare soil." Kongzi said: "I heard that Shun when young was perceptive, he relied on filiality in his words.... some became estranged because of anxiety. When Yao adopted Shun he followed him into the middle of the wilderness. He spoke to him of ritual, [and Shun] encouraged him to be broad(?)... and harmonious. Thus, Shun's virtue was really

12 In a brilliant, albeit highly speculative attempt to reconstruct the lacking sentence, Liao Mingchun proposed substituting the missing later part of slip 13 and the earlier part of slip 1 as follows (Liao's addition is marked by triple asterisks): "Zi Gao asked: 'So, among [the progenitors] of the three dynasties, who was *** the worthiest?' Confucius replied: 'None of [the progenitors] of the three dynasties can equal Shun's worthiness.' Zi Gao said: 'I dare to ask about Thearch Shun.' Confucius *** replied: '...'" 子羔曰：然則三王者孰***為賢？孔子曰：三王者皆不如帝舜賢也。子羔曰：請問帝舜？孔子***曰：(Liao Mingchun, "Shangbo jian 'Zi Gao' pian shi bu," 87).

13 In reconstructing this sentence I adopt the interpretation of the disputed characters and the punctuation as proposed by Zhang Guiguang 張桂光, "Shangbo jian (er) 'Zi Gao' pian shi du zha ji" 《上博簡》(二)《子羔》篇釋讀劄記, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 34–41.

14 Slip no. 2 is broken.

15 □ stands here and elsewhere for illegible characters.

[that of the] worthy: he came from amidst the fields, but [Yao] let him rule All under Heaven – [thereby] he became famous.”¹⁶

The exaltation of Shun in this section completely overshadows that of the royal progenitors at the beginning of the dialogue. First, Shun – who was clearly a son of a human and not of a God, a poor peasant plowing in the wastelands – succeeded in obtaining the position of a Thearch (*Di* 帝), i.e. of a divine ruler, superior to an ordinary king (*wang* 王), surpassing thereby the royal progenitors. Second, Confucius unequivocally states that this exceptional success derived exclusively from the proper implementation of the norms of succession in the past: as the good transmitted power to each other, they were able to attain the supreme position and to ensure thereby universal peace and harmony. The very legitimacy of hereditary transmission maintained by the Three Dynasties is questioned, and its existence “in antiquity” is denied. Third, the strong emphasis on Shun’s original humble position and his largely self-made advancement – a common *topos* in Zhanguo texts – further serves to highlight his advantage over the putative Heaven’s sons. The radically meritocratic nature of the text becomes even more pronounced in the last portion, which juxtaposes Shun and the royal progenitors:

子羔曰：「如舜在今之世則何若？」孔子曰：「{8}亦已先王之由道，不逢明王，則亦不大使。」孔子曰：「舜其可謂受命之民。舜，人子也，{7}而叁天子事之。{14}

Zi Gao asked: “Should Shun be in our generation, how would it be?” Kongzi replied: “As none follows any longer the Way of the former kings, he would not meet an enlightened king and hence would not be employed in a great [position].”¹⁷

Kongzi said: “Shun can be called ‘the Man who received the Mandate.’ Shun is a human son, but all the three Heaven’s sons¹⁸ served him.”

Severe damage of several slips and abundance of difficult characters hinder our understanding of parts of the text, but its radicalism is undeniable. The unequivocal readiness of the authors to draw far-reaching conclusions concerning the nature of the social hierarchy is striking. Shun’s low status is contrasted with the divine origins of “Heaven’s sons” – the progenitors of the Three Dynasties. Yet despite this inherent inequality, the sons of Heaven had to serve the son of a man – a humble commoner, one of the black-headed people. The text leaves no doubt that virtue (*de* 德), not pedigree, should be the only determinant of a person’s position.

The explicit radicalism of the “Zi Gao” is further emphasized by Zi Gao’s provocative question: “Should Shun be in our generation, how would it be?” In a well-ordered age, Shun must become a Thearch. Today, as we learn from Confucius’ reply, the Way of the former kings has been lost, and a person of Shun’s qualities can hardly expect a respectable appointment. Insufficient implementation of meritocratic principles and the adherence to hereditary succession are therefore harshly criticized. As we shall see below, this criticism is echoed, albeit in a somewhat different form, in other recently unearthed texts.

16 In reconstructing the first two sentences of this passage I adopt the version of Zhang Guiguang; for the rest I follow Qiu Xigui.

17 Confucius’ reply is hotly disputed between the scholars; I follow Qiu Xigui’s reading.

18 As convincingly argued by Qiu Xigui (“Tan tan Shangbo jian,” 9), in the “Zi Gao”, the term *tiansi* 天子 does not refer to a usual “Son of Heaven” (i.e. a king), but to the literal son of Heaven, i.e. one who was begotten through Heaven’s interference.

Regularizing Abdication: “Tang Yu zhi Dao”

“Tang Yu zhi Dao” is a brief and relatively well preserved text of 709 characters written on 29 slips, most of which are complete. This is the only known text that focuses exclusively on the issue of abdication, which is discussed from various points of view and is supported by several distinct arguments. It begins with the following statement:

唐虞之道，禪而不傳。堯舜之王，利天下而弗利也。禪而不傳，聖之{1}盛也。利天下而弗利也，仁之至也。故昔賢仁聖者如此。身窮不貪，沒{2}而弗利，躬仁矣。必正其身，然後正世，聖道備矣。故唐虞之〈道，禪〉{3}也{4}。

The way of Tang [= Yao] and Yu [= Shun] is to abdicate and not to transmit [the throne to their heirs]. As the kings, Yao and Shun benefited All under Heaven, but did not benefit from it. To abdicate and not transmit is the fullness of sagacity. To benefit All under Heaven but not to benefit from it is the utmost of benevolence. Thus, in antiquity the benevolent and sage were considered worthy to such a degree. Being in dire straits they were not greedy, until the end of their days they did not seek benefits [for themselves]: they embodied benevolence! One must first rectify oneself, and then rectify the world; this is the completeness of the Way of the Sages. Hence, <the way> of Tang and Yu is <to abdicate>.¹⁹

The first passage flatly transposes the notion of abdication from the issue of Zi Gao’s (or earlier Mozi’s) “elevating the worthy” to a more “Confucian” idea of moral rulership. Since abdication is an act of the utmost selflessness, it manifests the ruler’s sagacity and benevolence, and as such allows the ruler to “rectify the world by rectifying himself” in a way that is unmistakably reminiscent of Mengzi’s dictum.²⁰ Abdication is praiseworthy therefore primarily due to its ethical appropriateness, while its political effectiveness is derivative.

By focusing on the ethical aspects of the abdication, the authors of “Tang Yu zhi Dao” removed this topic from the purely administrative realm, where it was placed by earlier thinkers, such as Mozi, and shifted it to the broader issue of “moral politics”. By doing so, the authors clearly sought to enhance the legitimacy of abdication among the “Confucian-minded” part of their audience, namely those statesmen and thinkers who believed in the priority of moral values over purely political considerations. Yet by doing so, they made the issue of abdication much more vulnerable to attacks on moral grounds. Indeed, while the advantages of having a worthy ruler were easily demonstrable, it was not at all clear how the non-hereditary transfer of power could be reconciled with the priority of family values over political obligations, as promulgated by Confucius himself, as well as by many of his followers,

19 Jingmenshi Bowuguan 荊門市博物館 (ed.), *Guodian Chumu zhujuan* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998), “Tang Yu zhi Dao,” 157–158; I follow Li Ling’s 李零 rearrangement of the slips and reconstruction of the illegible characters, as published in his *Guodian Chujian jiaodu ji* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, rev. edition, 2002), 95–99. In the above passage I reject Li Ling’s reconstruction only once, reading the fourth character of the third slip as 躬 and not 窮, following the suggestion of the original editors.

20 “There is a Great Man: He rectifies himself, and the world is rectified” 有大人者，正己而物正者也。(Mengzi, “Jin xin, shang” 盡心上 13.19: 308). Cf. Confucius’ alleged saying: “To rectify yourself in order to pacify the hundred clans: even Yao and Shun would find it difficult!” 「修己以安百姓，堯、舜其猶病諸！」 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (annot.), *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1991), 14.42: 159.

including Mengzi and even the authors of several other Guodian texts.²¹ After all, by appointing Shun, Yao had forsaken his son(s); while Shun by assuming his position became ruler over his own father! Such a contradiction of the established norms did not go unnoticed by Confucian purists, including Mengzi's disciples, who frequently embarrassed their Master by posing troublesome questions regarding Shun's putative lack of filiality in his relations with his father.²² The authors of "Tang Yu zhi Dao" were apparently aware of this problem and tried their best to prove that abdication does not contradict the demands of filiality:

堯舜之行，愛親尊賢。愛{6}親故孝，尊賢故禪。孝之施，愛天下之民。禪之傳，世亡隱德。孝，仁之冕也。{7}禪，義之至也。六帝興于古，皆由此也。愛親忘賢，仁而未義也。尊賢遺親，義而未仁也。古者虞舜篤事瞽叟，乃戴其孝；忠事帝堯，乃戴其臣。{9}愛親尊賢，虞舜其人也。{10}

The conduct of Yao and Shun was to love relatives and respect the worthies. Since they loved relatives they were filial; since they respected the worthies they abdicated. The implementation of filiality is to love the people in All under Heaven; when transmission is done through abdication, no virtue remains hidden in the world. Filiality is the crown of benevolence; abdication is the utmost of righteousness. In antiquity all the Six Thearchs who rose to power acted in this way.²³ If in loving relatives one forgets men of worth, one is benevolent but not quite righteous. If in respecting men of worth one omits relatives, one is righteous but not quite benevolent. Hence, Yu Shun earnestly served [his father] Gusou, thereby bearing his filial [obligations]; he loyally served Yao, thereby bearing his ministerial [obligations]. Loving the relatives and respecting the worthy – Shun is this kind of a person.

The authors do their best to prove that there is no contradiction between abdication and filiality. Their response is twofold. First, they assert that "the implementation of filiality is to love the people in All under Heaven." If so, then by acting for the sake of humankind Shun continued to behave in the most filial way; political and family obligations may be thus reconciled.²⁴ The authors emphasize that both obligations are complementary and that only by

21 See *Lunyu*, "Zi Lu" 子路 13.18: 139; *Mengzi*, "Jin xin, shang" 13.35: 317; for the Guodian texts that promulgate the priority of family over the state, see *Guodian*, "Liude" 六德, p.188; "Yu cong" 語叢 3 slips 1–5, p. 209; see also Yuri Pines, "Friends or Foes: Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China," *Monumenta Serica* 50 (2002), 39–41. On the complexity of reconciliation between the family ideals and the doctrine of abdication as promulgated in "Tang Yu zhi Dao", see Ouyang Zhenren 歐陽禎人, "Chu jian 'Tang Yu zhi Dao' shan er bu chuan de lilun zhuizong" 楚簡《唐虞之道》“禪而不傳”的理論追蹤, in *Chu di chutu jianbo wenxian sixiang yanjiu* 楚地出土簡帛文獻思想研究, ed. Ding Sixin 丁思新, Vol. 1 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu, 2002), 91–102.

22 *Mengzi*, "Wan Zhang, shang" 9.1–9.4: 206–218; "Jin xin, shang" 13.35: 317. The *Lǐshì chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 says: "People offend Yao labeling him as unkind to his son; Shun – by designating him as humiliating his father; Yu – by telling that his mind was greedy for the [ruler's] position." 人傷堯以不慈之名，舜以卑父之號，禹以貪位之意。See *Lǐshì chūnqiū jiǎoshì* 呂氏春秋校釋, comp. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1990), "Ju nan" 舉難 19.8: 1309; cf. *Lǐshì chūnqiū*, "Dang wu" 當務 11.4: 596.

23 For different attempts to identify "the Six Thearchs," see Deng Jianpeng 鄧建鵬, "'Tang Yu zhi Dao' lin Di xin shi" 《唐虞之道》“六帝”新釋, *Guoji hui*, 277–282.

24 This idea is reminiscent of Mozi's justification of his controversial ideal of "universal love" (*jian'ai* 兼愛) as compatible with family-oriented morality; on the possible impact of Mozi's views on the authors of "Tang Yu zhi Dao", see Carine Defoort, "Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh: The middle position of the Guodian text '唐虞之道 (Tang Yu zhi Dao)'?" *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 76 (2004).

combining them can one become a truly moral person, preserving benevolence and righteousness alike. Second, to avoid any suspicion regarding Shun, the authors specifically mention his exemplary filiality; actually, this feature was crucial for Shun's ascendancy:

古者堯之與舜也；聞舜孝，知其能養天下{22}之老也；聞舜弟，知其能事天下之長也；聞舜慈乎弟（象□□，知其能>{23}爲民主也。{24}

In antiquity, Yao granted [the world] to Shun: He heard of Shun's filiality, and [thus] knew that he would be able to nourish the elders in All under Heaven; he heard of Shun's fraternal feelings, and [thus] knew that he would be able to serve the seniors in All under Heaven; he knew that Shun was kind to his younger brother <Xiang □□, and [thus] knew that he would be able> to become the Master of the people.

Having absolved Shun of aspersions on his filiality, the authors turn to a new and surprising argument to bolster their pro-abdication position: abdication is presented as a proper way to preserve the ruler's well-being and prolonging his life:

古者聖人二十而{25}冒，三十而有家，五十而治天下，七十而致政，四肢倦惰，耳目聰明衰，禪天下而{26}授賢，退而養其生。此以知其弗利也。{27}

In antiquity, the sages were capped at the age of twenty; at thirty they married, at fifty – 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 All under Heaven and delivered it to a worthy; and retired to nurture their lives. Therefore we know that they did not derive benefit [from All under Heaven].

This passage is extraordinarily interesting. First, unlike most extant discussions of abdication, which did not abandon the Yao-Shun narrative (sometimes supplementing it with additional abdication stories from the remote past), the authors of “Tang Yu zhi Dao” try to establish a general pattern of abdication, elevating it to the position of a general political theory, which is only barely disguised by the reference to the “sages” of “antiquity”. Second, this passage is the only known attempt to outline the ideal personal conditions for the sage ruler. This ruler should not prematurely ascend the throne (the age of fifty ensures complete maturity), nor should he stay on the throne for more than twenty years. The reason for the abdication is given with surprising candor: it is the ruler's physical deterioration. The text comes very near to establishing a mandatory retirement age for sovereigns!²⁵

Perhaps to moderate the harsh impression that such a statement could have made on the ruler, the authors of “Tang Yu zhi Dao” explain that the resignation would allow the sovereign to satisfy his personal needs, namely “nurturing his life”. This topic is present elsewhere

25 A similar passage, which quite probably refers to “Tang Yu zhi Dao”, is recorded in the *Guanzi* 管子, where, however, the pro-abdication sentiment is strongly qualified: “[He is] benevolent, and hence does not replace the king; [he is] righteous, and hence at the age of seventy delivers the power” 仁，故不代王；義，故七十而致政。See *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注, comp. Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2004), “Jie” 戒 10.26: 510; cf. *Guanzi*, trans. Allyn W. Rickett, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University, 1985), 379. The *Guanzi* thus favors the abdication gesture, but opposes the minister who would accept the offer. For different views regarding the dating and the nature of the “Jie” chapter of the *Guanzi*, see Rickett, *Guanzi*, Vol. 1, 376–377. The idea of retirement at the age of seventy appears elsewhere in Zhanguo texts: for instance, the “Quli” 曲禮 (“Minute rites”) chapter of the *Liji* requires the nobles (*dafu* 大夫) to resign at this age. See *Liji jijie* 禮記集解, comp. Sun Xidan 孫希旦 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), “Quli, shang” 曲禮上 1: 14.

in the text, and as it has now been discussed by Carine Defoort, I shall not deal with it here.²⁶ A cynical reader, like Han Feizi (韓非子, d. 233), would perhaps doubt the sincerity of ministerial concern for a ruler's health, insofar as such concern effectively dictated the ruler's resignation and replacement by the "worthy minister" himself. Whatever the degree of the authors' sincerity, they do not return to the issue of ruler's health but focus instead on political and moral aspects of abdication:

《虞詩》曰：『大明不出，萬物皆匍。聖²⁷者不在上，天下壞。』治之至，養不肖。亂之至，滅賢。仁者爲此進 {28}.

The *Yu Poems* say: "If the great brightness does not come out, the myriad things are in the dark. If the sage is not at the top, All under Heaven will inevitably collapse." The utmost of proper rule is to nourish the unable; the utmost of calamity is to annihilate the able. For these reasons the benevolent proceeds...²⁷

The citation of the lost poem attributed to Shun apparently reflects an attempt to lend further respectability to the heroes of the abdication legend. Evocation of "Poems" (*shi* 詩) in Zhanguo texts was a usual means of bolstering one's argument by referring to an ancient canonical or quasi-canonical tradition. However, the *Shijing* contains no poems attributed to Shun, and the language of the cited "Yu Poem" strongly suggests its relatively late (middle-Zhanguo?) provenance.²⁸ Hence, it looks as if the poem was created as part of the lore of texts aiming at bolstering the prestige of the abdication doctrine. Indeed, its message, "If the Sage is not at the top, All under Heaven will inevitably collapse," leaves no doubt about the utmost desirability of implementing an "elevation of the worthy" policy for the supreme ruler as well.²⁹

The "Tang Yu zhi Dao" continues with the discussion of the correlation between personal qualities of Yao and Shun and their good fortune which allowed them to exercise their abilities to the utmost – a popular topic in the Guodian texts.³⁰ The essay ends with a powerful assertion of the benefits of abdication:

26 See Defoort, "Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh."

27 Li Ling suggests to continue this slip with slips 12–21, but I am not convinced here by the proposed sequence, since the discussion on slips 12–13 deals with details of Shun's rule and is not thematically linked with the previous passage. Nor am I satisfied with the original arrangement of the slips, according to which the cited passage is supposed to end with the words "such is ..." (如此也。) on slip 29; but I cannot propose a better arrangement.

28 The poem is of middle-Zhanguo origin at the earliest; its usage of the term *wanwu* 萬物 ("myriad things", "all the things") is unattested in the pre-400 BCE texts. See Yuri Pines, "Lexical changes in Zhanguo texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.4 (2002), 697–698.

29 Absolute majority of references to the *Shi* in such texts as the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, *Guoyu* 國語, *Lanyu*, *Mozhi*, *Xunzi* many of the Guodian texts, as well as the *Kongzi Shi lun* published by the Shanghai museum, refer to the poems incorporated in the current *Shi jing*, which suggests that it was a more-or-less tightly organized collection already by the middle Zhanguo period, if not earlier, achieving by then the status of a revered repository of moral values. See e.g., Liao Mingchun 廖名春, "Guodian Chu jian yin *Shi lun Shi kao*" 郭店楚簡引詩論詩考, in *Jingxue jin quan chu bian* 經學今詮初編 [= *Zhongguo zhexue* 中國哲學 22] (Jilin: Liaoning jiaoyu, 2000), 148–192; Martin Kern, "The *Odes* in Excavated Manuscripts," in *Text and Ritual in Early China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington, 2005), 149–193, esp. 181. It is likely then that the *Yu poem* cited in the "Tang Yu zhi Dao" was supposed to refer to the canonical work and not just to a "poem".

30 This topic is central to another Guodian text, discussed by Dirk Meyer ("Structure as a Means of Persuasion as Seen in the Manuscript "Qiong da yi shi" 窮達以時 From Tomb One, Guodian," in this volume); see also Li Rui 李銳, "Guodian Chu jian 'Qiong da yi shi' zai kao" 郭店楚簡窮達以時再

禪也者，上德授賢之謂也。上德則天下有君而{20}世明，授賢則民興效而化乎道。不禪而能化民者，自生民未之有也{21}。

Abdication means that possessors of the supreme virtue deliver [the rule] to the worthy. When they have supreme virtue, this means that the world has the ruler, and the age is enlightened. When they deliver [the rule] to the worthy then the people uphold effectiveness and are transformed by the Way. From the beginning of humankind there was nobody who was able to transform the people without abdicating.

The pro-abdication sentiment stated here is even more powerful than in the “Zi Gao”. In the latter the advantages of abdication were supported primarily through the authority of the past. In “Tang Yu zhi Dao”, abdication is considered a desirable and immediately applicable mode of political conduct, which should be regularly employed if a ruler hopes to “transform” his people in accordance with the “Way”. This indirect denial of the possibility of hereditary monarchy to achieve this blessed condition barely disguises the most radical attack on the principle of hereditary rule altogether.

3 The historical justification: Abdication in the “Rong Cheng shi”

The “Rong Cheng shi” is a lengthy and relatively well-preserved text which comprises 53 slips of which 37 are complete; its publication was supervised by Li Ling, whose arrangement of the slips has been questioned by several scholars, among whom Chen Jian’s 陳劍 work will apparently become the authoritative new edition.³¹ The text presents a heretofore unknown attempt to reconstruct China’s remote past and to trace dynastic changes from antiquity to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty. The length and richness of “Rong Cheng shi” makes it impossible for me to discuss all the interesting aspects of this text; in what follows I shall focus primarily on those portions which are indicative of the authors’ attitude toward the abdication issue.³²

考, in *Xin chutu wenxian yu gudai wenming yanjiu* 新出土文獻與古代文明研究, ed. Xie Weiyang 謝維揚 and Zhu Yuanqing 朱淵清 (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue, 2004), 268–278.

31 For Li Ling’s study, see Li Ling 李零 (ed.), “Rong Cheng shi,” in *Shangbo jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ de zhujian pinhe yu pianlinhe wenti xiaoyi*” 上博簡《容成氏》的竹簡拼合與編連問題小議) was immediately published on the net (www.jianbo.org/Wssf/2003/chenjian02.htm) and later entered the *Shangbo yanjiu xubian* volume (pp 327–334); for a similar, albeit less comprehensive effort to improve the arrangement of the slips, see also Chen Ligui 陳麗桂, “Tan ‘Rong Cheng shi’ de liejian cuozhi wenti” 談《容成氏》的列簡錯置問題, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 335–342. The most detailed glosses on the text are those by Qiu Dexiu 邱德修, *Shangbo Chu jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ zhubi kaozheng* 上博楚簡《容成氏》注譯考證, *Chutu sixiang wenwu yu wenxian yanjiu congshu* 出土思想文物與文獻研究叢書 15 (Taipei: Taiwan Guji, 2003, hereafter *Kaozheng*), who unfortunately ignored Chen Jian’s study.

32 Among early studies of “Rong Cheng shi” views of abdication, the best is that by Asano Yūichi 淺野裕一, “‘Rong Cheng shi’ de shanrang yu fangfa” 《容成氏》的禪讓與放伐, in idem, *Zhanguo Chu jian yanjiu* 戰國楚簡研究, trans. Sato Masayuki 佐藤將之 (Taipei: Wanjuan lou, 2004), 85–112; see also Luo Xinhui 羅新慧, “‘Rong Cheng shi’, ‘Tang Yu zhi Dao’ yu Zhanguo shiqi shanrang xueshuo” 《容成氏》、《唐虞之道》與戰國時期禪讓學說, *Qilu xuekan* 6 (2003), 104–107; Zhang Huicheng 張輝誠, “Shang bo jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ shanrang sixiang kaolun” 上博簡《容成氏》禪讓思想考論, *Zhongshan niigao xuebao* 3 (2003), 13–24; Wu Genyou 吳根友, “Shangbo jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ zhengzhi zhixue sixiang tanxi” 上博簡《容成氏》政治哲學思想探析; and Sun Weihua 孫衛華, “Rong Cheng shi’ shang xian sixiang bianxi” 《容成氏》“尚賢”思想辨析, in *Chu di jianbo sixiang yanjiu* 楚地簡帛思想研究, Vol. 2, ed. Ding Sixin 丁四新 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu, 2005), 8–18 and 19–30. The text contains a lot of exceptional information about the foundation and fall of early dynasties, and the establishment of the Zhou. The last slip(s) is (are) missing, and the story of the overthrow of the Shang

The text begins with the depiction of a lengthy line of legendary rulers of the past. Upon a list of names follows the conclusion:

...之有天下也，皆不授其子而授賢。其德酋清，而上愛{1}下，而一其志，而寢其兵，而官其材。於是乎喑聾執燭，矇瞍鼓瑟，跛躄守門，侏儒爲矢，張者荷宅，僂者攻數，癯{2}者煮鹽，疣者漁澤，蚤棄不廢。凡民俾敝者，教而誨之，飲而食之，思役百官而月請之。故當是時也，無并{3}

... [when] all [these rulers] possessed All under Heaven, they did not transmit [the throne] to their sons, but transmitted it to the worthies. Their virtue was lasting and pure, and, moreover, the superiors cared for the inferiors, unifying their will, putting arms to rest and assigning tasks according to talents. Thus, the dumb and the deaf handled torches, the blind played psaltery, the lame kept the gates, the dwarfs produced arrows, those with chest distensions were maintaining the dwellings, hunchbacks kept counts, those with tumors extracted salt by boiling, those with warts were fishing in the marshes; and persons who were abandoned [by their relatives] did not perish. Each one of the unfit and incapable³³ people received education and instructions, was provided with beverages and food; was made to follow the officials and to wait on them monthly. Hence at that time there were no annexations...

The beginning sets the tone for the subsequent discussion. In antiquity, just as claimed in the “Zi Gao”, abdication was the only means of legitimate succession, and those days were indeed the Golden Age. The ideal society in which even the weakest members are employed and cared for is a recurrent topic in Zhanguo texts, and “Rong Cheng shi” social utopia occupies prominent place among similar depictions of social idyll in contemporary writings.³⁴ Its detailed depiction is particularly meaningful when considered in tandem with the depictions of the later ages, which, as we shall see, witnessed gradual deterioration both in living conditions and political *mores*. However, insofar as abdications remained the primary means of power transfer, the prosperity continued. After a lacuna caused by a missing slip, the “Rong Cheng shi” depicts once more the ideal life under a later sovereign, whose identity remains unknown:³⁵

□氏之有天下，厚愛而薄斂焉，身力以勞百姓{35B}；□於是乎不賞不罰，不刑不殺，邦無飢人，道路無殤{4}死者。上下貴賤，各得其世。四海之外賓，四海之內貞。禽獸朝，魚鼈獻，有無通。匡天下之政十有九年而王天下，三十有七{5}年而歿(?)終。{6}

When ... ruled All under Heaven, he increased his care and decreased taxation, he exerted personal efforts to work on behalf of the Hundred Clans... Then there were neither rewards nor punish-

is thus not complete; but since the name of the text (“Rong Cheng shi”) appears on the back of the last slip, it is likely that only few slips are lost.

- 33 In translating 俾敝 as “unfit and incapable” I follow Bai Yulan 白於蘭, “Shanghai bowuguan cang zhujian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ *fan min bibi zhe kao*” 上海博物館藏竹簡《容成氏》“凡民俾敝者”考, *Wemuu* 11 (2005), 88–90, 96.
- 34 For the detailed discussion of ancient Chinese social utopia, see Jiang Jianshe 姜建設, *Zhou Qin shidai lixiang guo tansuo* 周秦時代理想國探索 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji, 1998).
- 35 Li Ling (“Rong Cheng shi,” 254–255) identified this monarch as Di Ku 帝嚳. Recently, Guo Yongbing 郭永秉 proposed an alternative reading of slips 31, 32 and 5, suggesting that pre-Yao monarch was Youyu Tong 有虞迥 (see his “Cong Shangbo Chu jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ de ‘Youyu Tong’ shuo dao Tang Yu shishi de yiwen” 從上博楚簡《容成氏》的“有虞迥”說到唐虞史事的疑問, (www.jianbo.org/admin3/2005/guoyongbing001.htm). While Guo’s rearrangement contains many interesting insights, it creates no less textual problems than it resolves, and I tend to reject it.

ments, neither penalties nor executions; nobody starved in the country; nobody died prematurely at the road side. Superiors and inferiors, noble and mean – each obtained their years. [The people] from beyond the four seas submitted, and those from within the four seas were stabilized. Birds and beasts arrived at court; fish and turtles submitted [tribute]; there was [smooth] communication between [localities with] abundant and deficient [resources]. After he exercised rulership in All under Heaven for nineteen years, he became the king over All under Heaven; after [another] thirty seven years he died.

The last sentence is not entirely clear; it seems that for nineteen years the pre-Yao monarch performed government tasks from a position which was inferior to that of the king, and only after the initial success he became the omnipotent monarch. The riddle cannot be probably resolved without the missing slip which should have contained the monarch's identity; and in any case the mechanism of his elevation to the royal position is obscure.³⁶ The matters are clarified in the next portion of the narrative which turns to Yao:

昔堯處於丹府與灌陵之間，堯賤賤而時時，賞不勸而民力，不刑殺而無盜賊，甚緩而民服。於是乎方{6}百里之中，率天下之人，就奉而立之，以為天子。於是乎方圓千里<之中>，於是乎持板正立，四向隍和，懷以來天下之民。{7}其政治而不賞，官而不爵，無勵於民，而治亂不倦。故曰：賢及□□{43}

Yao resided between Danfu and Guanling. Yao despised amassing [riches] and acted according to the seasons. He did not encourage the people with rewards, but they exerted their efforts; he did not employ punishments and executions, but there were no thieves and bandits; he was extremely lenient, but the people submitted. Thus in the territory of one hundred *li* squared he led the people from All under Heaven, and they arrived, respectfully establishing him as Son of Heaven. Thus, <in> the territory of one thousand *li* squared, everybody properly upheld his official tablet; the four directions were made harmonious and he behaved kindly to bring the people from All under Heaven. His rule was ordered without rewards; his officials lacked ranks; he did not encourage the people, but tirelessly³⁷ ordered chaos. Hence, it is said: when the worthy...

The first part of the depiction introduces a crucial new element into Yao's story. Aside from praising his political abilities, the text clearly states that Yao *was established* by the people from "All under Heaven". This appears to be the most daring statement in Chinese political thought: popular will is presented as the crucial factor behind the establishment of the Son of Heaven.³⁸ Although "the people's will" will not be mentioned with regard to post-Yao developments, the "heretical" (in Graham's words) nature of the text cannot be dismissed. After the lacuna caused by a damaged slip, the "Rong Cheng shi" continues:

是以視賢：”履地戴天，篤義與信，會在天地之間，而包在四海之內。畢能其事，而立為天子。”堯乃為之教曰：”自{9}內（納？）焉，余穴窺焉，以求賢者而讓焉。”堯以天下讓於賢者，天下之賢者莫之能受也。萬邦之君皆以其邦讓於賢{10}□<讓天下>賢者，而賢者莫之能受也。於是乎天下之人，以{11}堯為善興賢，而卒立之。{13}

36 Guo Yongbing (see note 35 above) suggests that "Youyu Tong" also obtained the throne due to the predecessor's abdication.

37 Reading the character after 不 as 倦 in accord with He Linyi 何琳儀, "Di er pi Hu jian xuan shi" 第二批滬簡選釋, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 444.

38 A vague reference to the idea of possible "popular election" of a ruler may be contained in the "Elevating Uniformity" (or "Identifying with Superiors," *shang tong* 尚同) chapters of the *Mozǐ* (e.g., "Shang tong, shang" 尚同上, 11:109). For another important reference to the pivotal role of "public opinion" in fixing the ruler on the throne, see *Mengzǐ* "Wan Zhang, shang" 9.5: 219.

Yao then inspected the worthies: “Among those who tread on Earth and are covered by Heaven, those who are sincere, righteous and trustworthy should gather between Heaven and Earth and be embraced within the four seas. He who is able to complete the [government] tasks, I shall establish him as Son of Heaven.” Yao taught them saying: “When you enter, I shall peep at you, to demand the worthy among you and to yield [the throne] to him.” Yao yielded All under Heaven to the worthies, but the worthies from All under Heaven were unable to accept it. Heads of the myriad states all yielded their states to the worthies... <yielded to the> worthies <from All under Heaven>;³⁹ but the worthies were unable to accept it. Thus, all the people under Heaven considered Yao as one who is able to raise the worthies, and finally established him.

Certain details of this narrative require further discussion, but the basic outline is clear enough: immediately after being established as Son of Heaven, Yao begins searching for the worthies to whom the empire may be delivered. Initially the search is futile, but it encourages other leaders to do the same, creating a kind of abdication-based meritocratic system at the top of the government apparatus. Significantly, Yao’s relentless efforts to promote the worthy are rewarded – again by “all the people under Heaven” – who “finally establish” Yao (perhaps prolonging his tenure as the Son of Heaven?). Yao is not satisfied, however, and he continues to search for a worthy candidate until he finally finds Shun.

昔舜耕於歷丘，陶於河濱，漁於雷澤，孝養父母，以善其親，乃及邦子。堯聞之{13}而美其行。堯於是乎爲車十又五乘，以三從舜於畎畝之中。舜於是乎始免刈剛耨鍤，謁（？）而坐之。子堯南面，舜北面，舜{14}於是乎始語堯天地人民之道。與之言政，悅簡以行；與之言樂，悅和以長；與之言禮，悅泊而不逆。堯乃悅。堯{8}☐<堯乃老，視不明，>聽不聰。堯有子九人，不以其子爲後，見舜之賢也，而欲以爲後。{12}。

Shun was tilling the soil at Li Hills, was making pottery on the banks of the [Yellow] River, was fishing in the Lei marshes. He filially ministered to his parents and was good to his relatives and to all sons of his country.⁴⁰ Yao heard about it and liked his behavior. Thus Yao had fifteen chariots arranged, to visit Shun thrice amidst the fields. Upon this, Shun put aside the scythe and the sickle, the hoe and the ploughshare, made the presentation (?) and let Yao sit. Master Yao faced south; Shun faced north. Shun then began talking to Yao about the Way of the people, and of Heaven-and-Earth. He spoke to him about governmental affairs, encouraging him to behave simply; he spoke to him about music encouraging him to ensure harmony in order to prolong (his reign?). He spoke to him about ritual, encouraging him to be simple and not intransigent. Yao then was glad. Yao... <Yao then became aged, his sight was no longer clear>, his ears no longer sharp. Yao had nine sons; but he did not make his son heir. He observed Shun’s worthiness and wanted to make him his heir.

The narrative begins with a common Zhanguo presentation of Shun’s initially humble position and then focuses extensively on Yao’s exemplar behavior as a true sage-seeker: he thrice visits Shun in the latter’s remote location, listens to his advice, and then apparently decides to appoint him to a government position (the damage of the slip here prevents us

39 The beginning of the slip is missing; the three characters 讓天下 before the word 賢 (i.e. yielded to the worthies from All under Heaven) are tentatively reconstructed on the basis of Qiu’s glosses (*Kaoyheng*, 257).

40 Cf. Mengzi: “Treat my elders as elders, extending this to the others’ elders; treat my young as young, extending this to the others’ young” 老吾老，以及人之老；幼吾幼，以及人之幼 (*Mengzi*, “Liang Hui Wang, shang” 梁惠王上 1.7: 16).

from fully reconstructing the narrative).⁴¹ Then the story looks like an illustration of the general principle of retirement discussed in “Tang Yu zhi Dao”: the aged Yao must end his tenure. Yet despite his physical unfitness, Yao preserved his mental abilities and continued to behave selflessly. The “Rong Cheng shi” specifies that Yao had nine sons, but nonetheless chose Shun as his heir. Importantly, there are no hints of Yao’s sons’ ineptitude, an argument which was often employed as a justification of Yao’s transfer of power to Shun.⁴² According to the “Rong Cheng shi”, Yao appointed Shun as his heir in direct continuation of earlier tradition, when “nobody transmitted [the rule] to his son, but transmitted it to the worthies.”

At the beginning of Shun’s rule the situation appears to be less favorable than it was during preceding reigns: “Shun performed government tasks for three years, [during which] mountain ranges were disordered, water streams did not flow.”⁴³ Shun promptly reacted to this challenge by appointing Yu who ordered the universe; later Shun made other successful appointments, employing outstanding ministers such as Hou Ji, Gao Yao 皋陶 and Zhi 質, who cared respectively for economic livelihood, judicial matters and musical performances. This proper implementation of administrative and ritual improvements results in a renewed age of universal prosperity:

…當是時也，癘疫不至，妖祥不行，禍災去亡，禽獸肥大，草木晉長。昔者天地之佐舜而{16}佑善，如是狀也。舜乃老，視不明，聽不聰。舜有子七人，不以其子爲後，見禹之賢也，而欲以爲後。禹乃五讓以天下之賢{17}者，不得已，然後敢受之。{18}

At that time there were no epidemics, no evil portents. Disasters and calamities were eradicated, beasts and birds were fat, grass and trees – tall. So thriving was Heaven-and-Earth’s support for Shun and assistance to the good! Then Shun became aged, his sight was no longer clear, his ears no longer sharp. Shun had seven sons; but he did not make his son heir. He observed Yu’s worthiness and wanted to make him his heir. Yu then yielded five times to the worthiest in All under Heaven, but had no choice, and finally dared to receive [the throne].

Shun’s reign is the last age of limitless prosperity, the last manifestation of the support of Heaven-and-Earth for the virtuous ruler, one who was both chosen for his worthiness and is able to yield to the worthy. Shun in due turn abdicates and is succeeded by his worthy minister, Yu, whose ministerial achievements are discussed in great detail in a section that deals with the early stages of Shun’s reign. Yu displays the necessary modesty by looking for

41 This version of Shun’s elevation is referred to in the *Zhanguo* cc. “Yao met Shun among the reeds; they spread a mat on the embankment in the shadow of the sheltering mulberry tree. Before the shadow had moved, he delivered [to Shun] All under Heaven” (昔者堯見舜於草茅之中，席隴畝而廡庇桑，陰移而授天下傳。 *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋, annot. He Jianzhang 何建章 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1991), “Zhao ce” 趙策 4, 21.12, 790–791. Liu Lexian 劉樂賢 has proposed that Yao’s elevation of Shun was more gradual and that the details of the process appear on the missing slip(s). See Liu Lexian, “Du Shangbo jian ‘Rong Cheng shi’ xiao zha” 讀上博簡《容成氏》小劄, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 353–354.

42 See e.g., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, annot. Kong Yingda 孔穎達, Shisanjing zhushu 十三經注疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (repr. Beijing: Zhonghua, 1991), “Yao dian” 堯典 2: 122a. For the importance of this *topos*, see Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), 33–34.

43 舜聽政三年，山陵不疏，水潦不泄 {23}.

a worthy to whom he can yield the throne, and accepts the rule only when he has no other choice. Another period of prosperity follows:

禹聽政三年，不製革，不刃金，不略矢，田無藜，宅不空，關市無賦。禹乃因山陵平隴之可邦邑{18}者而繁實之，乃因迹以知遠，去苛而行簡，因民之欲，會天地之利，夫是以近者悅治，而遠者自至。四海之內及，{19}四海之外皆請貢。{20}

Yu performed government tasks for three years, [during which] no armor was produced, no blades sharpened, no arrowheads prepared. There were neither poisonous weeds in the fields, nor empty houses; customs were not collected at border passes and markets. Then Yu had chosen locations in mountains and lowlands suitable for the establishment of states and settlements and filled them [with the people]. He then relied on the near to understand the distant, eradicated quibbling and implemented simplicity; he relied on the people's desires, brought together the beneficent [matters of] Heaven and Earth, so that the near rejoiced the orderly rule while the distant arrived on their own initiative. Everybody within and outside the four seas requested to submit tribute.

Yu's age is still the era of well-being, but this prosperity somewhat pales in comparison with earlier ages. In the pre-Shun era the universal good fortune was an immanent feature of the sage rulers' reign; at Shun's age first signs of potential disorder appeared, but due to Shun's appropriate appointments the universal plentitude was restored – with the explicit support of Heaven-and-Earth. Yu's situation appears to be more challenging, and his age of prosperity was entirely self-made. Accordingly, his rule was marked by political achievements (peace and tranquility at the borders and beyond), but lacked the aura of universal harmony which characterized earlier reigns. Was it an indication of his son's future violation of the norms of abdication? Such an interpretation certainly appears plausible in the light of future events. The text depicts Yu's ritual innovations and then turns to the abrupt end of the age of virtuous yielding:

禹有子五人，不以其子爲後，見{33}臯陶之賢也，而欲以爲後。臯陶乃五讓以天下之賢者，遂稱疾不出而死。禹於是乎讓益，啓於是乎攻益自取。{34}□啓王天下十又六年（世）而桀作。{35A}

Yu had five sons, but he did not make his son heir. He observed Gao Yao's worthiness and wanted to make him his heir. Gao Yao then yielded five times to the worthiest in All under Heaven, and afterwards pled ill, did not leave [his house] and died. Yu then yielded to Yi, but then [Yu's son] Qi attacked Yi and seized power for himself. [His heirs] ruled All under Heaven for sixteen years [should be: generations], and Jie appeared.

The story of selfless transmission of power to the worthies ends almost incidentally, due to Gao Yao's early death and to the decisive action taken by Yu's son, Qi 啓, the eventual founder of the Xia dynasty. Strikingly, the *topos* of prosperity and orderly rule, which figured so prominently in the earlier parts of the "Rong Cheng shi", disappears completely from the narrative about the Xia period. To the contrary, the story mentions no remarkable deeds of the dynastic founder, Qi, and moves instead directly to depict transgressions of the infamous tyrant, the last Xia ruler, Jie 桀, under whose rule the world plummeted into deep turmoil. When Jie is removed by the founder of the Shang dynasty, Tang 湯, the latter's reign again remains without any depictions, and the narrative immediately moves to the

atrocities of the last vicious ruler of the Shang dynasty, Zhouxin 紂辛.⁴⁴ Thus, while dynastic founders are not criticized directly, the authors fail to praise their deeds. Moreover, the lengthy depiction of Jie's and Zhouxin's atrocities which mirrors the similarly lengthy treatment of the primeval Golden Age may serve as an indirect warning against the implementation of the principle of dynastic rule: even the virtuous founders of the dynasties may eventually beget a vicious offspring.

The "Rong Cheng shi" is an extraordinarily rich text, which cannot be reduced exclusively to the abdication issue, although its preoccupation with the rise and demise of rulers and dynasties is undeniable.⁴⁵ For the matters of current discussion, it is important to notice two major features of this text. First, unlike the "Zi Gao" and "Tang Yu zhi Dao", the "Rong Cheng shi" does not contain any direct statement in favor of abdication, but prefers to embed its authors' views exclusively within a quasi-historical narrative. Second, despite this apparent subtleness, the text leads the readers to the most radical conclusions. Not only prosperity is associated directly with the implementation of meritorious succession, but, moreover, the dynastic rule is presented as leading to the disastrous deterioration associated with tyrants like Jie and Zhouxin. This, together with hints at the possibility of the popular will being the main force in choosing the ruler, all makes "Rong Cheng shi" narrative truly subversive of the extant political order. In retrospective, the disappearance of the "Rong Cheng shi" version of ancient history from later narratives comes as no surprise.

4 Summary: Argumentation compared

The three unearthed texts present distinct ways of legitimizing the controversial doctrine of abdication. The "Zi Gao" argumentation is threefold. First, its authors borrow the authority of Confucius, whose views were apparently considered compelling enough to convince at least part of the audience in legitimacy of yielding the throne. The second argument is historical: Confucius' alleged claim that "In antiquity there was no hereditary [succession], but the good transmitted [the throne] to each other" serves as a powerful means of questioning the legitimacy of hereditary succession altogether. Third, by juxtaposing a humble "black-headed" "son of a man", Shun, and his servants – the miraculously conceived progenitors of the Three Dynasties – the authors unequivocally proclaim the primacy of virtue over pedigree. It should be noticed, however, that the major thrust of the text is not necessarily

44 Chen Jian suggests to place slips 36 and 37 which depict Tang's initial alliance with Yi Yin 伊尹 at the beginning of Tang's reign; if his arrangement is correct, then it means that Tang's reign began with multiple miserable phenomena caused by Tang's misrule, and only the appointment of Yi Yin restored the people's confidence in a new ruler. I reject this rearrangement here and follow Li Ling's initial arrangement, according to which the negative phenomena should be attributed to Jie's reign and not to that of Tang. My choice is dictated first by the logic of the narrative, which conventionally depicts Jie as a "last bad ruler" and which is not supposed to attribute violent deterioration to Tang's rule (cf. Ding Kai, 丁凱, "Shang bo Chu jian 'Rong Cheng shi' shuzha jiu ze" 上博楚簡《容成氏》疏劄九則, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 385). Second, the structure of the narrative also matters: there is obvious parallelism between the depiction of Yi, after whose ascendancy it is written "[Yi's heirs] ruled All under Heaven for sixteen generations, and Jie appeared" and that of Tang, after which follows "Tang's [heirs] ruled All under Heaven for thirty one generations, and Zhou[xin] appeared" (湯王天下三十又一世而紂作 {42}).

45 Asano ("Shang bo Chu jian") convincingly analyzes the entire historical narrative of the "Rong Cheng shi" as supportive of abdication.

the issue of royal succession, but rather a more common notion of the importance of meritocratic appointments. Confucius' sigh at the end of the dialogue that should Shun be born in our generation "he would not meet an enlightened king and hence would not be employed in a great [position]" may reflect very well the aspirations of the authors, who might have been quite satisfied with a great position under the enlightened king and not necessarily aspired to become the omnipotent rulers.

While the ideological focus of the "Zi Gao" is disputable, in case of the "Tang Yu zhi Dao" the message is quite clear. The authors unequivocally side with non-hereditary succession, which they consider as preferable on three major grounds. First, abdicating in favor of a worthier candidate is morally laudable and helps in transforming the *mores* of the people below; second, it is administratively welcome as it contributes to the orderly rule; and, third, it is personally beneficent to the ageing ruler, who can thereby be relieved of his burdensome duties on the throne and dedicate the rest of his life to self-cultivation. Historical narrative is employed – particularly to disprove claims of Shun's lack of filiality – but it is clearly of secondary importance. The "Tang Yu zhi Dao" remains therefore unique in its attempt to lay theoretical foundations for the issue of abdication.

The third text, the "Rong Cheng shi", is less overt than two previous ones, albeit not necessarily less radical. It embeds criticism of hereditary succession in a lengthy historical narrative which shows first, that in antiquity abdication was the only proper way of power transfer, and, second, that it was associated with extraordinary prosperity, while the dynastic age was an age of decline. The ostensible "objectiveness" of the historical narrative allows the authors to introduce their "heretical" ideas, including the notion of quasi-popular "election" of the supreme ruler, in a sufficiently subtle way to avoid accusations in direct subversion of the extant political order.

Despite these differences, the three texts share not only a common ideological perspective, but also a main common strand of argumentation, namely the resort to historical narrative as a powerful means of conveying unorthodox ideas. Indeed, in two of the three surveyed texts the major argument in favor of non-hereditary succession is the ancient precedent of abdications. The logic behind the argument is clear enough: the respectable pedigree of the abdication system turns it into both legitimate and preferable to the later way of lineal succession. The antiquity itself appears to be sufficiently compelling to convince the texts' readers. This well-known way of "using the past to serve the present" (*yi gu shi jin* 以古事今) appears to be particularly advantageous to the proponents of "heretical" doctrines. By attributing controversial policy to the past paragons, the authors might have freed themselves from the need to defend practical applicability of their proposals, and, moreover, had insulated themselves from probable accusation in political subversion. In a certain way the historical argumentation might have also absolved the proponents from the responsibility for the outcome of their proposals, which may explain in turn harsh criticism of irresponsible historical talks by some of the leading late Zhanguo thinkers, such as Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310–218) and his disciple Han Feizi.⁴⁶ It is worth reminding that it was another Xunzi's disciple, Li Si 李斯 (d. 208), who tried to put an end to the manipulations of the past by eradicating

46 See the discussion in Pines, "Disputers of Abdication," 287–293.

competing historical narratives proposed by different thinkers.⁴⁷ In light of the subversive nature of the historical narratives surveyed above, such harsh actions appear to be understandable, even if not justifiable.

Compelling as it might have been, the historical argument also held significant disadvantages for abdication proponents. The manipulation of the past, which became notorious in the late Zhanguo period, was ever prone to counter-manipulations.⁴⁸ Indeed, late Zhanguo opponents of abdication had frequently created their counter-narratives, which either ridiculed the notion of abdication altogether (as in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子) or presented the putative abdication of Yao in Shun's favor as outright usurpation.⁴⁹ While these narratives gained limited popularity and were ultimately rejected by later historiographic tradition, the mainstream narrative of Yao's abdication was reinterpreted in the way as to lend no support for attacks on hereditary rule. Thinkers like Mengzi or the authors of the "Yao dian" 堯典 had stressed the exceptional circumstances surrounding Shun's elevation, emphasizing thereby that this unique event should not become a guideline for contemporary political action.⁵⁰ The attempt of the "Zi Gao" and "Rong Cheng shi" authors to turn abdication into a common pattern of power transfer in the past was, therefore, ultimately rejected, and the legitimacy of hereditary succession restored.

Is it possible that the "Tang Yu zhi Dao" authors were aware of a historical trap when developing their arguments? The answer to this question will forever remain unknown, but it is clear that their argumentation with regard to the desirability of abdication was most innovative and bold. In particular, the idea of a quasi-mandatory retirement age reflects a remarkable insight into the major deficiency of the monarchical rule. Throughout its long imperial history China witnessed not a few emperors whose physical deterioration in the later part of their life led to mounting difficulties for the faithful bureaucratic apparatus, occasionally generating grave consequences for the country as a whole. The Kangxi 康熙 (1662–1722) Emperor's bitter complaint exemplifies this:

47 For the nature of the documents destroyed in the infamous Qin (秦, 221–207) burning, see Jens Østergård Petersen, "Which Books Did the First Emperor of Ch'in Burn? On the Meaning of Pai Chia in Early Chinese Sources," *Monumenta Serica*, 43 (1995), 1–52.

48 For the late Zhanguo manipulations of the past and the subsequent loss of respect of historical narratives, see Pines, "Speeches and the Question of Authenticity in Ancient Chinese Historical Records", in Schmidt-Glintzer, Helwig, with Achim Mittag and Jörn Rüsen, *Ideology and Historical Criticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 195–224.

49 For the first example, see Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (annot.), *Zhuangzi jinzhu juyi* 莊子今注今譯 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1994), "Xiaoyao you" 逍遙遊 1: 18; "Rang wang" 讓王 28: 744–745, 768; for the second – Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (comp.), *Han Feizi jiji* 韓非子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1998), "Shuo yi" 說疑 44: 406; "Nan, san" 難三 38: 374, and further discussion in Pines, "Disputers of Abdication," 286–287.

50 Thus, the "Yao dian" claims that Yao contemplated abdicating only after seventy years on throne (and not at the age of seventy) ("Yao dian" 2: 123a); Mengzi introduces complex political circumstances around Shun's and Yu's succession (*Mengzi*, "Wan Zhang, shang" 9.5: 219; 9.6: 221–222). Both texts deny Yao's retirement during his life-time and emphasize that Shun inherited Yao only after the latter's death.

Whereas the emperor's responsibilities are terribly heavy, there is no way he can evade them. How can this be compared with being an official? If an official wants to serve, then he serves; if he wants to stop, then he stops. When he grows old he resigns and returns home, to look after his sons and play with his grandsons; he still has the chance to relax and enjoy himself. Whereas the ruler in all his hardworking life finds no place to rest.⁵¹

The Kangxi Emperor was not aware of the “Tang Yu zhi Dao” recommendations, of which he might have approved. The idea of fixing a mentally and physically mature person on the throne, suggested by this manuscript's authors could have become a lasting contribution to the Chinese monarchical system. Unfortunately, no other known text had developed these recommendations further, and none tried to elaborate proper rules for selecting and changing a ruler. Apparently, the disastrous example of King Kuai of Yan discouraged later thinkers from systematizing abdication discourse. This discourse remained ultimately confined to historical narratives concerning Yao, Shun and Yu, and never evolved into analytically sophisticated doctrine.

The attempts of the three unearthed texts to legitimize the system of abdication and their rejection of hereditary succession are remarkable in light of the absence of similar statements in the received texts. Changing political climate in the late Zhanguo period, re-confirmation of the lineal succession as the only suitable way to ensure political stability, and the disastrous impact of the Yan affair – all these diminished pro-abdication sentiments and modified the argumentation of those who remained supportive of the Yao-Shun model of ruler-minister relations.⁵² While insightful scholars, such as Graham, were able to discern subtle pro-abdication current in the received texts, these conjectures remained unverifiable until the recent decade. This remarkable instance of archeological discoveries bringing to light long extinguished strand of thought is indicative not only of the revolutionary impact of archeology on our field, but also of the inadequacy of our current knowledge of the subtleties of Zhanguo intellectual tradition. Further discoveries, and publication of the already discovered but still unpublished texts, may allow us to fill in current gaps in our knowledge and further restore the complex picture of Zhanguo thought.

51 Cited from Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 146–147.

52 See an insightful discussion by Liu Baocai 劉寶才, “‘Tang Yu zhi Dao’ de lishi yu linian—jianlun Zhanguo zhongqi de shanrang sichao” 《唐虞之道》的歷史與理念—兼論戰國中期的禪讓思潮, *Renwen zazhi* 3 (2000), 106–110.