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## Questioning of Hereditary Succession in Ancient China

The principle of hereditary monarchy was accepted by all the major schools of early Chinese philosophy. It was recognised that the Shang and Zhou dynasties had overthrown their predecessors by force, and also that at the beginning of history heredity was overruled when Yao passed the throne to Shun and Shun to Yu; but Confucians treated these as exceptions justified by the villainy of the dispossessed emperors and the sagehood of Shun and Yu, while the Legalists simply dismissed them as usurpations. Even *Mozi*, who includes the enthronement of Shun among his examples of *shang xian* 尚賢 “elevation of worth”<sup>1</sup>, demands choice of the best man available only for offices below the throne. To extend the principle of *shang xian* to the throne itself would have been a dangerous thought, even if its scope were restricted to the ideal government of antiquity. However, there is considerable evidence that this dangerous thought circulated quite widely between 400 and 100 B. C.

Sarah Allan has shown by a very interesting structuralist analysis how the permutations of the stories of the predynastic emperors and dynastic founders reflect the different solutions of Confucians, Mohists and Legalists to conflicts between the claims of virtue and heredity.<sup>2</sup> She does not however discuss an important difference between the two types of acknowledged exception. The overthrow of Shang by Zhou was a historical fact which no one could afford to ignore; but the predynastic stories are legends of late origin which implicitly discredit the antiquity of the hereditary principle. As Gu Jiegang showed<sup>3</sup>, Yao and Shun, who are first solidly attested in the *Analects*, were originally unconnected with Yu, who already appears in the *Songs*. In the *Documents* the *Yaodian* records the abdication of Yao to the

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<sup>1</sup> *Mozi* (Harvard-Yenching sinological index series) 8/21, 9/47, 10/22.

<sup>2</sup> *The heir and the sage*, San Francisco 1981.

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<sup>3</sup> *Gushibian* v. 1, Shanghai 1982, 105–150.

commoner Shun, and the fragment in archaising style at the head of the suspect *Yao er* chapter of the *Analects* has Yao passing the throne to Shun and Shun to Yu. Outside these sources the succession is first attested in *Mozi* (which draws heavily on documents supposedly earlier than Zhou) and in *Mencius* (which quotes the *Yao dian* while denying that it implies abdication during Yao's lifetime).<sup>4</sup> Plainly the new historical scheme won general acceptance on the authority of the relatively recent forgeries professing to come from Shang, Xia or earlier which were circulating during the 4th c. B. C. But why did the forgers themselves avoid the obvious course of relating Yao, Shun and Yu by blood, unless as *Gu Jiegang* suggested it was their intention to teach that in ideal government the throne belongs to the most virtuous man? When *Sima Qian* wrote the first history of China he did take this course, within the limits allowed by his sources, by treating all three as descendants of the Yellow Emperor.

*Mencius* himself implies that many people drew from the legend cycle the obvious conclusion that in antiquity the criterion for succession was not birth but merit:

“Wanzhang inquired: ‘People have a saying: “By the time of Yu virtue had decayed, he passed the throne not to the worthiest but to his own son. “Do you agree?”’ (*Mencius* 5A/6)

*Mencius* is goaded to answer at some length. He explains that Yao, Shun and Yu all recommended as successor the worthiest man, who then waited to see whether the people preferred himself to the son. Yu recommended his minister Yi, but this time the people preferred the son Qi. Why this choice committed them to the whole of the Xia dynasty down to the villainous Jie is not explained by *Mencius*; his embellishments of the accepted history cannot quite force it to his own purposes.

*Mencius* elsewhere mentions the contemporary instance of Zikuai 子咳 of Yan abdicating to Zizhi 子之, about 316 B. C. He sees it as a dangerous violation of the hereditary principle.

“Shen Tong asked privately ‘May Yan be attacked?’. *Mencius* said ‘Yes. Zikuai had no right to give Yan to someone else, Zizhi had no right to accept it from him.’” (*Mencius* 2B/8).

We have three accounts of this incident juxtaposed by *Han Fei* and conflated in later sources<sup>5</sup>, in all of which Zikuai is claiming to follow the example of Yao and Shun. In two of the accounts the King makes Zizhi regent but leaves offices in the hands of the Heir Apparent's nominees; he is tricked into abandoning this precaution by the fear of not looking like a true sage, aroused by a cunning variation on the story of Yu, his regent Yi, and his son Qi:

“Yu loved Yi and entrusted the empire to him, but having done so gave the

<sup>4</sup> *Mencius* 5A/4.

<sup>5</sup> *Han Fei zi* ch. 35 shuo 3.

*Zhanguoce (Guoxue jiben congshu)* Part 3, ch. 29, pp. 60f. *Shiji* Peking 1959, ch. 34, pp. 1555f.

offices to Qi's men. In old age he judged Qi inadequate to be entrusted with the empire, so passed it on to Yi, but the weight of power was all in Qi. Afterwards Qi and his faction attacked Yi and robbed him of the empire. So Yu in name passed the empire to Yi, but in fact allowed Qi to take it for himself. From this it is plain that Yu was not the equal of Yao and Shun." (*Han Fei zi*, ch. 35 *shuo* 3).

The *Zhanguo ce* has a story of a scheme to make King Hui of Wei (370–319 B. C.) offer his throne to Zhang Yi, who is to refuse in the expectation of a generous reward.<sup>6</sup> In the *Lüshi chunqiu* the same king hypocritically offers his throne to Hui Shi in the expectation of refusal:

"In ancient times the possessor of a state was always the worthiest man. Now I am really not your equal, I wish you to allow me to pass the state to you...If I pass it to the worthiest, the spirit of greed and contention among the people will come to an end." (*Lüshi chunqiu* ch. 18/6).

In both stories the king is described as casting himself in the role of Yao. Such abdications, whether real or pretended, historical or fictitious, would have no point unless it was widely believed that in ideal government a king gives his throne not to his son but to the best man.

A text which explicitly ascribes the ills of later misgovernment to the move to hereditary succession is *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子, a little-studied book which seems to belong to the 2nd c. B. C.<sup>7</sup> It has an idiosyncratic philosophy traditionally classed as Taoist. Describing the decline to the first emperors from a Golden Age when "those with knowledge did not use it to deceive and subjugate each other, those with strength did not use it to make each other subject and ruler", it assumes disapproval of the shift to hereditary succession to be the general view of those who prefer morality to profit.

"Yao passed on the empire to Shun; therefore lovers of righteousness judge Yao wise, lovers of profit judge him foolish. Tang and Wu (founders of Shang and Zhou) banished one (Jie of Xia) and murdered another (Zhou of Shang) to profit their own sons; lovers of righteousness judge them without the Way, lovers of profit judge

<sup>6</sup> *Zhanguo ce* Part 3, ch. 23, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> The textual history of *Heguanzi* is very controversial. But its language preserves the old distinctions between negative *fu* 弗 (with transitive verb and implied object) and *bu* 不, and between pronouns *wu* 吾 ('I, my') and *wo* 我. The argument at the head of ch. 8 that excessive punishment interferes with the generation of water and the conquest cycle of the Five Elements is surely directed against the Qin, which claimed to rule by the power of water. The organisation of the empire in ch. 9 uses the titles of officials specific to the state of Chu. In ch. 10 the correlations of the Five Notes with the cardinal points are not those standard since the Former Han. Although ch. 12 is full of parallels with known sources which it may have pillaged, all are of the 2nd c. B. C. (Jia Yi's 'Owl fu', *Zhanguo ce*, the Mawangdui "Yellow Emperor" books).

that they acted worthily. In those dynasties they did not pass on to the worthiest, that is why there was a banished lord; their lords loved faction and flattery, that is why there was a murdered ruler. Wherever banishment and murder has been inflicted there will be a ruined state. I have never seen anyone who enjoyed such in comfort and occupied it in security." (*Heguanzi* ch. 13).

Elsewhere the book describes the ideal government of the primordial Nine August Ones (*Jiu huang* 九皇).

"The supremely worthy became emperor, the next in worth became the Three Dukes, the lofty became lords of fiefs. That they reigned changing surnames instead of becoming ruler by ancestral lineage was because they wished to share the security of the good which is in unity... Coming down to the times of ancestral lineages, to the rulers in dynastic succession, those who though themselves unworthy sit facing south calling themselves by the royal 'We' and still escape final ruin are the ones who are able to receive instruction from scholars who have the Way." (*Heguanzi* ch. 11).

That writers were cautious in handling this theme may be seen from the story of Bocheng Zigao, found in *Zhuangzi* ch. 12, *Lüshi chunqiu* ch. 20/2 and *Xinxu* ch. 7. The last version preserves phrases (which we shall emphasise) which have evidently been expurgated from the other two. Bocheng Zigao accepts a fief from Yao, keeps it after the throne is passed to Shun, but on the accession of Yu resigns it to plough the fields with his own hands. Asked by Yu for an explanation he replies:

"Formerly when Yao ruled the empire, he passed the whole empire to another man, which is the utmost in desirelessness: he gave his throne to the one he chose as worthiest, which is the utmost in impartiality. He displayed to the empire conduct of the utmost desirelessness and utmost impartiality, therefore the people were induced without reward and awed without punishment. It was still so under Shun. Now you punish and reward yet the people desire and are much inclined to partiality. This is because what you are meditating is a partiality (i.e. to pass the throne to your son), and the people know it. The springing up of greed and contention will start from now; from now virtue will decay, from now punishments by mutilation will multiply." (*Xinxu* ch. 7)

The phrasing connects directly with the *Lüshi chunqiu* story of the King of Wei hoping to end "greed and contention" (*tan zheng* 貪爭) by giving his throne to Hui Shi. The same vocabulary, "utmost impartiality" (*zhi gong* 至公), "partiality" (*si* 私) and "desire" (*yu* 欲), appears also in the *Lüshi chunqiu* references to the predynastic successions. The following is the first illustration in the chapter 'Getting rid of partiality':

"Yao had ten sons, but instead of giving the throne to his son he transmitted it to Shun. Shun had nine sons, but instead of giving the throne to his son he trans-

mitted it to Yu. It was the utmost impartiality (*zhi gong*).” (*Lüshi chunqiu* ch. 1/5)

In the chapter ‘Way of the circle’ the ruler is described as circling freely through affairs of state while his ministers stand square each with his own fixed functions, after the models of round Heaven and square Earth. However worthy the ruler, there can be good government only if the ministers fulfil their complementary role.

“Yao and Shun were worthy rulers who both took the worthiest as successor instead of giving the throne to their own descendants; but even they in establishing officials were sure to make them stand square. The rulers of the present age all desire not to lose the throne in future generations, and give it to their own descendants, but in establishing officials they are unable to make them stand square, because they throw them into disorder by desire which is partial (*si yu*). Why is that? What they desire is far ahead but all they know is the near.” (*Lüshi chunqiu* ch. 3/5)

Here too disorder is the direct result of introducing the hereditary principle; the ruler’s partiality for his own son infects his subjects with partiality.

Remarkably, the dangerous thought which Mencius refused to read into the tale of the predynastic emperors appears once (again with the word *gong* “impartiality”) in a familiar place in the Five Classics themselves, the ‘Revolutions of the rites’ in the *Liji*. Its significance was understood by the Later Han commentator Zheng Xuan. This document contrasts the Golden Age “when the Great Way prevailed” with the more modest ideal of the Three Dynasties. Although Yao and Shun are not mentioned the inferior order is said to begin with Yu.

“When the Great Way prevailed, the empire was treated impartially. They chose the worthy and capable, preached good faith and cultivated harmony. (Zheng Xuan: “They abdicated the throne to a sage, did not keep it for the family”). Therefore men did not treat only their own parents as parents, only their own sons as sons... Now the Great Way has been hidden, the empire has become the family (Zheng Xuan: “They transmit the throne to the son”), each treats only his own parents as parents, only his own sons as sons, property and strength are only for oneself, great men treat hereditary succession as propriety”. (*Liji* ch. 9).