CHAPTER 4

Leadership in Ancient China

Yuri Pines[*]

Yuri Pines explores the evolution of the discourse of leadership in pre-imperial (pre-221 BC*) China. His thoughtful analysis sheds light on the tensions accompanying this discourse in which political leadership was unanimously associated with the figure of the monarch, whereas moral and intellectual leadership was often viewed as belonging to ministers or just to morally cultivated intellectuals. The notion of charismatic leadership appeared early in the Zhou (c.1046–255* BC*) age in the context of the idea of Heaven's Mandate, which postulated that only a possessor of* de *(virtue, charisma, morality) would gain the support of Heaven above and the people below. This notion gradually died out, however, because statesmen and thinkers realised the impossibility of maintaining charismatic leadership under the principle of dynastic succession. The turbulent Springs and Autumns period, with the devolution of power from the Zhou kings to the regional lords and from these lords to their ministers, weakened not just the idea of Heaven's Mandate but the discussion of the leaders' positive qualities in general. The subsequent restoration of the rulers' authority in the Warring States period was accompanied by the advent of the ideology of monarchism. Some thinkers, such as Confucius, Mozi and Mengzi, hoped for a morally upright monarch who would combine political leadership with the role of the moral paragon; but again, it was tacitly understood that such an ideal is only rarely attainable under the principle of hereditary rule. Hopes for an intellectually and morally impeccable True Monarch coexisted with the realisation that most rulers are mediocrities, who are entitled to lead the state politically but are icapable of exercising moral and intellectual leadership. The latter, as argued forcefully by Xunzi, should be performed by leading intellectuals instead. Other thinkers, such as Shang Yang and Han Fei, feared that the bifurcation of leadership into political and moral-intellectual would jeopardise the principle of monarchism; hence, instead of discussing the leader's qualities, one should entrust the rule to impersonal standards and laws. Lively discussions continued throughout the*

[*] This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 568/19) and by the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies.

pre-imperial era and beyond. The complexities of this ongoing tension in theoretical reflections on leadership in ancient China are astutely analysed.

1 Introduction

Ancient China appears at first glimpse as an ideal candidate for discussions of leadership and the leader's qualities. Debates about rulership permeate the historical and philosophical texts of the centuries that preceded the imperial unification of 221 BC, the age of the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought. So pervasive are these debates that the entire intellectual tradition of that formative age of traditional Chinese culture was dubbed by the leading scholar of Chinese political thought, Liu Zehua (1935–2018), as the 'ideology of monarchism' (*wangquanzhuyi*).[1] And yet once we get into these discussions of rulership, we may soon discover that rulership was not necessarily coterminous with leadership, especially insofar as charismatic aspects of leadership are concerned. What Weber defines as a 'certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, "superhuman", or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities'[2] – in early China these are not uniformly associated with the ruler. For many (albeit by no means all) discussants, the ruler was primarily the supreme symbol of orderly rule, whereas the features thanks to which 'the individual concerned is treated as a leader'[3] were often associated with a minister, or with a potential minister – a morally cultivated and intellectually impeccable person. This subtle and yet palpable bifurcation between rulership and leadership is one of the most conspicuous features of early Chinese political thought.

In what follows, I shall outline the evolution of the discourse of leadership since the Western Zhou period (ca. 1046–771 BC), the first age from which we have ideologically important texts, through the aristocratic Springs and Autumns period (Chunqiu, 770–453 BC), and then to the ideological debates of the Warring States period (Zhanguo, 453–221 BC), that is, the age of the Hundred Schools. I shall explore tensions in this discourse and show how early Chinese intellectuals carefully constructed the image of the monarch in a way that left them and the members of their stratum considerable leverage vis-à-vis individual rulers.

[1] Liu Zehua (2000, 2013–14a). [2] Weber (1968), 48. [3] Weber (1968), 48.

2 The Origins: Attaining Heaven's Mandate

The year 1046 BC marked a momentous beginning in Chinese history. The coalition led by King Wu of Zhou (d. 1042 BC) smashed the Shang dynasty, which was the centre of gravity in the middle Yellow River basin for more than five centuries. Following their astounding success, the victorious Zhou leaders expanded their control over much vaster territories than were previously ruled by the Shang.[4] Yet almost simultaneously with this success came a warning: the rebellion of Shang loyalists, joined by the disgruntled members of the Zhou royal family itself around 1042 BC, almost toppled the new dynasty. The subsequent rationalisation of Zhou's successes and challenges gave rise to the peculiar concept of Heaven's Mandate.[5] This concept in turn became the foundation of Chinese political ideology for millennia to come.

In a nutshell, the idea of the mandate was that Heaven, the supreme deity, is in charge of proper order on earth. When the ruler behaves violently and oppressively – as was allegedly the case of the last king of Shang – Heaven, out of concern for the people below, transfers its mandate to a better incumbent. But how to gain the mandate? The Zhou ideologues believed that Heaven reacts to the people's mood: Heaven 'sees through what the people are seeing, hears through what the people are hearing' and it 'inevitably grants what the people desire'.[6] To gain Heaven's support, the ruler should gain the people's support first.[7]

It is in this context that we have the earliest-recorded debates in China about what is required to become a leader. One of the earliest and most influential texts from the Western Zhou period, the 'Declaration to Kang' ('Kang gao') chapter from the *Canon of Documents*, explains how the Zhou de facto founder King Wen (d. c. 1047 BC) attained the mandate:

> King Wen was able to illustrate his virtue (*de*) and be cautious in the use of punishments. He did not have temerity to offend widowers and widows. He employed the employable, revered the reverend, and overawed those who had to be overawed. He became illustrious among the people. Thus he laid the foundations for us in the Xia lands, allied with one or two countries and managed our western land. These were his efforts. He became renowned to

[4] Li Feng (2006). [5] Creel (1970), 93–100.

[6] These three statements are cited from the original text of 'The Great Oath' ('Tai shi' 泰誓) document (which was subsequently lost and replaced with a forgery currently incorporated in the *Canon of Documents*). For citations, see *Mengzi* 9.5 (Lau 1970, 144) and *Zuo Tradition*, Xiang 31.3. All the translations below are mine; other translations (from some of which I have borrowed) are provided for the sake of reference.

[7] For similar concepts in ancient Mesopotamia, see Fink (Chapter 1 of this volume).

> the Lord-on-High. The Lord was pleased. Thereupon, Heaven issued its great Mandate to King Wen.[8]

This short extract encapsulates major requirements of a leader who wants to secure popular support below and Heaven's Mandate above. The text starts with the concept of 'virtue', which has to be 'illustrate' so as to become 'illustrious among the people' and 'renowned to the Lord-on-High'. The term translated here as 'virtue' (*de* 德) is of crucial importance in Chinese debates of political and moral leadership. In the earliest texts (such as the one cited above) it refers to the ruler's charismatic power or *mana*, the sacred substance which allowed the ruler to attain Heaven's support.[9] Yet religious foundations aside, *de* was manifested primarily on two levels: that of proper political conduct and that of the ruler's personal morality.

Politically, *de* referred to caring for the people, including the weakest members of society, such as 'the widowers and widows'. The ruler was required to 'protect the people', which meant both paying attention to their economic needs and being fair and 'cautious' in imposing punishments. Initially, possessing *de* meant also being able to 'overawe those who had to be overawed', but gradually *de* became associated primarily with kindness and non-coercive means of rule (although the ability to 'inspire awe' and resort to force when necessary remained an essential feature of the monarch).[10] On the personal level, *de* referred to the incumbent's morality. As explained in other early Zhou documents, it meant being 'neither leisurely nor indulgent', refraining from excessive drinking, displaying proper decorum and the like. In due time this latter meaning became dominant, as the term *de* became largely equivalent with individual virtue, primarily moral behaviour. As such, it was no longer considered the exclusive characteristic of the ruler but rather was expected of any 'noble man' (*junzi*); that is, any acting and aspiring elite member. This transformation notwithstanding, possessing *de* forever remained the paramount requirement of a leader.

One additional important aspect of King Wen's leadership as outlined in the above extract was 'employing the employable', which evidently refers to proper appointments. In many other canonical documents – such as 'Lord Shi' ('Jun Shi') – the focus shifts from King Wen's (and earlier incumbents') personal qualities to their ability to find good aides without whom the 'great enterprise' of establishing a new dynasty would never

[8] Sun Xingyan (1998), 355–6. [9] Kryukov (1995). [10] Kominami (1992).

succeed. This ability to discover worthy appointees remained for millennia the most essential expectation of a good ruler. Yet already in the 'Lord Shi' chapter we discover the seeds of the subsequent tension between this aspect of the views of rulership and individual demands of a leader.[11] If the leader's major task is just to gather a good team and let the team work in his stead, how much real leadership does his position require? As we shall see, this tension would remain one of the perennial features of ruler-related debates in pre-imperial China and beyond.

Leadership-related discussions are concentrated in those canonical documents that deal with the dynastic founders. Many (albeit not all) of these documents apparently belong to the earliest layer of the *Book of Documents*. In later layers of this collection, as well as in other texts associated with the waning years of the Western Zhou period (such as odes from the *Canon of Poems*), we may observe new emphases in the discussions of rulership. These texts pay less attention to the rulers' personal charisma and focus instead on more modest requirements of respectfully protecting the enterprise of the founding paragons. The new 'Sons of Heaven' – that is, Zhou kings – are urged to display reverence to Heaven and deified ancestors and, importantly, to maintain amicable relations with their entourage and with powerful kinsmen, the regional lords, who were becoming increasingly independent of the king's control.[12] Alas, not all the kings heeded these warnings. A series of crises befell the Zhou dynasty from the ninth century BC, culminating with the disastrous fall of the Zhou capital in 771 BC to the coalition of rebellious kin and alien invaders. Yet this disaster did not result in the mandate's transfer to a new incumbent. Instead, the Zhou dynasty survived for another five-odd centuries in the crippled eastern part of its domain. These centuries – the Eastern Zhou period (770–255 BC) – witnessed an accelerating atrophy of the kings' power and the shift of the centre of gravity from kings to their formal underlings, the regional lords. This new situation required a reconceptualisation of the views of rulership.

3 'Masters of the People': Rulers and Ministers in the Aristocratic Age

The first half of the Eastern Zhou period is known as the Springs and Autumns period. It was the heyday of China's aristocratic rule and also the age of accelerating political fragmentation. First, the regional lords eclipsed

[11] Shaughnessy (1997), 101–36. [12] Li Feng (2006).

the power of the Zhou kings. Then these lords were challenged by their underlings, heads of hereditary ministerial lineages who succeeded – in most, albeit not all, of the Zhou states – in amassing considerable political, economic and military power. The devolution of power from the Zhou kings to the regional lords was now paralleled by a similar devolution of power from these lords to their ministers. Woeful turmoil ensued. Dozens of regional lords were assassinated, expelled or otherwise humiliated by their nominal aides. Many survived only as powerless figureheads. By the sixth century BC, most polities throughout the Zhou world became entangled in a web of debilitating power struggles between ministers and rulers, among aristocratic lineages and among rival branches within some of these lineages, in addition to endless wars with foreign powers. This was one of the deepest systemic crises in China's long history.[13]

This prolonged crisis had further weakened the appeal of the idea of the Mandate of Heaven. Just as in the case of the Zhou Sons of Heaven, whose weakening did not bring about emergence of a new universal dynasty, the same was the case in regional states. Although the rulers in most of these states lost their effective power, the ruling dynasties continued to drag on for generations. The ministers, even if much more powerful than their nominal sovereign, did not have the temerity to replace the ruling dynasty (these replacements took place only around 400 BC in the waning years of the aristocratic age). The result was odd: the centuries under concern witnessed downward but not upward mobility. Rulers were overthrown, ministerial houses were annihilated, but no winner in the internecine struggles succeeded in solidifying his success. Of many hundreds of major historical personages of that age, not a single one could claim charismatic power on a par with that of the Zhou dynastic founders. As a result, discussions of leadership during the aristocratic age focus more on negative aspects (the reason for the individual's or his house's downfall) than on the positive requirements of a leader.

This emphasis on losing rather than gaining leadership is evident from the speeches scattered throughout the *Zuo Tradition/Zuo Commentary* (*Zuo zhuan*) – the major historical work that covers the period under discussion. We learn that the ruler who 'fatigues the people's lives, neglects the deities and ignores the sacrifices' will be abandoned by his people and the deities alike and lose his position (*Zuo Tradition*, Xiang 14.6). We learn that the people can 'forget' the ruler: 'even if he dies in exile, who would pity him?' (*Zuo Tradition*, Zhao 32.4). As for the ministers: on the one

[13] Pines (forthcoming).

hand, they do bear a proud designation as 'masters of the people' (*min zhi zhu*), but this designation does not imply much about leadership qualities. Rather, this is a respectful reference to a minister who displays humility, respect to his nominal sovereign and concern for the polity's interests. This designation does not apply to the ministers who try to contest the ruler by appealing to the masses, mostly through displays of magnanimity and generosity. The success of these plotters is readily acknowledged but is not hailed as a model that should be emulated.[14]

Whereas domestic leadership is rarely discussed in *Zuo Tradition*, we do have plenty of debates about interstate leadership. They concern the institution of hegemony – a peculiar development of that age. Leaders of the most powerful states (Qi, Jin and Chu) utilised their military superiority to impose a semblance of normality on the evolving multi-state system. They were supposed to protect their weaker allies from external threats and domestic turmoil. The Qi and Jin leaders had further bolstered their legitimacy by presenting themselves as protectors of the Zhou house. The *Zuo Tradition* abounds with discussions about what it means to be a good hegemon; that is, a good international leader. From these discussions, two different models emerge. When discussants come from small and medium-sized states, which were often bullied by their nominal protectors, we hear a lot of appeals to the hegemons' *de* in its sense of mild and non-coercive virtue. When we encounter the voices of leading ministers from the powerful states themselves, the emphasis shifts: leadership should be maintained through resolute action, willingness to engage the enemy, martial spirit and forcefulness. Not surprisingly, it is these latter, *Realpolitik* voices that eventually prevail. Yet their success contained the seeds of failure. Committed to the idea that 'might makes right', leaders of powerful states, particularly Jin and Chu, undermined the legitimacy of their hegemony. The multi-state system entered an aggravating turmoil which ended only with the imperial unification of 221 BC.[15]

4 Sages and Mediocrities: Debates over Rulership among the Hundred Schools of Thought

The period from 453 to 221 BC bears an ominous name, the age of the Warring States. However, devastating warfare aside, this was also the age of profound economic, social, political, military and ideological transformation out of which the powerful Chinese empire was born. One of the

[14] Pines (2002), 136–53. [15] Pines (2002), 105–35 and Pines (forthcoming), chapter 6.

major aspects of this transformation was the replacement of the hereditary aristocracy with a new, much broader elite of the so-called *shi* (men-of-service) stratum. The *shi* owed their position to their abilities rather than pedigree. It was a very dynamic stratum which contributed decisively to the intellectual flowering of that age (see more in the next section).

The second major change was political. A series of profound reforms launched across the competing states had curbed the power of ministerial lineages and brought about comprehensive bureaucratisation and centralisation of the state power. The logical outcome of these reforms was the formation of a new entity, which Mark E. Lewis aptly names the 'ruler-centered state'.[16] The restoration of the rulers' authority and concentration of all the power in their hands was in turn paralleled by the advent of the ideology of monarchism. Thinkers of various convictions put forward a variety of ideas to bolster the ruler's power. Whereas they disagreed bitterly among themselves about details of the ideal political system, all accepted the need for a politically unified realm ruled by a single omnipotent sovereign as the only way to put an end to generations of disorder.[17]

Among many strands of debates over monarchic authority, some (but not all) focus on the ruler as the moral leader of society. Confucius (551–479 BC), the first major thinker of the Hundred Schools and arguably the most influential, explains: 'governance (*zheng* 政) means being correct (*zheng* 正). If you lead by being correct, who will have the temerity not to be correct?'[18] Elsewhere he expands: 'If you desire good, the people will become good. The virtue (*de*) of the noble man is wind; the virtue of the petty men is grass: the grass, when the wind blows over it, must bend.'[19] The leader of the society and the polity is first of all a moral leader. His superior *de* (here referring primarily to morality rather than charismatic power) will profoundly transform his subjects. In this view, the ruler should be the moral exemplar first and foremost.

Whereas in Confucius's thought the idea of a sovereign as a paragon of morality is present only in its nascent form, the second major thinker of that age, Mozi (c. 460–390 BC), turned it into the cornerstone of his ideology. Mozi outlined his blueprint for an ideal state in the chapters named 'Elevating Uniformity' (or 'Conforming Upwards'). These chapters depict a pre-state society that was plagued by consistent turmoil and war of all against all due to the absence of commonly acceptable norms of justice or propriety (*yi* 義). The solution to the turmoil came once the 'worthiest

[16] Lewis (1999), 597. [17] Pines (2009), 25–53. [18] *Lunyu* 12.17; Slingerland (2003), 133.
[19] *Lunyu* 12.19; Slingerland (2003), 134.

and most capable' leader was selected to become the Son of Heaven. This incumbent established the political system in which every unit was ruled by the 'worthiest and most capable' member of the unit. Since dwellers in each territorial unit were demanded to 'conform upwards' with their superiors, the imposition of uniform morality and uniform ideology was thereby ensured.[20]

Mozi's idea of unifying political and moral-intellectual pyramids may sound laudable but it was also hopelessly naïve. Mozi himself placed the narrative about the ideal state in the unspecified past, admitting that the current rulers do not fit his high expectations at all. This was not incidental, of course. Insofar as the ruler's position reflected his birthright rather than moral or intellectual abilities, there were no practical means to realise Mozi's dream. This does not mean, however, that the hopes for a morally superior leader were altogether abandoned. Mengzi (aka Mencius, c. 380–304 BC), one of the major followers of Confucius and Mozi's intellectual rival, made the quest for a benevolent sovereign the cornerstone of his political system. Mengzi shared his peers' belief that stability in the world could be attained only through unification of All-under-Heaven,[21] but he was emphatic that this unification cannot be achieved by an immoral ruler:

> The three dynasties (legendary Xia, Shang, and Zhou) gained All-under-Heaven through being benevolent and lost All-under-Heaven through being not benevolent. This is true also for the decline and rise, survival and extinction of regional states. If the Son of Heaven is not benevolent, he would not protect [all within the] four seas. If the regional lord is not benevolent, he will not protect the altars of soil and grain (the ritual center of the state). If high ministers and nobles are not benevolent, they will not protect their ancestral temple. If *shi* and commoners are not benevolent, they will not protect their four limbs.[22]

Benevolence (*ren* 仁) was the key moral value for Confucius and his followers. In Mengzi's eyes it is also the key for preserving one's leadership and even for preserving one's physical wellbeing. But the problem is that the current rulers were markedly *not* benevolent. Mengzi denounced them as 'criminals', 'devourers of human flesh' and 'having the proclivity to kill humans'.[23] Even the best of them – those with whom Mengzi repeatedly conversed – fell short of his high expectations. How, then, can one

[20] *Mozi* 11–13, 'Shang tong' chapters; Johnston (2010), 90–129 or Knoblock and Riegel 2013, 108–38; discussion in Pines (2009), 31–4.
[21] *Mengzi* 1.6; Lau (1970), 53–4. [22] *Mengzi* 7.3; Lau (1970), 119.
[23] *Mengzi* 12.7, 7.14, 1.6; Lau (1970), 176, 124, 54.

reconcile the low evaluation of the current sovereigns and the hopes that the ruler will become a moral leader? Here Mengzi comes up with an ingenious solution. He introduces the ruler's guide, the Great Man:

> Mengzi said: 'It is not enough to criticise others; it is not enough to blame the government. Only the Great Man is able to rectify the wrongs in the ruler's heart. When the ruler is benevolent, everybody is benevolent; when the ruler is righteous, everybody is righteous; when the ruler is correct, everybody is correct. Just rectify the ruler and the state will be stabilised.'[24]

The above passage looks like Mengzi's reply to Mozi's 'elevating uniformity' theory. Mengzi shares Mozi's belief in the exceptionality of the ruler's transformative power but also tries to resolve the inherent weakness of Mozi's theory regarding the common situation of an inept ruler on the throne. The solution will come through the blessed impact of 'a Great Man', the ruler's tutor (a task which Mengzi evidently desired for himself). This means that in practice there are two parallel pyramids – the political, headed by the ruler (who cannot be replaced unless under exceptional circumstances), and the moral, headed by the Great Man. The latter will serve the ruler and guide him towards goodness because it is only the ruler – not the Great Man alone – who will be able to create a moral universe.

Mengzi's idea creates a dangerous bifurcation of leadership between political and moral, and in the next section we shall address its political ramifications; but here suffice it to say that there was widespread agreement with Mengzi's views that the current rulers were less intelligent and less moral than they should be. Worse, they were often understood to be less apt than their aides, who owed their position to meritocratic selection rather than pedigree.[25] How, then, to reconcile this subtle but pervasive understanding of the minister's intellectual and moral superiority with the unwavering insistence on the monarchic principle of rule? In dealing with this challenge, most thinkers gravitated to a brilliant solution: creating two models of the ruler. One was the ideal sage monarch, who was expected to lead society politically, morally and intellectually. Another was a quotidian, mediocre ruler, who deserved the utmost respect but was not expected to exercise personal leadership.

For the current discussion, the first of these types matters most. An ideal ruler, often designated the True Monarch (*wang zhe* 王者, i.e., one who acts as the Monarch should), was a morally and intellectually impeccable

[24] Mengzi 7.20; Lau (1970), 126. [25] Pines (2013).

leader. His major defining feature was ruling All-under-Heaven as a whole and not just a regional state. Legendary and semi-legendary rulers of the past, the last of whom were the dynastic founders of the Zhou, Kings Wen and Wu, qualified as True Monarchs, whereas current or previous rulers of regional states – however powerful – definitely did not. Yet most discussions of the True Monarch were directed not at the past but at the future. The True Monarch was a saviour-like figure, the one who arises 'once in five hundred years' and whose arrival is long overdue.[26] The True Monarch was expected to bring about not just unity, which meant peace, but also prosperity, good order and universal compliance.

The True Monarch's success derived primarily from his exceptional personal qualities. He was identified as a Sage (*shengren* 聖人); that is, a person of superb morality and wisdom and, in the eyes of many thinkers, a semi-divine (or fully divine) person.[27] The True Monarch's sagacity elevated him above the rest of humankind and was the major reason for which he could expect universal compliance.[28] Panegyrics to True Monarchs, past and present, permeate the texts of the Hundred Schools of Thought. To illustrate these, let us focus on Xunzi (d. after 238 BC), arguably the single most profound and influential thinker of his age.[29] Xunzi presents the True Monarch's rule as follows:

> To preserve the Way and virtue complete, to be the highest and the most esteemed, to enhance the principles of refined culture, to unify All-under-Heaven, to put in order even the smallest things, to cause everyone under Heaven to comply and follow him – this is the task of the Heavenly Monarch. . . . If All-under-Heaven is not unified, and the regional lords customarily rebel – then the Heavenly Monarch is not the [right] man.[30]

Political unity, perfect order and universal compliance are the first cluster of features that distinguish the True Monarch (here designated as Heavenly Monarch) from ordinary rulers. The second is the True Monarch's ability to imbue his subjects with superb morality and put an end to moral and political deviancy:

> When the sage monarch is above, he apportions dutiful actions below. Then, *shi* (men-of-service) and the nobles do not behave wantonly; the hundred officials are not insolent in their affairs; the multitudes and the hundred clans [= all the people] are without odd and licentious habits; there are no crimes of theft and robbery; none dares to oppose his superiors.[31]

[26] *Mengzi* 4.13; Lau (1970), 94. [27] Puett (2002). [28] Liu Zehua (2013–14b).
[29] Sato (2003); Goldin (2020), 169–200. [30] Xunzi 9 ('Wang zhi'); Hutton (2014), 79.
[31] *Xunzi* 24 ('Junzi'); Hutton (2014), 258.

The success of the True Monarch ('sage monarch') starts with a political act: apportioning each member of society an appropriate task. This is done so aptly that everybody willingly complies with the regulations. Yet the perfect order in which every social group – from elite to commoners – follows their allotment and 'dares not oppose the superiors' derives not just from the political leadership of the True Monarch but primarily from the latter's superb moral and intellectual qualities:

> The [True] Son of Heaven is the most respectable in terms of his power and position and has no rivals under Heaven. ... His morality is pure; his knowledge and kindness are extremely clear. He faces southwards (as due to the ruler) and makes All-under-Heaven obedient. 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; the one who unites with him is right, the one who differs from him is wrong.[32]

This is an extraordinary statement. Xunzi, normally a staunch supporter of the intellectuals' moral autonomy,[33] is willing to give up this autonomy once the world is ruled by the True Son of Heaven (that is, the True Monarch). This stance may be mistakenly viewed as a proof of Xunzi's authoritarianism, but this is not the case. Xunzi's lionisation of the True Monarch allows him to create a foil against whom the current sovereigns should be compared. Since none of these regional lords could obviously equate himself with the universal True Monarch, they could not expect the same degree of obedience and compliance due to the sage ruler.

This brings us to the second part of the equation, the difference between the sage and average rulers. The latter, in Xunzi's eyes, deserve the utmost respect politically and socially speaking, but not in terms of wisdom and morality. Xunzi urges these rulers to cultivate themselves so as to improve their moral qualities, but he seems to be aware that not all the sovereigns will follow this advice profitably. Hence, his solution is to convince them to relegate everyday tasks to meritorious aides and satisfy themselves with nominal superiority, with the utmost respect, and with the right to supervise their ministers and have the final say in matters of importance.[34] Ostensibly, the ruler retains his absolute power, but practically, affairs will be run by meritocratically appointed ministers and not by the sovereign. Xunzi concludes, 'Hence, the ruler works hard in looking for [proper officials] and is at rest when employing them.'[35]

[32] *Xunzi* 18 ('Zheng lun'); Hutton (2014), 190–1. [33] Pines (2009), 129–31.
[34] Pines (2009), 82–97. [35] *Xunzi* 11 ('Wang ba'); Hutton (2014), 113.

As we shall see in the next section, not all thinkers shared Xunzi's high expectations of the ruler–minister symbiosis, but two of his points were broadly accepted across the ideological spectrum of the Warring States-period texts. One was the division of the rulers into sages and average sovereigns. The former were almost uniformly lionised. The latter were likewise almost uniformly considered inadequate. The second point was the conviction that to ensure appropriate functioning of the political apparatus, the best solution for the average sovereigns would be limiting their intervention in everyday policymaking. The rulers were overwhelmingly dissuaded from displaying their personal inclinations, from behaving whimsically and from engaging themselves in minute political details. The rationalisations for this advice differed: some texts recommend that the rulers emulate the impartial cosmic Way, whereas others emphasise the priority of impersonal human standards; some appeal to moral imperatives, whereas others urge the ruler to preserve power against scheming ministers. Differences aside, none of the contending thinkers seems to support the notion of an active ruler who undertakes everyday administrative tasks and personally intervenes in the affairs of his ministers.[36] This leaves considerable space for a minister to act in the ruler's stead. The resultant empowerment of the ministers (or the aspiring ministers) brings us to the notion of an intellectual as an alternative or supplementary leader to the ruler above.

5 Leads but Does Not Rule: Intellectuals as Leaders

Earlier, we noted Mengzi's aspiration to act as a Great Man who would guide the ruler rather than just serve him. This desire to become 'the leader's leader' was not exceptional to Mengzi. Rather, it reflected a peculiar sense of self-esteem shared by a broad segment of the *shi* stratum (normally 'men-of-service', but in certain contexts more appropriately translated as 'intellectuals'[37]). Early in the Warring States period, *shi* had secured their position as not just political but also intellectual leaders of society, the collective possessors of the Way (*Dao*, a term that refers to proper moral, sociopolitical or cosmic principles, essential to the wellbeing of the state and a single person). They have further benefited from a peculiar situation of the interstate market of talent which allowed them to cross borders of competing polities in search of better appointment. This situation empowered the *shi* vis-à-vis the rulers who tried not to alienate their advisors so as to avoid potential brain drain from their court.

[36] Pines (2009), 82–107. [37] Yu Yingshi (2003), 3–76, especially 3–4.

Emboldened by their social prestige and by the tolerant attitude from their employers, many *shi* adopted an assertive stance as the ruler's friends or even teachers rather than mere servitors.[38]

Mengzi epitomises the self-confidence of contemporary intellectuals. He consistently insists that his relations with the rulers should be based on reciprocity and mutual respect. He presents this point with greatest clarity in the following extract:

> There are three matters that command respect under Heaven: first is rank, second is age; third is virtue (*de*). At court, rank is supreme; in the village community, age; but in supporting the generation and prolonging the people's [life], nothing is comparable to virtue. How would a possessor of one of these behave arrogantly toward a possessor of the second? Hence the ruler who has great plans must have a minister who cannot be summoned; if he wants to make plans together [with the minister], he must approach the minister.[39]

Mengzi outlines here three parallel hierarchies: a political-administrative one, with the ruler at its apex; a social one (confined to small communities), which prizes age; and a moral hierarchy in which he and his like occupy the leading position. Although politically inferior to the ruler, outstanding *shi* are morally superior to the sovereign, and their relations should be therefore based on mutual respect, which reduces hierarchic distinctions. In one of the most radical pronouncements to this effect, Mengzi goes a step further. In dismissing the talks of ruler–minister 'friendship' (a popular concept in those days of diminishing hierarchy), Mengzi says: 'Judging by position, you are the ruler, and I am the minister – how dare I befriend a ruler? Judging by virtue [*de*], you serve me – how can you befriend me?'[40]

Mengzi's last phrase creates an explosive situation. Whereas the thinker confirms that politically he and his like should be the ruler's servitors, his emphasis on the minister's moral leadership refers to the ministerial *de* as superior to that of the ruler. This goes far beyond an acceptable claim that a minister may be morally superior to the sovereign. As Mengzi and his audience perfectly realised, *de* had an earlier meaning of charismatic power. By asserting that the ruler should *serve* the minister insofar as their *de* is concerned, Mengzi had thoroughly subverted the entire ruler–minister hierarchy.

[38] Pines (2009), 115–35 and 163–80.
[39] *Mengzi* 4.2; Lau (1970), 87.
[40] *Mengzi* 10.7; Lau (1970), 157.

Mengzi's haughty stance – which inevitably alienated the rulers, who tolerated Mengzi's affronts but were not very eager to employ him in influential positions – was considered too extreme by Confucius' other followers, most notably Xunzi. Xunzi shared Mengzi's view that cultivated 'noble men' (*junzi*) were morally superior to average (not sage) rulers, but instead of affronting the employers, he tried to convince them that morally superior subjects are an asset rather than a liability. Instead of over-emphasising the minister's position as the ruler's teacher, Xunzi presents the best of the 'noble men' – that is, Confucians (*Ru*) – as natural leaders of society whose blessed impact from below would strengthen rather than challenge the ruler's authority. Xunzi dismisses a provocative question of a potential employer, 'Are Confucians useless to the state?', explaining:

> Confucians take the former kings as their model, they exalt ritual and propriety, scrupulously observe the position of sons and subjects and elevate their superiors. When they are employed, they are positioned at the court and act appropriately; when they are not employed, they retreat, organise the hundred clans [= all the people], and behave sincerely: surely they will behave compliantly in an inferior position. Even if impoverished, freezing, and starving, they will not follow evil ways to satisfy their avarice; even when having not enough land to place an awl they are clear at upholding the great propriety of the altars of soil and grain [= the state]; when they shout but nobody responds, they still comprehend penetratingly the guidelines of accumulating myriad things and nourishing the hundred clans. When positioned above, they are of the qualities of kings and dukes; when positioned below, they are the ministers of the altars of soil and grain, the treasure of the ruler. Even when obscure in an impoverished lane in a leaking house, nobody will fail to esteem them – it is because the Way of esteem truly rests [with them]. . . . When in court, the Confucians beautify the government; when in inferior position they beautify the customs. This is how the Confucians behave when they are positioned below.[41]

Xunzi presents the Confucians as the ruler's voluntary aides. Even if they are not employed, they will assist the ruler by 'organising the hundred clans' and 'beautifying' popular customs. Their ability to guide society derives from their self-cultivation that makes them both knowledgeable of social norms and supremely moral, which means that they are willing to adhere to moral rules at the expense of personal benefits. This intellectual and moral superiority would generate enormous social prestige that the Confucians shall bring with them to any position they occupy. Xunzi hopes for them to be employed as officials, in which case they would

[41] *Xunzi* 8 ('Ru xiao'); Hutton (2014), 53–4.

'beautify the government'. Yet the internal power of cultivated Confucians is such that even if 'obscure in an impoverished lane in a leaking house', their high social prestige would be translated into social leadership below.

Xunzi is careful to emphasise that the moral leadership exercised by Confucians would never come at the expense of the ruler's authority but rather should strengthen it. Later in the same passage, he clarifies that a prudent ruler who opts to employ a Confucian will be 'joyously acclaimed' in All-under-Heaven simply due to the renown of his minister. This optimistic belief was not uniformly shared, though. One of Xunzi's famous predecessors, with whom Xunzi frequently (even if indirectly) polemicised, was Shang Yang (d. 338 BC), whose reforms propelled the state of Qin to the position of predominance in the world of the Warring States. Shang Yang and his followers who contributed to the *Book of Lord Shang*[42] had a radically different vision of the state. In their eyes, the only way to attain the coveted goal of 'a strong state and a rich army' was by creating a total state that would control the entirety of its subjects' social, economic, political and even cultural life, channelling them to the goals deemed essential by the state apparatus, namely agriculture and warfare. This exercise in social engineering[43] could succeed only when alternative routes of socio-economic and political advancement were cut off. Shang Yang's state was in need of officials only, not autonomous social leaders. The authors clarify:

> Those who do not work but eat, who do not fight but attain glory, who have no rank but are respected, who have no emolument but are rich, who have no office but lead – these are called 'villains'.[44]

Behind this short and vigorous statement, one can discern the authors' bold idea: to prevent those outside the state-imposed system of ranks of merit[45] from possessing political, social and economic power. The state is to exclusively grant this power; it is up to the government to decide who should enjoy food, glory, respect, riches and leadership. Those identified in the text as 'villains' are actually the remnants of autonomous social and economic elites, who, in the authors' eyes, have no right to exist. In particular, the intellectuals who hoped – like Mengzi and Xunzi – to lead society are derided throughout the *Book of Lord Shang* as 'parasites', 'caterpillars' and 'peripatetic eaters' (the latter designation derides the intellectuals' habitual movement from one court to another in search of appointment). Society does not need leaders. It needs officials who will

[42] Pines (2017). [43] Pines (2016). [44] *Book of Lord Shang* 18.6. [45] See Pines (2016).

obediently follow and implement laws, ordinances and regulations, and that is all. Even the ruler is not expected under normal circumstances to deviate from laws and standards; nor should he exercise moral leadership. In an impersonal society ruled by laws and standards, leadership qualities do not matter at all.[46]

Shang Yang's intellectual follower (and, according to common accounts, erstwhile student of Xunzi[47]) Han Fei (d. 233 BC) took Shang Yang's ideas one step further. He rejected the very discourse of leadership. Han Fei mercilessly exposed the moralising discourse of Confucius and Mozi's followers as self-serving: laudation of their own morality and perspicacity allows the talkative intellectuals to attain high positions without toiling for the state's interests. Moreover, by positioning themselves as the ruler's moral superiors, these intellectuals dangerously jeopardise the ruler-centred order to which they are ostensibly committed. The recommendation is clear:

> In the country of an enlightened ruler there are no texts written in books and on bamboo slips, but the law is the teaching; there are no 'speeches' of the former kings, but officials are the teachers; there is no private wielding of swords, but beheading [enemies] is the valor.[48]

Intellectual autonomy, perpetuated by the books written on bamboo slips and reinforced in the quasi-historical texts (such as chapters of the *Canon of Documents*), is as damaging politically as private vengeance that undermines the state's monopoly on violence. It should be abolished. Society is not in need of autonomous intellectual leaders. Instead, leadership in the intellectual sphere should be monopolised by the state ('officials are the teachers'). And officials themselves attain their position not due to exceptional moral qualities (in which Han Fei does not believe) but rather due to strict observance of laws and regulations.

This understanding, mutatis mutandis, applies to the ruler as well. Han Fei has no expectation whatsoever of the ruler's morality or intellectual qualities. It is clear to him that normally the ruler is a mediocrity and should be treated as such.[49] The best recommendation to this sovereign – much like in *Xunzi* and most other texts – is to refrain from whimsical intervention in policymaking. Whereas the ruler should preserve the two handles of rewards and punishments firmly in his hands – since relegating these handles to an underling is tantamount to opening ways for

[46] Pines (2017), 59–99. [47] But see Sato (2013), who questions this relationship.
[48] *Han Feizi* 49.13 ['Wu du']); Harbsmeier (2024), 976.
[49] Graziani (2015); Pines (2020); but see also Lewis (2024).

usurpation – he is not supposed to appoint or punish anybody on the basis of his personal inclinations. To preserve his authority, the ruler should strictly follow impartial standards, laws and regulations. So nullified is his personality as a result that a modern scholar has provocatively observed: 'He has no functions which could not be performed by an elementary computer.'[50]

6 Conclusion: Discourses of Leadership Revisited

Ancient China's debates about leadership cannot be separated from two fundamental issues behind them: the almost universal acceptance of the monarchic principle of rule, on the one hand, and the intellectuals' conviction that morally and intellectually they more often than not stand above the sovereign on the other. The tension between those two premises is palpable across the lines of ideological divides.

One of the crucial questions was whether or not the ruler should be a charismatic leader (due to the exceptionality of his moral, intellectual or other qualities). The earliest layer of discussions of rulership – the Western Zhou chapters of the *Canon of Documents* – provided an affirmative answer. The ruler has to gain the support of the people, which is the precondition for ensuring Heaven's Mandate and the right to rule. However, as time passed, it became clear that the charismatic leaders of the type of dynastic founders were a notable exception. Already in the Western Zhou the discourse of rulership shifted from the emphasis on the ruler's individual qualities to the need to behave prudently enough not to alienate powerful aides. Henceforth, and throughout the rest of the aristocratic age, the expectations of the rulers remained limited. Powerful ministers could easily fill in the leadership vacuum, but, lacking the ruler's pedigree-based legitimacy, they were discouraged from doing so. Well into the Warring States period, the discussions of leadership remained muted.

With the advent of the new, 'ruler-centred' state of the Warring States period, new views of rulership raised a wave of renewed interest in leadership-related questions. Many thinkers hoped that the ruler would lead society not only politically but also morally and perhaps intellectually. These hopes, however, could not be realistically adapted to average rulers who owed their position to pedigree alone and who normally lacked the moral and intellectual qualities demanded of the true leader. Hence, whereas expectations of the saviour-like True Monarch who would top both the political and the moral-intellectual pyramid

[50] Graham (1989), 291.

remained high, it was widely agreed that current sovereigns fell short of this extra-human figure. Most thinkers subsequently proposed the bifurcation of leadership into political, which would be ostensibly concentrated in the ruler's hands in the hope that he would not intervene too much in everyday policymaking, and moral and intellectual, which would belong to outstanding ministers or just to outstanding intellectuals. The opponents of these ideas considered them subversive and preferred to put forward a political system based on impersonal laws and standards. This system did not require many leadership qualities even of the ruler, not to say his ministers and officials.

With the establishment of the unified empire in 221 BC, its founder, the First Emperor (emp. 221–210 BC), hijacked the discourse of rulership of preceding generations and turned the tables on the intellectuals. As a unifier of All-under-Heaven, the First Emperor proudly proclaimed himself True Monarch. He claimed to be a sage, to 'embody the Way' and to possess the right to rule actively and aggressively.[51] Whereas his hubris backfired and the dynasty collapsed within three years of his death, the equation of an emperor qua universal ruler with the sage monarchs hailed in the Warring States-period political discourse remained a notable feature of China's emperorship. Any emperor was considered a sage ex officio and theoretically had the power to lead society in any imaginable aspect.[52] In practice, however, most emperors tacitly realised that their ministers were more experienced than them and should be heeded. More broadly, the idea that the Way – that is, the right to lead society morally – rests with the stratum of literati as a whole remained one of the essential features of Chinese imperial rule. The tense coexistence of two types of leadership – one deriving from the discourse of the True Monarch and the other deriving from a less overt but no less potent belief in the intellectuals as possessors of the Way – generated considerable tensions for millennia.[53]

A final word of caution is due here. China's discourses of leadership were shaped by the men of letters and served the men of letters. The emphasis on moral and intellectual qualities as essential for the leader came at the expense of other features (military valour, access to superhuman powers, the wealth and magnanimity that derives from it and so forth), which certainly existed and were important but were not extolled by the educated elite. From studies of late imperial China, we know well how these features could ensure social leadership.[54] Certainly, these were also important

[51] Kern (2000); Pines (2014). [52] Liu Zehua (2015). [53] Pines (2012), 44–103.
[54] See, for example, Esherick and Rankin (1990).

qualities of political leaders in both pre-imperial and imperial China. However, lacking the intellectuals' endorsement, these features were not conceptualised as essential for the leader and hence they do not belong in the framework of the current discussion.

References

Book of Lord Shang. See Pines (2017).
Creel, H. G. (1970) *The Origins of Statecraft in China,* vol. 1, *The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Durrant, S. W., Li, W. and Schaberg, D. (2016) *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan Commentary on the 'Spring and Autumn Annals'* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).
Esherick, J. E. and Rankin, M. B. (1990) 'Introduction', in M. B. Rankin and J. E. Esherick (eds.) *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1–24.
Goldin, P. R. (2020) *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: A History and Interpretation of Eight Classical Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
Graham, A. C. (1989) *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court).
Graziani, R. (2015) 'Monarch and Minister: The Problematic Partnership in the Building of Absolute Monarchy in the *Han Feizi*', in Y. Pines, P. R. Goldin and M. Kern (eds.) *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China* (Leiden: Brill), 155–80.
Han Feizi jijie 韩非子集解. (1998) Compiled by Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (1859–1922), collated by Zhong Zhe 鍾哲 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Harbsmeier, C., trans. (2024) *Han Feizi: The Art of Statecraft in Early China: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. J. Ø. Petersen and Y. Pines (Leiden: Brill).
Hutton, E. L., trans. (2014) *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
Johnston, I., trans. (2010) *Mozi: A Complete Translation* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press).
Kern, M. (2000) *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society).
Kominami I. 小南一郎 (1992) 'Tenmei to toku' 天命と德, *Tōhō gakuhō* 東方學報 64, 1–59.
Knoblock, J. and J. Riegel. (2013) *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings* (Berkeley CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Press).
Kryukov, V. (1995) 'Symbols of Power and Communication in Pre-Confucian China (On the Anthropology of *De*)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58, 314–33.
Lau, D.-C. (1970) *Mencius* (London: Penguin).

Lewis, M. E. (1999) 'Warring States: Political History', in M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 587–650.
Lewis, M. E. (2024) 'The Ruler in the Polity of Objective Standards', in Y. Pines (ed.) *The Dao Companion to China's Fa Traditions: The Philosophy of Governance by Impartial Standards* (Cham: Springer), 295–330.
Li, F. (2006) *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771* BC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Liu, Z. 劉澤華 (2000) *Zhongguo de Wangquanzhuyi* 中國的王權主義 (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe).
Liu, Z. (2013–14a) 'Monarchism: The Historical Orientation of China's Intellectual Culture', *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45(2/3), 21–31.
Liu, Z. (2013–14b) 'The Monarch and the Sage: Between Bifurcation and Unification of the Two', *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45(2/3), 55–88.
Liu, Z. (2015) 'Political and Intellectual Authority: The Concept of the "Sage Monarch" and its Modern Fate', in Y. Pines, P. R. Goldin and M. Kern (eds.) *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China* (Leiden: Brill), 273–300.
Lunyu yizhu 論語譯注 (1992) Annotated by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Mengzi yizhu 孟子譯注 (1992) Annotated by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Mozi jiaozhu 墨子校注 (1994) Compiled and annotated by Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 (1898–1977) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Pines, Y. (2002) *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press).
Pines, Y. (2009) *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press).
Pines, Y. (2012) *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
Pines, Y. (2013) 'Between Merit and Pedigree: Evolution of the Concept of "Elevating the Worthy" in pre-Imperial China', in D. Bell and Li Chenyang (eds.) *The Idea of Political Meritocracy: Confucian Politics in Contemporary Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 161–202.
Pines, Y. (2014) 'The Messianic Emperor: A New Look at Qin's Place in China's History', in Y. Pines, L. von Falkenhausen, G. Shelach and R. D. S. Yates (eds.) *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 279–358.
Pines, Y. (2016) 'Social Engineering in Early China: The Ideology of the *Shangjunshu* (*Book of Lord Shang*) Revisited', *Oriens Extremus* 55, 1–37.
Pines, Y. (2017) *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press).
Pines, Y. (2020) 'Worth vs. Power: Han Fei's "Objection to Positional Power" Revisited', *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 74(3), 687–710.

Pines, Y. (forthcoming). *China's Aristocratic Age: Politics and Power in the Springs-and-Autumns Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
Puett, M. J. (2002) *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
Sato, M. (2003) *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xun Zi* (Leiden: Brill).
Sato, M. (2013) 'Did Xunzi's Theory of Human Nature Provide the Foundation for the Political Thought of Han Fei?', in P. R. Goldin (ed.) *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei* (Dordrecht: Springer), 147–65.
Shaughnessy, E. L. (1997) *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
Slingerland, E. (2003) *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett).
Sun, X. 孫星衍 (1998 [1815]). *Shangshu jin guwen zhushu* 尚書今古文注疏, proof-read by Sheng Dongling 盛冬鈴 and Chen Kang 陳抗 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Weber, M. (1968) *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building. Selected Papers*. Edited and with introduction by S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
Xunzi jijie 荀子集解 (1992) Annotated by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917). Edited by Shen Xiaohuan 沈嘯寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju).
Yu, Y. 余英時 (2003) *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe).
Zuo Tradition. See Durrant, Li and Schaberg (2016).