

1.3 THE LEGENDARY EMPERORS

During the Classical era, the patrician elite was highly concerned with learning about the past and understanding the lessons it taught. In some cases, the effort was a sincere attempt to become enlightened; in other cases, the search for the past was actually a search for more practical tools, such as justifications for contemporary political goals. It is unclear to us just how much material was actually available for constructing an account of the distant past. What is clear is that the narratives of China's earliest history were cobbled together out of a mix of outright myths, legends with some historical basis, and the political and ethical prejudices of their authors.

It is easiest to conceive of the narrative of the past as being constructed *backwards* from the early Zhou. The Zhou people knew that before them had come a series of rulers belonging to a single ruling house, the Shang Dynasty. A clear picture existed for only a few Shang kings, but the Shang founder, at least, was seen as an heroic man, quite similar in many ways to the Zhou founders. Prior to the Shang, it was believed that there had been a dynasty called the Xia. Although these kings were mostly indistinguishable, again, the founding king, a man known as the Emperor Yu, was clearly conceived.

Yu represents a transitional figure. Prior to Yu, history was seen as a succession of emperors, mostly sages, rather than as a succession of dynasties. These legendary rulers seem to have been individuals who existed originally as mythical figures, many part man and part animal. Each appears to have been lifted out of the realm of myth and inserted in turn at the beginning of history either to celebrate some particular virtue associated with his legend, or for practical political reasons, such as those described below for the Yellow Emperor.

This process of back-filling distant history with mythical or semi-religious figures is known as “euhemerization” (an awkward term which in non-Chinese contexts actually means something else: the deification of historical figures). It is generally the case that the figures at the earlier stages of this historical story were added *latest*--there was always more room in the remote past to insert a new sage ruler.

A note on reading ancient chronicles. Reading directly from primary sources is an important part of this course. This course places higher value on learning to ask questions of texts and extracting useful information than it does on memorizing what others have already extracted. But frankly speaking (you will find this out anyway), ancient texts are not always dramatically thrilling. When you encounter a selection that will not hold your attention through its literary value, you need to

approach it as efficiently as possible so that you can retain information and avoid boredom. Consult the Study Questions at the end first, and then move *briskly* through the text noting down the basic information that will help you respond to those questions.

The texts which follow here – important but emphatically undramatic – are drawn from two sources. The descriptions of the first three sage rulers are translated from the Han Dynasty history *Shiji*, which Sima Qian composed about 100 B.C. These are followed by longer texts concerning the sage emperors Yao and Shun, two heroes of the Confucian tradition.

The Yellow Emperor

The Yellow Emperor was the son of Shaodian. His surname was Gongsun; his personal name Xuanyuan. He was born with spirit-like abilities, could speak when just a baby, had broad understanding as a youth, was sincere and assiduous as he grew up, and as an adult he possessed keen powers of wise perception.

During the age of Xuanyuan, the era of the clan of Emperor Spirit-like Farmer was in decline. The lords raided one another's states and tyrannized the common people, yet the clan of the Spirit-like Farmer could do nothing to suppress them.

The Spirit-like Farmer is a mythical culture hero who seems to have first been cast in the role of an ancient emperor during the third century B.C. He was placed before the Yellow Emperor, but does not appear to have had great influence on the notion of the distant past until after the end of the Classical era. Sima Qian, writing a century later, still does not see fit to describe his rule – his history of China begins with the Yellow Emperor. During the early Han, yet another sage was added to the list of China's earliest rulers. Prior to the Spirit-like Farmer, we learn, was the sage emperor Fu Xi. Fu Xi's great achievement was the discovery of the basis of the mantic text *Yi jing*, which was very much in vogue during the Han.

In referring to "the lords," this account projects back into earliest times the power structure of the Zhou era, when many political entities ruled by hereditary lords shared common cultural features and, although often engaged in mutual warfare, also joined in diplomatic agreements, alliances, and at times common acknowledgment of a paramount leader.

Accordingly, Xuanyuan learned to use the halberd and spear in order to subdue them, and the patrician lords all came to submit to him. But one, Chi You, was the most violent, and none could subdue him.

Now the Fire Emperor wished to control the lords, but the lords all cleaved to Xuanyuan. Xuanyuan thereupon perfected his virtue and raised the weapons of war, ordered the five vapors and planted the five seeds, surveyed the four quarters, and trained as soldiers the likes of bears and wolves and tigers. He met the Fire Emperor in battle on the plains of Banquan. Three times they fought, and only then did Xuanyuan prevail.

The Fire Emperor is sometimes reported to have been a brother of the Yellow Emperor. In this portion of the account and those that follow, it is easy to see that a series of discrete myths concerning the triumph of culture heroes over evil demons have been blended together to create the story of the Yellow Emperor.

Then Chi You rebelled and would not obey the ordinances of the emperor. So the Yellow Emperor raised armies from the lords and battled with Chi You on the plains below Mt. Zhuolu, and there he captured him and put him to death.

Then the patrician lords all honored Xuanyuan as the Son of Heaven and he succeeded to the throne of the house of the Spirit-like Farmer and was known as the Yellow Emperor. If there were those in the empire who were disobedient, the Yellow Emperor would go and suppress them, and would depart only once peace had been restored. In this way he cut tracks across the mountains and was never himself at rest.

It is intriguing that the process of the Yellow Emperor's enthronement is left so vague. No other example of this sort of imperial "election by the elite" comes to mind throughout the course of Chinese history, and it is a riddle why this tale was fashioned in this way. (Later in this course, when we look at the "Mohist" philosophy of the Classical age, we will see a similar notion of royal election projected into a distant past, but with no other specifics.)

The Yellow Emperor traveled east to the sea, ascending Wan Mountain and the exalted Dai Peak. He traveled west to Hollowtree Hill and ascended Chickenhead Mountain. He went south to the Yangzi River and ascended Bear Mountain and Mount Xiang. He went north as far as the lands of the Hunyu people, distributing the estate tally embalms at Fu Mountain and enclosing a walled town at the elbow beneath Mount Zhuolu.

He traveled to and fro with no permanent abode, his soldiers' encampments his only protecting barrier.

Why did this detail creep into the legend? It would appear that the Yellow Emperor was a hero to some anti-urban community of warriors.

In establishing titles for his ministers and army officers, he employed the term "cloud" in all of them. He created Supervisors of the Left and Right to watch over the myriad states. When the myriad states were all in harmony, the ghosts and spirits, mountains and rivers, and royal sacrificial ceremonies to Heaven were many indeed.

He obtained the treasured tripods, met the sun's motions and calculated by means of the tallies. He appointed Feng Hou (Lord Wind), Limu (Strong Shepherd), Changxian (Ever First), and Dahong (Grand Goose) to regulate the people. He accorded with the guidelines of Heaven and earth, the divinations of the forces of dark and light, and the principles of life and death. He preserved the ancestral lines of those who had perished. In accord with the seasons, he broadcast the hundred grains and planted grasses and trees. He nurtured the transformations of the birds and beasts, insects and crawling things of the earth. He charted

the sequences of the sun and moon, stars and planets, and of the tides, and differentiated the soils, stones, metals, and jades. He labored unfailingly with his mind and his strength, his eyes and his ears, and rationed the use of water, fire, and the natural riches of the world.

Portents showed that he possessed the virtue of the element earth, hence he was called the “Yellow Emperor.”

The Yellow Emperor resided on the hill of Xuanyuan and there he married a woman of the West Ridge clan, Leizu. She became his principal wife and bore him two sons, each of whose descendants later ruled the empire. The first was named Xuanxiao: he became known as Qingyang and descended to live in the valley of the River Jiang. The second was named Changyi, and he descended to live in the valley of the River Ruo. Changyi married a woman of the clan of Shu Mountain, known as Changpu, and she gave birth to Gaoyang, who possessed sagely virtue.

When the Yellow Emperor died, he was buried at Mount Qiao. He was succeeded by his grandson, Gaoyang, the son of Changyi. This was the Emperor Zhuanxu.

The way in which the Yellow Emperor fits into the genealogy of the succeeding rulers is rather uneven, and may reflect some late religious “patchwork.” The Yellow Emperor did not emerge as a significant figure until the Warring States period. At that time, one clan in the major state of Qi usurped the throne and, in order to demonstrate that they possessed ancestors worthy of veneration, claimed descent from this Yellow Emperor, whose previous role in legend is unclear. This ruling house sponsored a cult of the Yellow Emperor in Qi, which greatly enhanced their clan’s stature, and also had great intellectual influence over a much broader territory.

Emperor Zhuanxu

Gaoyang, the Emperor Zhuanxu, was the grandson of the Yellow Emperor and the son of Changyi. He was a deeply tranquil person of many plans, insightful into many things and possessing great practical skill in affairs. He fostered the riches of the world in his employment of the earth, and tracked the times in according with the heavens; he cleaved to the spirits in being constrained according to righteousness, governed the *qi* vapors in transforming through education, and was pure and sincere in ritual sacrifices.

Note that the details of whatever myth made Zhuanxu appear an attractive figure for the royal succession of the distant past seems to have dropped out. He is quite anonymous in this account. This may suggest that his name entered the narrative of the legendary past at an early date and his distinct role was subsequently lost to memory. It may also suggest that Zhuanxu was more likely than the Yellow Emperor to have been based on some real person.

He went north as far as dark You Ridge and south to Jiaozhi; he went west to the flowing sands of Liusha and east to the twisted trees of Panmu. Among the things of the world that move and those that are at rest, among the great spirits and the small spirits, among all the things upon which the sun and moon shine, none did not submit to him.

The Emperor Zhuanxu had a son named Qiongchan. When Zhuanxu died, Gaoxin, the grandson of Xuanxiao succeeded him. This was the Emperor Ku.

Emperor Ku

Gaoxin, the Emperor Ku, was the great-grandson of the Yellow Emperor. His father was named Jiaoji, whose father had been Xuanxiao, and Xuanxiao's father was the Yellow Emperor. Neither Xuanxiao nor Jiaoji had become emperor, but Gaoxin assumed the emperor's throne. Gaoxin was a fellow clansman of Zhuanxu.

Gaoxin was a prodigy and spoke his own name at birth. Everywhere he benefited things, but took no profit for himself. His brilliance of listening allowed him to know that which was far away, and his brilliance of sight let him penetrate to the slightest thing. He followed the righteousness of heaven and understood the plight of the people. He was humane but awesome, giving of grace and reliable; he cultivated his person and the empire submitted to him. He obtained the goods of the earth and judiciously employed them. He succored the myriad peoples with education and so taught them. He determined the motions of the sun and moon and had them greeted and sent off. He understood the spirits and respectfully served them. He was solemn of mien and towering in virtue. In action he was timely and the *shi* of the land submitted to him. Like a stream, he kept to the middle ground and journeyed throughout the world. What the sun and moon shone upon, what the wind and rain touched, all submitted to him.

The Emperor Ku married a woman of the Chenfeng clan who gave birth to Fangxun. He married a woman of the Zouzi clan who gave birth to Zhi.

When the Emperor Ku died, his position was taken by Zhi. But once he ascended the throne, the Emperor Zhi did not rule with goodness, and his younger brother Fangxun was enthroned in his stead. This was the Emperor Yao.

(*Shiji* 1.1-14)

The Emperor Yao

The Emperor Yao became a very important figure to Confucianism, and it is probably the Confucians of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. who embellished his legend into the text we have here. “The Canon of Yao” is the opening section of the *Book of Documents*, which became one of the five most sacred Confucian texts. The style of the text itself is so consciously archaic that it is nearly unreadable (it purports, after all, to date from about 2000 B.C.), a feature I have not attempted to replicate in this translation. In the current *Book of Documents*, “The Canon of Yao” and the following “Canon of Shun,” which recounts the reign of Yao’s legendary successor, are merged in a single chapter under the former title. For clarity, I have separated them here and also added subsection titles to highlight the organization of these two texts.

The Canon of Yao

The character of Yao

Examining into antiquity, we find the Emperor Yao was named Fangxun. He was reverent, intelligent, patterned, and thoughtful, with a manner of graceful ease. He was sincerely reverent and able to yield to those worthy of it. His brilliance pervaded the four quarters of the land and reached to all on high and below. He shone forth his heroic virtue and thereby cleaved to all in the many lineages of his kin. Once his kin were in harmonious accord, he brought order and decorum to the many clans of his people, whose excellence shone forth. Finally, he united and harmonized the myriad states. In this way, the black-haired people were transformed in a timely peace.

Yao orders the creation of the calendar

Yao commanded the brothers Xi and the brothers He, in reverent accord with their observation of the wide heavens, to delineate the successive appearances of the sun, the moon, the stars, and the constellations of the zodiac, and so carefully bestow to the people the calendar of seasons.

One of the legends associated with Yao in many texts is his initiation of astronomical observations to determine the calendar. The arts of astronomy were of critical importance to early agriculture in many cultures, because of the great dependence of society upon the weather and its effect on crops. In cultures whose oldest calendars were purely lunar, as was likely the case in China, it was extremely difficult to separate the seasons from the weather and so measure the year and the intervals for crops that occurred within it.

He separately commanded the brother Xizhong to reside at Yuyi, in the bright valley of Yanggu, there respectfully to receive as a guest the rising sun, and to discriminate and align the sprouting influence of the East. When at that place the length of the day was in balance with the night and the constellation Bird was in the center of the sky, mid-spring could be precisely determined. At such time, the people should be dispersed in the fields, and the birds and beasts mate and breed.

He further commanded the brother Xishu to reside at the south crossing Nanjiao, in the brilliant capital Mingdu, there to discriminate and align the transformation of the summer, and carefully to observe the exact limit of the gnomon shadow. When at that place the day was at its longest, and the constellation Fire was in the center of the sky, mid-summer could be precisely determined. At such time, the people should persist in their tasks, and the birds and beasts have light coats of feathers and fur.

He separately commanded the brother Hezhong to reside in the West, in the dark valley of Meigu, there respectfully to send off the setting sun and to discriminate and align the ripening influence of the West. When at that place the length of the night was in balance with the day and the constellation Vacuity was in the center of the sky, mid-autumn could be precisely determined. At such time, the people should be at ease, and birds and beasts put on new feathers and fur.

He further commanded the brother Heshu to reside in the boreal North, in the dark capital Youdu, to discriminate and align the boreal changes. When at that place the day was at its shortest, and the constellation Mao was in the center of the sky, mid-summer could be precisely determined. At such time, the people should keep within their homes, and the coats of birds and beasts be downy and thick.

The Emperor said, “Oh, you brothers of Xi and He, a round year consists of three hundred sixty-six days, and so you must by means of the intercalary month fix the four seasons and set the period of the year. In this way, the officers of state all being regulated in accord with this, their many accomplishments will shine forth with brilliance.”

Although Chinese astronomers understood that a solar year was $365\frac{1}{4}$ days, the calendar was never freed from its lunar origins. The twelve months of the year were 29 or 30 days long, and to keep the calendar synchronized with the seasons, “intercalary” leap months were added in seven of every nineteen years. The invention of this “solunar” calendar, which made agricultural planning possible, is here attributed to Yao.

Yao seeks meritorious officers

The Emperor said, “Now, who will search out for me a man able to accord with the seasons, whom I can raise and employ?”

The minister Fang Qi said, “Your son and heir Zhu is most enlightened.”

The Emperor said, “Indeed not! He is devious and quarrelsome. How could he suffice?”

This response reveals the extraordinary character attributed to the Emperor Yao. He is most famous for his decision that his own son was inadequate for the throne and that it would be necessary to select a new ruler according to a criterion of merit, rather than birth. Here, he is pictured rejecting his son Zhu in the role of prime minister. When succession to the throne is raised in the text, Zhu’s name does not again emerge.

Then the Emperor said, “Who will carry on my accomplishments?”

The minister Huan Dou said, “Ah! Gonggong has brought many great accomplishments to fulfillment.”

The Emperor said, “Indeed not! He speaks of his plans with assurance, but his actions are entirely contrary. He is respectful in appearances, but he offends against Heaven!”

Gonggong is the name of a villain in some versions of a Chinese flood myth (see the next note). Some commentators take this to be a different person, an anonymous Minister of Works (which is indeed a possible translation of the two characters that make up the name: in “The Canon of Shun” the same characters appear in connection with an official role: I translate them as a phrase, “coordinate as [Chief of] Works.”) Since Gonggong was not a real person and the myth tradition bearing his name was probably well known, it seems unlikely to me that the name could have been incorporated into this relatively late text without conscious reference to the myth.

Note that in the subsequent “Canon of Shun,” both Huan Dou and Gonggong are named as criminals banished by Emperor Shun.

Then the Emperor said, “Oh, Chiefs of the Four Peaks, the waters of the flood wreak destruction far and wide. In their vastness they embrace the hills and submerge the mountains, seeming to inundate the heavens. The people below groan and murmur! Is there a man capable of restoring order to the waters?”

The identity of the Chiefs of the Four Peaks is unclear, but they are pictured as sagely high ministers who represent the lords of territories in all directions. (It is also possible to read the text as referring to a single individual representing all four territorial quarters. In either case, the underlying idea is of a court presence who stands for the regions of the sacred mountains of the four directions.)

The narrative has here reformulated a flood myth which had wide circulation in early China. Its basic resemblance to the biblical flood tale has occasioned much speculation.

All in the court said, “Indeed, there is Gun!”

Reconstructions of the Chinese flood myth suggest that in its early forms the tale involved a demon named Gun, an evil force who caused or prolonged the flood. “The Canon of Yao” recasts him in historical garb as an incompetent proto-bureaucrat, unable to manage a water conservancy emergency.

The Emperor said, “Indeed not! He is perverse: disobedient to orders and destructive to his peers.”

The Chiefs of the Four Peaks said, “Yet try him to see if he can accomplish the work.”

And so the Emperor said to Gun, “Go and be reverent!”

For nine years Gun labored. But the work was not accomplished.

Yao seeks a successor

The Emperor said, “Oh, Chiefs of the Four Peaks, I have been on the throne for seventy years. You are able to carry out the mandate of office. I resign my throne to you.”

The Chiefs said, “I have not the virtue. I would disgrace the imperial throne.”

The Emperor said, “Then bring forth an illustrious man or raise one from among the rustic and unknown.”

All then said to the Emperor, “There is an unmarried man among the common ranks called Shun of Yu.”

The Emperor said, “Yes, I have heard of him. What is there to say of him?”

The Chief said, “He is the son of the blind man Gu. His father is obstinate, his step-mother devious, and his half-brother Xiang is arrogant, yet Shun has been able to live in harmony with them and through earnest filial conduct to lead them towards good conduct and away from wickedness.”

The Emperor said, “I will try him. I will marry him to my two daughters and observe his conduct towards them.”

The Emperor Shun became known as a paragon of filial piety in legend. The book of the Confucian philosopher Mencius records a number of lively tales about Shun’s family life – how he continued to love and honor his parents and younger brother despite their many imaginative attempts to murder him. In idealizing Shun, Mencius has to explain certain actions that Shun took that appear to violate cardinal rules. For example, we learn that Shun accepted Yao’s two daughters in marriage without informing his parents. It was unthinkable unfilial to marry without one’s parents’ approval (indeed, the norm was for parents to arrange marriages without even consulting the bride and groom), but in Shun’s case, we are told, he was justified because his evil parents would have vetoed *any* marriage and thus prevented Shun from carrying out the greatest of filial duties: providing his parents with descendants. (Marrying two women at once was, of course, perfectly acceptable in China’s polygamous society.)

Accordingly he prepared and sent down his two daughters to the bend of the River Gui, to be wives of Shun’s family in Yu. The Emperor said to them, “Be reverent!”

The Emperor Shun

The Canon of Shun

Shun as deputy emperor and successor to Yao

Shun carefully set forth the excellence of the five cardinal relationships among people and they came to be universally observed. When he was appointed to supervise the many ministers, every office acted in accord with its proper season. He was charged to receive at court visiting lords from the four quarters, and all became compliant in submission. When he was sent to tour the great wooded preserves, even amidst violent wind and thunderous rain he did not go astray.

In classical formulation, the five cardinal relationships refers to the norms of conduct between parents and children, rulers and ministers or subjects, elder and younger, husband and wife, and among friends. (There are, however, alternative interpretations of what the term may mean in this particular text.)

The Emperor said, “Come, my good Shun. For three years, when consulted you on affairs I have examined your statements and found that indeed you successfully act upon them. Now you must ascend the throne of the Emperor.”

Shun declined, saying he yielded to one of greater virtue and would not be Yao’s successor. But on the first day of the first month, he did accept Yao’s retirement at the altar of the patterned Imperial ancestors.

Shun’s initial ritual acts

Employing the pearl-adorned turning sphere with its transverse tube of jade, Shun calculated the movements of the seven governing celestial bodies.

Note that as with Yao, Shun initiates his reign through astronomical action. However, whereas Yao’s approach was conceived as appointing officers to calculate the movements of the seasons, Shun employed an imperial observational device and calculated the movement of heavenly bodies himself. These may be historicized transformations of two independent myths of the origins of the calendar, and they sit uneasily in sequence here, Shun essentially replicating the feats of Yao.

Thereafter, Shun delivered a ritual report to the Lord on High, sacrificed with reverent purity to the Six Exalted Ones, performed ritual offerings to the great mountains and rivers, and extended his worship to the host of spirits.

Early commentary identifies the Six Exalted Ones as the heavens, the earth, and the four seasons. This does not seem particularly persuasive, but no alternative is clearly preferable.

Shun collected from the lords the five types of jade symbols of rank and selecting first a propitious month and then a propitious day, he received in audience all those who ruled peoples under the leadership of the Chiefs of the Four Peaks, returning to this lordly host the jade tallies they had presented to the throne.

Shun's initial ritual tours of state

In the second month of the year he made a tour of inspection to the East, as far as Dai Peak, where he presented a burnt offering to Heaven and sacrifices to the mountains and rivers in order. Thereafter he gave audience to the lords of the eastern lands. He put the seasons of their calendar in order, and set the initial days of each month. He made uniform the standards of the pitch pipes, of measures of length, capacity, and weight, and regulated the steelyard balances. He delineated the five classes of ritual ceremony, the rules governing the lords' five jade ritual tallies, the three types of silk cushions, the two types of live offerings and the dead offering; and as for the five jade items, he stipulated that they should be returned to the lords at the close of their visits to court.

Commentary tells us the specific references of these ritual forms: the five jade tallies were brought to the imperial court by lords at the time of audience, the silk cushions on which they were placed distinguished the rank of each lord; live geese and goats were visiting gifts among officers of noble pedigree, and the slaughtered chicken was the visiting gift of the ordinary officers of court. Such ritual rules appear in wide variety among early texts and commentaries, and while each set of rules is presented as orthodox, the differences among them suggest that uniform ritual practices were likely a late emergence in many respects.

In the fifth month Shun made a similar tour to the South, as far as South Peak, where he observed the same ceremonies as at Dai Peak.

In the eighth month he made a tour to the West, as far as West Peak, where he did as before.

In the eleventh month he made a tour to the North, as far as North Peak, where he observed the same ceremonies as in the West. He then returned to the capital, went to the temple of his own ancestors, and sacrificed a single bull.

Touring was a central part of the kingship at many times in early Chinese history. It is important to recall the enormous size of the territories that were, at least nominally, under the rule of the dynastic king at the center. Communications and roads being primitive, it was essential that the king devote significant time to making his presence personal to those who managed his government throughout the empire. Moreover, the king was the axial figure of those aspects of religious practice that grew to a level of "state religion" by the early Zhou. His periodic physical participation in the religious rites parceled out to his various regional representatives sustained their legitimacy and inspired awe among those who were ruled. The notion of the king's tour, which we see here in a text that is basically a late Zhou creation, becomes even more central to the actual practice of government after the unification of China under a single ruler in 221.

Governance under Shun's rule

Every five years the emperor made one tour of inspection and the lords of each land appeared four times in audience at court, offering verbal reports of their governance that were assessed against their accomplishments, each receiving gifts of chariots and robes according to his merit.

Shun divided the land into twelve provinces, erecting in each of the twelve an altar upon a mountain top and dredging the courses of the rivers.

He published a list of legal punishments, prescribing that banishment be used in mitigation of the five mutilations. Corporal punishment was to be administered with the whip in magistrates' courts and with the stick in the schools; offenses could be redeemed through the payment of fines. Offenses committed unintentionally or under conditions of extreme misfortune were to be pardoned, but who transgressed arrogantly and were incorrigible were to be put to death. "Be reverent! Be reverent! And in punishments be compassionate."

The "five mutilations" were execution, castration, cutting off the foot, cutting off the nose, and tattooing. These were, in fact, established forms of legal punishment in early China. Banishment would have been far less severe, and in the context of contemporary society this code would have seemed extremely humane.

Shun banished Gonggong to northern of Youzhou; he exiled Huan Dou to the heights of Chung Mountain; he drove the chief of Sanmiao and his people into chasms of Sanwei; he held Gun a prisoner until death on Yu Mountain. The punishment of these four offenders led all in the empire to submit to Shun's justice.

This passage is a grab-bag of legendary villains, each most likely originally associated with an independent myth, chronologically grouped here in the reign of Shun. Huan Dou, Gonggong, and Gun were encountered in "The Canon of Yao," the latter two associated with the flood myth. The Sanmiao (or Three Miao) are sometimes portrayed as a morally corrupt tribe that was an enemy of early imperial rulers. Some scholars speculate that many early myths originated as recollections of the gradual subjugation of various independent tribes by the expanding polity that gradually evolved into the Chinese state.

The death of the retired Emperor Yao and Shun's renewed administration

In the twenty-eighth year of Shun's reign, the Emperor Yao passed away. The people mourned for him for three years, as they would for a parent. Within the four seas all the eight kinds of musical instruments of were hushed.

On the subsequent initial day of the first month, Shun went to the temple of the patterned ancestors. Then he deliberated with the Chiefs of the Four Peaks, wishing to throw open the gates of his court in the four directions, so that he could see with the eyes and hear with the ears of all in the four quarters.

He consulted with the twelve pastoral lords, saying, “Be diligent and govern according to the timeliness of the seasons. Be gentle towards those distant and nurture the abilities of those near. Honor the virtuous and trust the good, but look upon glib talkers as a danger to you. In this way, even barbarous tribes will all submit to you.”

Shun appoints the officers of his government

Shun said, “Oh, Chiefs of the Four Peaks, is there anyone capable of vigorous service who can make brilliant the affairs of the Emperor and supervise my ministries so that each fulfills its appointed tasks?”

All replied, “There is Yu, the Minister of Works.”

“Yes,” the Emperor said. “Oh, Yu! You have regulated the waters and the land. Exert yourself now in this office.”

Here we have a reference to the happy culmination of the great flood myth of China. The hero of the original flood tale was named Yu, a semi-divine figure, part man and part beast, who tamed the flood by dredging the river beds of mud. This Yu of myth came to be identified with the founder of what was traditionally known as China’s earliest dynastic ruling line: the Xia Dynasty – Yu the man-beast became Emperor Yu. In “The Canon of Shun” we see him rewarded for his flood-taming skills by being promoted to Minister of Works under the Emperor Shun. (The villain of the mythical flood, Gun, whom we encountered as an incompetent officer under Yao in “The Canon of Yao,” was transformed in legend into the father of Yu. Note that a few paragraphs earlier in “The Canon of Shun” this same Gun has been dispatched by Shun into terminal incarceration.)

Yu did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Qi, Xie, or Gaoyao.

The Emperor said, “Now go and undertake your duties.”

The Emperor then said, “Qi, the black-haired people are troubled by hunger. Be in charge as Prince Millet, and sow for them the various kinds of grain.”

One of the most notable features of early Chinese history is *the emergence of bureaucratic government* – that is, of a government of stipended (salaried) functionaries with distinct roles and privileges who occupy their offices at the pleasure of the state, or ruler. The Classical period, as we shall see, represents a transitional era where hereditary privilege and office were increasingly rare and appointment according to merit was becoming the political norm. This text reveals its late origins by the detailed portrait of a bureaucratic court which begins to occupy the narrative here.

Qi was, in Zhou Dynasty legend, the founder of the royal lineage of the Zhou people. He was also known as Prince Millet and it appears the Zhou adopted a much older mythical culture hero of agriculture to serve as their earliest ancestor.

The Emperor then said, “Xie, the people do not bear affection for one another and do not comply with the five cardinal relationships. Serve as Minister of Instruction and carefully set forth the five teachings that govern these, exemplifying attitudes of tolerance as you do so.”

Xie was, in clan legend, the founder of the royal lineage of the Shang Dynasty. “The Canon of Shun,” by “appointing” as the three chief officers in Shun’s court the progenitors of the Xia Dynasty (Yu), Shang Dynasty (Xie), and Zhou Dynasty (Qi), has retrospectively cast the history of dynastic rule in China as descending from an originally unitary age of governance in which all three “future” dynastic lines were legitimate leading participants.

The Emperor then said, “Gaoyao, the barbarous Man and Yi tribes disrupt our great land, which is filled with robbers, murderers, dissolute men, and traitors. Be Chief of Justice; employ the five mutilations to punish their offenses, and assigning the five forms of offense to the three courts of judgment, determine the appropriate place of exile for the five corresponding forms of banishment, assigning each of the five types of offenders to one of the three lands of exile. Exercise insight in your tasks and all will submit with sincerity.”

The Emperor then said, “Who can superintend the labor of my lands?”

All replied, “Indeed there is Chui!”

“Yes!” said the Emperor. “Oh, Chui! You shall coordinate as my Chief of Works.”

Chui did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Shu, Qiang, or Boyu.

The Emperor said, “Now go and bring harmony to all under your supervision.”

The Emperor then said, “Who is equal to the duty of superintending the grasses and trees, birds and beasts of the highlands and lowlands?”

All replied, “Indeed there is Yi!”

“Yes!” said the Emperor. “Oh, Yi! You shall be my Chief Forester.”

Yi did obeisance with his head to the ground and wished to decline in favor of Zhu, Hu, Xiong, or Pi.

The Emperor said, “Now go and bring harmony to all under your supervision.”

The Emperor then said, “Oh, Chiefs of the Four Peaks, is there any one able to direct my three ceremonies?”

All answered, "Indeed there is Boyi!"

"Yes!" said the Emperor. "Oh, Bo! You shall be Supervisor of the Ancestral Temple. Be ever reverent, day and night, upright and pure."

Boyi did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Kui or Long.

The Emperor said, "Now go and be reverent!"

The Emperor then said, "Kui, I appoint you to be Director of Music and to teach our sons that they may be straightforward yet mild, tolerant yet stern, strong yet without cruelty, spare in manner but without arrogance. The words of poetry express the poet's aspirations: let song prolong that expression in modes that join in harmony. Let the eight kinds of musical instruments be tempered in tune so that none shall overstep its ensemble role; thus shall spirits and men be brought into harmony."

Kui said, "Oh, yes! For when I strike the stone chimes and make them ring, even the beasts shall join together, all as one in the dance!"

The Emperor said, "Long, I detest slanderers and those who engage in brutal conduct, frightening my hosts of people. I appoint you to act as Minister of Communication; day and night you shall proclaim my orders and convey reports back to me, in all things ever sincere."

Kui and Long are particularly intriguing figures here. "*Long*" means "dragon," while "*kui*" denoted a one-legged ape-like monster, of which there were in ancient China precisely as many as there were dragons. That two ministers should be thus named may reflect the fantastic nature of the heroes of those myths that lie behind this account.

The Emperor said, "Oh! You twenty-two men, be reverent and through timely good works help accomplish the tasks entrusted me by Heaven."

To make the number twenty-two make sense, commentators assume that the ten men just appointed by Shun are joined by the twelve pastoral lords, that is, the local leaders of territorial peoples throughout the empire Sun ruled.

Every three years there was an examination of merit, and after three examinations the undeserving were degraded and the deserving promoted. In this way, the tasks of all were brilliantly accomplished, and the Sanmiao peoples were segregated and banished.

The death of Shun

Shun was in his thirtieth year when called by Yao, and until another thirtieth year he reigned as joint ruler with Yao. In the fiftieth year of his reign as Emperor as he climbed on tour of his state, he died.

This closes the account of the legendary pre-dynastic rulers of China. Apart from these mythic heroes, who reflect in these texts the values of an era when myths were no longer fresh, the great heroes of the tradition were the **Emperor Yu**, who succeeded Shun, **Tang the Successful**, who founded the Shang Dynasty, and the founders of the Zhou: **King Wen**, **King Wu**, and the **Duke of Zhou**. Yu is a transitional figure: he is the last of the figures who we may say for certain are more mythical than historical, and it is he who is cast in the role of the ruler who establishes the absolute rule of hereditary succession to office – the Xia Dynasty, which he is said to have founded (and whose historical authenticity is much disputed). The Xia royal line after Yu included over a dozen kings, whose general anonymity may be the best evidence of their historicity. (Why invent featureless figures?) When we reach Tang, the first leader of the Shang people to rule as King, independent evidence confirms that we have entered the realm of real rulers rather than legendary ones.

LIST OF KEY NAMES

Yellow Emperor
 Emperor Yao
 The Brothers Xi and He
 Gun
 Emperor Shun
 Yu (later Emperor)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *List the characteristics of each legendary ruler that seem to have been attractive to the chroniclers. What do these tell us about early Chinese concepts of leadership?*
2. *List the basic elements of culture that are accounted for in these narratives about cultural origins. Which seem to you most unusual?*
3. *Why might the Yellow Emperor, Emperor Ku, and Emperor Yao all be pictured as establishing basic astronomical offices?*
4. *How would you distinguish the supposed achievements of the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun from one another? How are the three figures individualized in legend?*

Sources and Further Readings

As indicated, this reading is basically a translation of materials from two Chinese texts: the *Shiji*, authored by the second century B.C. historian Sima Qian, and the *Book of Documents*, an undated collection of texts purporting to be the most ancient historical records in China, but with some exceptions, likely to have been authored during the Classical era. Both these texts are introduced in the “Sources” reading at the course website’s [Supplements](#) link, along with notes of published translations.

(Commentary editions consulted in preparing these translations include Zeng Yunqian, *Shang shu zhengdu* [Beijing: 1964] and Wu Yu, *Shang shu duben* [Taipei: 1977].)