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# From Myth to History: Historicizing a Sage for the Sake of Persuasion in the Yellow Emperor Narratives

Zhang Hanmo 張瀚墨

Professor of History, Renmin University of China

hanmochang@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Among the many depictions of the Yellow Emperor that survive in a number of early Chinese texts, the historicized image of this purported ancient sage king has been accepted by many Chinese scholars as that of a historical figure and has greatly inspired their reconstruction of China's remote past. In examining some of the extant Huangdi narratives, especially passages preserved in the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu*], *Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shiji*], and *Remaining Zhou Documents* [*Yi Zhoushu*], this paper reveals a trend of historicizing an originally mythical Yellow Emperor presented in early Chinese writings. It also explores the historiographical reasoning behind such historicization and provides an alternative approach emphasizing the role of persuasion in the Huangdi narratives.

## Keywords

ancient Chinese history – historiography – myth – persuasion – Yellow Emperor

In early Chinese writings, Huangdi 黃帝 [the Yellow Emperor] is received as a cultural hero, which is generally defined as a legendary or mythical inventor of the culture (or of particular cultural creations, such as agriculture, fire, music, or law) of an ethnic or religious group. In Warring States [475-221 BCE] ritual texts, the culture heroes are identified as ancient sage kings and their ministers who have been commemorated in sacrifice for their devotion to and invention

of governance, ritual, tools, and writing for the good of their people.<sup>1</sup> As the extant texts demonstrate, the legends associated with the Yellow Emperor as a sage king occupied a significant place in Chinese culture in which venerating him as a person and celebrating his cultural inventions have continued to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

Among the earliest extant textual sources mentioning the Yellow Emperor is the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語], in which the Yellow Emperor is exalted on different occasions as the ancestor, remote yet historical, of the polities located in the heartland of China proper.<sup>3</sup> What is particularly relevant to our discussion is one of the *Discourses of the States* passages providing specific information about the home base of the Yellow Emperor. Because the description of the actual location in this passage is associated with the Yellow Emperor, it becomes the *locus classicus* most frequently cited in the search for a historical Yellow Emperor.

This passage is part of the speech given by Sikong Jizi 司空季子, a follower of the Jin 晉 prince Chong'er 重耳 [r. 636-628 BCE] during his exile, on the

- 1 K. C. Chang 張光直, "Shang Zhou shenhua zhi fenlei 商周神話之分類," in his *Zhongguo qingong shidai* 中國青銅時代 (Taipei: Lianjing Chuban Shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2005), 41-43; "Jifa," in *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, *Shisanjing zhushu (biaodian ben)* 十三經注疏 (標點本) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 46: 1307.
- 2 Qi Sihe 齊思和, "Lun Huangdi zhi zhiqi gushi 黃帝之制器故事," in *Gushi bian* 古史辨 [*Debates on Ancient History*], 7 (2), ed. Lü Simian 呂思勉 and Tong Shuye 童書業 (Repr. 1941 Kaiming shudian edition. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982).
- 3 The "Zhouyu 周語" says that Gun 鯀, Yu 禹, Gonggong 共工, Siyue 四岳, and the rulers of a number of states "were all the descendants of the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor" (皆黃炎之後也) (Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 98; "Jinyu 晉語" says that the Yellow Emperor had twenty-five sons but only two of them inherited his surname Ji 紀 (Xu, *Guoyu jijie*, 333-334); and the "Luyu 魯語" says the Yellow Emperor is mentioned as the sacrificial receiver of several states (ibid., 154-162). The Yellow Emperor's name is also found on a Warring States bronze vessel called "Chenhou Yinqi dui 陳侯因齊敦," the earliest among the datable sources pertaining to the Yellow Emperor, who, according to the reading of the inscriptions by some scholars, is considered the "Remote Ancestor 高祖" of the Tian Qi 田齊 royal family. See Xu Zhongshu 徐仲舒, "Chenhou siqi kaoshi 陳侯四器考釋," in *Xu Zhongshu lishi lunwen xuanji* 徐仲舒歷史論文選輯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 412-431, 438. We need to be aware of the typo in the Zhonghua shuju version of this article, saying that the Yinqi *dui* was commissioned in 375 BCE (p. 434). In consulting with what Xu says in its previous section, the Yinqi *dui* should be dated in 357 BCE. See ibid., 425, 427. For a different reading of this passage, see Guo Moruo 郭沫若, "Liang Zhou jinwenci daxi kaoshi 兩周金文辭大系考釋," in *Guo Moruo qianji* 郭沫若全集 (Beijing: Kexuechubanshe, 2002c), 8:464-466; Zhang Hanmo, "Authorship and Text Making in Early China" (PhD dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2012), 81-87.

eve of Chong'er's return to power. In order for Chong'er to seize rule from his nephew, the then-king of Jin [Lord Huai 懷, r. 637 BCE], he and his entourage went to the state of Qin 秦 to seek political alliance and military aid. The king of Qin attempted to seal the alliance with the deposed prince by having Chong'er marry his daughter, Huai Ying 懷嬴, who had some time earlier been married to, and then been abandoned by, the current Jin ruler. Learning that Chong'er intended to refuse Qin's request, Sikong Jizi persuaded him to accept. Sikong Jizi suggested that a marital tie between Jin and Qin would not only help the exiled prince return to power but would also make his offspring flourish. Taking the Yellow Emperor as an example, Sikong Jizi says:

In the past Shao Dian married the daughter of the You Qiao clan and she gave birth to the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor. The Yellow Emperor settled in the Ji River valley, and the Flame Emperor, in the Jiang River valley. They both were established, yet their powers differed. Therefore, the Yellow Emperor was surnamed Ji, and the Flame Emperor was surnamed Jiang. That the two emperors used their armies to conquer each other resulted from their differing powers. Those who are surnamed differently differ in power; those different in power are different in kind. Those who differ in kind, even though they live close, when their men and women match each other, will successfully generate offspring.<sup>4</sup>

This passage, likely one instance of the euhemerization of the Yellow Emperor,<sup>5</sup> names both the Yellow Emperor's biological parents and the place where he was established, even though none of this information can be verified. The identities of Shao Dian and You Qiao are difficult to trace, but they are generally regarded as two different ancient tribes located in the western highland

4 昔少典娶于有蟠氏，生黃帝、炎帝。黃帝以姬水成，炎帝以姜水成。成而異德，故黃帝為姬，炎帝為姜，二帝用師以相濟也，異德之故也。異姓則異德，異德則異類。異類雖近，男女相及，以生民也。“Jinyu,” in *Guoyu [Discourses of the States]*, 4:356.

5 Euhemerization is a method usually referred to as euhemerism, called the “historical interpretation” of mythology by Thomas Bulfinch. According to this theory, myths are a reflection of historical events and mythological characters, historical personages, although both the historical events and historical personages may have been reshaped and exaggerated under the influence of traditional mores during their transmission. It is defined in modern literary theory as an approach holding that myths are distorted accounts of real historical events. See Thomas Bulfinch, *Mythology* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004), 194; Lauri Honko, “The Problem of Defining Myth,” in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 45.

region of China in today's Gansu and Shaanxi provinces. This inference is derived from the belief that the Ji and Jiang Rivers, which were close to the bases of the Shao Dian and You Qiao tribes, were in western China.

Guided by such assumption, scholars seem to have confidently located the Jiang River in present-day Baoji, but the location of the Ji River has long been under debate.<sup>6</sup> Since the Zhou 周 later rose to power in the west with the help of its major ally, the Jiang people, the location of the Ji River is considered closely related to the origin of the Ji Zhou 姬周 tribe. A long-held idea is that the Zhou culture originated from the Jing 涇 and Wei 渭 River valleys.<sup>7</sup> Following Qian Mu 錢穆 [1895-1990], however, many scholars now believe that the Zhou had lived in present-day Shanxi Province, at least from the time of Hou Ji 后稷,<sup>8</sup> the alleged ancestor of the Zhou according to the ode “Shengmin [生民].”<sup>9</sup> Later, the Ji tribe migrated from Shanxi to Bin 邠 and then to Zhouyuan 周原 [the plain of Zhou] in present-day Shaanxi Province, which became its new base and from which it rose to threaten the western border of the Shang 商 [ca. 1600-1046 BCE] domain as it grew in power.<sup>10</sup>

Many other sources agree with the *Discourses of the States* passage, but the exact location of the Yellow Emperor's original power base is still far less than definite.<sup>11</sup> For example, both the *Records of the Grand Historian* and “Wudide

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- 6 Cf. Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞, *Gushi xukao* 古史續考 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991), 1-73, 161-197; Yin Shengpin 尹盛平, *Zhouyuan wenhua yu Xi Zhou wenming* 周原文化與西周文明 (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005); Xu Bingchang 徐炳昶 [Xu Xusheng 徐旭生], *Zhongguo gushi de chuanshuo shidai* 中國古史的傳說時代, *Minguo congshu* series 2, vol. 73 [photocopy of 1946 edition], 26-36; Zou Heng 鄒衡, *Xia Shang Zhou kaoguxue lunwenji* 夏商周考古學論文集 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1980), 297-356; Yang 1992, 13-44.
- 7 For example, see Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐, *Di wang shi ji* 帝王世紀 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997); Hsu and Linduff 1988.
- 8 Han Jianye 韓建業 and Yang Xin'gai 楊新改, *Wudi shidai: Yi Huaxia wei hexin de gushi tixi de kaogu guan cha* 五帝時代: 以華夏為核心的古史體系的考古觀察 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2006), 53-54.
- 9 “Shengmin,” in *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, ed. Shisanjing zhushu 十三經注疏 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 17: 1055-1078.
- 10 “Gongliu,” in *Maoshi zhengyi*, 17: 109-1123; “Mian,” in *ibid.*, 16: 979-995; Han and Yang, *Wudi shidai*, 53-54.
- 11 Cf. Wang Hui 王暉, *Gushi chuanshuo shidai xintan* 古史傳說時代新探 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe 2009), 9-11; Guo Moruo, “Yin qi cuibian 殷契粹編,” in *Guo Moruo qianji* (Kaogu bian 考古編) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2002a), 4: 16-22; *idem*, “Yin Zhou qingtongqi mingwen yanjiu 殷周青銅器銘文研究,” in *ibid.*, 5: 114; Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎, *Zong Zhou shehui yu liyue wenming* 宗周社會與禮樂文明 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1992), 21-23; Zou, *Xia Shang Zhou kaoguxue lunwenji*, 297-356.

[五帝德]" in the *Da Dai liji* [大戴禮記] suggest that the Yellow Emperor was also called Xuanyuan 軒轅, and Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 [215-282 CE] explains that he was named this because he was born on Mount Xuanyuan.<sup>12</sup> Based on phonological similarities between the terms *gui* 龜 [\*kwrə] and *ji* 姬 [kə (\*kjə)], *xuanyuan* 軒轅 [\*hɲan wan] and *tianyuan* 天鼈 [\*thîn ɲwan] as well as on the provenance of some of the bronzes marked with the characters 天鼈 [*tianyuan*], which is interpreted as the family emblem of the Yellow Emperor, Guo Moruo and Yang Xiangkui propose that the Yellow Emperor tribe originally lived northeast of the Luo 洛 River in Shaanxi Province before moving to northern Shaanxi and finally migrating southward to the Zhouyuan area.<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of the differences in their conclusions, these two lines of argument about the location of the Ji River share the same presumption: Sikong Jizi's narration about the origin of the Yellow Emperor is a trustworthy historical account. In fact, this assumption has been so solidly established that this passage is often cited in scholarly works either as self-evident proof or as the premise in the search of the Yellow Emperor's original power base. Nevertheless, such an assumption is not without question if we examine how the Yellow Emperor is portrayed in early Chinese literature. A careful review of these materials reveals the Yellow Emperor as both a mythical and a historicized figure in extant early writings. By reviewing some of these materials, this paper aims to present how the historicization of the Yellow Emperor occurred and, at the same time, explore the persuasive power of the Huangdi

12 "Wudide," in *Da Dai liji huizhu jijie* 大戴禮記匯注集解, ed. Fang Xiangdong 方向東 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 62: 689; "Wudi benji," in Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [*Records of the Grand Historian*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 1: 5.

13 Wang, *Gushi chuanshuo shidai xintan*, 11-13; Zou Heng 鄒衡, *Xia Shang Zhou kaoguxue lunwenji* 夏商周考古學論文集, 2d ed. (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2001), 310-312. For a discussion of the connection between the Huangdi clan and the *tianyuan* emblem, see Guo, "Yin qi cuibian," 16-22; Guo, "Yin Zhou qingtongqi mingwen yanjiu," 114; Yang 1992, 21-23. Another scholar, Chen Ping 陳平, inspired by Su Bingqi 蘇秉琦 and others, traces the origin of the Huangdi tribe even farther east. He believes that the Yellow Emperor is associated with the Hongshan 紅山 culture in northeastern China. He suggests that it was from the Hongshan cultural base that the Huangdi tribe expanded and gradually moved to the west highland, becoming one of the groups later known as the Ji Zhou of Zhouyuan. He also argues that the legendary Battle of Zhuolu in present-day northern Hebei 河北 Province was caused by the westward migration of the Ji tribe out of the Hongshan culture base, rather than by the expansion of the Hua Xia 華夏 ethnic groups from the west highland. See Chen Ping, "Lüelun Banquan Zhuolu Dazhan qianhou Huangdi zu de lailongqumai 略論阪泉、涿鹿大戰前後黃帝族的來龍去脈," in *Yan Qin wenhua yanjiu: Chenping xueshu wenji* 燕秦文化研究: 陳平學術文集 (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 2003).

narrative, a function that, by nature, defines the historicity of the Huangdi narrative as secondary to its purpose of persuasion. The research on Huangdi as a mythical or historical figure is abundant. Nevertheless, for its own purposes, this article focuses on a few important but often misinterpreted passages from *Records of the Grand Historian*, *Discourses of the States*, and *Remaining Zhou Documents*. Its main purpose is not only to stress that historicized information does not represent historical facts but also to reveal the force driving such historicization.

### The Mythical, Macrobian Yellow Emperor with Four Faces

Generally speaking, two scholarly approaches are used to deal with the emergence of the Huangdi myth. One of them tends to view the Huangdi myth as a historical development, which I call the historical approach, while the other—the structuralist approach—prefers to explore the symbolic meanings of the Huangdi myth by analyzing its structural elements while avoiding embroilment in debates about the putative oral transmission upon which the historical approach relies.<sup>14</sup> The historical approach consists of two main lines of arguments. The first line, advocated by Yang Kuan 楊寬 [1914-2005], suggests that the myth of the Yellow Emperor as presented in Warring States writings was primarily the product of a tradition of oral transmission extending back to a distant past when the belief in the Supreme Being [*shangdi* 上帝] was first formed. According to Yang Kuan, this supreme being was called the “August Thearch” [*huangdi* 皇帝], which became a general term to refer to many regional gods during the Eastern Zhou period, as it imparts an air of antiquity to such deities. Because the syllable *huang* 皇\* [(g) wân] is phonetically identical to the syllable *huang* 黃 [\*wân, or yellow], the term “August Thearch” was thus rendered later as the “Yellow Thearch” 黃帝 or, more commonly, the “Yellow Emperor.” Because of this, the myths of other godlike figures—Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹, for instance—also contain hints of the later historicizing of the Yellow Emperor.<sup>15</sup> Following Yang Kuan, Mark Lewis

14 Cf. Charles LeBlanc, “A Re-Examination of the Myth of Huang-ti,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 13-14 (1985-1986); Yün-hua Jan, “The Change of Images: The Yellow Emperor in Ancient Chinese Literature,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 19, no. 2 (1981). The structuralist approach is not the focus of this paper.

15 Yang Kuan, “Zhongguo shanggushi daolun 中國上古史導論,” in *Gushi bian*, 189-199. For related arguments identifying the Yellow Emperor as Yao or Yu, also see Sun Zuoyun 孫作雲, “Huangdi yu Yao zhi chuanshuo jiqi diwang 黃帝與堯之傳說及其地望,” in

examines the Warring States myths regarding Huangdi and Chi You 蚩尤 in the ancient tradition in which those myths were rooted, reconstructed, and interpreted to argue that they are closely associated with the philosophy of Warring States warfare and statecraft.<sup>16</sup>

The second historical approach, taken by Michael Puett, accepts that the emergence of the Huangdi myth concerns Warring States history, but it disagrees with the opinion that the Huangdi myth was connected to any earlier tradition. For Puett, connecting the Warring States Huangdi myth to an earlier mythical tradition not only takes the already scattered information on the Huangdi myth out of context and leads to the reconstruction of an earlier tradition that is historically meaningless but also fails to explicate the diverse and, in some cases, conflicting narratives on the Yellow Emperor. He also takes issue with the structuralist approach to the Huangdi myth, an approach that does not account for the differences among the various narratives on the Yellow Emperor. Puett believes that, by pursuing the “ultimate symbolism” in the structures of the Huangdi narratives, the structuralist approach fails to read the Huangdi myth in its proper context. He suggests that, to avoid decontextualizing the myth, one has to avoid reconstructing a composite Huangdi myth based on materials scattered in different texts. On the contrary, he suggests that we situate the Huangdi myth only in the Warring States debates pertaining to the use of warfare in the creation of statecraft.<sup>17</sup>

Both Lewis's and Puett's arguments are inspiring, but this paper separates the emergence of the Huangdi narratives from how they were used in early Chinese Literature. Whether a mythological Yellow Emperor existed in the ancient past is one question; how the Huangdi narratives contributed to the Warring States intellectual debates is another. The Huangdi myth could have occurred very early on, but it functions differently in different contexts in which this myth is often conveniently recreated and reinterpreted. That is, when the myth is adapted in a new narrative, it may appear so scattered that its original context can no longer be meaningfully recognized and reconstructed. The following is a good example of this point.

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*Sun Zuoyun wenji: Zhongguo gudai shenhua chuanshuo yanjiu* 孫作雲文集：中國古代神話傳說研究 (Zhengzhou: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2003); Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, “Shangdai de shenhua yu wushu 商代的神話與巫術,” *Yanjing xuebao* 20 (1936).

16 Mark Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State of University of New York Press, 1990), 165-212.

17 Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 92-101.

According to the *Shizi* 尸子, a text allegedly associated with Shang Yang's 商鞅 [395-338 BCE] contemporary Shi Jiao 尸佼,<sup>18</sup> one day Confucius's disciple Zigong 子貢 asked the master, "Is it true that in ancient times the Yellow Emperor had four faces?"<sup>19</sup> Confucius answered this question with a twist on the term *simian* 四面, suggesting a rational response to a rather odd inquiry:

The Yellow Emperor summoned four persons who agreed with him and dispatched them to govern the four quarters. They remained close to one another without intention and accomplished the task without prearrangement. They had achieved great success and merits. This is what the term *simian* means.<sup>20</sup>

Confucius intentionally dismisses a literal reading of the word *simian* [four faces] emphasized in Zigong's question. Instead, he translates this term into a figurative expression for the Yellow Emperor's wisdom in governance. In this new context, the term "four faces" turns into four ministers representing the Yellow Emperor to govern the "four quarters."<sup>21</sup>

However bizarre Zigong's question may sound, the notion that the Yellow Emperor had four faces does not seem to have been raised out of thin air. Not only did Zigong ask about it, but in a text preceding one of the versions of the *Laozi* 老子 on one of the silk manuscripts found at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Tomb 3, the Yellow Emperor is depicted as literally having four faces. According to this account, these four faces enabled the Yellow Emperor to observe the four quarters and to collect information more efficiently than ordinary people, thereby allowing the Yellow Emperor to make more informed policies and to conduct the affairs of state with greater understanding of the conditions of the people: "he was therefore able to act as the model of all under heaven."<sup>22</sup>

18 "Yiwen zhi," in Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 [*History of the Han*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 30:1741.

19 古者黃帝四面，信乎？

20 黃帝取合己者四人，使治四方，不謀而親，不約而成，大有成功，此之謂四面也。Li Shoukui 李守奎 and Li Yi 李軼, *Shizi yizhu* 尸子譯註 (Harbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 2003), 67.

21 A similar interpretation of the term *simian* 四面 also appears in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 [*Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü*]. See Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1995), 740.

22 是以能為天下宗。See Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Huangdi sijing jinzhuzhuyi: Mawangdui Hanmu chutu boshu* 黃帝四經今注今譯 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), 196. Mark Csikszentmihalyi imagines that this type of writing might have been carved on ritual objects and our understanding of it must be based on such ritual context; see his



Similarly, it is not surprising that, in various sources, the Yellow Emperor appears as a godlike figure associating with or commanding dragons, monsters, beasts, ghosts and spirits, or wind and rain gods either on ritual occasions or in battle.<sup>23</sup> Even the *Records of the Grand Historian* preserves this image of a divine Yellow Emperor in the “Treatise on the Feng and Shan sacrifices [Fengshan shu 封禪書].” In that chapter, Gongsun Qing 公孫卿, a *fangshi* 方士, describes to Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 [r. 141-87 BCE] how the Yellow Emperor ascended to heaven as an immortal.<sup>24</sup> This account also reflects that different images of the Yellow Emperor circulated in different circles of learning. Nevertheless, as Yang Kuan points out, because the name Yellow Emperor was derived from the general term “august thearch,” the stories surrounding the Yellow Emperor and other sage kings all evolved out of the myth of this “august thearch.”<sup>25</sup>

Confucius's answer highlights the central role of rationalization in discourse at the time this anecdote was formed. Through rationalization, a mythical figure is transformed into an actual sage king documented in a historical account. In other words, after such a historicization has taken place, the mythical figure becomes a historical fact.<sup>26</sup>

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“Reimagining the Yellow Emperor's Four Faces,” in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, ed. Martin Kern (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

23 Scattered information pertaining to different images of the Yellow Emperor is still available in a number of sources, especially in the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 [*Classic of Mountains and Seas*], the *weishu* 緯書 [weft] writings, and the *zhuzi* 諸子 [speculative] writings considered inelegant by the Grand Historian. For examples on how the *Shanhaijing* depicts the Yellow Emperor, see Mori Yasutarō 森安太郎, *Kōtei densetsu: kodai Chūgoku shinwa no kenkyū* 黃帝傳說：古代中國神話の研究 (Kyōto: Kyōto joshi daigaku jinbun gakkai, 1970), 149-174; for a summary of information in the *zhuzi* texts, see Xu Shunzhan 許順湛, *Wudi shidai yanjiu* 五帝時代研究 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 2005), 69-78; for the depictions of the Yellow Emperor arranged according to different categories, see Huangdiling jijinhui 黃帝陵基金會, *Huangdi wenhua zhi* 黃帝文化志 (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2008), 1-220; for related information text by text, see Nakajima Toshio 中島敏夫, *Sankō gotei ka u senshin shiryō shūsei* 三皇五帝夏禹先秦資料集成 (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 2001); for the analysis of the Yellow Emperor appearing in different sources as the god of rain, storm, and fog, see Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 179-183.

24 “Fengshan shu,” in *Shiji*, 28: 1393-1394.

25 Yang, “Zhongguo shanggushi daolun,” 195-206.

26 Compared with their Greek counterparts, who, as William G. Boltz points out, “have mythologized their history, Chinese historicized their mythology.” Therefore, to restore Chinese myths means a process of “reverse euhemerization,” that is “to peel away, so to

Another similar conversation between Confucius and one of his disciples comparable to this narrative also deals with the mythical aspect of the Yellow Emperor as well as Confucius' attempt to historicize this figure. Like Zigong, who doubts that the Yellow Emperor could have had four faces, Zaiwo 宰我 questions the ancient sage about his abnormal longevity in the "Wu Di De":

In the past I heard from Rong Yi that the Yellow Emperor lived for three hundred years. May I ask whether the Yellow Emperor was a human being? How could he have lived for three hundred years?<sup>27</sup>

Three-hundred-year longevity is as strange as a human being with four faces. Both inquiries question the superhuman characteristics of the Yellow Emperor. As with Zigong's question in the *Shizi*, here in the "Wu Di De" narrative, Confucius interprets Zaiwo's question in an ethical, political sense. After repeating almost verbatim some of the information included in the Yellow Emperor's account in *Records of the Grand Historian*, Confucius explains:

When [the Yellow Emperor] was alive, people benefited from his rule for a hundred years; after he died, people stood in awe of his spirit for a hundred years; after [his spirit] disappeared, people used his teachings for a hundred years. For this reason, people say [that the Yellow Emperor lived for] three hundred years.<sup>28</sup>

Here, again, in answering his disciple's questions, Confucius transforms the literal strangeness of the sayings into political wisdom that comments on the Yellow Emperor's governance and merits. What Zaiwo asks about is the unbelievably long life of the Yellow Emperor, but Confucius extends the connotation of longevity to include the time of one's influence after death.

It is also worth noting the persuasive power of Confucius' rationalizations to historicize and moralize the old sayings in these two passages. In demythicizing the saying that the Yellow Emperor had four faces, Confucius interprets the Yellow Emperor's four faces as four persons who agreed with him. Such rhetoric links the strangeness of the Yellow Emperor with his actual governing

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speak the Juist [Confucian] overlay" ("Kung Kung and the Flood: Reverse Euhemerism in the Yao Tian," *Young Pao* 67, nos. 3-5 [1981]: 141-142).

27 昔者予聞諸榮伊言黃帝三百年。請問黃帝者人邪？亦非人邪？何以至於三百年乎？Fang, *Da Dai liji huizhu jijie*, 689.

28 生而民得其利百年，死而民畏其神百年，亡而民用其教百年，故曰三百年。Ibid., 690.

skills and his virtue of being willing to share power with others. Similarly, in explaining how the Yellow Emperor could have lived for three hundred years, Confucius reinterprets a person's lifespan into the lasting influence of his contributions to a society, a strategy that further facilitates the euhemerization of the Yellow Emperor. In both cases, the rhetoric privileges the figurative over the literal.

What caused the demythicization of the Yellow Emperor in the Eastern Zhou ritual and religious context is a very interesting question worth further discussion, but it is not the focus of this paper. Suffice it to say that it is related to the change in ritual and religious thinking after the decline of Zhou royal power. Behind this change was an increase in the role of the human realm in the workings of the cosmos: heaven now responded to the human manipulation of the patterns and forms in which the mandate of heaven was believed to manifest itself. Under such a religious mentality, although people still presented sacrifices to all sorts of spirits, deities, and constellations to avoid disasters and seek blessings, the causality between the heaven and the human realm now became explicable and predictable according to those forms and patterns.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, this paper aims to reveal the function of the Huangdi narrative in the tradition of early Chinese historiography.

### Historiographical Reasoning behind the Historicization

The rationalization at work in the transmission of the Huangdi stories makes unifying the depiction of the Yellow Emperor difficult. If one aims to present a consistent image of the Yellow Emperor, this task requires not only the rationalization of all the Huangdi myths but also the eradication of all the pre-rationalized myths to remove all those incompatible sayings and accounts from Huangdi lore. This is not how it had worked. In fact, on the contrary, the reinterpretation of the Huangdi stories that resulted from such a rationalization by different groups in different circumstances further complicates consistency in the Huangdi lore.<sup>30</sup> Such a diversity of sources seems to have confronted the

29 For an extended discussion, see Zhang, "Authorship and Text Making in Early China," 95-117.

30 Nakajima mentions 39 Han and pre-Han texts in which the Yellow Emperor's name appears at least once (*Sankō gotei ka u senshin shiryō shūsei*, 2-5). Liu Baocai 劉寶才 also lists 39 major texts (dating from pre-Qin to the Qing dynasty) containing information pertaining to the Yellow Emperor in a conference paper (Jiang Linchang 江林昌, "Zhongguo

Grand Historian when he had to choose among available sources to compile the Yellow Emperor's biography.

In terms of structural organization, the *Records of the Grand Historian* account begins with the protagonist's genealogy and his extraordinariness, even as a youth; then it delineates his achievements, before ending with information regarding his death and progeny. Although the narrative is included in the "Basic Annals [Benji 本紀]" section of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the structure of the story of the Yellow Emperor resembles that of a *Records of the Grand Historian* biography. The *Records of the Grand Historian* uses the biographical structure to present the first comprehensive image of the Yellow Emperor, one that depicts him as the founding father of Chinese civilization, an idea that was flourishing at the time the *Records of the Grand Historian* was compiled. Thus the Yellow Emperor's military accomplishments—that is, his defeat of the Flame Emperor and Chi You—consequently saved a large domain from the chaotic rule of his predecessor, the Divine Farmer [Shennong 神農], and he became the starting point for human history, as expounded by the Grand Historian.<sup>31</sup>

The Grand Historian's comments at the conclusion of the chapter on the Yellow Emperor and the other four ancient Thearchs, however, also indicate that the historicized Yellow Emperor is not his only image. He indeed had other "faces" preserved in the materials that the Grand Historian intentionally excluded from his writing, as he says:

Men of learning frequently mention the Five Thearchs and consider them ancient. Nevertheless, the *Book of Documents* merely records what had occurred since the time of Yao. As for what the Hundred Schools have said about the Yellow Emperor, their writings are neither elegant nor refined, and it is difficult for gentlemen to talk about them. Some Confucian scholars do not transmit Confucian's teaching on Zaiyu's [Zaiwu] inquiry about the virtues of the Five Thearchs and the Yellow Emperor's lineages and clans. I once reached Kongtong to the west, visited Zhuolu to the north, approached the sea in the east, and floated along the Yangzi and the Huai Rivers in the south, arriving at the places often mentioned

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shoujie Huangdi wenhua xueshu yantaohui zongshu 中國首屆黃帝文化學術研討會綜述," *Xueshu yuekan* 4 [2001]: 83).

31 "Wudi benji," 11-10. For the Grand Historian's own voice revealing his ambition of "exploring the edge between humans and heaven" (*jiu tian ren zhi ji* 究天人之際), see his letter to Ren An 任安 preserved in his biography in the *Hanshu*; "Sima Qian zhuan," in *Hanshu*, 62: 2735.

by each and every one of the seniors and elders as where the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun once lived. The customs and teachings of those places indeed are different, but in general those that do not deviate from the ancient texts are close to the truth. I have observed that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Discourses of the States* have noticeably elucidated the *Virtues of the Five Thearchs* and the *Yellow Emperor's Lineages and Clans*. Although I have not examined them in depth, what they present is not empty at all. The *Book of Documents* has long remained incomplete, yet what is not included in the *Documents* frequently appears in other sayings. One could not truly understand their meaning unless he is fond of learning and thinks deeply. It is indeed difficult to discuss them with those who lack ideas and knowledge. I have put the sayings in order: selecting the refined, elegant words, I put them at the beginning of the Basic Annals.<sup>32</sup>

Several points in this passage illuminate how the Grand Historian selected data to present in the Yellow Emperor's biography. First, he points out that he had access to both "elegant" and "inelegant" materials, but he left out the inelegant materials because they lacked the canonicity of the more elegant Confucian classics. What, in the view of the Grand Historian, constituted inelegant information? According to this passage, it consisted of the sources related to the teachings of the Hundred Schools as well as legends and myths orally circulated by elders as recollections of the past. Bizarre details, such as the belief that the Yellow Emperor had four faces, may have been found in the inelegant sources at the Grand Historian's disposal. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the sources must have naturally resulted in inconsistent descriptions of the Yellow Emperor. That the Grand Historian chooses "those words that are refined and elegant" to portray his version of the Yellow Emperor unambiguously shows his disbelief in the materials of the "inelegant" category.

The second principle for selecting sources is closely associated with the first. The Grand Historian's decision to use the biography seen in the "Wu Di De" and the "Di Xi Xing [帝系性]," authoritative teachings supposedly passed

32 學者多稱五帝尚矣。然尚書獨載堯以來；而百家言黃帝，其文不雅馴，薦紳先生難言之。孔子所傳宰予問五帝德及帝繫姓，儒者或不傳。余嘗西至空桐，北過涿鹿，東漸於海，南浮江淮矣，至長老皆各往往稱黃帝、堯、舜之處，風教固殊焉，總之不離古文者近是。予觀春秋、國語，其發明五帝德、帝繫姓章矣，顧弟弗深考，其所表見皆不虛。書缺有間矣，其軼乃時時見於他說。非好學深思，心知其意，固難為淺見寡聞道也。余并論次，擇其言尤雅者，故著為本紀書首。"Wudi benji," 1: 46.

down from Confucius and through his disciples, requires additional support of related information about a historical Yellow Emperor from other Confucian classics, especially the *Book of Documents*, the work considered the most reliable collection of materials about ancient kings and ministers. What made the Grand Historian uneasy is that the Yellow Emperor is not mentioned in the *Documents*. Instead, this collection of speeches and documents ascribes the beginning of a civilization ruled by the innovations of ancient sage kings not to the Yellow Emperor, as the *Records of the Grand Historian* does, but to Yao, another sage ruler who greatly postdates the Yellow Emperor according to the genealogy in the “Wu Di De” and the *Records of the Grand Historian* account. This puts the Grand Historian’s historicization of the Yellow Emperor on an unstable ground: his painstaking effort to exclude “inelegant” sayings is rendered moot because of this contradictory genealogy in the *Documents*, even though in reality he consulted “ancient texts” [*guwen* 古文] to tease out “those words that are neither refined nor elegant.”<sup>33</sup> This inevitably compromises the Grand Historian’s methods for evaluating and selecting materials to present a historical Yellow Emperor in his writing.

This leads to the last important point about this passage. Aware of the above-mentioned dilemma, the Grand Historian offers two explanations for his stance. On the one hand, “The *Documents* has long been incomplete.” This statement indicates that he trusts the “Wu Di De” and believes that the Yellow Emperor is indeed the starting point of Chinese history even though this position is not verified by the *Documents*. That is, the Yellow Emperor’s absence in the *Documents* could be due to the loss of written records. On the other hand, the Grand Historian finds that “what is not included in the *Documents* frequently appears in other sayings” of reliable texts such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the *Discourses of the States*, which “have noticeably elucidated the *Virtues of the Five Thearchs* as well as the *Lineages and Clans of the Thearchs*.” In linking the “Wu Di De” to historical sources such as the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and the *Discourses of the States*, the Grand Historian justifies his historicization of the Yellow Emperor without support from the *Documents*, which he considers the more authoritative source.

The Grand Historian’s historicization of the Yellow Emperor not only has influenced the interpretation of the Yellow Emperor’s stories but also has shaped the conception of the origin of Chinese ethnicity and civilization.

33 According to the commentaries, the term *guwen* denotes to the “Wudide” and the “Dixixing.” Nevertheless, if the word *gu*, or “archaic,” does play a role in this context, the writings collected in the *Documents* certainly look more archaic than the former two. For the *Shiji* commentaries on the term *guwen*, see “Wudi benji,” 1:46.

The Yellow Emperor is the root of almost all ancestral trees, upon which the entire system of ancient Chinese history is reconstructed. Those texts used by the Grand Historian—the “Wu Di De,” the “Di Xi Xing,” and the *Discourses of the States*, among others—are still accepted as historical evidence and are fundamental in structuring, depicting, and interpreting a historically undocumented past. Although historians of the “doubting antiquity” persuasion have claimed that the Yellow Emperor is a legendary or mythological figure, his stories are still tailored to match or interpret archaeological finds. To be sure, nowadays his image as a historical individual seems less appealing to many scholars of ancient Chinese history, who tend to conceive of the Yellow Emperor as a collective term denoting a group of people, a society, or a culture that is archaeologically traceable, but the premise of this view undoubtedly rests upon the historicization of the Yellow Emperor initiated in the *Records of the Grand Historian*.<sup>34</sup>

Despite its lasting influence, the Grand Historian’s approach to the Yellow Emperor has a noticeable limitation. His method for omitting the inelegant sources when trying to historicize the Yellow Emperor results in an incomplete image of this figure. Such an intentional omission also obscures the earlier or concomitant context that is linked to the phenomenon of the Yellow Emperor’s sudden rise in popularity since the Eastern Zhou period [770–221 BCE]. A further danger in this regard is that the predominant historiographical principle of rationalizing the selected materials may lead to a false representation of the Yellow Emperor as a historical figure. After the description of a historicized Yellow Emperor is widely accepted and the image of him as a historical figure is established, all the materials selected to describe him are also historicized and rationalized and are further woven into a structure of historical knowledge legitimized as historical facts by this structure itself. This is why we saw in the beginning of this paper that scholars willingly consider what is presented in the *Discourses of the States* passage as historical description and painstakingly try to locate the Yellow Emperor’s original power base. A careful reading of the *Discourses of the States* passage and other relevant information, however, not only reveals competing images of the Yellow Emperor that cannot be completely reconciled by the historicization discussed above but also helps elucidate how the Huangdi narratives work in their proper contexts.

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34 Many works approach both related textual and archaeological data in this similar vein, however different some of details might be. See Xu, *Wudi shidai yanjiu*; Liu, *Gushi xukao*, 1–73; Yin, *Zhouyuan wenhua yu Xi Zhou wenming*, 115–118.

### Competing Images and Purpose of Persuasion

The *Discourses of the States* passage cited above mentions the conflict between the Ji and Jiang tribes, which seem to denote the battle between the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor<sup>35</sup> referred to as the Battle of Banquan [*Banquan zhizhan* 阪泉之戰] in both the “Wu Di De” and the *Records of the Grand Historian*. According to the “Wu Di De,” the Yellow Emperor “taught his army of bears, leopards, and tigers to fight against the Flame Emperor in the field of Banquan and was able to achieve his goal after three battles.”<sup>36</sup> The animal troops are interpreted as the names of the Yellow Emperor’s armies, possibly distinguished by different banners emblazoned with bears, leopards, and tigers. Such an interpretation is again influenced by the tendency to historicize the Yellow Emperor as an ancient sage king. It is also possible that in the legend the Yellow Emperor indeed commanded animals in battle. The *Records of the Grand Historian* account about the Battle of Banquan accords with the “Wu Di De” passage,<sup>37</sup> but it narrates the details of another battle (the Battle of Zhuolu) immediately after its account of the Battle of Banquan. In the narrative about the Battle of Zhuolu, Chi You, often depicted as a beastlike war hero in a number of sources, was captured and killed in the field of Zhuolu for his rebellion.<sup>38</sup>

The Yellow Emperor’s two adversaries, the Flame Emperor and Chi You, who are confronted separately according to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, are united as a single narrative preserved in the “Changmai [嘗麥]”—a piece related to the writing of punishment [*xingshu* 刑書]—in the *Remaining Zhou Documents*. The story forms part of the Zhou king’s speech to his Grand Corrector [Taizheng 大正], the official in charge of punishment, and is as follows:

In the past, at the beginning of the formation of heaven, two rulers were established; as a result, norms were also set up. The Red Emperor was ordered to assign the governing duties to two ministers; Chi You was ordered to live with Shao Hao, in charge of the four quarters and

35 The Flame Emperor [Yandi 炎帝] sometimes is also referred to as Chidi 赤帝, the Red Emperor, as seen in the cited sentence that follows.

36 教熊羆貔豹虎，以與赤帝戰於阪泉之野，三戰然後得行其志。Fang, *Da Dai liji huizhu jijie*, 689.

37 “Wudi benji,” 1:5.

38 Ibid.



the work that had not been accomplished by heaven above. Chi You then expelled the Emperor and the two fought by the Zhuolu River,<sup>39</sup> leaving nowhere in the nine corners unaffected. The Red Emperor was greatly frightened and thus persuaded the Yellow Emperor to capture Chi You and kill him in central Ji. The Yellow Emperor released the anger [toward Chi You] with armors and weapons, therefore he achieved his governance greatly. He followed the order of heaven, and heaven recorded his achievements. For this reason, central Ji was also called the “Field without War Horse Bridles.” Then Shao Hao, that is, Qing,<sup>40</sup> was appointed minister of war and master of bird to command the officials of the five elements;<sup>41</sup> therefore he was also called Zhi. Heaven thus accomplished [its work], lasting until today without being disturbed.<sup>42</sup>

Despite its vague wording and poor organization, this passage clearly attests that the Battle of Zhuolu started with a dispute between the Red Emperor and Chi You. Initially defeated by Chi You, the Red Emperor went to seek assistance from the Yellow Emperor, who was able to capture and kill Chi You in central Ji. Contrary to the account in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, in the *Remaining Zhou Documents* it is not the Yellow Emperor but the Flame Emperor (if he can be equated with the Red Emperor, as commentators suggest) who plays the major role in the Battle of Zhuolu against Chi You. This passage indeed states that the Red Emperor and Chi You were the two rulers. The reason that scholars now identify the *erhou* [二后] as the Red Emperor and the Yellow Emperor has to do with the modern synthesization of Huangdi lore, which elevates the Yellow Emperor to the role of the central protagonist in Chinese

39 Some commentators suggest 河 is a mistaken rendering of 阿, denoting Mount Zhuolu instead of a river. See Huang Huaixin 黃懷信 et al., *Yi Zhoushu huijiao jizhu* 逸周書彙校集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), 732-733.

40 Most commentators tend to think that 請 is 清, meaning Shao Hao. See *ibid.*, 734-736.

41 The term *wudi* 五帝 is interpreted as the five elements with the reference from Shanzi's 剡子 speech recorded in the *Zuozhuan* [*Zuo Commentaries*]. See “Zhao,” in Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 17.3: 1386-1388.

42 昔天之初, [character missing] 作二后, 乃設建典, 命赤帝分正二卿, 命蚩尤宇于少昊, 以臨四方, 司 [two characters missing] 上天未成之慶。蚩尤乃逐帝, 爭于涿鹿之河, 九隅無遺。赤帝大懼, 乃說于黃帝, 執蚩尤殺之于中冀。以甲兵釋怒, 用大正。順天思序, 紀于大帝, 用名之曰絕轡之野。乃命少昊請司馬鳥師, 以正五帝之官, 故名曰質。天用大成, 至于今不亂。Huang et al., *Yi Zhoushu huijiao jizhu*, 730-736.

legendary history.<sup>43</sup> In helping the Red Emperor to punish Chi You, the Yellow Emperor accomplishes what heaven had commanded the *erhou* to undertake. Violence, whether legal punishment or war, was henceforth legitimized as a means to establish the “norms” of good governance and peace. The theme that violence is necessary for the restoration of peace from chaos remains consonant with the ideology of Shang and Zhou statecraft. The founding fathers of both the Shang and Zhou dynasties established their rule by overthrowing kings in the preceding dynasties. The Zhou king’s reference to the Yellow Emperor’s defeat of Chi You in the chapter “Chang Mai” in the *Remaining Zhou Documents*, invokes this principle of statecraft.

The “Chang Mai” version of the Yellow Emperor’s story is considered fairly early. Li Xueqin 李學勤 observes that the wording of the chapter resembles early Zhou bronze inscriptions and suggests that it could have taken its written form by the time of King Mu’s 穆王 reign [r. 956-918 BCE], if not earlier, as suggested in the postscript to the *Remaining Zhou Documents*.<sup>44</sup> Li’s article aims to relate the “Chang Mai” to Western Zhou legal writings, particularly those mentioned in the *Zuozhuan* [*Zuo Commentaries*] as the “Nine Punishments” [*jiu xing* 九刑]. But Li does not provide substantial evidence to prove his speculation; his dating of the “Chang Mai” to King Mu of Zhou also awaits verification, as there are not enough specifics in the “Chang Mai” to link it to King Zhao’s 昭王 [r. 995-977 BCE] southern campaign, as Li surmises.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Li considers those expressions anachronistic in Western Zhou writing conventions, which undermine his early dating of this passage. A final blow to Li’s dating is delivered by the *Zuo Commentaries* passages indicating that the creation of legal writings is a later occurrence.<sup>46</sup> The use of the phrase “rectifying writings of punishment” [*zhengxingshu* 正刑書] in the “Chang Mai” appears to be an

43 Huang et al., *Yi Zhoushu huijiao jizhu*, 731.

44 Li Xueqin 李學勤, “‘Changmai’ pian yanjiu 《嘗麥》篇研究,” in *Dangdai xuezhe zixuan wenku: Li Xueqin juan* 當代學者自選文庫：李學勤卷 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), 575. For related information in the postscript of the *Yi Zhoushu*, see Huang et al., *Yi Zhoushu huijiao jizhu*, 1133.

45 Li, “‘Changmai’ pian yanjiu,” 575.

46 “Zhao,” in Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 6.3: 1274-1277. The strong disagreement expressed in Shu Xiang’s 叔向 letter to Zichan 子產 for the latter’s drafting of legal writings seems to suggest that at that time legal writings were rather innovative. Those earlier legal writings mentioned by Shu Xiang in his letter, such as the “Punishment of Yu [Yu xing 禹刑],” the “Punishment of Tang [Tang xing 唐刑],” and the “Nine Punishment (Writings)” that Li Xueqin tends to believe as the Western Zhou legal writings, make more sense to the overall debate in the *Zuozhuan* context if we understand them as rhetorical devices, rather than historical documents.

Eastern Zhou event when considered in light of the more concrete evidence of its historical context in the *Zuo Commentaries*. Interestingly, this dating accords with Li Xueqin's dating of the less archaic expressions in the "Chang Mai" chapter, which he considers to be Eastern Zhou interpolations. The *Zuo Commentaries* narratives suggest, however, that those "less archaic" expressions are not later interpolations; rather, they betray the later date of the "Chang Mai" chapter as a whole.

To attest to the reliability of Sikong Jizi's statement about the Yellow Emperor in the *Discourses of the States*, Wang Hui 王暉 embraces Li Xueqin's dating of the "Chang Mai." In examining the usage of the character 中 [*zhong*] in a variety of sources (including the newly discovered "Baoxun [保訓]" in the Qinghua University collection of Warring States Writings) in comparison with its use in the "Chang Mai," Wang argues that the it is a written record of the Western Zhou dynasty. Moreover, by linking a phrase in it to oracle bone inscriptions and Shao Hao's naming his officials with birds names mentioned in the *Zuo Commentaries*, Wang Hui further traces the official system emphasizing the number five in its numerological sense to the pre-Shang period and suggests that not only was the it written early but what it depicts is also historically reliable.<sup>47</sup>

Wang Hui's argument is flawed. To interpret the character 中 [*zhong*] as he does, as a burial banner on the basis of such later texts as the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記] and *Etiquette and Rites* [*Yili* 儀禮] does not prove the "Chang Mai" was an early text. Moreover, the different uses of the character *zhong* in the "Bao Xun" only reflect how complex this issue is, which certainly compromises the "Bao Xun" as evidence of the reliability of the "Chang Mai" as a Western Zhou source. Also, the connection of the "Chang Mai" to some oracle bone inscriptions and the legendary associations with the number five in Wang Hui's argument seems to ignore how the number five had been used and how its meaning changed over time. For example, he could have included in his argument that the number five is related to the development of the theory of the "five elements" in the Warring States period. A final shortcoming of Wang Hui's argument is that, in explaining why the Chen 陳 rulers had not offered the *di* 禘 sacrifice to the Yellow Emperor before they usurped the Jiang Qi family,

47 Wang, *Gushi chuanshuo shidai xintan*, xi-xvii; for Shao Hao's naming of his officials, see "Zhao," in Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 17.3: 1386-1388; for the "Baoxun" bamboo strips and text, see Li Xueqin, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2010), 1: 8-9, 55-62, 142-148.

he asserts that the *di* sacrifice could be performed only by hegemonic rulers.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the *di* sacrifice consisted of two seasonal and ancestral offerings. Offering *di* sacrifices to one's ancestor was not merely limited to hegemonic rulers.<sup>49</sup> The state of Lu had never achieved hegemonic status, but its rulers periodically performed *di* sacrifices.<sup>50</sup>

Instead of selecting different versions of the Huangdi story in different sources as historical data, I prefer to read them in context. Take the *Discourses of the States* and the *Remaining Zhou Documents* passages mentioned earlier, for example. In those passages, it is understandable that Sikong Jizi and the Zhou king care about the persuasive effect of their speeches. But are they equally concerned about the factuality of the stories about the Yellow Emperor?

To answer this question, let us first examine Sikong Jizi's speech. He informs us that the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor were brothers, but because they grew up in different places, they developed different "potencies," and, because of their different "potencies," they could not get along with each other. If this has anything to do with the Battle of Banquan, a decisive battle won by the Yellow Emperor, it indicates that, after its defeat, the Jiang clan submitted to the Ji clan. This can hardly be proved. The "Sheng Min," an often-cited piece in the *Book of Odes* [*Shijing* 詩經] considered to convey information of the past of the Zhou people, describes the Ji (referring to the Zhou people) and the Jiang as longtime allies. It also indicates the latter as helping the former in its ascendancy,<sup>51</sup> but no sources recount how submissive the Jiang clan was, nor do they detail how dominant the Ji clan was, especially in its early stages. If we interpret Sikong Jizi's story in the context of the situation prompting his speech, however, it becomes clear that his purpose is to liken the relationship between the Ji and Jiang to that between the Jin and Qin.

Each and every point in the story regarding the relationship between the Yellow Emperor and the Flame Emperor corresponds to a parallel relationship between Jin and Qin, and this correspondence highlights the thrust of Sikong Jizi's speech for his intended audience. Sikong Jizi argues that the advantages

48 Wang, *Gushi chuanshuo shidai xintan*, 8-9. Here Wang Hui refers to the contents of the bronze inscriptions on the "Chenhou Yin Qi dui." Cf. Xu, "Chenhou siqi kaoshi"; Ding Shan, 丁山, *Gudai shenhua yu minzu* 古代神話與民族 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), 154-178; Guo, "Liang Zhou jinwenci daxi kaoshi," 464-466; Wang, *Gushi chuanshuo shidai xintan*, 7-9; Mori, *Kōtei densetsu*, 149-174; Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 165-212.

49 "Zhao," in Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, 15.1: 1369; see both the main text of the *Zuo Commentaries* and the notes by Yang Bojun.

50 "Min," in *ibid.*, 2; "Zhao," in *ibid.*, 15; "Zhao," in *ibid.*, 25; "Ding," in *ibid.*, 8.

51 "Shengmin," 17: 1055-1078.

of obtaining Qin's support through marriage to the king's daughter should trump any concerns about clan differences and occasional conflicts between the states. And his account of the Ji and Jiang clans underscores his point: Ji and Jiang lived in different areas, had different potencies, and geopolitically did not get along well with each other, but the two groups had longtime marriage ties and their descendants prospered. To ensure the prosperity of the state of Jin, Chong'er should model himself after the Yellow Emperor. Moreover, as with many other speeches in the *Zuo Commentaries*, the function of relating the success of the Yellow Emperor in dealing with the Flame Emperor anticipates the Jin prince's future victory over the Qin, and, even if for this purpose alone, Chong'er should follow Sikong Jizi's advice.

Seeking the historical factuality of the statements in stories about the Yellow Emperor misses the point. Sikong Jizi was concerned about the persuasive effect, not the historical accuracy, of the comparison he makes between the Huangdi story and the situation facing Chong'er. Although many scholars insist on the historical truthfulness of Sikong Jizi's statements about the Yellow Emperor by assuming that it is part of a chain of oral transmission extending back to a distant past, it is impossible to verify how far into the past this chain extends. The lack of explicit connections explains the multiplicity of attempts to locate the Yellow Emperor's domain and the difficulty in pinpointing the area of the Ji River where the Yellow Emperor allegedly grew up. This difficulty is largely caused by the assumption that all the sources record historical facts about the Yellow Emperor that can be pieced together, without regard for their textual contexts, to create a unified, historically accurate image of the Yellow Emperor. The conflicting information presented in different sources, however, leads us to question the validity of such an assumption. In fact, in Sikong Jizi's story, the location of the Ji River must be in Jin because he has equated the territory of the Yellow Emperor in the vicinity of the Ji River with the territory of Jin. That is, the precise location and the actual existence of the Ji River play no part in Sikong Jizi's persuasion.

As with Sikong Jizi's story, the narratives recounting the Yellow Emperor's battles against Chi You and the Flame Emperor present a labyrinth of nominally concrete information on the battles of Banquan and Zhuolu. Both the "Wudide" and the *Records of the Historian* mention the Yellow Emperor's fight against the Flame Emperor, but unlike the latter, the "Wu Di De" says nothing about the Battle of Zhuolu. The *Records of the Historian* describes the "Battle of Banquan" and the "Battle of Zhuolu" as separate events; in both cases the Yellow Emperor appears as the initiator and the eventual victor. In the "Chang Mai" chapter, however, the Flame Emperor and Chi You, both appointed by heaven, are the central characters. The Yellow Emperor is portrayed merely as an assistant of

the Flame Emperor, and there is no indication, as other sources claim, that the two engaged in a major battle with each other at Banquan. Interestingly, the “Explanation of the *Records of the Grand Historian* [Shiji jie 史記解],” another chapter in the *Remaining Zhou Documents*, even suggests that it was Chi You instead of the Flame Emperor who fought the Yellow Emperor at the “Battle of Banquan,” which would explain why this chapter refers to Chi You as “Sir Banquan.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the *Commentary on the Water Classic* [*Shuijing zhu* 水經注] cites an earlier text to confirm this notion that Banquan is closely related to Chi You.<sup>53</sup> Another geographical source even suggests that Banquan was also called Huangdiquan 黃帝泉 [Spring of the Yellow Emperor], while Zhuolu was the Yellow Emperor’s capital city.<sup>54</sup> In synthesizing all the information, some scholars conclude that Banquan is located in the same area as Zhuolu and that the Battle of Banquan was none other than the Battle of Zhuolu.<sup>55</sup> In short, what all these sources preserve is nothing but a narrative framework about emperors and battles in which the line between the memory of real events, if they were real, and an imagined past is almost impossible to draw.<sup>56</sup>

If, however, we read the story about Chi You, the Red Emperor, and the Yellow Emperor related in the Zhou king’s speech as a rhetorical strategy, all the seemingly conflicting elements fit the import of the speech. Keep in mind that the “Chang Mai” is a work devoted to the establishment of a series of laws relating to punishment. Since the real aim of the king’s speech is to issue the “nine writings on punishment [*xingshu jiupian* 刑書九篇],” it is not surprising that he advocates the legitimacy of violence as the means for achieving good

52 Huang et al., *Yi Zhoushu huijiao jizhu*, 965-966.

53 Yang Shoujing 楊守敬 and Xiong Huizhen 熊會貞, *Shuijingzhu shu* 水經註疏 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1989), 1184-1186.

54 “Wudi benji,” 1: 5.

55 Qian Mu, *Guoshi dagang* 國史大綱 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1991), 10; Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩, *Shiji zhiyi* 史記志疑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 3-4.

56 Some scholars attempt to solve this problem with the support of archaeological data. For example, Han Jianye and Yang Xin’gai believe that the Miaodigou 廟底溝 and Hougang 後崗 archaeological cultures in the present-day area of Zhuolu correspond to the Huangdi and Chi You groups, respectively. The conflicts between the Huangdi and Yandi clans are archaeologically reflected in the interaction between the Zaoyuan 棗園 culture in Shanxi and the Banpo 半坡 culture in Guanzhong 關中. This kind of match obviously accepts the interpretation on the locations of the three ancient groups provided by textual information as preknowledge. Archaeological cultures do not explain specific historical events or heroidal biographies. For this reason, K. C. Chang laments that most of the pre-Shang legendary history cannot be proved by archaeological data (“Shang Zhou shenhua zhi fenlei,” 287; see also Han and Yang, *Wudi shidai*, 154-156.

governance. For this reason, the story is set in the time of an imperfect world waiting to be brought to perfection by two heaven-appointed rulers, the Red Emperor and Chi You. Unfortunately, shared rule soon leads to a chaotic situation: Chi You upends the balance of power by exiling the Red Emperor. To end the chaos and restore peace, the Red Emperor seeks the aid of the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor uses military force to eliminate the threat posed by Chi You and then establishes the rule of law. Only through violence is heaven's work carried out and peace restored. Viewed from this perspective, the Zhou king's telling of these particular events about the Yellow Emperor is not intended to recount historical facts but to justify the king's own promulgation of new laws. Citing the Yellow Emperor's use of punishment to pacify the world, the king evokes a connection between his current actions and those of the legendary sage king.

### Conclusion

As illustrated in the preceding discussion, anecdotes about the Yellow Emperor should be read as hortatory rhetoric rather than as a reflection of historical facts. Even the Yellow Emperor's biographical account in the *Records of the Grand Historian* is a rearrangement of scattered, historicized information within a fixed narrative framework. Such biographical writing is not history. As K. C. Chang points out in his study on the Shang and Zhou myths, the primary approach to them is to view them as myths created to fill the needs of their own times; these myths do not reflect the life of earlier societies even though their contents may claim to do so.<sup>57</sup> The same can be said for the Yellow Emperor's biographical account in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Its historical value is not as a factual record of the times of the Yellow Emperor but as a reflection of the Western Han scribes' view of the Yellow Emperor. Likewise, the sources upon which the Han Grand Historian relied are a better record of how Eastern Zhou people viewed the Yellow Emperor than of who the Yellow Emperor actually was. Instead of studying a "historical" Yellow Emperor, we need to examine how he was received during the Eastern Zhou and early imperial periods and how he was associated with a changing sociopolitical environment, religious context, and way of thinking.

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57 Chang, "Shang Zhou shenhua zhi fenlei," 288.

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