

DISPUTERS OF ABDICATION: ZHANGUO EGALITARIANISM AND THE SOVEREIGN'S POWER*

BY

YURI PINES

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The idea of a ruler yielding his throne to a worthier candidate, which is the theme of the legend of Yao's 堯 abdication to his meritorious minister, Shun 舜, and of the parallel legend of Shun's abdication in favor of Yu 禹, is one of the most curious legacies of Zhanguo ("Warring States," 453-221 BCE)¹ political thought. No other concept promulgated by Zhanguo thinkers was so contradictory to the political reality of pre-imperial and imperial China; and yet the ideal of "yielding to the worthy" remained popular throughout the imperial millennia, and the legend of Yao's abdication was routinely employed to facilitate dynastic changes from the Han (漢, 206 BCE-220 CE) dynasty onwards. What is even more puzzling is that, despite the evident popularity of the abdication myth and its ubiquity in Zhanguo writings, not a single received Zhanguo text discusses this issue systematically. Angus Graham asserted that such muted discussion may reflect the 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

* This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 726/02-1) and under the auspices of the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies. I am deeply indebted to Carine Defoort, Irene Eber, Andrew Plaks, Moss Roberts and the *T'oung Pao* reviewers for their insightful remarks to the earlier drafts of this paper, and to Ed Shaughnessy for generously sharing with me his unpublished materials.

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* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 293.

of 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 emphases, each displays a favorable attitude toward abdication as an appropriate way of placing the worthier ruler on the throne. The recent publication of these texts enables a renewed analysis of Zhanguo debates about abdication versus hereditary succession. It allows us to reconstruct the evolution of the discourse of abdication in the Zhanguo period, and to contextualize this discourse more precisely within the general framework of pre-imperial political thought.³

In what follows, I shall use the newly discovered texts in order to shed new light on the abdication-related passages in the received texts. I shall try to show that the three texts may represent the high tide of pro-abdication sentiment, and that the many references to the abdication legend in middle to late Zhanguo texts can be understood as attempts to modify or to oppose the overt political radicalism of texts like *Zi Gao* or *Tang Yu zhi dao* and to protect the legitimacy of hereditary succession. I hope to substantiate Graham's insight and to show that extant references to the abdication legend are indeed only the tip of an iceberg of anti-hereditary sentiments; and I shall trace the various arguments employed by the supporters and opponents of the abdication doctrine. In the final part of the essay I shall also try to contextualize Zhanguo abdication discourse

³ Several important studies had been dedicated to the issue of abdication before the recent discoveries. Of these, the seminal research of Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, "The Abdication Legend Began with the Mohists" (originally published in 1936), remains heretofore the single most detailed analysis of the evolution of the abdication discourse (see Gu Jiegang, "Shanrang chuanshuo qi yu Mojia kao" 禪讓傳說起於墨家考, rpt. in *Gu Jiegang gu shi lunwenji* 顧頡剛古史論文集, ed. by Pian Yuqian 駢宇騫 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988], vol. 1, 295-369). Among other important studies prior to the publication of the Guodian texts are Sarah Allan's insightful analysis of the structure of the abdication legend in her *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981); and Hu Mingquan 胡明權, "'Shanrang shuo' wenhua pin'ge dujie" "禪讓說"文化品格讀解, *Kangding xuekan* 3 (1996), 32-40, and 1 (1997), 43-50. For a discussion that incorporates *Tang Yu zhi dao* but not the Shanghai Museum texts, see Zheng Jiewen 鄭傑文, "Shanrang xueshuo de lishi yanhua ji qi yuanyin" 禪讓學說的歷史演化及其原因, *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* (Spring 2002), 26-40. Further studies of the abdication legend and the abdication doctrine which have appeared since the publication of Guodian and Shanghai Museum texts will be mentioned in the footnotes below.

within the broader framework of contemporary political thought, and in particular within views of rulership. It is my contention that proponents of the abdication doctrine⁴ identified correctly some of the major weaknesses of Zhanguo political theories, and proposed interesting, albeit ultimately ineffective, remedies to these inherent problems.

The beginnings: The emergence of the abdication legend

Gu Jiegang's famous assertion that the earlier the legendary sage was, the later he was introduced into intellectual discourse, fits well the case of Yao and Shun.⁵ Unlike Shun's putative successor, Yu, whose deeds became renowned from the middle-Western Zhou (西周, c. 1046-771) period on,⁶ neither Yao nor Shun are mentioned in the earliest texts: they are absent from both the *Shi jing* 詩經 and the early chapters of the *Shu jing* 書經,⁷ as well as from bronze inscrip-

⁴ I distinguish between the abdication legend (mostly although not exclusively confined to the Yao-Shun and Shun-Yu transmission), and the abdication doctrine, i.e. claims in favor of abdication as an advantageous form of power transfer. While the doctrine was often embedded in the legend, I hope to show that the legend and the doctrine were not identical, and that in certain cases the former was employed to undermine the latter.

⁵ See Gu Jiegang, "Gu shi bian di yi ce zi xu" 古史辨第一冊自序, in *Gu Jiegang gu shi lunwenji*, Vol. 1, 1-100. Several attempts have been made to trace the historical (or anthropological) background of the abdication legend and even to corroborate it archeologically: see e.g. Qian Yaopeng 錢耀鵬, "Yao Shun shanrang de shidai qiji yu lishi zhenshi—Zhongguo gudai guojia xingcheng yu fazhan de zhongyao xiansuo" 堯舜禪讓的世代契機與歷史真實—中國古代國家形成與發展的重要線索, *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 5 (2000), 127-137; and Zhou Suping 周蘇平, "Yao, Shun, Yu 'shan-rang' de lishi beijing" 堯、舜、禹「禪讓」的歷史背景, *Xibei daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 2 (1993), 45-52. I am not concerned here with tracing the roots of a Yao-Shun legend; suffice it to mention that I whole-heartedly agree with Michael Puett's assertion that Zhanguo mythology should be analyzed within the framework of Zhanguo political debates rather than that of putative earlier traditions (see his *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001], 92-101).

⁶ The earliest notice of Yu's merits in subduing the flood is the recently published X gong-xu 夏公盪 inscription, dated to the reign of King Gong of Zhou (周共王, c. 922-900); see the discussion of the inscription by Li Xueqin 李學勤, Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚 and Li Ling 李零 in *Zhongguo lishi wenwu* 6 (2002), 4-45; cf. Xing Wen 邢文, ed., *The X-gong Xu: Reports and Papers from the Dartmouth Workshop* (a special issue of *International Research on Bamboo and Silk Documents: Newsletter*), Dartmouth College, 2003.

⁷ The "Yao dian" 堯典 chapter of the *Shu jing*, which is discussed below, was

tions. In the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, the bulk of which comprises historical materials from major Chunqiu (春秋, 722-453) states, Yao and Shun are still fairly marginal personages. Aside from a lengthy story of Shun's inheriting Yao, which was obviously interpolated into the *Zuo zhuan* text during the middle-to-late Zhanguo period and which is discussed below, as well as several other later interpolations which mention Yao and Shun, albeit briefly, in the bulk of the *Zuo zhuan* narrative both personages are all but absent, and in no case are they referred to as paragons of good rule, let alone the models of abdication.⁸

definitely created in the middle to late Zhanguo period, and it probably contains even later additions from the Qin period; see Jiang Shanguo 蔣善國, *Shang shu zongshu* 尚書綜述 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1988), 140-168; Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, *Shangshu tonglun* 尚書通論 (wai er zhong 外二種) (rpt. Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 152-163.

⁸ For the reliability of the *Zuo zhuan*, particularly of the speeches cited therein (which mention Yao and Shun) as sources for Chunqiu intellectual history, see Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722-453 B.C.E* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 14-39. To recapitulate, I argue that most of the speeches were incorporated into the *Zuo zhuan* from its primary sources—narrative histories produced by the Chunqiu scribes; and although some of the speeches were heavily edited or even invented by the scribes, the evidence suggests that they reflect the Chunqiu intellectual milieu and that their content was not significantly distorted by the author/compiler of the *Zuo zhuan*. It does, however, contain several later interpolations, made either by its Zhanguo or even Han transmitters (see *Foundations*, 221-226 and 233-246). For the matter of the present discussion, the most significant is a lengthy passage (analyzed below) which discusses among others Yao's transfer of power to Shun (see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981; hereafter the *Zuo*], Wen 18: 633-644); for the detailed discussion of the reasons for which I consider this text a later addition, see Pines, *Foundations*, 234-238. Similar doubts concern several other passages which refer briefly to Yao and Shun; two of them (*Zuo*, Xiang 24: 1087-1088 and Zhao 29: 1500-1503) were apparently added by the Han transmitters to fabricate a favorable biography for the dynastic founder, Liu Bang (劉邦, d. 195), who is thereby connected to Yao (see the detailed discussion by Gu Jiegang, *Chunqiu san zhuan ji Guoyu zhi zonghe yanjiu* 春秋三傳及國語之綜合研究, published and edited by Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞 [Chengdu: Bashu chubanshe, 1988], 68-73). Similarly a speech by Ji Zha 季札 of Wu 吳, allegedly from 544, which makes reference to Yao (*Zuo*, Xiang 29: 1163), is evidently a Han interpolation (see the detailed discussion by Zhao Zhiyang 趙制陽, “*Zuo zhuan* Ji Zha guan yue youguan wenti de taolun” 《左傳》季札觀樂有關問題的討論, *Zhonghua wenhua fuxing yuekan* 18.3 [1985], 9-20). Finally, another reference to Shun as a progenitor of the rulers of the state of Chen 陳 (Zhao 8: 1305) was made in a speech that employs miscalculations of Jupiter's position performed after 365 BCE (see Hu Nianyi 胡念貽, “*Zuo zhuan* de zhenwei he xiezuo shidai kaobian” 左傳的真偽和寫作時代考辨, *Wen shi* 11 [1981], 22-25); hence it likewise belongs to the Zhanguo intellectual milieu. For the only unequivocally early reference to Yao (named Tao Tang shi

The situation changes in the *Lunyu* 論語, the earlier layers of which are roughly contemporary with or slightly postdate the bulk of the *Zuo zhuan*.⁹ Here we have a sudden explosion of effusive panegyrics in praise of Yao and Shun. Confucius (孔子, 551-479) is cited, for instance, as exclaiming “Great was Yao as a ruler! How lofty! Only Heaven is great, only Yao was able to model himself after it!” and “How lofty! Shun and Yu possessed All under Heaven but did not make it their private possession.”¹⁰ Why such vociferous praises for these heretofore marginal figures? Do they refer to Yao and Shun’s abdications? While the later statement may suggest so (Shun and Yu “did not make All under Heaven their private possession”), such an interpretation would be at odds with the established tradition according to which Yu did not abdicate but became the founder of the Xia 夏 dynasty; hence it is likely that the statement above refers merely to both rulers’ selflessness.¹¹ The only passage in the *Lunyu* (“Yao yue” 堯曰) which unequivocally refers to the story of Yao’s transfer of power to Shun, and Shun’s later transfer of power to Yu, is widely and justifiably considered a later addition, since stylistically it differs strikingly from the rest of the *Lunyu*.¹² Otherwise there are

陶唐氏) in the *Zuo*, see Xiang 9: 964. Elsewhere (Xi 33: 502) the *Zuo* mentions a renowned legend about Shun’s execution of Yu’s father, Gun 鯀, and his subsequent promotion of Yu; another protagonist attributes the execution of Gun to Yao (Zhao 7: 1290). Finally, the *Zuo zhuan* cites Confucius as referring to the now lost “Xia document” (*Xia shu* 夏書), which praises Yao (Ai 6: 1636). Confucius’s comments definitely represent a separate stratum in the *Zuo* (see Eric Henry, “Junzi yue’ and ‘Zhongni yue’ in *Zuo zhuan*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 59. 1 [1999], 125-161), but it is interesting to notice that by the time of their addition to the *Zuo* text there was a separate “Xia document” which referred to Yao as a model ruler.

⁹ For my assertions regarding the dating of several pivotal Zhanguo texts, based on their lexical features, see Yuri Pines, “Lexical changes in Zhanguo texts,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.4 (2002), 691-705.

¹⁰ For the first reference, see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1991), “Tai Bo” 泰伯 8.19: 83 (子曰: 「大哉! 堯之爲君也! 巍巍乎! 唯天爲大, 唯堯則之!); for the second, see *ibid.* 8.18: 83 (子曰: 「巍巍乎! 舜、禹之有天下也, 而不與焉。」); for other praises of Yao and Shun in the *Lunyu*, see “Yong ye” 雍也 6.30: 65; “Xian wen” 憲問, 14.42: 159; “Wei Ling gong” 衛靈公 15.5: 162.

¹¹ Alternatively, it is possible that the notion of Yao’s and Shun’s abdication is implicitly present in the *Lunyu*, which would explain why panegyrics to these rulers were included in the chapter which begins with Confucius’s praise of Tai Bo 泰伯, the uncle of King Wen 文王 of Zhou, who allegedly yielded the leadership of the Zhou house to his younger brother, Ji Li 季歷. This conjecture (for which I am grateful to Moss Roberts), remains, however, problematic, insofar as we cannot reliably prove the original unity of the *Lunyu*’s “chapters.”

¹² This passage (*Lunyu*, “Yao yue” 堯曰 20.1: 207-208) briefly surveys pivotal

no indications of Confucius's awareness of the abdication legend.¹³ If this legend existed at the time of the *Lunyu* compilation, it might have been too sensitive to be openly promulgated.

While the *Lunyu* contains no direct hints of the abdication legend, it does indicate that the process of the elevation of Yao and Shun to the position of supreme paragons began in Confucius's life-time. The acceleration of this process is discernible in the next major Zhanguo text, the *Mozi*. Thus, while in the *Lunyu* Yao and Shun appear altogether nine times (excluding the spurious Chapter 20), in the "core chapters" of the *Mozi*, which are twice as long, Yao and Shun are referred to twenty times each, invariably as paragons of good rule, mentioned along with the rest of model rulers, the founders of the Xia, Shang (商, c. 1600-1046) and Zhou dynasties.¹⁴ Moreover, the *Mozi* is the first text to discuss explicitly Yao's elevation of Shun, which is considered an early example of "elevating the worthy":

Thus, in antiquity when the sage kings exercised their government, they arranged [the subjects according to their] virtue and elevated the worthy. Even if a person was a peasant or an artisan, they commissioned him a high rank, increased his emoluments, assigned him [important] tasks and empowered his orders, saying: "If the rank and the position are not high, the people will not respect him; if emoluments are not generous, the people will not trust him; if his administrative orders are not decisive, the people will not be in awe of him."...

sayings of the model rulers of the past from Yao to the Zhou (周, 1046-256) founders, and then summarizes historical lessons of the past. Its style is akin to the *Shu jing* extracts, and it is remarkably devoid of any mention of Confucius himself. I agree with Dim-Cheuk Lau's assertion that "it is very unlikely that this passage has much to do with Confucius except that it may constitute teaching materials used in Confucius' school" (Confucius, *The Analects*, translated with an introduction by D.C. Lau [London: Penguin, 1979], 158n.1; see also Lau's discussion on pp. 223-227). For a detailed attempt to distinguish Chapter 20 from the rest of the *Lunyu*, see Gu Jiegang, "Shanrang chuanshuo," 321-328. Of course, doubts can be raised regarding the dating of any passage of the *Lunyu*, including those which praise Yao and Shun, but I am reluctant to treat a saying as an interpolation on the basis of its content only, unless stylistic, grammatical, lexical or other data unequivocally support such a claim.

¹³ At the very least, Confucius was unaware of Shun's abdication in Yu's favor; hence, he praises Shun for elevating the worthy Gao Yao 皋陶, but not for yielding his throne to Yu (*Lunyu* "Yan Yuan" 顏淵, 12.22: 131).

¹⁴ Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 has convincingly argued that the core chapters (8 to 37) might have originated within Mozi's life-time or shortly thereafter and evidently reflect his authentic views (see his "Mozi gepian zhenwei kao" 墨子各篇真偽考, in Wu Yujiang, annot., *Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994], 1025-55).

Hence, Yao raised Shun from the northern shore of the Fu marshes, entrusted him with the government, and All under Heaven was pacified; Yu raised Yi 益 from the middle of Yinfang, entrusted him with the government, and the nine provinces were established; Tang (湯, the founder of the Shang dynasty) raised Yi Yin 伊尹 from the middle of the kitchen, entrusted him with the government, and his plans were fulfilled; King Wen (文王, the founder of the Zhou dynasty) raised Hongyao 閎夭 and Taidian 泰顛 from the middle of the nets, entrusted them with the government, and the Western Lands submitted.¹⁵

This is the earliest unequivocal mention of the transfer of power from Yao to Shun (and from other model rulers to their worthy ministers). It contains only the initial outline of the future legend: Yao raises Shun from a humble position (as indicated by the marshland location), and entrusts him with government affairs. However, the passage above lacks the most important part of the story: Shun is elevated, but the throne is not yielded to him. He stands here with other worthy ministers who were entrusted with supreme administrative responsibility, but none of whom attained the ruler's position.¹⁶ This promotion of Shun is in accord with Mozi's recommendation regarding promoting the worthy (commissioning them a high rank, assigning them important tasks and empowering their orders), but it stops short of advocating the elevation of the worthy to the throne itself. As we shall see, this step is taken in two other of the "Shang xian" (尚賢 "Elevating the Worthy") chapters.

Before we return to the abdication legend as presented in the *Mozi*, we should recall that, while it is difficult to determine whether or not the Yao-Shun abdication legend was fabricated by Mozi and his disciples, as asserted by Gu Jiegang, it is clear that Mozi was the first known thinker to present what appears to be veiled criticism of the principle of hereditary rule. In the "Elevating Uniformity" (or "Identifying with Superiors," *Shang tong* 尚同) chapters, which present Mozi's political ideal in the most detailed way, the principle of "elevating the worthy" is explicitly applied to the ruler's position.

¹⁵ 故古者聖王之爲政，列德而尚賢，雖在農與工肆之人，有能則舉之，高予之爵，重予之祿，任之以事，斷予之令，曰：『爵位不高則民弗敬，蓄祿不厚則民不信，政令不斷則民不畏』…故古者堯舉舜於服澤之陽，授之政，天下平；禹舉益於陰方之中，授之政，九州成，湯舉伊尹於庖廚之中，授之政，其謀得；文王舉閎夭、泰顛於置罔之中，授之政，西土服。*Mozi*, "Shang xian shang" 尚賢上 8: 67. Of the figures mentioned in this passage, two (Hongyao 閎夭 and Taidian 泰顛) are less well known from the later texts.

¹⁶ The importance of these parallels for understanding the legend's message is analyzed by Sarah Allen, *The Heir and the Sage*.

There, after depicting the primeval turmoil of the war of all against all, Mozi focuses on the process of the emergence of the pristine state:

It was clear that the chaos under Heaven derived from the absence of a ruler. Therefore, the worthiest and the most able [man] in All under Heaven was selected and established as the Son of Heaven. When the Son of Heaven had been established, he apprehended that his might was still insufficient; hence, again, [he] selected the worthiest and the most able [men] in All under Heaven and placed them in the positions of the Three Dukes. After the Son of Heaven and the Three Dukes had been established, they apprehended that All under Heaven is vast and huge, and one or two persons cannot clearly know the distinctions between the beneficent and the harmful, the true and the false regarding the people of the distinct lands; therefore, they divided it up into myriad states and established overlords and rulers of the states.¹⁷

Mozi then depicts in great detail the structure of the ideal state, in which every official and local potentate is selected (or elected?) due to his moral qualities. What is interesting, however, is the vagueness surrounding the most important step, namely the selection of the worthiest man to become the Son of Heaven. Who was responsible for this? Did Mozi envision a kind of election, in which all members of society agreed upon the leader best able to impose stability and act for their mutual benefit or did he consider omnipotent Heaven as the sole Elector? The imprecision may have been intentional: explicitly propounding the popular election of the supreme ruler might have been too radical a departure from the extant rules of hereditary succession, even for so bold a thinker as Mozi. What is more interesting is that Mozi did not refer to the Yao-Shun legend to exemplify the transfer of power to the most able and moral person, but placed it in an unspecified past, “in antiquity, when the people just arose.”¹⁸ This is a unique departure from Mozi’s common pattern of resorting to historic or legendary events to bolster his controversial arguments. This avoidance of what could have been easily used as an example of “elevating the worthy” to the throne suggests that the legend might have not been finally shaped during Mozi’s life-time or that it was not sufficiently compelling to be employed in pivotal

¹⁷ 夫明乎天下之所以亂者，生於無政長。是故選天下之賢可者，立以為天子。天子立，以其力為未足，又選天下之賢可者，置立之以為三公。天子三公既以立，以天下為博大，遠國異土之民，是非利害之辯，不可一二而明知，故畫分萬國，立諸侯國君。*Mozi*, “Shang tong shang” 尙同上, 11:109.

¹⁸ 古者民始生。*Mozi*, “Shang tong shang” 尙同上, 11:109.

political discussions. Hence, when the abdication story does appear in the *Mozi*, it seems to be almost in passing:

In times of old, Shun cultivated land at Mount Li, made pottery on the [Yellow] River's banks, went fishing in Lei marshes. Yao discovered him at the northern shore of the Fu marshes, raised him to [the position of] Son of Heaven and handed him the government of All under Heaven, [thus ensuring proper] rule over the people under Heaven. Yi Zhi [Yi Yin] was a private servant of the daughter of the Xin ruler, becoming a cook. Tang discovered him, raised him to the position of his own prime-minister and handed to him the government of All under Heaven [thus ensuring proper] rule over the people under Heaven.¹⁹

This passage, which is repeated almost verbatim in both “Elevating the Worthy” B and C chapters, is the earliest unequivocal reference to the abdication story in the received texts. While bearing clear similarities to the “Elevating the Worthy” A version cited above, the B and C versions introduce two new dimensions. First, both strengthen the emphasis on Shun's initially humble position: thus, not only his unassuming location in the marshlands is mentioned again, but also his particularly humble occupations as a peasant, pottery-maker and fisherman. Second, and more crucially, unlike in the A chapter, in the later versions Shun is elevated not merely to the head of the administration, but explicitly to the position of Son of Heaven, i.e. Yao's heir. Thus, Shun is properly distinguished from Yi Yin, who was granted “only” the position of the prime-minister by his master, Tang.

I shall not touch here on an intriguing question regarding the possibility of temporal differences between the three versions of “Elevating the Worthy” chapter, which, if correct, may reflect the early evolution of the Yao-Shun legend, nor shall I discuss the importance of Shun's example for Mozi's general emphasis on the advantages of merit over pedigree.²⁰ What is important is that the story is presented

¹⁹ 古者舜耕歷山，陶河瀕，漁雷澤。堯得之服澤之陽，舉以為天子，與接天下之政，治天下之民。伊摯，有莘氏女之私臣，親為庖人。湯得之，舉以為己相，與接天下之政，治天下之民。*Mozi*, “Shang xian zhong” 尚賢中 9: 77.

²⁰ The possible temporal and ideological differences between each part of the triple chapters of the *Mozi* are discussed by Angus C. Graham in *Divisions in Early Mohism Reflected in the Core Chapters of Mo-tzu* (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Occasional Paper and Monograph Series 1, 1985) and Erik W. Maeder, “Some Observances on the Composition of the ‘Core Chapters’ of the *Mozi*,” *Early China*, 17 (1992), 27-82. Recently, Karen Desmet has reinforced the possibility of the later origins of the B and C versions in comparison with the A version of the

in the *Mozi* only *en passant*; it is neither elaborated, nor explained, nor substantiated with appropriate citation from the early books, as is common in many other historical narratives scattered throughout the *Mozi* core chapters. Never again is the story of Yao's abdication raised in the *Mozi* and no attempt is made to combine it with Mozi's implicit attack on hereditary rule in the "Elevating Uniformity" chapters. This lack suggests that by the time of the *Mozi*'s compilation, in the late fifth to early fourth centuries BCE, the legend of the abdication was still in its infancy, and was not considered an important asset by the thinker who could have benefited most from its popularization.

Legitimization of abdication: Theory and praxis

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. New approaches appeared with regard to the functions of the state, to state-society relations, to the intellectual's social obligations, and, of course, to the ruler and the minister. It is in regard to the latter aspect that the abdication issue as the means to ensure adequate rulership gained popularity.

During Confucius's and even Mozi's life-time, when the old Zhou ritual system was still largely intact, the idea of a non-violent change of the ruling house was unthinkable; each of the states which comprised the Chinese world was still ruled by the descendants of the founding house. The first major change occurred in 403, when King Weilie of Zhou (周威烈王, r. 414-402) conferred the overlord (*zhuhou* 諸侯) title on the heads of the Zhao 趙, Han 韓, and Wei 魏 lineages who had earlier dismembered the once powerful state of Jin 晉.²¹ Soon thereafter a similar "usurpation" occurred in the state of

triple (see her "The Chronological Sequence of the Mohist Core Chapters: A New Approach", presented at the 15th EACS Conference, Heidelberg, August 2004). For the importance of the example of Shun's elevation for Mozi's doctrine, see Gu, "Shanrang chuanshuo," 310-316.

²¹ The importance of this event as the hallmark of the breakdown of the ancient

Qi 齊, where the Tian 田 family seized power as early as 481, but continued to rule in the name of the legitimate lords, the descendants of Jiang Taigong 姜太公, until 379. The demise of two major ruling lines in favor of their erstwhile servants dealt a serious—albeit not mortal—blow to the principle of hereditary succession. It is not surprising, therefore, that a new atmosphere of skepticism regarding the legitimacy of lineal succession emerged.

Prior to the recent discoveries, this atmosphere was expressed in the clearest form in the question of Mengzi's disciple, Wan Zhang 萬章:

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?²²

Mengzi's reply, one of the most important pre-imperial discussions regarding the possibility of dynastic change, will be examined in the next section. Here we shall focus first on the "people's saying" cited by Wan Zhang. It appears to reflect an increasing discontent with the principle of hereditary rule. The sentiment expressed by Wan Zhang is not unique to this thinker; rather, as the unearthed texts suggest, it was shared by many of Mengzi's contemporaries, including some of Confucius's followers. Three newly discovered texts from the state of Chu may disclose the arguments of Wan Zhang's contemporary supporters.²³

ritual system was correctly apprehended fifteen centuries later by Sima Guang (司馬光, 1019-1086), who chose it for an opening discussion in his *magnum opus*, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997, 1: 2-6).

²² 萬章問曰：「人有言『至於禹而德衰，不傳於賢而傳於子』，有諸？」 See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), "Wan Zhang shang" 萬章上 9.6: 221.

²³ 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, disputed only by Wang Baoxuan 王葆琰 ("Shi lun Guodian Chujian 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一論郭店及包山楚墓的時代問題, *Guodian Chujian yanjiu* 郭店楚簡研究 [*Zhongguo zhaxue* 20] [Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu, 1999], 366-390) 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 tombs, 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.

《Zi Gao》子羔

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, Xie 契 of the Shang, and Hou Ji 后稷 of the Zhou). 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 forms the later part.²⁴ My discussion focuses on the second half of the text, which follows Confucius’s stories of the miraculous birth of each of the Three Progenitors:

²⁴ For the original publication, see *Zi Gao* 子羔, edited and annotated by Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, in Ma Chengyuan, ed., *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, Vol. 2 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 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 of two other Shanghai Museum texts, namely *Kongzi Shi lun* 孔子詩論 and *Lu bang da han* 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, “Shanghai 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, Ōsaka daigaku Chūgoku tetsugaku kenkyūshitsu 大阪大學中國哲學研究室, ed., *Shin shutsudo shiryō to Chūgoku shisōshi* 新出土資料と中國思想史 [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, 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, eds., *Shangbo guan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu yanjiu xubian* 上博館藏戰國楚竹書研究續編 [Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2004, hereafter *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*], 53-84). Fukuda’s proposed rearrangement was however superseded even before its publication by a careful study by Chen Jian 陳劍 (first published on <http://www.jianbo.org/Wssf/2003/chenjian01.htm>), “Shangbo jian *Zi Gao*, *Cong zheng* 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, *Wenwu* 5 (2003), 56-59, 64. Chen’s research served as a foundation for further similar rearrangements proposed independently by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, “Tantan Shangbo jian *Zi Gao* pian de jian xu” 談談上博簡《子羔》篇的簡序, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 1-11; Li Xueqin 李學勤, “Chu jian *Zi Gao* yanjiu” 楚簡《子羔》研究, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 12-17; Lin Zhipeng, “Zhanguo Chu zhushu *Zi Gao*”; 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;

... said: the son of the Musical Master of the You Yu lineage, Gu Sou.²⁵ Zi Gao asked: “Why he was 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 properly to rule 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 respectfully to preserve them.²⁶ Yao observed that Shun’s virtue is [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....”²⁷

This portion of the text contains two important innovations in comparison with the *Mozi*. First, Zi Gao’s interlocutor is none other than Confucius himself, which means that the cited statement is to become ultimately authoritative among the Zhanguo *Ru* 儒.²⁸ Second, Confucius’s message is remarkably unequivocal: the possibil-

the latter two scholars discuss the relations between *Zi Gao* and the parallel texts, especially *Kongzi Shi lun*; see also 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: <http://www.hnass.com.cn/zxxk/200306/6-24.htm>). Generally, I follow Qiu Xigui’s arrangement, which integrates most of the earlier studies.

²⁵ 曰：有虞氏之樂正瞽瞍之子也。{1} (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.) The sentence above apparently deals with Shun and continues the previous dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zi Gao. In a brilliant, albeit highly speculative attempt to reconstruct the previous sentence, Liao Mingchun proposed preceding it with slip number 13, as accepted by other scholars, and also substituting the missing later part of slip 13 and the earlier part of slip 1 as follows (the proposed 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***爲賢？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).

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 子羔曰：何故以得爲帝？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。舜畚於童土之田，則{2}... Slip no. 2 is broken.

²⁸ Needless to say, this example suffices to question Gu Jiegang’s attempts to confine the doctrine of virtuous abdication exclusively to Mozi’s followers.

ity of obtaining “emperorship” (i.e. becoming *Di* 帝, a Thearch, a person above the ordinary “king” [*wang* 王])²⁹ lies exclusively in the ability to transfer power to the worthiest candidate as opposed to hereditary transmission. The latter’s existence “in antiquity” is denied, and its very legitimacy is accordingly strongly shattered. The egalitarian nature of the text becomes even more pronounced in its next portion, which deals in greater details with Shun and his relations with Yao:

...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 become 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 [that of the] worthy: he came from amidst the fields, but [Yao] let him rule All under Heaven—[thereby] he became famous.”³⁰

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].”³¹

Kongzi said: “Shun can be called ‘the Man who received the Mandate.’ Shun is a human son, but all the three Heaven’s sons served him.”³²

The many damaged slips and partly illegible characters prevent us from fully reconstructing the text, but its egalitarian appeal is clear enough. It refers to a famous *topos* of Zhanguo texts, retelling a story of Shun’s humble conditions and of Yao’s ability to recognize Shun’s worthiness despite the latter’s remote location. This story was repeated in greater detail in the *Rong Cheng shi*, discussed below, and is present in several received texts, and we shall not deal with it here. The unequivocal readiness of the authors to draw far-reaching conclusions concerning the nature of the social hierarchy is striking.

²⁹ I adopt the term “Thearch” for *Di* 帝 as proposed by several earlier scholars, since this neologism aptly conveys both the divine and the mundane aspects of *Di*’s power.

³⁰ In reconstructing the first two sentences of this passage I adopt the version of Zhang Guiguang; for the rest I follow Qiu Xigui.

³¹ Confucius’s reply is hotly disputed between the scholars; I follow the reading of Qiu Xigui.

³² 之童土之黎民也。孔子曰：□{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。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}

Shun's low status is contrasted with the divine origins of "Heaven's sons"—the progenitors of the three dynasties.³³ 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) is the only consideration that should be taken into account for 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's 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.

Tang Yu zhi dao 唐虞之道

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 unique text 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:

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 himself, and then rectify the generation; this is the completeness of the Way of the Sages. Hence, <the way> of Tang and Yu is <to abdicate>.³⁴

³³ As convincingly argued by Qiu Xigui ("Tantan Shangbo jian," 9), in the *Zi Gao*, the term *tianzi* 天子 refers not to a usual "Son of Heaven" (i.e. a king), but to a literal son of Heaven, i.e. one who was begotten through Heaven's interference. For further analysis of the stories of the Three Royal Progenitors in the *Zi Gao*, see Yuri Pines, "Subversion Unearthed: Criticism of Hereditary Succession in the Newly Discovered Manuscripts," *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005, forthcoming).

³⁴ 唐虞之道，禪而不傳。堯舜之王，利天下而弗利也。禪而不傳，聖之盛也。利天

The first passage flatly transposes the notion of abdication from the issue of “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 generation by rectifying himself” in a way that is unmistakably reminiscent of Mengzi’s dictum.³⁵ Abdication, therefore, is praiseworthy 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 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, including Mengzi and even the authors of several other Guodian texts.³⁶ After all, by appointing Shun, Yao had forsaken his

下而弗利也，仁之至也。故昔賢仁聖者如此。身窮不貪，沒而弗利，躬仁矣。必正其身，然後正世，聖道備矣。故唐虞之〈道，禪〉也。Jingmenshi Bowuguan 荆門市博物館, *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 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, as published in his *Guodian Chujian jiaodu ji* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, rev. edition, 2002), 95-99. Additions in <> stand here and elsewhere for the reconstruction of the missing or illegible characters. 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.

³⁵ “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’s 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！」 *Lunyu* 14.42: 159).

³⁶ 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*, “Liu de” 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

son(s); while Shun by assuming his position became ruler over his own father! Such 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.³⁷ 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:

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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

The defense of Shun's filiality is twofold. First, the authors 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

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: Ding Sixin 丁思新, ed., *Chu di chutu jianbo wenxian sixiang yanjiu* 楚地出土簡帛文獻思想研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002, Vol. 1), 91-102.

³⁷ Mengzi, "Wan Zhang shang" 萬章上 9.1- 9.4: 206-218; "Jin xin shang" 13.35: 317. The *Lüshi chunqiu* 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 Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 [Shanghai: Xuelin, 1990], "Ju nan" 舉難, 19.8: 1309); cf. *Lüshi chunqiu*, "Dang wu" 當務 11.4: 596. As we shall see below, these critical comments were employed later by the opponents of abdication.

³⁸ For different attempts to identify the "six Thearchs," see Deng Jianpeng 鄧建鵬, "*Tang Yu zhi dao* 'liu Di' xin shi" 《唐虞之道》“六帝”新釋, 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 chubanshe, 2000, hereafter *Guoji hui*), 277-282.

³⁹ 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{8}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}

continued to behave in the most filial way; political and family obligations may thus be reconciled.⁴⁰ The authors emphasize that both obligations are complementary and that only by combining them can one become a truly moral person, preserving benevolence and righteousness alike. Second, to avoid any suspicion of Shun, they specifically mention his exemplary filiality; actually, this feature was crucial for Shun's ascendancy:

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 <□ □ □, and [thus] knew that he would be able> to become the Master of the people.⁴¹

The issue of Shun's filiality as the precondition for Yao's choice of Shun was raised in several texts, most importantly in the *Yao dian*, where it similarly becomes a crucial argument in Shun's favor.⁴² Such claims, as we shall see below, will not convince cynical opponents of the abdication legend, but they were sufficient for the argument in *Tang Yu zhi dao*. 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:

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. Therefore we know that they did not derive benefit [from All under Heaven].⁴³

⁴⁰ 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 '唐虞之道 (Tang Yu zhi Dao)'" in *Between Confucius and Mencius: Buried Thoughts in Early China* (forthcoming 2005).

⁴¹ 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〈□□□，知其能〉{23}爲民主也。{24}。□ stands here and elsewhere for illegible characters.

⁴² See Kong Yingda 孔穎達, annot., "*Shang shu*" *zhengyi* 尚書正義; rpt. in: Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), "Yao dian" 2:123a.

⁴³ 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}

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!⁴⁴

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 in the text, and as it has now been discussed by Carine Defoort, I shall not deal with it here.⁴⁵ A cynical reader, like Han Feizi (韓非子, d. 233), whose views are discussed below, 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 the ruler’s health but focus instead on the political and moral aspects of abdication:

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 the 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...⁴⁶

⁴⁴ 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。Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳, *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), “Jie” 戒 10.26: 510; cf. Allyn W. Rickett, tr., *Guanzi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 379. The *Guanzi* thus favors the abdication gesture, but opposes the minister who would not reject the offer. For different views regarding the dating and the nature of the “Jie” chapter of the *Guanzi*, see Rickett, *Guanzi*, 376-377.

⁴⁵ See Defoort, “Mohist and Yangist Blood in Confucian Flesh.”

⁴⁶ 《虞詩》曰：“大明不出，萬物皆匱。聖者不在上，天下壤。”治之至，

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 quasi-canonical tradition. However, the *Shi jing* contains no poems attributed to Shun, and the language of the cited “Yu Poem” strongly suggests its relatively late (middle-Zhanguo?) provenance.⁴⁷ It seems therefore that the poem was created as part of the lore of texts aimed at bolstering the prestige of abdication doctrine; indeed, its message, “If the Sage is not at the top, All under the 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.⁴⁸

The *Tang Yu zhi dao* ends with a powerful assertion of the benefits of abdication:

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.⁴⁹

The pro-abdication sentiment stated here is more powerful even

養不肖。亂之至，滅賢。仁者爲此進。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.

⁴⁷ 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 Pines, “Lexical change,” 697-698).

⁴⁸ An absolute majority of references to the *Shi* in such texts as the *Zuo zhuan*, *Guoyu* 國語, *Lunyu*, *Mozi*, *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, *Jingxue jin quan chu bian* 經學今詮初編 [*Zhongguo zhexue* 中國哲學 22] [Jilin: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000], 148-192). 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.”

⁴⁹ 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}。

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.

Rong Cheng shi 容成氏

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 陳劍, whose work will apparently become the authoritative new edition.⁵⁰ The text presents a heretofore unknown attempt to reconstruct China’s remote past and traces dynastic changes to the beginning of the Zhou dynasty. The length and richness of *Rong Cheng shi* prevent me from discussing many interesting aspects of this text; in what follows I shall focus only on those portions which deal directly with the abdication issue.⁵¹

⁵⁰ For Li Ling’s study, see Li Ling 李零, ed., “Rong Cheng shi,” in *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu*, II, 247-293; Chen Jian’s alternative rearrangement (“Shangbo jian *Rong Cheng shi* de zhujian pinhe yu pianlian 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 (<http://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’ zhuyi 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.

⁵¹ For early studies of the *Rong Cheng shi* views of abdication, see Asano Yūichi 淺野裕一, “*Rong Cheng shi* de shanrang yu fangfa” 《容成氏》的禪讓與放伐, in id., *Zhanguo Chujian yanjiu* 戰國楚簡研究, translated by Satō Masayuki 佐藤將之 (Taipei: Wanjuan lou, 2004), 85-112; 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, *Qi Lu xuekan* 6 (2003), 104-107. The text contains much unique 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 is therefore 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.

The text begins with the depiction of a lengthy line of legendary rulers of the past. After a list of names, the conclusion comes:

... [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.⁵²

The beginning is clear enough. Abdication was the only means of legitimate succession in the past, and those days were indeed the Golden Age. The text specifies the excellent conditions that prevailed during this age of primeval harmony, both under the early rulers and under a later sovereign, whose name is lost due to the slip's damage, but who has been convincingly identified by Li Ling as Yao's predecessor, Di Ku 帝嚳.⁵³ Then the narrative turns to Yao:

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 tirelessly⁵⁴ ordered chaos. Hence, it is said: when the worthy...⁵⁵

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." The erstwhile ambiguity of the *Mozi's* narrative gives way here to the most daring statement in Chinese political thought: popular will appears to be the single factor behind the establishment of the Son of Heaven.⁵⁶ Although "the people's will" will not be mentioned

⁵² ... 之有天下也，皆不授其子而授賢。其德曾清，而上愛 {1} 下，而一其志，而寢其兵，而官其材。{2}

⁵³ Li Ling, "Rong Cheng shi," 254-255.

⁵⁴ Reading the character after 不 as 倦 in accord with He Linyi 何琳儀, "Di er pi Hu jian xuan shi" 第二批滙簡選釋, *Shangbo yanjiu xubian*, 444.

⁵⁵ 昔堯處於丹府與蕃陵之間，堯賤也而時時，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<中之>，於是乎持板正立，四向喙和，懷以來天下之民。{7}其政治而不賞，官而不爵，無勸於民，而治亂不倦。故曰：賢及□ {43}

⁵⁶ Later we shall see seeds of similar ideas in Mengzi's thought.

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:

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] matters, 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 receive it. Heads of the myriad states all yielded their states to the worthies... <yielded to the> worthies <from All under Heaven>;⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

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:

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.⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁷ 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 (*Kaozheng*, 257).

⁵⁸ 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}

⁵⁹ 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).

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.⁶⁰

The story follows in its early part Mozi's assertion of Shun's humble position, but then it develops in a much more radical way. Yao behaves as a model 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 from fully reconstructing the narrative).⁶¹ Later, the story looks as 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 continues 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 the ineptitude of Yao's sons, a *topos* which, as we shall see, was often employed as a justification of Yao's transfer of power to Shun.⁶² 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."

Shun begins his rule with a series of administrative and ritual improvements, as a result of which All under Heaven prospers:

At that time there were no epidemics, no evil portents. Disasters and calamities were eradicated, beasts and birds were fat, grass and trees—tall. Such pros-

⁶⁰ 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。舜於是乎始免刈鬲耨鍤，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}.

⁶¹ This version of Shun's elevation is referred to in the *Zhanguo ce*: "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 the Heaven" 昔者堯見舜於草茅之中，席隴畝而蔭庇桑，陰移而授天下傳 (He Jianzhang 何建章, *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 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 appeared 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).

⁶² For the importance of this *topos*, see Allan, *The Heir and the Sage*, 33-34.

perity 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].⁶³

Shun's reign is marked by a prosperity that indicates 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 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; then the story of virtuous yielding ends abruptly:

Yu had five sons, but he did not make his son heir. He observed Gao Yao's 皋陶 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.⁶⁴

The story of the virtuous transmission of power 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. We shall not focus here on the important sub-topic of the reasons for the cessation of abdication practices after Yu,⁶⁵ but rather notice that prosperity and orderly rule, which characterized the ages of abdication, disappear from the narrative when hereditary rule is established. The dynastic cycle thereafter is discussed only in terms of the struggle between the vicious last ruler and the upright challenger; but nothing positive is told of the dynastic age. Without openly negating the principle of hereditary rule, the *Rong Cheng shi* authors leave no doubt that the loss of support of Heaven-and-Earth by

⁶³ ... 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}

⁶⁴ 禹有子五人，不以其子爲後，見 {33} 皋陶之賢也，而欲以爲後。皋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。

⁶⁵ See Allan, *The Heir and the Sage*, 68-76.

contemporary rulers is related to their abandonment of the principle of abdicating in favor of the worthiest.⁶⁶

We may now summarize the importance of the three unearthed texts. Each text reveals clear and unqualified pro-abdication sentiments. By borrowing Confucius's authority or by explaining ethical advantages of abdication, by creating a favorable historical account regarding endless abdications by the former paragons or by emphasizing the personal advantages to the aging ruler who would opt to resign and to cultivate his body, the *Zi Gao*, the *Tang Yu zhi dao* and the *Rong Cheng shi* unequivocally promote the idea of abdication as a system far superior to hereditary succession. Moreover, all three texts try to convince the reader that abdication was not an extraordinary and unique event, but rather a norm—a norm which was abandoned by the rulers of the Xia dynasty, but which may—and should—be restored. In light of these texts we may suggest that Wan Zhang's citation of a "popular saying" in favor of abdication cited at the beginning of the present section did not disclose the private opinion of a dissenting disciple, but reflected a genuine opposition to the principle of hereditary succession during the middle-Zhanguo period.

Abdication actualized: King Kuai and Zi Zhi

Going from the realm of political theories to that of practical policies, we may discern an undeniable impact of the abdication doctrine on mid-Zhanguo politics. Zhanguo texts tell of the abdication gestures made by several rulers in the second half of the fourth century BCE,⁶⁷ and while the veracity of these anecdotes is impossible to verify, at least in one case a real abdication did occur. In 314, King Kuai of Yan (燕王噲, r. 320-314) yielded the throne to his minister, Zi Zhi 子之. King Kuai's motivations for this extraordinary step are not clear,⁶⁸ but the results of his decision were

⁶⁶ See further discussion of the *Rong Cheng shi*'s support of abdication in Asano, "Rong Cheng shi"; Pines, "Subversion Unearthed."

⁶⁷ The *Zhanguo ce* tells of the supposed intention of Lord Xiao of Qin (秦孝公, r. 361-338) to yield his throne in favor of his famous aide, Shang Yang (商鞅, d. 338) (*Zhanguo ce*, "Qin ce 秦策1" 3.1: 71); the *Lüshi chunqiu* tells of a similar gesture by King Hui of Wei (魏惠王, r. 369-319) in favor of his aide, Hui Shi 惠施 (*Lüshi chunqiu*, "Bu qu" 不屈 18.6: 1196); another anecdote of abdication gesture is told of King Hui's son, King Xiang (*Zhanguo ce*, "Wei ce 魏策 2" 23.4: 855).

⁶⁸ Zhanguo and Han texts contain conflicting depictions of this abdication;

both unequivocal and disastrous: the state of Yan deteriorated into conflict between Zi Zhi and the “legitimate” heir, Ping 平; and the eventual turmoil brought about an invasion and a brief occupation by the forces of neighboring Qi 齊. Although Yan reestablished its independence shortly thereafter, the historical lesson had been learnt: while a good recipe in theory, in actual life abdication may have disastrous consequences.

Rare epigraphic evidence provides us with a unique clue as to the immediate reaction to the Yan case in the Zhanguo world. Bronze vessels cast by the order of King Cuo of Zhongshan 中山王譽, whose troops seized the opportunity of Yan’s turmoil to invade it and to conquer part of its territory, leave no doubt that the abdication of the legitimate royal line in Yan was condemned by the Zhongshan leaders as a severe breach of the norms of ritual and political propriety, providing Zhongshan with a convenient *casus belli*. For Zhongshan statesmen the abdication of King Kuai eventually became a paradigmatic example of political folly. The inscription on the royal cauldron says:

Wuhu! These *Speeches* should not be neglected!⁶⁹ I, the Lonely Man, have heard: it is better to sink in the abyss than to sink among men. Previously, Zi Kuai, the ruler of Yan, was broadly intelligent and deeply thoughtful, as an elder he was a ruler of men, and was skilled in the affairs of All under Heaven and was not hesitant. And still, he was deluded by Zi Zhi, lost his state and was destroyed by All under Heaven.⁷⁰

according to some versions the step was genuine, albeit misguided; other texts assume that the king did not expect Zi Zhi to accept the offer. For conflicting versions, see *Shiji* 34: 1555-1557; *Zhanguo ce*, “Yan ce 燕策 1” 29.9: 1104-1105; Wang Xianshen 王先慎, *Han Feizi jiji* 韓非子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1998), “Wai chu shuo you xia” 外儲說右下 35: 338-341.

⁶⁹ I prefer to translate *yu* 語 here as referring to the genre of *Speeches* (collections of historical anecdotes—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), and not to King Cuo’s specific speech. First, the following sentence is proverbial: it is cited *verbatim* in *Da Dai liji* 大戴禮記 (Wang Pinzhen 王聘珍, comp., *Da Dai liji jiegou* 大戴禮記解詁 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992], “Wu wang jian zuo” 武王踐阼 59:105). Second, the entire story of King Kuai below may be used as a kind of historical anecdote; hence it is preceded by the word *xi* 昔 (literally: “in the past,” “in antiquity”), which refers to events that occurred just several years before the inscription was made.

⁷⁰ 嗚呼！語不廢哉！寡人聞之：與其溺於人也，寧溺於淵。昔者，燕君子噲，睿奔夫悟，長為人宗，閑於天下勿疑，猶迷惑於子之而亡其邦，為天下戮。(Zhongshan Wang Cuo *da ding* inscription, cited from Hebei Sheng wenwu yanjiu suo 河北省文物研究所, ed., *Cuo mu—Zhanguo Zhongshan guo guowang zhi mu* 譽墓—戰國中山國國王之墓 [Beijing: Wenwu, 1995], vol. 1, 341-369; hereafter *Cuo mu*). For a slightly

After clarifying the view that abdication of King Kuai was a result of delusion rather than a laudable act of selflessness, King Cuo explains elsewhere why the abdication in the state of Yan violated political and ritual norms, and why this state should be punished:

... Then it happened that Zi Kuai, the ruler of Yan, failed to distinguish great propriety, did not behave in accord with ancient [norms appropriate to the] overlords, and thus the dynastic head and the minister changed their position. Internally, they cut off thereby the great enterprise of [the founder of Yan] Lord Shao 召公 and deprived the former kings of their sacrifices. Externally, they intended to let Zi Zhi be elevated to perform the *jin* ceremony at the Son of Heaven's ancestral temple, while at the court he would be ranked according to age along with other overlords during the royal *huitong* assemblies.⁷¹ This meant to go against the Heaven above and was not in conformance with the people below. I, the lonely man, opposed this. Zhou [King Cuo's chief minister] said: "When a minister turns the dynastic ruler into his servant—nothing can be more inauspicious than this! I will never tolerate that [Zi Zhi] exist in the same generation with my ruler, and be ranked according to age at the *huitong* assemblies. I, Zhou, would like to lead the nobles to pacify Yan's boundaries."⁷²

This outburst of righteous indignation against the violation of the norms of social hierarchy in general and of dynastic principles in particular in a neighboring country should be taken *cum grano salis*: it was primarily a convenient pretext for Zhongshan's invasion of Yan, which resulted not in the restoration of internal order in Yan, but merely in the expansion of Zhongshan's territory by "hundreds of *li*" at the expense of Yan. The abuse of moral discourse to conceal sinister motives notwithstanding, the importance of Zhongshan's anti-Yan rhetoric cannot be dismissed. King Cuo and his aides may

different punctuation and transliteration of the problematic characters, based on earlier studies, see Gilbert L. Mattos, "Eastern Zhou Bronze Inscriptions," in *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to Reading Inscriptions and Manuscripts*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1997), pp. 104-111.

⁷¹ *Jin* 覲 is an autumn visit of the overlord to the Son of Heaven; *hui* 會 and *tong* 同 are emergency meetings of the overlords at the royal court (see *Zhou li zhushu* 周禮注疏, annotated by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, rpt. in *Shisanjing zhushu*, "Da zong bo" 大宗伯 18: 759c). Being ranked according to age meant being equal to other overlords. For further details see the glosses in *Cuo mu*, 382-383.

⁷² 適遭燕君子噲，不分大義，不舊諸侯，而臣宗易位；以內絕召公之業，乏其先王之祭祀；外之則將使上覲於天子之廟，而退與諸侯齒長於會同。則上逆於天，下不順於人也。寡人非之。謂曰：爲人臣而反臣其宗，不祥莫焉。將與吾君並立於世，齒長於會同，則臣不忍見也。謂願從在大夫，以靖燕疆。(Zhongshan wang Cuo-hu inscription; *Cuo mu*, 370-383).

have utilized genuine dissatisfaction among the Zhanguo ruling elites with regard to the overt violation of the principle of hereditary succession. The implementation of the abdication doctrine was in their eyes utterly illegitimate.

Some scholars suggest that King Kuai's disastrous experience played a decisive role in the decline of pro-abdication sentiments in the late Zhanguo period.⁷³ This may be indeed an important turning point in the thinkers' views on abdication; but I believe the reasons for the eventual disappearance of texts like *Zi Gao*, *Tang Yu zhi dao* or *Rong Cheng shi* are deeper. Liu Baocai may be more to the point in his assertion that the renewed institutionalization of the Warring States after a period of profound reforms led to the reassertion of the hereditary principles of rule and the decline of the appeal of the abdication doctrine.⁷⁴ In any case, the pro-abdication enthusiasm reflected in the texts surveyed above subsided significantly from the late fourth century BCE on, while anti-abdication views became much more visible than before. Nonetheless, pro-abdication sentiments did not disappear altogether, creating immense tension in abdication-related discussions during the late Zhanguo period. In what follows we shall trace different arguments employed by the reluctant supporters and reluctant or overt opponents of the abdication doctrine during that period.

Qualified support: The uniqueness of abdication

It is tempting to analyze the genesis of the abdication discourse as a temporary sequence from the nascent concept of abdication in the *Mozi* through the high tide of pro-abdication sentiments expressed in the recently unearthed texts to qualified support of abdication in the texts discussed below, such as "Yao dian" and the *Mengzi*, and, finally, to the rejection of the abdication doctrine by such third century BCE thinkers as Zhuangzi, Xunzi and Han Feizi. The problem of this

⁷³ 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* chutan" 楚簡《唐虞之道》初探, *Guoji hui*, 261-272.

⁷⁴ See 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.

otherwise neat sequence is that, aside from the ongoing difficulties in dating most of the key texts (see, e.g., note 23 above), we cannot be entirely sure whether or not the pro-abdication sentiments in the unearthed texts represent a truly significant current in mid-Zhanguo thought. Is it possible that these manuscripts circulated only within a limited circle of late fourth century Chu nobles and never influenced Zhanguo discourse in general?

The very possibility to raise this reservation dictates utmost caution in our further discussion. We cannot be sure, for instance, whether or not the arguments of Mengzi and of the “Yao dian” were shaped in response to those of *Tang Yu zhi dao* and the like, or whether they developed independently as two parallel and unrelated traditions. The interpretative framework adopted below will remain forever tentative, at least unless future discoveries shed new light on the evolution of the abdication discourse. Nonetheless, some indirect evidence may support my evolutionary views of abdication discourse. First, the three texts discussed above differ in their views of the past and in their argumentation; and the existence of several pro-abdication lines of argument indicates a certain degree of popularity of this topic among Zhanguo *shi* 士. Second, Wan Zhang’s enthusiastic endorsement of non-hereditary succession also testifies to the fact that the unearthed texts were not unique in their support of abdication. Finally, some of the angry remarks by Xunzi and Han Feizi against supporters of abdication, discussed below, may also be interpreted as indirect evidence of the power of the pro-abdication tide in Zhanguo discourse. In light of these hints, I believe it is possible to argue that both “qualified support” and overall rejection of the abdication legend in the middle to late Zhanguo texts were a response to the pro-abdication sentiments discussed in the previous section.

It would be wrong in any case to assume that an overall change in the attitudes toward abdication took place immediately in the aftermath of King Kuai’s ill-conceived abdication. While the events in the state of Yan may have brought about a reappraisal of the practicality of yielding the throne, they did not necessarily result in an overall rejection of the abdication doctrine. Three major factors ensured the ongoing popularity of the Yao-Shun example in the eyes of Zhanguo thinkers. First, since the position of Yao and Shun as utmost paragons of virtue had been firmly established, it was not easy to dismiss the major act of these rulers, that which immortalized them as models of impartiality and selflessness. In particular, such

rejection was unthinkable for the self-proclaimed heirs of Yao and Shun, the followers of Confucius and Mozi.⁷⁵ Second, the practical disadvantages of abdication notwithstanding, this act remained in the eyes of many thinkers the most laudable manifestation of the moral quality of “yielding” (*rang* 讓)—a hallmark of the “superior man’s” morality, which could not be discarded.⁷⁶ Third, the abdication legend had become firmly associated with the widely hailed principle of “elevating the worthy.” High-aspiring Zhanguo *shi* found in Shun an ultimate source of emulation: a person who preserved moral integrity despite the most adverse personal conditions, and whose steadfast observation of moral norms was rewarded by the highest possible appointment.⁷⁷ Yao’s selection and elevation of Shun became the ultimate act of “recognizing” the worthy,⁷⁸ and Yao and Shun became the model pair of enlightened ruler and worthy minister. Insofar as their story could further *shi* aspirations, the popularity of the abdication legend remained largely intact.

Middle and late Zhanguo thinkers faced therefore the compelling task of resolving the contradiction between the radical implications of

⁷⁵ Han Feizi argued: “[Followers] of Confucius and Mozi all speak about Yao and Shun, but they differ in what they accept and what they reject; yet each of them claims himself to be a real follower of Yao and Shun” 孔子、墨子俱道堯、舜，而取舍不同，皆自謂真堯、舜 (*Han Feizi*, “Xian xue” 顯學 50: 457).

⁷⁶ For the importance of ritual yielding (*li rang* 禮讓) as one of the foundations of the abdication doctrine, see Luo Xinhui 羅新慧, “Li rang yu shan rang—lun Zhou dai ‘rang’ de shehui guannian bianqian” 禮讓與禪讓—論周代“讓”的社會觀念變遷, *Shehui kexue zhanxian* 6 (2002), 143-147.

⁷⁷ The egalitarian appeal of Shun’s example was ubiquitous. Thus, the *Lüshi chungqiu* praises Shun as being “a plain-clothed [*shi*], who came to possess All under Heaven” 舜布衣而有天下 (*Lüshi chungqiu*, “Shi wei” 適威 19.5: 1280). Zhanguo texts abound with stories which emphasize Shun’s dire circumstances, which did not prevent him from fulfilling his highest aspirations; see, e.g. the *Mengzi*: “Shun lived deep in the mountains, dwelling together with trees and stones, traveling together with deer and wild boars; he was almost indistinguishable from the savages who live deep in the mountains” 舜之居深山之中，與木石居，與鹿豕遊，其所以異於深山之野人者幾希 (*Mengzi*, “Jin xin shang” 13.16: 307; cf. *Mengzi*, “Gaozi xia” 告子下 12.15: 298; “Jin xin xia” 14.6: 326; *Lüshi chungqiu*, “Shen ren” 慎人 14.6: 802). It is not surprising therefore that certain *shi* adopted Shun as the ultimate source of emulation; one of the later chapters of the *Mozi* tells of a certain Wu Lu 吳慮 from the southern outskirts of the Lu capital who “made pottery in winter and plowed in summer, comparing himself to Shun” 魯之南鄙人，有吳慮者，冬陶夏耕，自比於舜 (*Mozi*, “Lu wen” 魯問 49: 736). See also the *Zi Gao* text above.

⁷⁸ For the notion of “recognizing” a person’s worth in ancient Chinese political tradition, see Eric Henry, “The Motif of Recognition in Early China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47.1 (1987), 5-30.

the abdication legend and the ever clearer political inapplicability of the abdication doctrine. While some, whose views will be discussed in the next section, opted for the overall rejection of the abdication legend altogether, others developed a more sophisticated approach. Without questioning the paradigmatic importance of the Yao-Shun legend, these thinkers tried to reduce abdication to a single historical event, which, laudable as it may have been, could never become the foundation of systematic yielding as envisioned by the authors of the *Tang Yu zhi dao* and *Rong Cheng shi*. By emphasizing the unique circumstances which occurred during the Yao-Shun transmission, these thinkers effectively undermined the possibility of practicing abdication under the “normal” conditions of the Warring States.

This emphasis on the uniqueness of Yao’s and Shun’s abdications is vivid in the “Yao dian”—a chapter of the *Shu jing*, which was composed, in all likelihood, in the fourth century BCE, although later it may have been modified by the transmitters.⁷⁹ After the detailed depiction of Yao’s rule, the text tells of Yao’s dialogue with his aides:

The Thearch said: “Who can be promoted for an appointment in accord with timely needs?”

Fangqi answered: “Your son, Zhu, is already enlightened.”

The Thearch said: “Really? [He is] raucous and contending, can he be employed?”⁸⁰

By disqualifying Zhu (or Danzhu 丹朱) as a proper appointee, Yao clearly undermined his son’s position as an heir. Hence, the next dialogue comes as a no surprise:

The Thearch said: “Oh, Si Yue!⁸¹ I am already seventy years on the throne.

⁷⁹ See note 7 above.

⁸⁰ 帝曰：「疇咨若時登庸？」放齊曰：「胤子朱啓明。」帝曰：「吁！嚚訟，可乎？」（“Yao dian” 2: 122a). In translating this passage I relied on the glosses by Huang Huaixin 黃懷信, *Shang shu zhu xun* 尚書注訓 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2002), 16-19.

⁸¹ Commentators disagree with regard to the precise meaning of Si Yue 四岳 (literally “Four Peaks”); in the *Guoyu* 國語 it is apparently a personal name of a grand-nephew of the legendary rebel, Gong Gong 共工 (see Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, comp., *Guoyu jiji* 國語集解 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002], “Zhou yu xia” 周語下 3.3: 95), although the commentary of Wei Zhao (韋昭, 204-273 CE) suggests that it is a title of the official in charge of the overlords. Alternatively, Yan Shigu (顏師古, 581-645) identified Si Yue as “overlords from the four directions” (*si fang zhuhou* 四方諸侯, see his commentary in Ban Gu 班固, *Han shu* 漢書 [Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997], 19:723, n.10). For further suggestions see the glosses collected by

Who of you is able to follow my order and to inherit my position?"

Yue answered: "We lack virtue, we would disgrace the Thearch's position."

[The Thearch said]: "So, clear-sightedly promote those from the remote outskirts."

One of the Masters answered the Thearch: "There is an unmarried man below, named Yu Shun."

The Thearch said: "Oh! I have heard about him. What do you think of him?"

Yue answered: "He is the son of the Blind Man. His father is stubborn, his mother is raucous, [his brother] Xiang, is arrogant, but [Shun] is able to harmonize them by means of his filiality; he behaves respectfully and will never behave wickedly."

The Thearch said: "I shall try him. I shall marry my daughters to him, to check his behavior with my daughters."⁸²

The authors of the "Yao dian" introduce here two crucial changes in comparison with the earlier surveyed stories. First, Yao has only one—presumably inept—son, and not the nine nameless and featureless sons mentioned in the *Rong Cheng shi*. Second, Yao decides to retire not at the age of seventy, as recommended by *Tang Yu zhi dao*, but after seventy years in power. Needless to say, this "minor" change completely undermines the applicability of the mandatory abdication as envisioned by the authors of *Tang Yu zhi dao*. While certain rulers could attain the age of seventy, not a single person occupied the Chinese throne (including the throne of one of the Warring States or their predecessors) for seventy years.⁸³ Yao's example is thus excluded from ordinary succession procedures and becomes a unique case with limited—if any—applicability in the present.

Aside from the "Yao dian," the *Mengzi* may be considered the most important text which combines a favorable attitude toward abdication with imposing strict limits on the actual possibility of abdicating.⁸⁴ On the one hand, *Mengzi* lauds Yao:

Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 in *Shangshu jinguwen zhushu* 尚書今古文注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), "Yao dian" 1: 26.

⁸² 帝曰：「咨！四岳！朕在位七十載，汝能庸命，巽朕位？」岳曰：「否德忝帝位。」曰：「明明揚側陋。」師錫帝曰：「有鰥在下，曰虞舜。」帝曰：「俞，予聞。如何？」岳曰：「瞽子，父頑，母嚚，象傲；克諧以孝，烝烝乂不格姦。」帝曰：「我其試哉。女于時，觀厥刑于二女。」("Yao dian" 2: 123a).

⁸³ The Qianlong emperor (乾隆, 1736-1795 CE) occupied the imperial throne for a full sixty years, reigning for another four years in the name of his son, the Jiaqing emperor (嘉慶, 1796-1820 CE). Of the pre-imperial rulers, the lengthiest reign is recorded for King Nan of Zhou (周王赧, r. 314-256).

⁸⁴ *Mengzi's* views of abdication have been studied by several scholars, of whom

As for Yao's attitude toward Shun, he ordered nine of his sons to serve [Shun], married two of his daughters to him, he provided the hundred officials, oxen and sheep, granaries and storehouses—to feed Shun amidst the fields. Later he raised him and gave him the highest position. Hence it is said that kings and lords respect the worthies.⁸⁵

This claim places Mengzi within the same current represented by Mozi and more radically by the authors of the texts surveyed above, who consider the transfer of the throne from Yao to Shun a normal and desirable manifestation of the “elevating the worthy” principle. However, Mengzi, who had personally witnessed the turmoil in the state of Yan as a result of King Kuai's abdication,⁸⁶ was perfectly aware of the potential negative consequences of a normalization of abdication. Hence, in a series of crucial dialogues with his disciples he did his best to confine the abdication only to the cases of Yao and Shun, explaining that even these could not have been possible without the intervention of the most powerful force—Heaven:

Wan Zhang asked: “Did it really happen that Yao granted All under Heaven to Shun?”

Mengzi said: “No, the Son of Heaven cannot grant anybody All under Heaven.”

“Nonetheless, Shun possessed All under Heaven. Who granted it to him?”

[Mengzi] said: “Heaven granted it.”

“That Heaven granted it, does it mean that it repeatedly ordered him so?”

[Mengzi] said: “No, Heaven does not speak. It clarified [its intent] through conduct and through sacrifices.”

[Wan Zhang] said: “What does it mean ‘clarified through conduct and through sacrifices?’”

[Mengzi] said: “The Son of Heaven can recommend a person to Heaven, but cannot force Heaven to grant this person All under Heaven; an overlord can recommend a person to the Son of Heaven, but cannot force the Son of Heaven to grant this person the rank of overlord; a noble can recommend

I would single out Li Cunshan, whose “Fansi jing shi guanxi” presents a most systematic, even if sometimes speculative, attempt to address internal contradictions in Mengzi's views of abdication and hereditary succession.

⁸⁵ 堯之於舜也，使其子九男事之，二女女焉，百官牛羊倉廩備，以養舜於畎畝之中，後舉而加諸上位。故曰王公之尊賢者也。（*Mengzi*, “Wan Zhang xia” 10.6: 245; cf. *ibid.*, 10.3: 237). Elsewhere Mengzi claims that it was absolutely normal for Shun to receive All under Heaven from Yao, whose Way he shared (“Teng Wen Gong xia” 滕文公下 6.4:145).

⁸⁶ Mengzi served as a high minister at the court of Qi during the latter's invasion and occupation of Yan; for his views considering Yan's turmoil, see *Mengzi*, “Liang Hui wang xia” 2.10-2.11: 44-45; “Gongsun Chou xia” 公孫丑下 4.8-4.9: 99-101.

a person to the overlord, but cannot force the overlord to grant this person a noble rank. In the past, Yao recommended Shun to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him; he displayed Shun to the people, and the people accepted him; hence I said: 'Heaven does not speak. It clarified [its intent] through conduct and through sacrifices.'"

[Wan Zhang] said: "What does it mean 'recommended to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him; displayed to the people, and the people accepted him?'"

[Mengzi] said: "[Yao] ordered [Shun] to preside over sacrifices, and the hundred spirits accepted the offerings: this means that Heaven accepted him. He ordered [Shun] to preside over the people's affairs and the hundred clans were at peace under him: this means that the people accepted him. Heaven granted him [All under Heaven], the people granted him; hence I said: the Son of Heaven cannot grant anybody All under Heaven.

Shun acted as Yao's chancellor for twenty-eight years: it is not something that a human effort can bring about, it is Heaven. When Yao passed away, at the end of the three-year mourning, Shun escaped to the South of the River to avoid Yao's son. Yet when the overlords from All under Heaven arrived at court, they did not approach Yao's son, but Shun; those who had litigations did not approach Yao's son, but approached Shun; those who sang eulogies did not sing eulogies of Yao's son, but of Shun. Hence I said: it is Heaven. Only then did [Shun] return to the Central State, and ascend the throne of the Son of Heaven. Should he live in Yao's palace and oppress Yao's son, this would mean usurpation, not the grant of Heaven. The *Great Pledge* says: 'Heaven sees what our people see; Heaven hears what our people hear.' It is said about this."⁸⁷

This lengthy and frequently discussed passage is of crucial importance for understanding Mengzi's tactics. On the one hand, Mengzi does not reject the idea of abdication; on the other, he modifies it in a way that makes Yao's posthumous yielding of the throne into a unique event with minimal relevance to the present. This is achieved, first, through manipulating earlier versions of the abdication legend so as to introduce the notion of Shun's futile attempt to avoid Yao's

⁸⁷ 萬章曰：「堯以天下與舜，有諸？」孟子曰：「否，天子不能以天下與人。」「然則舜有天下也，孰與之？」曰：「天與之。」「天與之者，諄諄然命之乎？」曰：「否，天不言，以行與事示之而已矣。」曰：「以行與事示之者，如之何？」曰：「天子能薦人於天，不能使天與之天下；諸侯能薦人於天子，不能使天子與之諸侯；大夫能薦人於諸侯，不能使諸侯與之大夫。昔者堯薦舜於天而天受之，暴之於民而民受之。故曰：天不言，以行與事示之而已矣。」曰：「敢問薦之於天而天受之，暴之於民而民受之，如何？」曰：「使之主祭而百神享之，是天受之。使之主事而事治，百姓安之，是民受之也。天與之，人與之，故曰：天子不能以天下與人。舜相堯，二十有八載，非人之所能為也，天也。堯崩，三年之喪畢，舜避堯之子於南河之南。天下諸侯朝覲者，不之堯之子而之舜；訟獄者，不之堯之子而之舜；謳歌者，不謳歌堯之子而謳歌舜；故曰『天』也。夫然後之中國，踐天子位焉。而居堯之宮，逼堯之子，是『篡』也，非『天與』也。《泰誓》曰：『天視自我民視，天聽自我民聽』，此之謂也。」(Mengzi, "Wan Zhang shang" 9.5: 219).

son and thereby to prevent the loss of power by Yao's family.⁸⁸ This interpretation of Shun's behavior indicates that the latter considered hereditary transmission of power as singularly correct. Second, Mengzi introduces Heaven's factor into power transfer to an extent unknown elsewhere in Zhanguo texts, with the major exception of the *Mozi*.⁸⁹ Heaven thus becomes an active and presumably sentient entity, which, albeit not speaking directly with its appointees, intervenes in human affairs and determines who is appropriate to inherit the position of Son of Heaven. We have seen above that the *Rong Cheng shi* mentions signs of Heaven-and-Earth's approval of Yao's and Shun's reign, but this approval is mentioned as a post-factum blessing, with no impact on the process of the power transfer. In the *Mengzi*, in contrast, Heaven becomes the major player, the supreme arbiter of human affairs.

By turning Heaven into a major political player Mengzi departed from the common Zhanguo tradition and ostensibly resorted to the centuries-old Zhou legacy.⁹⁰ He was certainly aware of the difficulty involved in re-introducing Heaven into political discourse, as implied by the ironic question of Wan Zhang, "does it mean that it repeatedly ordered [Shun to ascend the throne]?" Hence, while symbolically placing Heaven at the center of his argument, Mengzi in fact redirected the discussion from Heaven to men. Paying due respect to Shun's ability to let the spirits enjoy his offerings, he then focuses on the real manifestation of Heaven's pleasure: the people's acceptance of Shun as a true leader. Similarly, he explained elsewhere, it was the people's actions which failed Yu's appointed successor, Yi 益, and allowed Yu's son, Qi 啓, to seize power.⁹¹ This notion of the

⁸⁸ Elsewhere Mengzi, like the "Yao dian," which he cites, strongly rejects the idea that Yao abdicated in favor of Shun during Yao's life-time and emphasizes that Shun replaced Yao only after the latter's death (*Mengzi*, "Wan Zhang shang" 9.4: 215).

⁸⁹ For a similar invocation of Heaven as a major factor of dynastic change, see *Mozi*, "Fei gong xia" 非攻下 19: 220-221.

⁹⁰ For early Zhou concepts of Heaven's Mandate, see e.g. Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 314-317.

⁹¹ *Mengzi*, "Wan Zhang shang" 9.6: 221-222. Mengzi therefore tried to dismiss the notion of Qi's violent seizure of power from Yi, as mentioned both in the *Rong Cheng shi* and in the *Zhushu jinian* (Fang Shiming 方誌銘 and Wang Xiuling 王修齡, *Guben Zhushu jinian jizheng* 古本竹書紀年輯證 [Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981,

pivotal role of “the people” in the *Mengzi* curiously resembles much more overt statements in the *Rong Cheng shi*, where the popular will was crucial for Yao’s promotion. It reflects, therefore, the increasing awareness of Zhanguo thinkers of the possible impact of the lower strata on the ruler’s position.

This, however, was a dangerous argument. If indeed, “Heaven sees what our people see; Heaven hears what our people hear,” then popular support or the lack thereof may decide the very nature of the rulership. If so, skillful manipulators, of whom Chinese history knew quite a few (such as the forefathers of the Tian family of Qi, whom Mengzi served), may garner popular enthusiasm and thereby endanger the legitimate ruler.⁹² To avoid this danger, Mengzi introduces another crucial factor, namely the ruler’s recommendation. While in the passage cited above Yao’s recommendation to Heaven to appoint Shun is mentioned only *en passant*, in the next dialogue with Wan Zhang, which focuses on the establishment of hereditary transmission at the beginning of the Xia dynasty, the issue of recommendation becomes as crucial as Heaven’s support itself. After explaining the failure of Yu’s righteous minister, Yi, to succeed his master due to the shortness of his tenure as Yu’s aide, and due to the worthiness of Yu’s son Qi, Mengzi continues:

The length of time which separated [the ministerial tenures] of Shun, Yu and Yi, as well as the worthiness or unworthiness of their sons—all this is [arranged by] Heaven, it is not something human beings are capable of. When nobody acts, but the action is performed—this is Heaven; when nobody delivers [the power], but it arrives—this is Destiny. For a commoner to possess All under Heaven, he must be virtuous as Shun and Yu, and also have the Son of Heaven to recommend him; hence Zhongni (Confucius) did not possess All under Heaven.⁹³

In this passage Mengzi moderates the inherent radicalism of his earlier interpretation of the abdication legend. First, Heaven’s support is manifested in one’s longevity in tenure as well as in the aptitude of the reigning ruler’s son, and not primarily in the people’s action as

hereafter *Guben jizheng*], 2-3), to mention the earliest texts (for the *Zhushu jinian* see the discussion below).

⁹² The way of the Tian family to power, in particular its steps to gather popular support, is discussed in the *Zuo zhuan* (Zhao 3: 1234-1235; Zhao 26: 1480); cf. *Han Feizi*, “Wai chu shuo you shang” 34: 212-213.

⁹³ 舜、禹、益相去久遠，其子之賢不肖皆天也，非人之所能爲也。莫之爲而爲者，天也；莫之致而至者，命也。匹夫而有天下者，德必若舜禹，而又有天子薦之者；故仲尼不有天下。（*Mengzi*, “Wan Zhang shang” 9.6: 222).

implied earlier. Second, the recommendation by the reigning ruler suddenly becomes the most important asset of the aspiring minister, overshadowing other factors. The failure of Confucius to ascend the throne was not due to his lack of popularity among the people or the lack of Heaven's support, but simply because of the lack of a supportive ruler. In the final account, the decision to whom to transfer power lies solely within the acting ruler's prerogatives and the idea of yielding is not supposed to undermine the absolute power of the sovereign. Mengzi concludes with Confucius's alleged quote: "Tang and Yu abdicated; Xia, Yin and Zhou succeeded lineally; their principle is the same."⁹⁴

Mengzi's qualification of the possibility of non-linear succession notwithstanding, a danger remained that a scheming minister would rely in his bid for power on manufactured popular support rather than wait for the acting ruler's "recommendation." Insofar as "the people" acted on behalf of Heaven as *vox Dei*, determining the outcome of succession struggles, it was tempting for some ministers and their advisors to turn "the popular will" into a major asset. Supporters of the "popular will" theory interpreted the abdication legend in such a way that Shun's elevation was attributed exclusively to the people's support of his actions, simultaneously sidelining Yao. Thus, for instance, in the *Lüshi chunqiu* Shun is lauded for his self-advancement:

When Shun moved once he established a settlement; twice—he established a city; thrice—he established a capital, and Yao had abdicated and ceded him his position. This is because Shun relied on the people's hearts.⁹⁵

This presentation of Shun's elevation (echoed in the *Guanzi*)⁹⁶ is puzzling. Shun's success is entirely self-made; the motif of Yao's search for and "recognition" of Shun is entirely missing; Shun's advancement from the lower levels of power to supreme ruler is presented as exclusively due to the people's support. But if Yao played nothing but a marginal role in Shun's promotion, how can we distinguish abdication from usurpation? Such suspicions increase when we read the story of Shun's ascendancy which was interpolated into the *Zuo*

⁹⁴ 孔子曰：『唐虞禪，夏后、殷、周繼，其義一也。』 (Mengzi, "Wan Zhang shang" 9.6: 222).

⁹⁵ 舜一徙成邑，再徙成都，三徙成國，而堯授之禪位，因人之心也。 (Lüshi chunqiu, "Gui yin" 貴因 15.7: 918).

⁹⁶ *Guanzi*, "Zhi guo" 15.48: 926; Rickett, *Guanzi*, 179.

zhuan. The putative speaker (Grand Scribe Ke 大史克 of Lu 魯) tells a lengthy story of Yao's failure to promote the popular "eight kind ones" and "eight excellent ones," who were later promoted by Shun, and to punish the four notorious evildoers, "the evil ones." Then Ke continues:

When Shun served as Yao's minister, he "opened four gates to accept guests";⁹⁷ he expelled the families of the four evil ones, Hundun, Qiongqi, Taowu and Taotie, and threw them [into the areas] of the four boundaries to repulse evil demons. Therefore, when Yao died, All under Heaven unanimously united their hearts in admiring Shun and made him the Son of Heaven. This is because he promoted sixteen chancellors (i.e. "eight kind ones" and "eight excellent ones") and drove away the four inauspicious ones.⁹⁸

Here the message is even more radical than in the *Lüshi chunqiu* and *Guanzi* passages cited above. Shun's ministerial achievements highlight Yao's failure as ruler and earn him public support, so that finally Shun is "made the Son of Heaven" by the people of All under Heaven. While for the modern reader such democratic reinterpretations of ancient history may sound laudable, this was not the case for the Zhanguo audience. Sensitive readers of the *Zuo zhuan* could not fail to apprehend that the speech which hailed Shun was pronounced in order to defend another meritorious servant of an inept ruler—Lord Xuan's (魯宣公 r. 608-591) minister, Ji Wenzi 季文子, the head of the powerful Jisun 季孫 lineage, who spearheaded the process of the lineage's elevation to the position of de facto rulers of the state of Lu. In this context, the unrestrained praise for Shun's self-promotion was a disguise of the author's support of ministerial usurpation!

The manipulations of the abdication story⁹⁹ in the way it is presented in the *Zuo zhuan*, the *Lüshi chunqiu* and potentially even in the *Mengzi* indicate the danger of the abdication legend when employed by unscrupulous ministers and their aides. The high moral ideals

⁹⁷ Citing the "Shun dian" 舜典 section of the "Yao dian" (*Shang Shu zhengyi* 3: 126).

⁹⁸ 舜臣堯，賓于四門，流四凶族，渾敦、窮奇、檮杌、饕餮，投諸四裔，以禦魑魅。是以堯崩而天下如一，同心戴舜，以爲天子，以其舉十六相、去四凶也。 (*Zuo*, Wen 18: 641-642).

⁹⁹ When I speak of "manipulations" here and elsewhere I do not imply that there was a "true" abdication story which was later manipulated, but, rather, that contending thinkers were consciously altering earlier versions of the Yao-Shun legend to serve their competing ideological needs.

of the authors of *Tang Yu zhi dao* and *Rong Cheng shi*, just like those of Mozi and Mengzi, could become a dangerous weapon in the hands of Zi Zhi of Yan and his ilk. Those who realized this danger and those who were unwilling to tolerate the hypocrisy of some of the abdication proponents contributed to the overall assault on the doctrine of abdication, undermining its legitimacy and reducing its political impact by the end of the Zhanguo period.

Ridiculing and reinterpreting abdication: the conservative reaction

In the late fourth century BCE Wan Zhang questioned the very legitimacy of hereditary rule; several decades later it was the turn of the supporters of abdication to be vehemently assaulted by their opponents. Most late Zhanguo texts, with the major exception of the egalitarian-minded *Lüshi chungiu*,¹⁰⁰ are explicitly critical of the abdication doctrine in general and of its manifestation—the Yao-Shun legend—in particular. Two major camps challenged the legitimacy and moral superiority of abdication. Some, as Zhuangzi (莊子, d. c. 280), questioned the morality of abdication heroes and sought to undermine their position as infallible paragons. Others, like Xunzi (荀子, c. 310-218) and especially his disciple, Han Feizi, opposed the doctrine of abdication primarily due to its negative impact on political stability and on the ruler's position. Both camps shared certain arguments, especially insofar as reinterpreting history was concerned; but the ideology underlining the new narratives of the past was not the same.

The most frequent weapon of the opponents of abdication was creating counter-narratives about Yao and Shun. As we have seen, since the emergence of the abdication legend between the fifth and the fourth century BCE its scope gradually expanded and new heroes were introduced. While Mozi mentioned only the transfer

¹⁰⁰ Here and elsewhere I distinguish between support of meritocracy (shared by the vast majority of Zhanguo thinkers) and more radical egalitarianism, represented by those texts which emphasize the humble and miserable condition of the true worthies, who, despite their unenviable background, could—and should—ascend the top of the sociopolitical ladder. In the *Lüshi chungiu*, in particular, a strong emphasis on the superiority of the poor “plain-clothed” *shi* over their rulers displays the radical egalitarian mind of some of the texts' authors. See, e.g. *Lüshi chungiu*, “Shi jie” 士節 12.2: 622-623; “Bu qin” 不侵 12.5: 640; “Shi wei” 適威 19.5: 1280.

of power from Yao to Shun, by Mengzi's age the parallel transfer from Shun to Yu had become similarly grounded in historical memory;¹⁰¹ and the *Rong Cheng shi* authors further expanded the list of abdicators back to the pre-Yao past in order to bolster the legitimacy of yielding the throne. By the third century BCE these manipulations of the legendary past became, however, a weapon of the opponents of abdication. Zhuangzi was particularly successful in introducing a set of entirely new figures into the abdication legend: proud recluses who refused to accept the throne, preserving thereby their unwavering moral integrity. The most famous of these heroes was Xu You 許由, who rejected Yao's suggestion to yield to him All under Heaven:

Yao yielded All under Heaven to Xu You, saying: "If the torches were not extinguished after the sun and moon have already come out, would it not be difficult for them to [remain the source] of light? Irrigating while the seasonal rains are falling—is it not a waste of labor? If you are established [as the ruler], All under Heaven will be well ordered. Insofar as I am impersonating [the ruler], I am aware of my failings. I beg to grant you All under Heaven."¹⁰²

This display of modesty and impartiality is, however, rejected with a ridicule by Xu You:

Xu You said: "You govern the world and the world is already well governed. Now if I take your place, will I be doing it for a name? But name is only the guest of reality—should I become a guest? When the tailorbird builds its nest in the deep wood, it needs no more than one branch. When the mole drinks at the river, it takes no more than a bellyful. Go home and forget the matter, my lord. I have no use for the rulership of All under Heaven! Even if the cook [at the sacrifice] does not run his kitchen properly, the impersonator of the dead and the invocator will not leap over the wine casks and sacrificial stands and go take his place."¹⁰³

Xu You's statement contains two distinct explanations for his refusal. Hailing self-sufficiency and disdainfully rejecting the futile

¹⁰¹ For similarities and differences between the Yao-Shun and Shun-Yu legends, see Allan, *The Heir and the Sage*, 55-57; for the details regarding the genesis of the Shun-Yu legend, see Gu Jiegang, "Shanrang chuanshuo," 316-321.

¹⁰² 堯讓天下於許由，曰：「日日出矣而燭火不息，其於光也，不亦難乎！時雨降矣而猶浸灌，其於澤也，不亦勞乎！夫子立而天下治，而我猶尸之，吾自視缺然。請致天下。」 (Chen Guying 陳鼓應, annot., *Zhuangzi jinzhū jìnyì* 莊子今注今譯 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994], "Xiao yao you" 逍遙遊 1: 18).

¹⁰³ 許由曰：「子治天下，天下既已治也。而我猶代子，吾將爲名乎？名者，實之賓也。吾將爲賓乎？鷦鷯巢於深林，不過一枝；偃鼠飲河，不過滿腹。歸休乎君，予無所用天下爲！庖人雖不治庖，尸祝不越樽俎而代之矣。」 (*Zhuangzi*, "Xiao yao you" 1: 18).

search for fame (or name, *ming* 名), as well as praising Yao's rule, Xu You ostensibly behaves in accord with the conventional morality which demanded ritual yielding (*li rang* 禮讓) of superior men. But on a more subtle level Xu You displays his contempt of Yao, who is compared to a humble cook, while Xu You, the moral recluse, compares himself to the ritually important impersonator and invocator. Thus, the gesture of abdication loses some of its aura, and Yao's moral credentials are thereby subtly questioned.

Xu You's refusal to accept the throne undermines the moral posture not only of Yao, but, more specifically, of Shun and Yu. Indeed, if yielding is considered to be the highest virtue, then the truly laudable persons should be those who rejected the throne altogether, not those who finally accepted the offer. Following this logic, the Yao-Shun-Yu legend deals not with moral exemplars but rather with persons of impaired morality, or even with unscrupulous villains who manipulated haughty ideals to attain earthly gains. This view is clarified in a chapter entitled "Yielding the kingly [position]" ("Rang wang" 讓王), where the satiric nature of recurrent yielding and refusal becomes the predominant topic.¹⁰⁴ Yao and Shun desperately look for somebody to accept their throne, but in vain, every new candidate behaving ever more disdainfully toward his putative benefactors: Xu You simply refuses to accept the throne; Zizhou Zhifu 子州支父 (or Zhibo 支伯) excuses himself saying that "I happen to have a deep and worrisome illness which I am just now trying to put in order. So I have no time to order All under Heaven."¹⁰⁵ Shan Juan 善卷 disdainfully declines Shun's abdication in his favor saying: "What a pity that you don't understand me!"—and flees deep into the mountains. The next candidate, Shun's friend, the Farmer of the Stone Yard 石戶之農, is so appalled by the offer that he flees further—to the remote islands. Finally, the last candidate, the Northerner Nothing-to-choose 北人無擇, decides that Shun's offer is so humiliating that only suicide can preserve his good name!¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ In a recent study, Chao Fulin 晁福林 ("Zhuangzi 'Rang wang' pian xingzhi tanlun" 《莊子·讓王》篇性質探論, *Xuexi yu tansuo* 2 [2002], 114-119) convincingly argues that the "Rang wang" chapter is not derivative of the *Lüshi chungqiu* as it was sometimes assumed; yet he completely ignores the ironic nature of the abdication stories in this chapter and hence suggests that it was written prior to 314, i.e. prior to King Kuai's abdication.

¹⁰⁵ 我適有幽憂之病，方且治之，未暇治天下也。（Zhuangzi, "Rang wang" 讓王 28: 744).

¹⁰⁶ Zhuangzi, "Rang wang" 28: 744-745, 768. The same anecdotes are scattered

By piling anecdotes about the futile attempts by Yao and Shun to find a substitute and escalating the refusals' disdainfulness toward the offer, Zhuangzi (or those of his followers who wrote this chapter) creates a powerful ironical effect. The Men of the Way, "from whose dust and dregs alone one could mould a Yao or a Shun,"¹⁰⁷ do not trust Yao's and Shun's gestures, considering them either stupid or malevolent, in accord with the generally negative picture of Yao and Shun as presented in the *Zhuangzi*.¹⁰⁸ Abdication—the ultimate manifestation of Yao's and Shun's morality—is stripped of its halo and treated with barely disguised contempt.

This ridicule, however, pales in face of the vehement attack against Yao, Shun, and other exemplary rulers and ministers of the past that appears in the "Robber Zhi" (Dao Zhi 盜跖) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, a brilliant political satire.¹⁰⁹ There, the arch-villain, Robber Zhi, presents a long manifesto in which he ridicules Confucius and all those heroes admired by Confucius's followers. Robber Zhi masterfully presents a counter-narrative of the past, in which all the former heroes are reinterpreted as disgusting villains. He first charges Yao and Shun with "setting up a host of officials," namely establishing state institutions which are the crucial step towards the overall deterioration of humankind.¹¹⁰ Then he attacks their *mores*: "Yao was a merciless father, Shun was an unfilial son," says the Robber, and it is echoed elsewhere in the same chapter: "Yao killed his eldest son, Shun exiled his mother's younger brother."¹¹¹ Here

throughout the *Lüshi chungiu* ("Gui sheng" 貴生 2.2: 74; "Li su" 離俗 19.1: 1233-1234; Xu You's story is repeated in "Qiu ren" 求人 22.5: 1515)

¹⁰⁷ 是其塵垢秕糠，將猶陶鑄堯、舜者也。(Zhuangzi, "Xiao yao you" 1:21).

¹⁰⁸ On many occasions the *Zhuangzi* charges Yao and (more rarely) Shun with having had a negative impact on humankind; it is through their activities that the process of deterioration began, which would ultimately result in cannibalism and the overall lack of morality (see, e.g., *Zhuangzi*, "Ren jian shi" 人間世 4:106; "Da zong shi" 大宗師 6: 202; "Tian yun" 天運 13: 328-329; "Gengsan Chu" 庚桑楚 23: 593; "Xu Wugui" 徐無鬼 24: 654).

¹⁰⁹ For the dating of this chapter, which apparently existed as an independent treatise, see Liao Mingchun 廖名春, "*Zhuangzi* 'Dao Zhi' pian tanyuan" 《莊子盜跖》篇探源, *Wenshi* 45 (1998), 49-60.

¹¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of "Robber Zhi's" views of organized society and the state, see Yuri Pines and Gideon Shelach, "Using the Past to Serve the Present': Comparative Perspectives on Chinese and Western Theories of the Origins of the State," in Shaul Shaked, ed., *Genesis and Regeneration: Essays on Conceptions of Origins* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Science and Humanities, 2005), 140-142.

¹¹¹ 堯不慈，舜不孝 (Zhuangzi, "Dao Zhi" 29: 778-779), and 堯殺長子，舜流母弟 (ibid., p. 791).

the entire narrative of the *Mengzi* and of *Tang Yu zhi dao* is turned upside down: the abdication and the consequent violation of family obligations are reinterpreted in the most negative way.

The anti-Yao and anti-Shun tirades of Robber Zhi introduce a new strand into anti-abdication polemics, namely the outright presentation of these paragons as villains. While earlier thinkers may have had their reservations about Yao's and Shun's treatment of their kin, these never amounted to an overt attack against the exemplary rulers. Now, as counter-narratives of Yao's and Shun's behavior were introduced, it was possible to question the very occurrence of the famous abdication. Not only did multiple abdications as depicted in *Rong Cheng shi* never occur; even the single power transfer from Yao to Shun was no longer considered a selfless abdication, but rather the result of barely disguised usurpation.

This reinterpretation of abdication as usurpation is first recorded in a little-known text, the *Suoyu* 瑣語. The *Suoyu* was unearthed by grave robbers in 280 CE from a tomb identified as that of King Xiang of Wei (魏襄王, 318-296) at Ji 汲 commandery, Henan, together with the much more famous *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年) and other manuscripts; by the Song dynasty (宋, 960-1279 CE) it was lost again. The nature of this text is unclear: according to one version it comprised eleven chapters which recorded "divination according to the dreams, demonic and fortune telling [affairs] from various states"; according to another it was either the *Springs and Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) from the Xia and Shang periods, or the *Chunqiu* which covered a period parallel to that of the famous *Springs and Autumns Annals* from the state of Lu.¹¹² The Tang historian, Liu Zhiji (劉知幾, 661-721 CE), cites the *Suoyu* as mentioning that "Shun had expelled Yao to Pingyang."¹¹³ Some of the other Ji tomb documents might

¹¹² The first version (瑣語十一篇，諸國卜夢妖怪相書也) appears in the biography of Shu Xi 束皙, the first editor of the unearthed documents from the Ji tomb (Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al., *Jin shu* 晉書 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997], 51: 1433); the second and the third are mentioned by Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 in his *Shi tong tong shi* 史通通釋, annotated by Pu Qilong 浦起龍 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 1993), "Liu jia" 六家, 1.1: 7 and "Huo jing" 或經 14.4: 408, respectively (the latter entry specifies that the *Suoyu chunqiu* was a Jin record that contained among others detailed accounts of the mid-sixth century BCE state of Lu).

¹¹³ 汲冢瑣語云：「舜放堯於平陽。」(*Shi tong*, "Yi gu" 疑古 13.3: 384). Liu Zhiji strengthens this tradition of Shun's mistreatment of Yao by mentioning an unidentified location which once was named Qiu Yao 囚堯 (Arresting Yao).

have contained similar hints.¹¹⁴ Whether or not these texts reflected an early, unattested legendary tradition is impossible to verify, but to me it seems more likely that their narrative was created in the wake of the anti-abdication sentiments that followed Zi Zhi's usurpation in the state of Yan. This tendency of reappraising abdication as a mere disguise for violent usurpation recurs with increasing intensity by cynical late Zhanguo thinkers.

The impact of what happened in Yan on the changing views of abdication in late Zhanguo texts is widely evident. King Kuai's "abdication gesture" and similar actions by Zhanguo rulers are uniformly treated as cynical manipulations and not as manifestations of genuine selflessness, and this manipulative attitude is projected backwards on Yao and Shun.¹¹⁵ Han Feizi cites the anonymous persuaders who claim that "Shun oppressed Yao; Yu oppressed Shun,"¹¹⁶ and elsewhere he states:

Yao's worthiness crowned that of the six kings. But, as Shun followed him, [Shun] gathered everybody around himself and Yao no longer possessed his All under Heaven.¹¹⁷

This transformation of abdication into a "usurpation" legend was helpful in undermining the legitimacy of the abdication doctrine, but its effectiveness remained limited. The original narrative of Yao's abdication was too powerfully entrenched in the thinkers' minds to be shattered by a counter-narrative which could not be substantiated by such respectable documents as the "Yao dian." Han Feizi thus did not confine himself to a single "usurpation" narrative, but proposed different versions of the events of the reigns of Yao and Shun

¹¹⁴ Luo Bi's (羅泌, fl. 1170) *Lu shi* 路史 contains several entries regarding Shun's alleged oppression of Yao, all of which are referred to the *Zhushu jinian* or to other "Bamboo books" (*Zhushu* 竹書) (see *Guben jizheng*, 170-171); similar passages (which probably derive from *Suoyu* but are erroneously attributed to the *Zhushu jinian*) appear in the *Su shi yanyi* 蘇氏演義 by Su E (蘇鶚, fl. 885 CE) (see *Guben jizheng*, 159-160). It is impossible to discuss here the complexity of the Ji tomb texts; see the illuminating discussion by Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming). For the purposes of the present study, suffice it to emphasize that at least one of the Ji tomb texts contained a narrative of Shun's usurpation of Yao's throne, and that this text (or texts) could not have been compiled after 295 BCE.

¹¹⁵ See, e.g. *Zhanguo ce*, "Yan ce" 燕策 1 29.9: 1104-1105; *Han Feizi*, "Wai chu shuo you xia" 外儲說右 35: 338-341; cf. *Lüshi chungiu*, "Bu qu" 不屈 18.6: 1196.

¹¹⁶ 舜偪堯，禹偪舜。(Han Feizi, "Shuo yi" 說疑 44: 406).

¹¹⁷ 夫堯之賢，六王之冠也，舜一從而咸包，而堯無天下矣。(Han Feizi, "Nan san" 難三 38: 374).

in ways that would serve his arguments. His games with competing narratives of the past may well be part of his conscious design to show the futility of resorting to the past in political arguments. Thus, while elsewhere Han Feizi accepts the historicity of the abdication legend, he argues that it merely reflects the *mores* of a long bygone age which is of no relevance to the present:

When Yao ruled the world, his thatched roof remained untrimmed, his speckled beams unplanned. He consumed coarse millet and a soup of greens, wore deerskin in winter and rough fiber robes in summer. Even the food and clothes of the gatekeeper are not as miserable as this. When Yu ruled the world, he personally took plow and spade to lead his people, working until there was no more skin on his thighs or hair on his shins. Even the slave's toil is not as bitter as this. From this we see that those in antiquity who yielded the position of the Son of Heaven in reality abandoned the gatekeeper's food and left behind the slave's toil. Therefore, the transfer of rule over All under Heaven was not considered a great matter. Nowadays, however, when the district governor dies, his descendants for generations go on riding in carriages; hence the people respect this position. ...

People lightly relinquished the position of the Son of Heaven not because they were high-minded but because the advantages [of this position] were slight; [now] people struggle for sinecures in the government¹¹⁸ not because they are low-minded, but because the power [of this position] is weighty.¹¹⁹

Han Feizi performs an outstanding intellectual task. Instead of arguing against the historicity of Yao's abdication, he focuses on the lack of relevance of this event for present political conditions. Yao abdicated because in his remote, primeval times the position of Son of Heaven was of minimal value and could easily be forsaken. However, this event is meaningless for the present. Its uniqueness lies neither in the personal circumstances of Yao's and Shun's life, as implied by the "Yao dian," nor in a putative intervention by Heaven, as argued by Mengzi; it is simply a matter of changing times. By introducing the notion of historical evolution, borrowed from Shang Yang (商鞅, d. 338),¹²⁰ Han Feizi is able to defeat his opponents

¹¹⁸ Following the gloss by Wang Xianshen 王先慎, I emend 土橐 to 仕托.

¹¹⁹ 堯之王天下也，茅茨不翦，采椽不斲，糲粢之食，藜藿之羹，冬日麤裘，夏日葛衣，雖監門之服養，不虧於此矣。禹之王天下也，身執耒耜以爲民先，股無胈，脛不生毛，雖臣虜之勞不苦於此矣。以是言之，夫古之讓天子者，是去監門之養而離臣虜之勞也，古傳天下而不足多也。今之縣令，一日身死，子孫累世絮駕，故人重之。…輕辭天子，非高也，勢薄也；爭土橐，非下也，權重也。(Han Feizi, "Wu du" 五蠹 49: 443-444).

¹²⁰ For the evolutionary concept of history proposed by Shang Yang and further developed by Han Feizi, see Pines and Shelach, "Using the Past to Serve the Present," 134-140.

without constructing unreliable counter-narratives of Shun's alleged usurpation.

Han Feizi's manipulations of the past were not merely intellectual acrobatics. His attacks on or dismissal of the abdication legend served the explicit political goal of strengthening the ruler's position and preventing any alterations of ruler-minister relations. This goal was shared, even if with a somewhat different emphasis, by Han Feizi's teacher, Xunzi. The latter, however, could not dismiss the past with the same ease as the anti-traditionalist Han Feizi; hence, Xunzi's attack against the abdication legend appears somewhat cumbersome:

The vulgar people say: "Yao and Shun abdicated." This is not true. The Son of Heaven is the most respectable in terms of his power and position, and has no rivals under Heaven: to whom could he abdicate? His morality is pure, his knowledge and kindness are extremely clear, he faces southwards and commands [the obedience] of All under Heaven: and among all the people there is none who does not politely hold his hands following him, thereby being compliantly transformed. There are no recluses under Heaven, the goodness of no one is neglected; one who unites with him is good, one who differs from him is bad: so why would he yield All under Heaven?¹²¹

This passage, one of the strongest statements in favor of the omnipotent ruler, explains Xunzi's dislike of abdication as a manifestation of functional disorder. The good ruler should continue his rule—he has neither reason nor right to abandon the throne. The theoretical explanation is clear enough, but it does not answer the historic question: what happened to Yao and Shun? Xunzi avoids providing a direct answer. He explains that in theory Yao and Shun *should not have abdicated*, but does not clarify what actually happened.¹²² Instead, Xunzi continues:

¹²¹ 世俗之爲說者曰：「堯、舜擅讓。」是不然。天子者，執位至尊，無敵於天下，夫有誰與讓矣！道德純備，智惠甚明，南面而聽天下，生民之屬莫不振動從服以化順之。天下無隱士，無遺善，同焉者是也，異焉者非也，夫有惡擅天下矣？(Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jiyie* 荀子集解 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992], "Zheng lun" 正論 12.18: 331).

¹²² Carine Defoort notices in her "Mohist and Yangist Blood" (n.18) that Xunzi consistently employs the character *shan* 擅 instead of the usual 禪 to denote abdication; and that the former term carries the connotation of "to monopolize," "to usurp." It is possible then that Xunzi was opposed to enforced abdication and not to abdication in general. This suggestion certainly fits well with the general mode of Xunzi's thought, but I am reluctant to follow this argument since a strong possibility remains that 擅 is employed in the *Xunzi* merely as a homophone of 禪.

Some say: "They abdicated posthumously." Again, this is wrong. When a sage king is above, he determines [the subjects'] virtue and fixes the [ranks'] order, he gauges the abilities and allots official positions, he lets everyone among the people perform his task and accept what is appropriate; those who are unable to restrict profit-seeking in accord with propriety and to beautify their nature in accord with the artifice,¹²³ all those he would make [common] folk.

When the sage is gone, if there is no sage under Heaven, then certainly there is nobody worth yielding All under Heaven to. If there is a sage under Heaven, and he is one of [the former ruler's] sons, then All under Heaven will not leave him, there will be no change of positions at the court, no modification of regulations at the capital, All under Heaven will compliantly bow and none will have second thoughts: if Yao inherits Yao, then what change can we talk about? If the sage is not among the sons but among the Three Dukes, then All under Heaven appears as if returning to him, as if everybody is inspired anew. All under Heaven will compliantly bow and none will have afterthoughts: if Yao inherits Yao, then what change can we talk about? The only difficulty is to change the court and to alter the regulations.

Hence, when the Son of Heaven is alive, All under Heaven has only one to respect; they are utterly compliant and therefore well-ordered; [the Son of Heaven] ranks their virtue and fixes the [ranks'] order; and when he is dead then certainly there will be somebody able to undertake the affairs of All under Heaven. When the distinctions/divisions based on ritual and propriety are completely [observed], what need is there to abdicate?¹²⁴

Once again Xunzi avoids a historical discussion in favor of a theoretical one, in which his arguments are more convincing. Indeed, the perfect mechanism based on ritual and propriety as envisioned by Xunzi requires no abdication and no transfer of power. Xunzi mentions the possibility of a sage minister inheriting from the sage ruler, but he leaves the nature of this succession unresolved, mentioning the difficulty as "to change the court and to alter the regulations," but leaving no clues as to how this difficulty was (or should be) resolved. His statement that "when he is dead then certainly there will be somebody able to undertake the affairs of All under Heaven"

¹²³ "Artifice" (*wei* 偽) is considered in the *Xunzi* (or it least in portions of it—see e.g. Dan Robins, "The Development of Xunzi's Theory of *Xing*, Reconstructed on the Basis of a Textual Analysis of *Xunzi* 23, 'Xing E' 性惡 [*Xing* is Bad]," *Early China* 26-27 [2001-2002], 99-158) as a major means of overcoming the inherent inadequacy of human nature.

¹²⁴ 曰：「死而擅之。」是又不然。聖王在上，決德而定次，量能而授官，皆使民載其事而各得其宜。不能以義制利，不能以偽飾性，則兼以爲民。聖王已沒，天下無聖，則固莫足以擅天下矣。天下有聖，而在後子者，則天下不離，朝不易位，國不更制，天下厭然與鄉無以異也；以堯繼堯，夫又何變之有矣！聖不在後子而在三公，則天下如歸，猶復而振之矣。天下厭然與鄉無以異也；以堯繼堯，夫又何變之有矣！唯其徒朝改制爲難。故天子生則天下一隆，致順而治，論德而定次，死則能任天下者必有之矣。夫禮義之分盡矣，擅讓惡用矣哉！（*Xunzi*, "Zheng lun" 12.18: 331-332).

allows a less radical interpretation: after the death of the sage ruler the affairs will be governed by the regent, as performed by Xunzi's paragon, the Duke of Zhou (周公, d. c. 1036).¹²⁵ As for the Yao-Shun-Yu transmission, Xunzi again makes no comment, being apparently unable to adjust the legend to his theoretical premises.

In the last part of his discussion Xunzi confronts the question in a way that reflects his knowledge of the *Tang Yu zhi dao* or of some parallel text: "Some say, [Yao and Shun] became senile and then abdicated." Again, Xunzi disagrees: after a lengthy discussion of the rites appropriate to the Son of Heaven, he explains that the Son of Heaven's tasks are light enough to be performed even at the most advanced age:

Hence the overlords may retire due to senility, but the Son of Heaven may not. There are abdications in a [single] state, there is no abdication of All under Heaven: it is the same in antiquity and nowadays. Hence the sayings that "Yao and Shun abdicated" are empty words, transmitted by mean people, theories from the remote outskirts, of those who have no idea of defiance and compliance [and of alterations between] the large and the petty, between the attained and the unattained; it is impossible [to discuss] with [these people] the great patterns of All under Heaven.¹²⁶

For the third time Xunzi avoids discussing the historical precedents of abdication and focuses instead on purely theoretical issues. This avoidance in three consequent passages cannot be coincidence. Being unable to dismiss the abdication legend altogether, Xunzi tries to limit its damaging impact on political mores by undermining the validity of abdication discourse. This discourse, which focused on the Yao-Shun legend, was endangering political stability by encouraging veiled attacks against the principle of the hereditary rule; hence those who circulated it were "mean people" whose "empty words" were at odds with "the great patterns of All under Heaven," and whom Xunzi evidently detested. Being unable either to modify the abdication legend or to utilize it, Xunzi simply seeks to silence its proponents. The bitterness of his attacks may well conceal his despair with regard to his rivals' irresponsible use of the sacred past. This outrage against what is perceived as "subversive" abdication discourse

¹²⁵ For Xunzi's admiration of the Duke of Zhou's regency, see *Xunzi*, "Ru xiao" 儒效 4.8: 114-115.

¹²⁶ 故曰：諸侯有老，天子無老，有擅國，無擅天下，古今一也。夫曰堯、舜擅讓，是虛言也，是淺者之傳、陋者之說也，不知道順之理，小大、至不至之變者也，未可與及天下之大理者也。（*Xunzi*, "Zheng lun" 12.18: 336).

is echoed even more powerfully in the writings of Xunzi's prominent disciple, Han Feizi:

All under Heaven affirm the Way of filiality and fraternity, of loyalty and compliance, but they are unable to investigate the Way of filiality and fraternity, of loyalty and compliance, and to implement it precisely; hence All under Heaven are in chaos. Everybody affirms the Way of Yao and Shun, and models himself accordingly: hence, some murder their rulers and some behave hypocritically toward their fathers.

Yao and Shun, [kings] Tang and Wu: each of them opposed the propriety of ruler and minister, wreaking havoc in the teachings for future generations. Yao was a ruler who turned his minister into a ruler; Shun was a minister who turned his ruler into a minister; Tang and Wu were ministers who murdered their masters and defamed their bodies; but All under Heaven praise them: therefore All under Heaven have not been orderly ruled. After all, he who is called a clear-sighted ruler is the one who is able to nurture his ministers; he who is called a worthy minister is the one who is able to clarify laws and regulations, to put in order offices and positions and to support his ruler. Now, Yao considered himself clear-sighted but was unable to feed Shun,¹²⁷ Shun considered himself worthy but was unable to support Yao, Tang and Wu considered themselves righteous but murdered their rulers and superiors: this means that the clear-sighted ruler should constantly give, while a worthy minister—constantly take. Hence until now there are sons who take their father's house, and ministers who take their ruler's state. When a father yields to a son, and a ruler yields to a minister—this is not the Way of fixing the positions and unifying the teaching.¹²⁸

Han Feizi is no longer interested in the details of the Yao-Shun legend, nor does he try to present yet another version of past events. He dwells only on the most important point of the abdication discourse, namely that the actions of Yao and Shun (just as those of the violent founders of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, kings Tang 湯 and Wu 武王) are subversive of the extant order and have a disastrous impact on political *mores*. Even if Yao's abdication at the time was justifiable—or at least understandable—the constant resort to this event by current thinkers and statesmen is entirely unjustified. The

¹²⁷ Referring to Shun's humble position under Yao's rule before his sudden elevation, see *Han Feizi*, "Nan yi" 難一 36: 349-350.

¹²⁸ 天下皆以孝悌忠順之道爲是也，而莫知察孝悌忠順之道而審行之，是以天下亂。皆以堯、舜之道爲是而法之，是以有弑君，有曲於父。堯、舜、湯、武，或反君臣之義，亂後世之教者也。堯爲人君而君其臣，舜爲人臣而臣其君，湯、武爲人臣而弑其主、刑其尸，而天下譽之，此天下所以至今不治者也。夫所謂明君者，能畜其臣者也；所謂賢臣者，能明法辟、治官職以戴其君者也。今堯自以爲明而不能以畜舜，舜自以爲賢而不能以戴堯，湯、武自以爲義而弑其君長，此明君且常與，而賢臣且常取也。故至今爲人子者有取其父之家，爲人臣者有取其君之國者矣。父而讓子，君而讓臣，此非所以定位一教之道也。（*Han Feizi*, "Zhong xiao" 忠孝 52: 465-466).

discourse of abdication itself adversely affects the behavior of current ministers (who find in it justification for their own usurpations) or of the *shi* in general, who are inspired by Shun's example to behave haughtily and defy their ruler. Hence, Han Feizi concludes:

Thus, the minister should not praise the worthiness of Yao and Shun, should not extol the punitive expeditions of Tang and Wu, should not talk of the loftiness of zealous *shi*. [Only] he who with the utmost force preserves the law and focuses whole-heartedly on serving the ruler is the loyal minister.¹²⁹

After almost two centuries of debates about abdication, Han Feizi suggested what his teacher, Xunzi, might have desired, but dared not pronounce: he proposed simply to abolish the abdication discourse altogether, as well as other references to dynastic change, and to eliminate thereby any potential danger to the unshakeable principle of hereditary rule.

Epilogue: advantages and weaknesses of the abdication doctrine

The opponents of abdication, led by two of the most sophisticated Zhanguo political thinkers, Xunzi and Han Feizi, were to a large extent successful in their efforts to de-legitimize the idea of abdication. Under the unified empires the principle of hereditary rulership was unequivocally adopted, becoming part of state orthodoxy. The only significant attempt to reintroduce the notion of abdication as a legitimate means of succession was made by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, c. 179-115), who tried to integrate abdication into the general cosmic pattern of mega-historical developments. The results were tragic: when Dong's disciple, Sui Hong (睢弘, d. 78 BCE), demanded that the Han emperor abdicate in accord with Dong's model, he was promptly executed.¹³⁰ This was a clear message that the issue of abdication, like the issue of the Heavenly Mandate, was beyond the scope of legitimate intellectual discourse.¹³¹

¹²⁹ 故人臣毋稱堯、舜之賢，毋譽湯、武之伐，毋言烈士之高，盡力守法，專心於事主者為忠臣。 (*Han Feizi*, "Zhong xiao" 52: 468).

¹³⁰ Dong's theory and Sui's ill-fated attempt to implement it are discussed by Gary Arbuckle in "Inevitable Treason: Dong Zhongshu's Theory of Historical Cycles and Early Attempts to Invalidate the Han Mandate," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115.4 (1995), 585-597.

¹³¹ For the cessation of discussions about Heavenly Mandate due to the political

The cessation of the abdication discourse was not complete, however. Not only did the Yao-Shun-Yu legend survive, but it was enshrined from the Han dynasty on in the sacred Canon, its heroes retaining their positions as paragons of proper rule and pure morality. On the one hand, this legend became an integral part of imperial political rhetoric,¹³² while on the other it became a useful tool for settling dynastic change from the Han dynasty on, as Yao's precedent was routinely employed to justify the enforced "abdication" of the ruling dynasty in favor of its "virtuous" successor.¹³³ Although these invocations subsided after the Song dynasty, the ethical appeal of Yao's and Shun's selflessness remained intact well into the later years of imperial rule.

These and other instances of the ongoing appeal of the abdication precedent should not conceal the major difference between the Zhanguo and the later imperial invocations of the Yao-Shun legend. For the imperial statesmen, Yao and Shun belonged to a bygone golden age, which should be respected but not necessarily actively emulated. For some of the Zhanguo thinkers, in contrast, the idea of abdication was very much a relevant political recipe, an ideal to be emulated and actualized here and now. At least the authors of the three unearthed texts discussed above shared a common hope of legitimizing abdication as a normal rule of succession. Although these hopes ultimately failed, their presence in the unearthed manuscripts, as well as references to them in the received texts, show the wider than previously assumed appeal of the abdication paradigm among segments of the educated elite. It is now time to ask how this

sensitivity of this issue, see Sima Qian 司馬遷 et al., *Shiji* 史記, annotated by Zhang Shoujie 張守節, Sima Zhen 司馬貞 and Pei Yin 裴駟 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 121: 3122-3123.

¹³² The rhetorical resort to abdication as an ideal of proper rule was powerful throughout the imperial period: already Han Wendi (漢文帝 r. 180-157) excused himself for being unable "to broadly search for the worthy, sage and virtuous from all under Heaven to abdicate in their favor" 不能博求天下賢聖有德之人而禪天下焉 (*Shiji* 10: 419); for later invocations of the Yao and Shun precedent, see the next note.

¹³³ For an excellent discussion of abdication as a means of dynastic change in the early imperial period, see Yang Yongjun 楊永俊, "Shanrang zhengzhi yanjiu—Wang Mang shan Han ji qi xinfa chuanti" 禪讓政治研究—王莽禪漢及其心法傳替 (Ph. D. dissertation, Beijing shifan daxue, 2003); for a detailed discussion of the Han abdication in 220 CE and the importance of the Yao and Shun precedents for the manipulations surrounding it, see Howard L. Goodman, *Ts'ao Pi Transcendent: The Political Culture of Dynasty-Founding in China at the End of Han* (Seattle: Scripta Serica, 1998).

paradigm was related to general Zhanguo views on rulership, and why its proponents were defenseless in the face of vehement attacks by such thinkers as Zhuangzi, Xunzi and Han Feizi.

Most past discussions of the abdication doctrine (or, more narrowly, of the abdication legend) focused on two pivotal issues: its egalitarian appeal as a manifestation of the “elevating the worthy” principle, and its ethical appeal as a manifestation of a ruler’s modesty and selflessness. Without questioning the validity of both theses, I would like to add a new angle to the discussion: namely, that abdication could become a means of compromise between the unrestricted idealization of the ruler in Zhanguo thought and the thinkers’ widespread dissatisfaction with the acting rulers of their age.

In a recent study, Liu Zehua has defined the elevation of the ruler (*wangquanzhuyi* 王權主義, which may be translated as “the principle of absolute autocracy”) as the main feature of Chinese political thought and of Chinese political culture in general.¹³⁴ This definition indeed grasps certain basic features of China’s political tradition. Even if we focus only on major thinkers from the Zhanguo period, we can discern in their texts a definite tendency toward elevating the ruler—the overlord, and, more importantly, the future ruler of the unified realm, the would-be Son of Heaven—to an extraordinarily high position. The ruler is the absolute source of ritual authority in the *Lunyu*, he is the repository of supreme morality in the *Mozi*, he is the counterpart of Heaven-and-Earth in the *Laozi* 老子, and he is the unrivaled head of the omnipotent bureaucratic apparatus in the *Shang jun shu* 商君書, to mention only a few texts.¹³⁵ Indeed, their deep divisions notwithstanding, rival thinkers agreed that the ruler should be omnipotent, that no institutional limits should be imposed on his authority, that all state assets should be under his supreme control, and that no social group should be able to claim institutional autonomy from his power. The frequently cited “Bei shan” 北山 ode of the *Shi jing* 詩經 succinctly summarizes this approach:

¹³⁴ Liu Zehua 劉澤華, *Zhongguo de wangquanzhuyi* 中國的王權主義 (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2000).

¹³⁵ See *Lunyu*, “Ji shi” 季氏 16.2: 174; *Mozi*, “Shang tong” chapters 11-13: 109-153; Gao Ming 高明, *Boshu Laozi jiaozhu* 帛書老子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 25: 351 (cf. the Guodian *Laozi* version in *Guodian Chumu zhuyuan*, 112); Jiang Lihong 蔣禮鴻, annot., *Shang jun shu zhui zhi* 商君書錐指 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), *passim*.

“Everywhere under Heaven is the King’s land, each of those who live on the land is the King’s servant.”¹³⁶

The elevation of the sovereign’s power throughout the Zhanguo period was not a result of the thinkers’ slavishness or sycophancy, but reflected their conscious choice to combat the centrifugal forces that had torn apart the Zhou world and were endangering each of the major states as well. The unfortunate experience of the Chunqiu period, when rulers were considered *primi inter pares* by their powerful aides and their orders were frequently disobeyed, served as a powerful warning for Zhanguo thinkers.¹³⁷ To most if not all of them it was clear that the dispersal of the sovereign’s authority would inevitably result in power struggles, internal turmoil and the ultimate collapse of the state. The *Lüshi chunqiu* succinctly summarized this view:

The true king upholds Oneness and becomes the Rectifier of the myriad things. The army must have the general, thereby it is unified. The state must have the ruler, thereby it is unified. All under Heaven must have the Son of Heaven, thereby it is unified. The Son of Heaven upholds oneness, thereby unifying it [the realm]. Oneness means [proper] government; duality means chaos.¹³⁸

The notion of the uniqueness of the sovereign’s power, which should never be matched by any rival source of authority in order to avoid endless strife, permeates Zhanguo thought.¹³⁹ Yet this firm

¹³⁶ 溥天之下，莫非王土，率土之濱，莫非王臣。(Mao shi zhengyi 毛詩正義, annot. by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, rpt. in *Shisanjing zhushu*, Vol. 1, “Bei shan” 北山 13:463 [Mao 205]). This ode is one of the most frequently cited in Zhanguo texts, see, e.g., Mengzi, “Wan Zhang shang” 9.4: 215; Xunzi, “Junzi” 君子 17.24: 450; Han Feizi, “Shuo lin shang” 說林上 22: 174-175, “Zhong xiao” 51: 467; *Lüshi chunqiu*, “Shen ren” 14.6: 802; *Zhanguo ce*, “Dong Zhou 東周 ce” 1.12: 22.

¹³⁷ The weaknesses of Chunqiu rulers are discussed in Pines, *Foundations*, 136-163.

¹³⁸ 王者執一，而爲萬物正。軍必有將，所以一之也；國必有君，所以一之也；天下必有天子，所以一之也；天子必執一，所以搏之也。一則治，兩則亂。(Lüshi chunqiu, “Zhi yi” 執一 17.8: 1132).

¹³⁹ “If there were two Sons of Heaven in All under Heaven, All under Heaven would be impossible to order; if there were two rulers in a state, the state would be impossible to order; if there were two fathers in a family, the family would be impossible to order” (*Guanzi*, “Ba yan” 霸言 9.23: 472); cf. Mawangdui Hanmu boshu zhengli xiaozu 馬王堆漢墓帛書整理小組, *Jing fa* 經法 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1976), “Liu fen” 六分, pp. 16-17; *Han Feizi*, “Yang quan” 揚權 8: 43-53; see also Xunzi’s views discussed above. For the philosophical foundations of Xunzi’s theory of rulership, see Sato Masayuki, *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xunzi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 315-340. This emphasis on the exclusivity of the ruler’s authority ultimately derives from the common need to

belief in the wisdom of concentrating power in the hands of one individual was deeply at odds with the thinkers' less than flattering estimate of contemporary rulers. The gulf between the ideal and reality grew constantly. Ideally, the ruler was expected to be selfless, impartial, benevolent, righteous and wise; on the highest scale of idealization he had a divine (or at least a semi-divine) status, as a being in charge of the prosperity of humankind, the counterpart of Heaven-and-Earth, guarantor of the proper functioning of the universe.¹⁴⁰ In reality, many overlords were selfish, short-sighted, intemperate and prone to manipulations; they had little understanding of their country's tasks and were in many instances utterly unfit to perform the glorious role that political theory assigned to them. This contradiction was the source of great, if necessarily muted, concern for most eminent thinkers.¹⁴¹

Few Zhanguo thinkers could ignore the devastating effect of an inept leader on the fortunes of his state. How could this situation be avoided? Insofar as thinkers unanimously refused to consider imposing institutional (as distinguished from moral) limitations on the ruler's authority, the only way to ensure proper functioning of the system was to improve the quality of the sovereign. This, indeed, was advocated by those thinkers who believed that educating an heir-apparent, or constantly remonstrating with and instructing the

establish a unified empire to end the calamity under heaven (see Yuri Pines, "The One that Pervades the All' in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: Origins of 'The Great Unity' Paradigm," *T'oung Pao*, 86 [2000], 280-324; Liu Zehua, *Zhongguo de wangquanzhuyi*, 1-19).

¹⁴⁰ Recently, in an inspiring study, Michael Puett comprehensively discussed the notion of "self-divinization" in ancient Chinese thought: *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 57; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). In many cases, some of which are not sufficiently emphasized in this insightful book, the divinization of humans meant actual divinization of the ruler, which peaked in the age of unified empires, but was firmly rooted in Zhanguo thought. See Puett, *To Become a God*, 225-258; cf. Liu Zehua, *Zhongguo de wangquanzhuyi*, 128-137.

¹⁴¹ For the continuous problematic of the inevitable gulf between the ruler as an ideal and the actual sovereign, see Zhang Fengtian, *Zhongguo diwang guannian—shehui pubian yishi zhong de 'zun jun—zui jun' wenhua fanshi* 中國帝王觀念—社會普遍意識中的“尊君—罪君”文化範式 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2004), 624-721. For the impact of this immanent contradiction on imperial China's political life, see Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), who shows the constant attempts of the late Ming ministers to turn the emperor into a "living ancestor": a ritual figurehead, devoid of all personal traits, even a kind of a rubberstamp.

reigning ruler, would eventually improve the ruler's functioning. Yet it was also recognized that in some cases even the best teachers could not alter the sovereign's or his son's ineptitude, while remonstrance was quite often unheeded.¹⁴² The solution had to be sought elsewhere. The inept ruler had to be replaced.

In traditional China only two ways of replacing the reigning ruler existed: either through violent overthrow or through abdication. The first way, albeit legitimate under certain circumstances, was by definition abnormal and could be employed only in exceptional cases; violence was not a laudable means of settling political issues. The second, namely the voluntary yielding of the throne, was a morally advantageous and less costly alternative. Ideally, it could ensure the ascendancy of the best suited rulers, implementing the principle of "elevating the worthy" at the very top of the government apparatus. Moreover, insofar as the ultimate decision regarding the successor's choice remained in the hands of the acting sovereign, the procedure of abdication did not infringe on the principle of the ruler's absolute power. Ultimately, therefore, abdication can be seen as the most elegant way of ensuring the accession of the best possible sovereign.

As discussed above, two major factors impeded the implementation of the abdication doctrine despite its apparent popularity in the middle Zhanguo period. First, the contradiction between the meritocratic and the family principles of government had never been sufficiently resolved. Even in the highly mobile Zhanguo society, the idea that the ruler's descendants could become somebody's servants was unbearable for many, as the Zhongshan inscriptions suggest. Second, and more importantly, Zhanguo political theory lacked any practical recommendations regarding the way of ceding the throne. In these conditions an abdication could easily be interpreted as a disguise for actual usurpation, as King Kuai and Zi Zhi learnt to their dismay.

Why then did the proponents of abdication—with the partial

¹⁴² For the limits of education, see e.g. Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, comp., *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), "Chu yu 楚語 1" 17: 483-485; for the limits of remonstrance, see Liu Zehua 劉澤華 and Wang Liansheng 王連升, "Xian Qin shidai de jianyi lilun yu junzhu zhuanzhizhuyi" 先秦時代的諫議理論與君主專制主義, rpt. in Liu Zehua, *Xi er zhai wen gao* 洗耳齋文稿 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 27-43.

exception of the *Tang Yu zhi dao* authors—fail to institutionalize their proposal? Why did the idea of selecting a worthy ruler remain forever at the level of unsophisticated wishful thinking, in sharp distinction to the elaborate means of selecting worthy officials? I believe the answer lies within the very nature of abdication discourse. Fearing the political consequences of their boldness, early proponents of abdication, such as Mozi, transferred their doctrine to a legendary past, inventing the story of Yao's and Shun's ceding of the throne (which replaced Mozi's initial references to the primeval past in which the ruler was elected due to his moral qualities). This routine "use of the past to serve the present" turned out, however, to be a trap. The notion of abdication became too deeply embedded in the Yao-Shun-Yu legend, and never developed as an independent political theory. The legitimization of abdication was performed largely, as the *Zi Gao* and especially the *Rong Cheng shi* suggest, by expanding the number of past abdicators and beautifying their rule as a Golden Age. However, during an age when manipulations of the past were omnipresent and counter-narratives easily constructed and deconstructed, such means of legitimization of political theory remained ultimately futile.¹⁴³ The proponents of abdication were easily outmaneuvered by those who reinterpreted the abdication legend in such a way as to diminish the appeal of the abdication doctrine in the present.

The disjunction between the uniform preservation of the dynastic principles of government and the ideal of throne-yielding by the paragons of the past remained a source of tension between ideals and actuality, one of the many such tensions that characterized imperial Chinese political culture. Some tend to dismiss the unattainable ideals promulgated by Chinese statesmen and thinkers as mere conventions of discourse, as "labels" which had no impact whatsoever on actuality.¹⁴⁴ I doubt the correctness of this supposition. The ideals were rarely actualized, but their latent presence had undeniable impact on political life. The idea of abdication as the

¹⁴³ For the Zhanguo thinkers' appropriation of the past to serve their political agendas, see Yuri Pines, "Speeches and the Question of Authenticity in Ancient Chinese Historical Records," in Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag and Jörn Rüsen, eds., *Ideology and Historical Criticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 214-220.

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Aleksandr S. Martynov, "Konfutsianskaia Utopiia v Drevnosti i Srednevekov'e," in L.P. Deliusin and L.N. Borokh, eds., *Kitajskie Sotsial'nye Utopii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 10-57, especially pp. 28-29.

only reasonable institutional means of replacing an inept or aging leader was relevant, insofar as it expressed muted criticism of the ruler's ostensible immutability.

History abounds with coincidences. In 1995, two years after the discovery of *Tang Yu zhi dao*, Chinese communist leaders agreed to establish the age of seventy as a mandatory retirement age from the party leadership. In 2002, the year of the publication of *Zi Gao* and *Rong Cheng shi*, Jiang Zemin 江澤民, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, stepped down from his position in favor of his designated successor, Hu Jintao 胡錦濤. The first abdication-like power transfer in Chinese history (after Yao and Shun, of course), had been actualized.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ For the mechanism of the recent power transfer at the top of the CCP, see Andrew J. Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York: New York Review Books, 2003, 2nd rev. ed.).