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CHAPTER

4 The Confucian Legendary Past

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Abstract

The paragon rulers, ministers, and villains became stock figures in Confucian political discourse since the Warring States period and for millennia to come. This essay explores three sets of legendary and semi-legendary figures that were used by Confucian thinkers to put forward controversial political ideas. The morally impeccable Zhou dynastic founders, Kings Wen and Wu, who were mandated by Heaven to replace the depraved last ruler of the Shang dynasty, exemplified the idea of righteous rebellion. The sage monarchs, Yao and Shun, who allegedly abdicated in favor of their meritorious ministers, were presented to promote the daring notion of meritocratic power transfer as advantageous to the hereditary principle of rule. And the early Zhou regent and model minister, the Duke of Zhou, who acted as *de facto* ruler in his nephew's stead, epitomized the Confucian aspiration to have real—albeit not nominal—power concentrated in the hands of wise ministers.

Keywords: [abdication](#), [Duke of Zhou](#), [King Wen](#), [King Wu](#), [rebellion](#), [ruler-minister relations](#), [Shun](#), [Yao](#)

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The Master said, “Great indeed was Yao as a ruler! How lofty! It is Heaven that is great and it was Yao who patterned himself upon it.”

—*Lunyu* 8.19

When under siege in Kuang, the Master said, “With King Wen dead, is not this culture of ours (*wen*) invested here in me?”

—*Lunyu* 9.5

The Master said, “How I have deteriorated! It has been such a long time since I dreamt of the Duke of Zhou.”

THE above statements, attributed to Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE), are well known.¹ The Master avowedly drew inspiration from the ancient paragons whose legacy he claimed to be “transmitting” (*shu* 述) to his contemporaries and to posterity rather than “creating” (*zuo* 作) anything new.² Veneration of the former sages became one of the most notable features of Confucian (and not only Confucian) thought. Even a less conservative thinker, such as Xunzi 荀子 (d. after 238 BCE) hailed the true “noble man” (*junzi* 君子) as the one “who lives in the current age but whose aspirations focus on the Way of the ancients.”³ Who these ancient paragons were, their alleged legacy, and the role some of these figures played in early Confucian thought are the questions to be addressed in this essay.

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It is important to emphasize that the goal of this essay is not to analyze the historicity of the former paragons and their real deeds. A century-old assertion of Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) that most if not all paragons were invented by competing thinkers of the Warring States period (Zhangguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE) may not be entirely accurate, but it suffices to serve as the foundation for the current discussion. Even details about fully historical personages, such as King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (d. ca. 1047 BCE) and his sons, King Wu 周武王 (d. ca. 1042 BCE) and the Duke of Zhou 周公 (d. ca. 1035 BCE) are so altered in later legends that it is all but impossible to reconstruct their “true” image. Earlier sage monarchs, such as Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, are fully legendary figures. Even if their names can be associated with primordial ancestors of certain clans, this association is meaningless insofar as their primary story—that of a monarch’s abdication in favor of a meritorious aide—is concerned. This story is most certainly a Warring States–period ideological construct.

With this understanding in mind, in what follows I shall focus not on the historicity of the paragons’ deeds but on their ideological roles. In my discussion, I shall follow the chronology not of the lives of legendary personages, but of their appearance as ideologically important figures in Confucian thought. I shall focus on three sets of personages. First, I shall discuss the dynastic founders, kings Wen and Wu of the Zhou dynasty, and their imagined counterpart, King Tang 湯, the founder of the Shang dynasty 商 (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), whose names are associated with the concept of Heaven’s Mandate. In this context I shall also discuss the antiheros—those who lost Heaven’s Mandate due to their moral depravity. Second, I shall explore the evolution of the abdication legend, that is, the story of voluntary power transfer from primordial thearch Yao to his minister Shun, and from Shun to Yu 禹, the eventual founder of the semi-legendary Xia 夏 dynasty. Third, I shall analyze the importance of the Duke of Zhou as a model minister.

These personages were at the core of veneration by Confucian-minded thinkers from the Warring States period. Other legendary personages, such as the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), Fuxi 伏羲, the Divine Husbandman (Shennong 神農), and the like were added to the Confucian pantheon only in the imperial era (i.e., after 221 BCE), and played markedly lesser roles in the shaping of Confucian views of the past than Yao, Shun, and the dynastic founders of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. Even the highly revered demiurge Yu, who subdued the flood and ordered the terrestrial space, occupied a less prominent position in later tradition than Yao, Shun, and the dynastic founders of Shang and Zhou. Consequently, these “lesser paragons” will not be discussed in this essay.

Heaven's Mandate

Around 1046 BCE a momentous event occurred in China's history. The centuries-old Shang 商 dynasty, the major center of political gravity in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River basin, was overthrown by its former subordinate, the Zhou polity. In the wake of their surprising victory (and after crushing the rebellion of the Shang loyalists), the Zhou leaders reshaped the landscape of northern China, establishing numerous subordinate polities ruled by the Zhou kinsmen and allies, and dispersing the Shang population to new localities. For several generations thereafter, the Zhou kings succeeded in controlling much broader swathes of territory than any preceding polity in Chinese history.⁴ Centuries later, Confucius, his followers, and many other thinkers ↪ viewed the early Zhou rule as the apex of political order, the golden age of bygone stability.

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Aside from their real success, the Zhou exercised a lasting impact on subsequent generations due to their major ideological innovation: the concept of Heaven's Mandate (*tian ming* 天命). This concept, developed in the wake of the overthrow of the Shang and the quelling of subsequent rebellion, assigned the omnipotent, omniscient, and interventionist entity, Heaven (*tian* 天), with the task of ensuring proper order on earth. When the ruler behaves violently and oppressively—as was allegedly the case of the last king of Shang, Zhòu 紂 (d. 1046 BCE)—Heaven, out of concern for the people below, transfers its Mandate to a better incumbent. According to this theory it was through his utmost morality and concern for the weakest members of society that King Wen of Zhou attained the Mandate, allowing his son, King Wu, to overthrow the Shang and establish the new dynasty. But the Mandate is “not constant.” Should future generations of Zhou kings lose their *de* 德 (moral virtue, but also charismatic power), “merciless Heaven” will withhold the Mandate and transfer it to a better candidate. Maintaining one's *de* requires not just moral behavior on behalf of the ruler, but most notably taking care of the people below. It was through neglect of the people that King Zhou lost his Mandate. Heaven “sees through what the people are seeing, hears through what the people are hearing” and it “inevitably grants what the people desire.”⁵

The concept of Heaven's Mandate—which remained the cornerstone of the views of dynastic legitimacy well into the end of imperial China—was a most effective intellectual construct. Its advantages were not only in legitimating the current dynasty but primarily in warning the rulers that any misbehavior would cause them to lose Heaven's support. However, laudable as it was, the idea of Heaven as the supreme supervisor of human realm faced a major challenge: it was not supported by any unequivocal evidence except for the Zhou overthrow of the Shang. No prophet spoke on Heaven's behalf, no scripture encapsulated its will, no priestly stratum meditated between Heaven and humans.⁶ In the final account, the only real proof of Heaven's benevolent intervention in human life was the Mandate's transfer from the Shang to the Zhou. This real event was supplemented by the parallel (in all likelihood outright invented) transfer of the Mandate in the past from the semi-legendary Xia to the Shang dynasty. It was the depravity of Jie 桀, the last king of Xia, which caused Heaven to choose the Shang founder Tang, the Accomplished (Cheng Tang 成湯), as the new “master of the people” (*min zhu* 民主). It was through the paired power transfer from Xia to Shang and then from Shang to Zhou that the Mandate theory was validated.

Insofar as the fundamental political concept of Heaven's Mandate was intrinsically linked to the Xia-Shang-Zhou power transfers, the major heroes of these transfers played an exceptionally important role in Chinese political thought in general and in Confucian thought in particular. Rather than analyze abstract principles of dynastic replacement—which was a sensitive issue even during the relative ideological freedom of the Warring States period and doubly so in the imperial age—it was much safer to focus on good and bad individuals from the past and discuss their personal traits that brought about the Mandate's change. This personalization of the Mandate's discussions ↪ is fully observable already in the earliest documents related to the Mandate transfer, namely, relevant sections of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) and *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經).⁷ In the works of Confucius, his disciples, and his followers, this focus

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on personal qualities of ancient paragons had further intensified. The winners and the losers of the Mandate became the core of positive and negative historical examples for millennia to come.

The founders of the Shang and Zhou dynasties were lionized beyond recognition. King Wen, for instance, was credited with creating an ideal political system, which, according to the authors of a few would-be canonical texts, such as chapters of the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) and the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) on the *Spring and Autumn Classic* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), should serve as a timeless blueprint for correct sociopolitical order.⁸ But political achievements aside, what mattered more for Confucian thinkers was King Wen and other Mandate receivers' utmost morality. According to Mengzi 孟子 (d. ca. 304 BCE), for instance, King Tang and King Wen initially ruled just a tiny territory of seventy and one hundred *li* squared (800 to 1600 km²) respectively. Yet due to their moral superiority they had overpowered all their enemies. Tang was so moral as to assist the depraved ruler of the neighboring state of Ge 葛, providing him with the needed grain and meat to conduct appropriate sacrifices. King Wen was so benevolent as to humbly serve neighboring tribesmen. In due time, when each of these kings started campaigning in one of the cardinal directions, the people from another direction complained, "Why he does not start with us first?"⁹ Xunzi echoes this conviction that morality alone determined the paragons' success: when the armies of kings Tang, Wen, and Wu invaded their enemies, the people willingly submitted to the paragons' insuperable morality: "The blades of their weapons were not stained with blood, but people far and near came and submitted to them."¹⁰ Worthy aides were attracted to the paragons from afar, further augmenting their rule. This ability to generate full support at home, to attract the people from afar and to generate universal compliance with their rule explains how the paragons received the Mandate. Needless to say, the lionized figures of dynastic founders served as foils for current inept rulers who could never match the paragons' moral superiority.

In tandem with the veneration of the dynastic founders, a parallel tradition ensued of using the images of Jie and Zhòu, the kings who lost their ancestral Mandate, as a warning to current sovereigns. Jie and Zhòu became the accumulation of all imaginable vices. They were accused of debauchery and sadism, of wastefulness and negligence of their subjects, of punishing upright remonstrators and dismissing meritorious aides, of following the whims of vicious concubines and treacherous ministers, and so forth. Take for instance Xunzi's explanation for the reasons of the Mandate's loss:

As for Jie and Zhòu: Their thought was extremely dangerous; their desires extremely benighted; their behavior extremely calamitous. Their relatives were estranged from them; the worthies despised them; the people resented them. Despite being the descendants of Yu and Tang [the founders of Xia and Shang respectively], they had nobody to support them. They dissected Bigan, imprisoned Jizi;¹¹ they were personally killed and their state overthrown; they were greatly punished by All under Heaven, and those in later generations who talk of wickedness refer to their [case].¹²

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This enumeration of the tyrants' crimes was a convenient way of reducing the likelihood of renewed rebellions: after all, few if any monarchs could match the degree of depravity of Jie and Zhòu. There was an important minority opinion, though. In justifying the tyrants' overthrow, Mengzi mentioned that their crime was just "mutilating" benevolence and righteousness.¹³ This was a daring statement: any reader of Mengzi's philippics against contemporary rulers would not fail to notice that those were equally guilty of "mutilating benevolence and righteousness." There are indeed indications that Mengzi was more ready to endorse the principle of righteous rebellion than most other contemporaneous thinkers.¹⁴ However, in the long run, his views were sidelined. A common interpretation of the Mandate's transfer, presented in China's foundational historical work, Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) emphasizes the extreme depravity and cruelty of Jie and Zhòu. These tyrants remained exceptional figures; but their fate could be conveniently invoked whenever a ruler should be cautioned against transgressions.

Changes of the Mandate in the past served as a proof that Heaven is watching from above, and sooner or later it may intervene should a sovereign become too wicked to be tolerated by his subjects.

Yielding the Throne to the Worthy

Unlike the story of righteous rebellion, the story of Yao's and Shun's abdications is not based on historical events but is a much later ideological construct. Prior to the fifth century BCE, neither Yao nor Shun appeared as important political figures, nor was the story of their abdication in favor of meritorious ministers mentioned in contemporaneous texts. Confucius's *Analects* contains a few statements of admiration of these figures (see the epigraph), but even there the story of abdication is never mentioned explicitly. It is Confucius's intellectual rival, Mozi 墨子 (ca. 468–390 BCE), who appears to be the first to firmly incorporate Yao, Shun, and Shun's replacement, Yu, the founder of the Xia dynasty, with kings Tang, Wen, and Wu to create a fixed list of paragon rulers of the past. And it is in the *Mozi* that we find the first reference to the legend of Yao's abdication in favor of Shun. Yet even in this text very little is told about Yao and Shun, except that the latter started as a menial, acting as peasant, pottery-maker, and fisherman. These humble beginnings notwithstanding, "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."¹⁵

p. 62 Only three generations separate Mozi from Mengzi, but within these generations it seems that the abdication legend—and the figures of Yao and Shun—dramatically gained in popularity. Mengzi's disciple, Wan Zhang 萬章, directly confronted his master 孟 with the question: "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?"¹⁶ This and a few similar references caused Angus C. Graham (1919–1991) to opine that the extant references to the abdication legend are "likely to be the tip of the iceberg."¹⁷ Graham's prescience was indeed proven soon after the above observation was made (and unfortunately after his premature death), when several manuscripts were unearthed that contained much more focused discussion of the abdication legend than was known from the transmitted texts. These manuscripts fill in the gaps in our understanding of the evolution of the abdication discourse and of the views of Yao and Shun in early Chinese political thought in general and among Confucius's followers in particular.¹⁸

The story of Yao's and Shun's abdications to meritorious ministers gained popularity during the time of a dramatic shift in China's political system. The aristocratic order in which pedigree determined one's position was replaced by a meritocratic system in which top offices were granted to men of proven abilities.¹⁹ This created a peculiar situation: the rulers remained the only executives who owed their position to pedigree alone. Not surprisingly, some thinkers began pondering how to ensure that the most capable person would ascend the throne. The story of a ruler's abdication in favor of a worthy minister fitted these expectations perfectly. On the one hand, this model did not jeopardize the ruler-centered political order: after all, it was the ruler—and the ruler alone—who had the right to decide whether or not to yield power and who should be his replacement. On the other hand, the abdication-based power transfer had dramatically enhanced the prestige of the ministerial position. A truly worthy minister could henceforth expect nothing less than elevation to the position of the monarch's heir or immediate replacement.

In what follows I shall focus on the earlier and more influential part of the abdication legend, namely Yao's abdication in favor of Shun, putting aside for the time being Shun's putative abdication in favor of Yu. Yao and Shun eventually became the paradigmatic pair of a wise ruler and a worthy minister. Yao was hailed first for the perceptiveness that allowed him to discern Shun's worthiness and, second, for his selflessness and impartiality, as manifested in yielding the throne to the meritorious minister rather than to his own inept son. Yet the real hero of most accounts about these two paragons is Shun. Shun's primary importance was as

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a minister rather than a ruler. For many thinkers, his career—beginning with a humble start, attaining renown due to personal morality, catching Yao’s attention, serving as Yao’s minister, and finally replacing Yao (either posthumously or during Yao’s lifetime)—seemed to be the realization of the dream of “elevating the worthy.” Thus, the *Zigao* 子羔 manuscript from the Shanghai Museum collection emphasizes that Shun’s virtue was so great that three “sons of Heaven”—here referring to the miraculously conceived progenitors of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties—served him as his ministers, despite his being a humble “son of men.” The text adds Confucius’s lament: “As none follows any longer the Way of the former kings, he [Shun] would not meet [nowadays] an enlightened king and hence would not be employed in a great [position].”²⁰ The bottom line is clear: in a properly ruled world, pedigree is meaningless and only one’s virtue should determine one’s position. Yao’s acuity in recognizing Shun’s excellence even in the midst of humble circumstances is contrasted with the inadequacy of the current rulers.

Shun’s story of rags-to-riches became the favorable topic for frustrated men of letters. Mengzi’s repeated praise of Shun may well reflect the thinker’s hidden expectation that sooner or later he would encounter a Yao who will then “discover” and elevate him. A similarly strong infatuation with Shun is visible among the early imperial literati, whose voices are present in the first-century-BCE text, *Debates of Salt and Iron* (*Yantielun* 鹽鐵論).²¹ However, their glorification of Shun notwithstanding, for many Confucians the abdication legend posed severe challenges. For instance, it could be interpreted as subversive of the cherished family values. As critics of the abdication legend were swift to notice, Yao, by transferring power to Shun, forsook the rights of his own son, whereas Shun became—quite scandalously—a ruler over his own father.²² Some Confucian texts tried to gloss over these tensions between kinship obligations and the principle of “elevating the worthy” by simply declaring that these tensions do not exist. For instance, *Tang Yu zhi Dao* 唐虞之道 (“The Way of Tang and Yu,” i.e., of Yao and Shun) manuscript, discovered in 1993 at the site of Guodian 郭店, proclaims that “loving relatives” and “respecting the worthies” are fully compatible and are actually complementary virtues—that the paragons Yao and Shun embodied both.²³ Others propose a more sophisticated defense. Mengzi in particular repeatedly emphasizes Shun’s position as a champion of filiality and fraternal feelings: although his notorious father and brother plotted against his life, Shun behaved with utmost respect to them, enfeoffing the brother and helping the father to morally transform himself. Mengzi is unequivocal: should Shun have ever faced the need to punish his father for murder, he would have preferred to save the father even at the cost of abandoning the rule over All under Heaven.²⁴ In Mengzi’s eyes, questioning Shun’s filial dutifulness amounts to sacrilege.

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In the text of the *Mengzi* there is considerable tension between Mengzi’s admiration of Yao’s elevation of his worthy aide, and the fear of excessive enthusiasm toward the idea of abdication demonstrated by some of Mengzi’s disciples, such as Wan Zhang, cited earlier. The reasons for Mengzi’s hesitation are well known. It was during his life that the real abdication attempt of King Kuai of Yan 燕王噲 (r. 320–314 BCE) in favor of his minister, Zizhi 子之 took place. The results were disastrous: Yan sank into turmoil caused by the rebellion of the former crown prince against Zizhi, and the state was almost annihilated. In the aftermath of these events, attitudes toward abdication began to change.²⁵ Whereas Confucian thinkers continued to glorify Yao and Shun, they began de-emphasizing the importance of abdication and focused instead on personal moral qualities of these paragons. Mengzi explains that Yao’s abdication was a result of highly peculiar circumstances—the length of Shun’s tenure as Yao’s minister, the notorious ineptitude of Yao’s son, and the uniform support for Shun among the populace. This combined support of Heaven, humans, and Yao himself ensured Shun’s succession to Yao; yet this was an exceptional combination of positive factors that should not be frequently expected.²⁶ Xunzi is much more resolute in denouncing the very debate about abdications in the past: “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.”²⁷ Xunzi did not go so far as to plainly reject the historicity of the abdication legend, but he seems to be visibly irritated by it.

A new image of Yao and Shun emerges in the “Canon of Yao” (“Yao dian” 堯, comprising a section, “Canon of Shun” 舜典), a chapter from the *Classic of Documents* that purports to be a record from the days of these two thearchs. The text—probably composed in the late Warring States period and further edited by the early imperial court erudites—very briefly mentions Yao’s abdication to Shun, which is portrayed as an exceptional event. After no less than seventy years on the throne, Yao had only one inept son and therefore had to find an adequate replacement. Yet the focus of the text is not on the abdication moment but on Yao’s and Shun’s modes of rule. Both are model thearchs, presenting highly distinctive ways of rule: Yao’s is charismatic and highly personalized; Shun’s is bureaucratic and completely depersonalized.²⁸ What matters to the authors of that text is the thearchs’ contribution to orderly rule in All under Heaven—each one in his own way—rather than their willingness to yield power to meritorious aides.

The canonical status of the “Canon of Yao” was supposed to shape once and for all the image of Yao and Shun as model rulers rather than as a pair who abdicated. This did not happen though. Whereas the rule of Yao and Shun was routinely identified with the golden age, their figures remained most potently connected to the idea of yielding one’s power to the meritorious. The latent threat of their example to the dominant principle of hereditary succession was never fully eradicated. Even for the late imperial thinker, Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), the appeal of Yao and Shun was precisely in their unparalleled selflessness, exemplified in their renunciation of the narrow family-based principle of rule. Huang’s invocation of Yao and Shun was meant to criticize the prevailing dynastic mode of power transfer.²⁹ Through the centuries, the subversive potential of the abdication story was never lost.

The Model Minister

The discussion heretofore has focused on legendary and semi-legendary thearchs and monarchs. Yet the list of the paragons of the past will not be complete without an exceptional minister whose power was as close as it could be to that of a full monarch, the Duke of Zhou. A younger brother of King Wu of Zhou, after Wu’s death, the Duke of Zhou became the regent on behalf of his nephew, King Cheng 周成王 (r. ca. 1042–1021 BCE). During his seven-year-long regency, the Duke of Zhou suppressed the major rebellion of the Shang loyalists, who were aided by the Duke of Zhou’s own disgruntled brothers. In the aftermath of suppression he acted to solidify Zhou rule. He is widely credited with establishing the political system of the young Zhou dynasty and with developing its ideological foundations, including the theory of the Mandate of Heaven. The Duke of Zhou is considered the author of many documents from the *Classic of Documents* and of some of the poems from the *Classic of Poetry*. Putting aside the veracity of these attributions, there is no doubt that the Duke of Zhou’s contribution to the Zhou success was huge.³⁰

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Aside from his real and imagined role in consolidating the Zhou rule, the Duke of Zhou gained special prestige in the state of Lu 魯, the homeland of Confucius. He was a nominal founder of that state, which was the source of pride for the Lu elites. It is perhaps this universal as well as local prestige of the Duke of Zhou that explains why he served as a source of inspiration for Confucius (see the third epigraph). By the time of Mengzi, the Way of Confucians was already defined as “the Way of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius.”³¹ Yet notwithstanding the due respect given to the Duke of Zhou in the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and other texts of Confucian lore, in most of those texts he does not appear as the major paragon.

The elevation of the Duke of Zhou to the ideal minister is most clearly associated with Xunzi. Xunzi discerned yet another important trait in the Duke’s exploits: his peculiar ruler-like position. In manifold documents from the canonical collection, the alleged speaker is the Duke of Zhou; yet when he is cited the text reads: “the king said to the effect ...” (*wang ruo yue* 王若曰). This highly exceptional reference to a minister as a king allowed Xunzi to deduce that the Duke acted not merely as a regent of his nephew but as a

full replacement. It is this unparalleled power of the Duke of Zhou as a minister that made him the focus of Xunzi's panegyric:

This is the efficacy of the Great Ru: when King Wu died and King Cheng was young, the Duke of Zhou supported King Cheng, continued King Wu's [enterprise] to make All under Heaven submissive, hating [the idea] that All under Heaven would rebel against the Zhou. He held the regalia of the Son of Heaven, maintained the affairs of All under Heaven, being at ease as if it was his fixed possession, but All under Heaven did not consider him greedy. He killed [his rebellious elder brother] Guanshu, emptied the Yin [Shang] capital, but All under Heaven did not consider him cruel. He ruled uniformly All under Heaven, establishing seventy-one states, of which fifty-three were occupied by the [members of the royal] Ji clan, but All under Heaven did not consider him partial. He taught and instructed King Cheng, clarifying for him the Way so he would be able to follow the steps of kings Wen and Wu. When the Duke of Zhou returned to the Zhou [capital], he gave back the regalia to King Cheng, and All under Heaven did not cease serving the Zhou. Then the Duke of Zhou faced north [as due to a subject] and attended the court. ... All under Heaven were at peace like a single person: only the Sage can attain this. This is the efficacy of the Great Ru!³²

p. 66 “Ru” is usually translated as “Confucian” (alternative translations include “classicist” or “ritualist”), but in the context of the above passage it serves as a reference to the model intellectual. The Duke of Zhou serves here as the paragon of ministerial power. Many of his deeds were questionable in light of conventional political, ritual, and moral norms. He acted as a replacement of the king; he possessed the king's regalia; he executed his own elder brother; he unequivocally favored his kinsmen over members of other clans. Yet all this is forgivable in light of the bottom line: the Duke of Zhou preserved the dynasty's power and did not violate the fundamental norms of hereditary succession. ↪ Having accomplished his tasks, he restored King Cheng to power and allowed the dynasty to continue for centuries to come. This is the apex of political success, which derives from the minister's intellectual and moral superiority.

The figure of the Duke of Zhou in *Xunzi* and many later texts may be interpreted as an alternative ministerial ideal to that symbolized by Shun. Whereas the latter represented an unattainable dream of a minister who inherited the monarch, the example of the Duke of Zhou—a sagacious and immensely powerful quasi-monarch, the one who practically ran the affairs of All under Heaven, but still acted within the framework of hereditary succession—was more easily realizable. The story of the Duke of Zhou who attained utmost power without jeopardizing the political system may have reflected the hidden aspirations of ambitious men-of-service. Not incidentally, Xunzi praised King Cheng's subservience to the Duke of Zhou as follows: “With regard to the Duke of Zhou, King Cheng was attentive to whatever [the Duke] proposed: he knew whom to esteem!”³³

To not a few men of letters during Xunzi's times and throughout the subsequent imperial period, attaining power on a par with the Duke of Zhou was arguably the loftiest dream. If the ideal of a paragon ruler remains unattainable, then at the very least one may strive to the position of a paragon minister. This minister would act as the monarch's surrogate; his proposals would be uniformly rubber-stamped by the compliant nominal sovereign; and yet the minister will never use his power to usurp the throne. Much like the Duke of Zhou he would retire in due time and preserve his clean political image. Whereas this goal was not easily attainable, it proved to be more realistic than expecting for a sage to ascend the throne.

Notes

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2. *Lunyu* 7.1 (cf. translation in Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects with Selection from Traditional Commentaries* [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003], 64).
 3. *Xunzi*, “Jun Dao” 君道 (cf. translation in Eric Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014], 135)
 4. See details in Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
 5. These three statements are cited from the original text of “The Great Oath” (“Tai shi” 泰誓) (which was subsequently lost and replaced with a forgery currently incorporated in the *Classic of Documents*). For citations, see *Mengzi* 9.5 (cf. translation in D.-C. Lau, *Mencius* [London: Penguin 1970], 174) and *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 Xiang 31:3 (cf. translation in Stephen W. Durrant, Li Wai-ye, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition / Zuo zhuan Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016], 1275). For a general introduction of the Mandate of Heaven theory, see Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China. Volume 1. The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 93–100.
 6. The ritual interaction with Heaven was monopolized by Zhou kings themselves, who bore a proud title of “Sons of Heaven” (*tianzi* 天子). These pontifical functions aside, however, the kings did not claim to have either direct access to Heaven’s will or superior understanding of its intent.
 7. See more in Martin Kern, “Bronze Inscriptions, the *Shijing* and the *Shangshu*: The Evolution of the Ancestral Sacrifice during the Western Zhou,” In *Early Chinese Religion. Part One. Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 143–200.
 8. Joachim Gentz, “Long Live the King! The Ideology of Power between Ritual and Morality in the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳.” In *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 69–117.
 9. *Mengzi* 2.11, 3.3, 6.5 (Lau, *Mencius*, 69, 80, 109–110).
 10. *Xunzi*, “Yi bing” 議兵 (cited from Hutton, *Xunzi*, 164).
 11. Both atrocities are attributed to King Zhòu. Bigan was his righteous uncle, whose body Zhòu reportedly ordered to be dissected to check whether or not the sage’s heart has seven openings. Another uncle, Jizi, pretended to be crazy and was imprisoned, but at least escaped death (*Shiji* 3; William H. Nienhauser, ed., *The Grand Scribe’s Records. Volume 1. The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, by Ssu-ma Ch’ien [Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994], 51).
 12. *Xunzi*, “Jie bi” 解蔽 (cf. translation in Hutton, *Xunzi*, 193).
 13. See *Mengzi* 2.8 (Lau, *Mencius*, 68).
 14. See Yuri Pines, “To Rebel Is Justified? The Image of Zhouxin and Legitimacy of Rebellion in Chinese Political Tradition,” *Oriens Extremus* 47 (2008): 1–24; cf. Justin Tiwald, “A Right of Rebellion in the *Mengzi*?” *Dao* 7.3 (2008): 269–282.
 15. *Mozi*, “Shang xian zhong” 尚賢中 (cf. translation in Ian Johnston, tr., *Mozi: A Complete Translation* [Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010], 73). For the evolution of the abdication legend (including the analysis of why two references to it in early texts—such as *Zuo zhuan* and the *Analects*—are later interpolations), see Yuri Pines, “Disputers of Abdication: Zhanguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign’s Power,” *T’oung Pao* 91.4–5 (2005): 243–300; for a different view, see Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China*, rev. ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press 2016).
 16. *Mengzi* 9.6 (cf. translation in Lau, *Mencius*, 144).
 17. Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 293.
 18. For these texts, see Pines, “Disputers”; Pines, “Subversion Unearthed: Criticism of Hereditary Succession in the Newly Discovered Manuscripts,” *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005–2006): 159–178; Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Recently Discovered Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).
 19. See Pines, “Between Merit and Pedigree: Evolution of the Concept of ‘Elevating the Worthy’ in Pre-imperial China,” in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 2013), 161–202.

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20. Translation from Pines, “Subversion Unearthed,” 164; cf. Allan, *Buried Ideas*, 147.
 21. See Anatoly Polnarov, “Looking Beyond Dichotomies: Hidden Diversity of Voices in the *Yantielun* 鹽鐵論,” *T’oung Pao* 104 (2018): 465–495, especially 487–488.
 22. For the criticism of the abdication legend, see Pines, “Disputers.”
 23. In addition to Pines’s and Allan’s studies, see also the study cum translation by Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2012), 521–563.
 24. *Mengzi* 9.2, 7.28, 9.4, 13.35 (Lau, *Mencius*, 139–140, 127, 140–141, 190).
 25. Pines, “Disputers,” 268–271.
 26. *Mengzi* 9.5–9.6 (Lau, *Mencius*, 143–145).
 27. *Xunzi*, “Zheng lun” 正論 (cf. translation in Hutton, *Xunzi*, 197).
 28. See more in Martin Kern, “Language and the Ideology of Kingship in the ‘Canon of Yao,’” in *Origins of Chinese Political Philosophy: Studies in the Composition and Thought of the Shangshu (Classic of Documents)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 23–61.
 29. See the first chapter (“On rulership” 原君) of Huang’s *Mingyi daifang lu* 明夷待訪錄, translated by William T. De Bary as *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 91–93.
 30. For the figure of the Duke of Zhou as discerned from the Western Zhou documents and bronze inscriptions, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 101–136.
 31. *Mengzi* 5.4 (Lau, *Mencius*, 103).
 32. *Xunzi* “Ru xiao” 儒效 (cf. translation in Hutton, *Xunzi*, 76).
 33. *Xunzi*, “Junzi” 君子 (cf. translation in Hutton, *Xunzi*, 257–258).

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