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# Researching the Image of the Yellow Emperor in China's Early Textual Sources and Archaeological Materials

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## Abstract

In China's early textual sources and archaeological materials, the Yellow Emperor 黃帝 appears in the following three contexts: in genealogical records, among predynastic rulers, and in sacrificial rituals. The earliest appearance of the Yellow Emperor is probably in genealogical records; then, after being an ancestral ruler, he becomes the earliest emperor and a legendary ruler. This demonstrates his shift from an ancestral context to a monarchic context and illustrates the gradual yet colossal shift in ancient Chinese political thought from a system of enfeoffment built on blood relations to a system of prefectures and counties based on regional ties. The image of the Yellow Emperor in the context of sacrifice is closely linked to the yin-yang and five elements theories beginning in the later stage of the Warring States period; as society developed, this image also became associated with a certain Daoist path, thereby acquiring a religious value.

## Keywords

ancient rulers – genealogy – *Huang di* – sacrificial rites – Yellow Emperor

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## Introduction

Among the Daoist classics, one genre builds specifically on the myth of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝.

Unlike the *Laozi* 老子, which is one of a kind, the Yellow Emperor literature is a genre of texts with a common characteristic: they are all based on the legend of the emperor. Daoist texts such as the *Guanzi* 管子, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子; Legalist texts such as the *Book of Lord Shang* [*Shang jun shu* 商君書], the *Shēnzi* 申子, the *Shenzi* 慎子, and the *Han Feizi* 韓非子; and various other writings, such as the *Shizi* 尸子 and *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋], the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* [*Shanhaijing* 山海經], the medical book *The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* [*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經], war manuals by Sunzi 孫子 and Wei Liaozi 尉繚子, as well as the *Zuo Commentaries* [*Zuo zhuan* 左傳], the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語], the *Da Dai liji* 大戴禮記, and the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記], and the apocrypha, or *weishu* 緯書, of the Han dynasty—all tell stories of the Yellow Emperor. Not only are these widely accepted accounts that have been handed down orally, but they have also developed into a body of literary works.<sup>1</sup>

In the Han dynasty [202 BCE–220 CE], Huang-Lao 黃老 was often used as a combined concept, “Huang” for the Yellow Emperor and “Lao” for Laozi. But how were they connected? In order to shed some light on our fuzzy understanding of Yellow Emperor literature and the “Huang” in “Huang-Lao,” this study examines early textual sources and archaeological materials.

Cautious use of data is crucial in investigating the image of the Yellow Emperor, because the choice of material is bound to have a strong impact on the conclusion reached. It is necessary to take note of the following three factors when selecting sources: first, the status of some materials from the pre-Qin and Qin [221–207 BCE] through Han dynasties within traditional authentication studies; second, the need to identify the most convincing sources on an ancient historical, legendary character such as the Yellow Emperor; and, third, the influence of contemporary discussions of ancient history. Regarding research in ancient history, the remote Yellow Emperor remains, of course, unrecoverable, even to archaeologists: only sites dating to the era of the Five Emperors, which he represents, can provide vague proof of his existence.

1 Li Ling 李零, “Shuo ‘Huanglao’ 說 ‘黃老’”, in *Li Ling zixuanji* 李零自選集 [*Li Ling's Self-Selected Works*] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1998), 278.

Therefore, to this day, he exists only in ancient legends. Because at the time that early Chinese documentation was written it was not easy to settle on the chronological order, accounts of the same event in different documents often do not correspond with one another; legends are not factual history and therefore are almost impossible to date correctly. According to Li Ling,

Ancient legends can be classified as follows: first, those that rely on sacrificial rites, since in antiquity people were very thorough in observing funeral rites and sacrifices for ancestors, essentially as a way of tracing their roots; second, in aristocratic education at the time, a lot of weight was placed on the teaching of “lineage [*shi* 世]”; third, genealogy from the era of the legend includes blood relations, relations by marriage, as well as fictive kinship; fourth is that the system of ancient sacrificial rites was based on blood relations, but could also consider relations by marriage, and fictive kinship.<sup>2</sup>

Considering Li Ling’s observations, then, if one starts with different kinds of materials and explores the image of the Yellow Emperor in genealogy, among ancient rulers, and in sacrificial rites, what will emerge? Of course, these three contexts serve as only a rough categorization, as the boundaries between them are not fixed and can be crossed: it is only the perspective that changes.

### The Yellow Emperor in the Ancestral Context

The first reliable accounts of the Yellow Emperor in early writings or archaeological resources date roughly from the Warring States period [475-221 BCE]. The Marquis of Chen Yin *Dui* 敦 bronze vessel inscription, which is well known to scholars and dates from the early stages of the mid-Warring States period [475-221 BCE], mentions the Yellow Emperor as follows:

On the first month of the *guiwei* 癸未 year, the Marquis of Chen said: the strategy of my father, Duke Huan of Qi, will be successful since he carried forward the achievements of his remote ancestor, the Yellow Emperor; now I am succeeding my father in his undertaking, paying visits to feudal lords, paying back his kindness. The lords presented me with good bronze ware; I have made a ritual bronze vessel of it in honor of my father and

2 Li Ling, “Chutu faxian yu gushu niandai de zairenshi 出土發現與古書年代的再認識,” in *Li Ling zixuanji*, 49-52.

thereby protect the State of Qi, hoping that generations of descendants will forever continue to take care of it and cherish it.<sup>3</sup>

The “Marquis of Chen” 陳侯 in this epigraph is Yinqi 嬰齊, King Wei of Qi, and Duke Huan is his father, Huan Gongwu 桓公午. According to this inscription, the lineage of King Wei of Qi can be traced back to the Yellow Emperor. Chen’s ancestral surname Gui 媯, originally descendants of the Yu 虞 clan, was not among the twelve surnames of Yellow Emperor descendants (see “Discourses of Jin No. 4,” in *Discourses of the States*), but the inscription mentions the Yellow Emperor as being Chen Qi’s “remote ancestor,” which corresponds precisely to the imperial ancestor worship found in the “Discourses of Lu.”<sup>4</sup> This was, of course, consistent with lineage records. But another reason may have been that the State of Qi

was originally founded by ancestors named Jiang 姜. This was after the Flame Emperor [Yan Di 炎帝]. Between the end of the Spring and Autumn period [771-476 BCE] and the start of the Warring States period, the Jiang clan was gradually replaced by the Tian clan from the state of Chen. At the time of King Wei of Qi, it was not long since the Jiang clan had been deposed, hence his “forefather the Yellow Emperor” defines his lineage, on the one hand, to make a clear distinction from the Jiang; on the other hand, this may also have been a way to identify with other vassal states in order to make a struggle for supremacy seem reasonable.<sup>5</sup>

Tracing back the ancestral lineage, the legend of the Yellow Emperor defeating the Flame Emperor therefore served to prove the legitimacy of the Tian clan’s taking the place of the Jiang clan. The bamboo-slip text “Wu Wang Ascends the Throne,” which dates from the mid-Warring States period and is part of a collection at the Shanghai Museum, also mentions the Yellow Emperor: “King Wu asked his teacher, Shang Fu: does the Way of the Yellow Emperor, of Emperor Zhuanxu 顓頊, of Emperors Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 still exist? I wonder whether

3 Guo Moruo 郭沫若, “Liangzhou jinwenci daxi kaoshi 兩周金文辭大系考釋,” in *Guo Moruo quanji (kaogu bian) 郭沫若全集(考古編)* [*The Complete Works of Guo Moruo (Archaeology)*] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2002), 8:464. Not all the contents are from this source, as other similar sources have also been consulted.

4 Li Ling, “Kaogu faxian yu shenhua chuanshuo 考古發現與神話傳說,” in *Li Ling zixuanji*, 72.

5 Wang Bo 王博, “Huangdi sijing he guanzi sipian ‘黃帝四經’ 和 ‘管子’ 四篇,” in *Daojia wenhua yanjiu 道家文化研究* [*Researching Daoist Culture*], ed. Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 211.

it has not been lost forever.”<sup>6</sup> Tomb no. 56 at the Jiudian site in Jiangling, Hubei, contained bamboo slips from the later Warring States period, of which section 7 mentions the Yellow Emperor, though its brevity and lacunae make it hard to interpret: 東、北高，二方下，黃帝□宮，庶民居之。<sup>7</sup>

The title “Yellow Emperor” started to emerge frequently in documentation from after the mid-Warring States period, often to record the Yellow Emperor’s lineage. In the chapters on “Imperial Genealogies,” “Biographies,” and “Clan Names” in the *Book of Origins* [*Shiben* 世本], extensive mention is made of the Yellow Emperor and his descendants: “the Yellow Emperor of the Youxiong 有熊 clan married Leizu 嫫祖 of the Xiling 西陵 clan, who gave birth to Qingyang 青陽 and Changyi 昌邑.” “The Yellow Emperor fathered Xuanxiao 玄囂, who then had a son, Jiaoji 僑極, who in turn had a son called Di Ku 帝嚳.” “The Yellow Emperor had a son called Changyi, whose son Zhuanxu fathered Gun 鯀. Gun married Nüzhi 女志 of the Youxin 有辛 clan, who gave birth to Gaomi 高密.”<sup>8</sup> Similar accounts are in the chapters “Imperial Genealogies” and “Virtue of Imperial Genealogies” in the *Da Dai liji*, which are even more detailed than the aforementioned sections in the *Book of Origins*.

Such records about the Yellow Emperor can be divided into two branches. The first is that of Xuanxiao 玄囂, from which Di Ku and Yao stem. The second is that of Changyi, from which Zhuanxu and Shun originate.

In establishing the connection between the *di* 帝 of the Zhou and the *di* of the Tang, the Shun, the Xia, and the Shang, we can call it the imperial lineage of the Zhou. In fact the sacrificial system mentioned in the *Discourses of the States*: “Discourses of Lu, Part 1,” and in the section “Law of Sacrifices” of the *Book of Rites* (that is, the Yellow Emperor originating from Yu and Xia, and Di Ku from Shang and Zhou) does indeed reflect this lineage.<sup>9</sup>

6 Chen Peifen 陳佩芬, “Wu Wang Jianzuo 武王踐祚,” in *Shanghai bowuguan cang zhan-guo chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書 [*Chu-Script Bamboo Slip Manuscripts in the Shanghai Museum Collection*], vol. 7, ed. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008). For annotation see p. 151.

7 Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 湖北省文物考古研究所 and Department of Chinese Language, Peking University 北京大學中文系, ed., *Jiu dian chu jian* 九店楚簡 [*The Jiudian Chu-Script Bamboo Slip Manuscripts*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), p. 14 for plate, p. 51 for annotation, and p. 114 for analysis.

8 Song Zhong 宋衷 and Wang Mo 王謨, *Shiben jiben* 世本輯本 [*Book of Origins: Collection*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 3, 6, and 7.

9 Li, “Kaogu faxian yu shenhua chuanshuo,” 71.

The issue of the Yellow Emperor's lineage is also mentioned in the "Discourses of Jin, No. 4," in *Discourses of the States*: "Of the Yellow Emperor's twenty-five sons, fourteen gained their own surnames. There were twelve clan names: Ji 姬, You 酉, Qi 祁, Ji 己, Teng 滕, Zhen 箴, Ren 任, Gou 苟, Xi 僖, Ji 姑, Xuan 僂, and Yi 依. Only Qingyan 青陽, and Cang Lin 蒼林 had the same family name as the Yellow Emperor: all were of the Ji clan."<sup>10</sup> However, looking at related records in the *Book of Origins* and the *Da Dai liji*, the sons of the Yellow Emperor were not as numerous as stated in the *Discourses of the States*, so this clearly comes from a different narrative tradition, and this point in the *Discourses* was carried on in Sima Qian's [b. 145 BCE] "Annals of the Five Emperors," in the *Records of the Grand Historian* [*Shiji* 史記] and in Wang Fu's "The Zhi Clan," in *Comments of a Recluse* [*Qian fu lun* 潛夫論]; part of the contents of the "Table of Prominent People, Past and Present" in the *History of the Han* [*Hanshu* 漢書] are also related.

Moreover, some chapters in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*—the "Classic of the Great Wilderness: East [Dahuang dongjing 大荒東經]," the "Classic of the Great Wilderness: West [Dahuang xijing 大荒西經]" and the "Classic of Regions within the Seas [Hainei jing 海內經]"—also discuss this topic, but these accounts are not in the mainstream of early documentation. They are considerably different from records in the *Book of Origins* and the *Da Dai liji*, except for mention of the Yellow Emperor's wife being called Lei Zu 雷祖 (i.e., the aforementioned Lei Zu 嫫祖), which is to some extent consistent with these writings. The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* seems to illustrate the mighty rule of the Yellow Emperor through the regions of his descendants. This point of view emphasizes regional management through ties of consanguinity.

Why, then, did the number of records on the Yellow Emperor's lineage increase after the middle of the Warring States period? Li Ling believes that "in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the importance of ties of consanguinity was overtaken by, and thinned down by, that of regional ties. The more chaotic lineages became, the more people felt the need to put them in the foreground."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, according to Wang Mingke,

genealogies and family lineages are the "history" of a community linked by blood ties. Documenting them in writing allows a community to vehemently affirm its existence and to announce its ties with the wider Chinese

10 Xu Yuanhao 徐元誥, *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 [Collected Commentary on the Discourses of the States] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 334-335.

11 Li, "Shuo 'huanglao,'" 281.

society. The conservation and handing down of such documents caused this kind of declaration and easily became the focus of social identity.<sup>12</sup>

Precisely this emphasis on genealogy, therefore, explains the need, within the disorganized lineage system at the time, for an image allowing for ethnic identification: the Yellow Emperor was adapted to this need.

Again, considering the aforementioned records in the *Discourses of the States*, fourteen of the Yellow Emperor's sons gained their own surname. A clan is an ethnic unit based on consanguineous ties; units that formed around a single surname were quite large, while clans were relatively small. Looking at the Shang [approx. 1600-1046 BCE] through Zhou [1046-256 BCE] dynasties surname and clan system, "from the Western Zhou until before the middle of the Spring and Autumn period, common people certainly had neither family names nor clan names: that was altered by the implementation of the practice of bestowing the imperial family name as a reward. After the mid-Spring and Autumn period, following the collapse of the patriarchal clan hierarchy system, aristocratic surnames spread among the people, and slowly common people also began to use surnames, which gradually brought about the popularity of surnames."<sup>13</sup> The period from mere descriptions of the Yellow Emperor's lineage in the *Book of Origins* and the *Da Dai liji* to the account of his sons gaining surnames in the *Discourses of the States* covers a change: the passage from tribal clans to a pattern of governing a nation by means of an enfeoffment system based on blood relations.

### The Yellow Emperor as an Ancient Ruler

The materials we have relied on to discuss the position of the Yellow Emperor in the context of lineage are "origin"-related texts dating from pre-Qin through Han times. The question of his position among ancient rulers is more complex. Materials I have used for this part are mostly pre-Qin documents, except for "origin"-related ones, because the object of my discussion emerges in a variety of situations.

12 Wang Mingke 王明珂, "Lun Panfu: Jindai yan huang zisun guozu jiangou de gudai jichu lun 攀附: 近代炎黃子孫國族建構的古代基礎," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 73, no. 3 (2002): 610.

13 Chen Jie 陳絜, *Shang-Zhou xingshi zhidu yanjiu 商周姓氏制度研究 [Researching the Surnaming System in the Shang through Zhou Dynasties]* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007), 428.



When pre-Qin educators looked back at their origins to compile texts, they were extremely keen on commending ancient sages and praising their rule and made this their theoretical narration strategy. Confucian classics repeatedly commend the figures Yao, Shun, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, and Wen 文; the Confucian doctrine was being established, and these are all images of sages to which it was persistently traced back. As in the “Canon of Yao [Yao dian 堯典],” “Counsels of Gao Tao [Gao yao mo 皋陶謨],” “Tribute of Yu [Yu gong 禹貢]” and other similar sections in the *Book of Documents*, “Emperor Yao Said [Yao yue 堯曰]” and “Tai Bo 泰伯” in the *Analects*, “Wan Zhang 萬章” and “Jinxin 盡心” in the *Mengzi*, and Xunzi’s work *Chengxiang* 成相, these all contain a similar rhetoric. The same goes for the Mohist school, only with a twist that sets it apart from Confucianism, in that it praises the Xia dynasty rather than the Zhou dynasty. However, just as stated in the “Xianxue 顯學” chapter of the *Hanfeizi*, “Confucius and Mozi all discuss Yao and Shun”;<sup>14</sup> similar contents are also found in the sections “Suoran 所染,” “Sanbian 三辯,” “Shangxian 尚賢,” “Tiangzhi zhong 天志中,” “Tianzhi xia 天志下,” “Minggui 明鬼,” and “Guiyi 貴義” in the *Mozi*. The teachings of the yin-yang school in the Warring States period begin with the Yellow Emperor in the “Biographies of Mencius and Xunzi [Mengzi xun qing liezhuan 孟子荀卿列傳]” in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Zou Yan 鄒衍

did an in-depth study of changes in the Universe, its bizarre and tortuous transformations; he wrote over ten thousand characters in his essays “Zhongshi 終始” and “Dasheng 大聖.” The contents are absurd and illogical. He studied all things, starting his survey from the very small to the greatest objects, to the point that there were no limits; he started with the present and went all the way back to the Yellow Emperor. This became a method used by all scholars.<sup>15</sup>

Yin-yang scholars based their discussions on the Yellow Emperor. All the above clearly shows that scholars were in the habit of incorporating narratives about ancient rulers in their discussions. Meng Wentong once commented on three of the pre-Qin schools of philosophy, pointing out that they often traced their theories back to the ancient sage kings, saying that the Legalists spoke of the ancient kings as working diligently to bring benefit to the people;

14 Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷, *Hanfeizi xin jiao zhu* 韓非子新校注 [A New Critical Annotation to the Hanfeizi] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), 1124.

15 Sima Qian 司馬遷, Pei Yin 裴駰, Sima Zhen 司馬貞, Zhang Shoujie 張守節, *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 2344.



the Daoists spoke of the ancient kings in obscure and exaggerated terms; the Confucians spoke of them as being wise and benevolent.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of Gu Jiegang's doubts about the titles of ancient emperors, Liu Qiyu states that these imperial titles were created as scholars completed the compilation of ancient legends at the end of the Warring States period.<sup>17</sup>

When the Yellow Emperor is mentioned in early textual sources, it is generally as part of the combined designation of Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors. Of these, the "Three Sovereigns" stands for Fuxi 伏羲, Shennong 神農, and the Yellow Emperor 黃帝. We find this interpretation in texts such as the preface to the *Book of Documents*, the commentary on the "Annals of the Five Emperors [Wu di benji 五帝本紀]" in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the preface to the *Wuxing dayi* [五行大義], as well as the *Liwei jiming zheng* [禮緯稽命征].

Accounts that place the Yellow Emperor among the Five Emperors are far more frequent. The following interpretations of the Five Emperors are mentioned in early texts:

1. Those with the Yellow Emperor as the supreme one. (a) After him come Emperors Zhuangxi, Di Ku 帝嚳, Yao, and Shun. This interpretation is from the "Annals of the Five Emperors," and was largely adopted in later times. (b) The Yellow Emperor, Shao Hao 少皞, Zhuangxi, Di Ku, Yao, and Shun. In this version, the "Five Emperors" are actually six. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 [127-200] of the Eastern Han dynasty remarked in the "Chi sheng tu [敕省圖]" of the *Shangshu zhonghou* [尚書中候]:

Those whose virtue correlates with the polestar are all called Sovereigns; the *Yundoushu* [運門樞] states that the Three Sovereigns are Fuxi 伏羲, Nüwa 女媧, and Shennong 神農. Those whose virtue correlates with the Five Celestial Seats constellation are called Emperors; the Yellow Emperor, Jin Tian, Gao Yang, Gao Xin, Tao Tang, and You Yu can all be called Emperors. They are called five but are in fact six, because they all match the Five Celestial Seats.<sup>18</sup>

16 Meng Wentong 蒙文通, *Gushi zhen wei* 古史甄微 [A Thorough Examination of Ancient History] (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1999), 22.

17 Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞, "Woguo gushi chuanshuo shiqi zongkao 我國古史傳說時期綜考," in *Gushi xubian* 古史續辨 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991), 23-24.

18 Kong Anguo 孔安國 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Shangshu zhengyi, shisan jing zhushu* 尚書正義, 十三經注疏, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 113.

2. Those where the Yellow Emperor is placed in the middle. (a) Fuxi, Shennong, Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun. “The House of Zhao [Zhao shi jia 趙世家]” in the *Records of the Grand Historian* says: “Fuxi and Shennong educated, but did not punish; the Yellow Emperor, Yao and Shun carried out punishment, but not excessively.”<sup>19</sup> This version is also used in the section “Xici xia [繫辭下]” of the *Book of Changes*. (b) Tai Hao, Yan Di, Yellow Emperor, Shao Hao, and Zhuanxu. The Twelve Almanacs in *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* divide into five emperors and five gods within four seasons. More specifically, as follows: Tai Hao-Ju Mang, Yan Di-Zhurong, Huangdi-Houtu, Shao Hao-Rushou, Zhuanxu-Xuanming. The “Yuelingjie [月令解]” in the *Yizhou shu* [逸周書] and the chapter “Yueling [月令]” in the *Book of Rites* are identical to this tradition. (c) Tai Hao, Gong Gong, Yan Di, Yellow Emperor, Shao Hao, Zhuanxu. This version also includes Gong Gong, that is, six rather than five rulers. “The seventeenth year of the reign of Duke Zhao” in the *Zuo Commentaries* also makes mention of Tanzi 鄰子 telling officials to make records of the Yellow Emperor, Yan Di, Gong Gong, Tai Hao, Shao Hao, and Zhuanxu.

These accounts of the Five Emperors “were very popular with numerologists, since they matched the five directions and five colors.”<sup>20</sup> In the eyes of many ancient scholars, they also stood for a regional distinction. The States of Qi and Lu in the east had the Yellow Emperor, Zhuanxu, Di Ku, Yao and Shun as Five Emperors, and the State of Qin in the west recognized Tai Hao, Yan Di, the Yellow Emperor, Shao Hao and Zhuanxu.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, certain ancient rulers were also mentioned in unearthed scripts. Referring to the *Rongcheng shi* 容成氏 bamboo slips in the Warring States period in the Shanghai Museum collection, Li Ling says, “this text contains legends of ancient rulers. . . the first part of it tells of *Rongcheng shi*, and some others of the most remote emperors (there are twenty-one of them).”<sup>22</sup> The background from which these rulers emerged is probably also related to the wider backdrop of scholars from the mid-late Warring States period basing their theories on, and seeking deep meaning from, ancient rulers. Opinions in academic circles are still inconsistent as to the affiliation of these schools of

19 *Shiji*, 1810.

20 Li Ling, “Kaogu faxian yu shenhua chuanshuo 考古發現與神話傳說 [Archaeological Finds and Mythological Traditions],” in *Li Ling zixuanji*, 71.

21 Xu Xusheng 徐旭生, *Zhongguo gushide chuanshuo shidai* 中國古史的傳說時代 [*The Age of Myth in Ancient Chinese History*] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1960), 238-243.

22 Li Ling, “Rongcheng shi shuoming 容成氏・說明,” in *Shanghai bowuguan cang zhan-guo chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, ed. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 2:249.

thought. Li Xueqin believes that “accounts of abdication and ancient historical legends in the *Rongcheng shi* may have been included to further the interests of political strategists in the Warring States period.”<sup>23</sup> Guo Yongbing thinks that “the text does not put any emphasis on the genealogical links between ancient rulers themselves, those between them and Yao and Shun, or those between them and three generations of their ancestors. This is very different from the one precise origin given for each imperial clan, as in the ‘Imperial Genealogy 帝系.’”<sup>24</sup> Cao Feng also points out that the “Empress” [Huanghou 皇后] mentioned in the section “Three Virtues [Sande 三德]” on the bamboo strips at the Shanghai Museum is in fact also the Yellow Emperor,<sup>25</sup> which would seem plausible. In fact, also in these archaeological finds, the Yellow Emperor seems to be being portrayed as an ancient ruler.

Because the Warring States philosophers were in a constant state of debate with one another, competing for polemic advantage, their arguments often contained much exaggeration, speculation, and even defamation. These factors make the various accounts of the Yellow Emperor inconsistent and confusing. As to whether he was an ancient ruler and where he fit in the pantheon with all the other ancient rulers, this, too, was often up to speculation. One scholar pointed out, “In antiquity, many prehistoric rulers and sovereigns were mentioned, and they were mostly mentioned on a par with one another, except for occasional differences on when they had lived; no differences were made as to their ranking. In these accounts they are all on an equal level.”<sup>26</sup> Precisely for this reason, I find that so-called imperial genealogy is unreliable and therefore unsuitable as a historical source, although it provides a rather interesting research angle for understanding scholars’ thoughts and attitudes toward ancient rulers.

Because portrayals of the Yellow Emperor as an ancient ruler do exist, an entourage of officials and ministers becomes indispensable. Among the Yellow Emperor’s officials were Qifu 七輔, Sifu 四輔, Sixiang 四相 (the official in

23 Li Xueqin 李學勤 and Liu Guozhong 劉國忠, “Jianbo shujide faxian ji qi yiyi 簡帛書籍的發現及其意義,” in *Zhongguo gudai wenming yanjiu* 中國古代文明研究, ed. Li Xueqin 李學勤 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), 307.

24 Guo Yongbing 郭永秉, *Dixi xin yan: Chudi chutu zhanguo wenxian zhongde chuanshuo shidai gudiwang xitong yanjiu* 帝系新研——楚地出土戰國文獻中的傳說時代古帝王系統研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2008), 221.

25 Cao Feng 曹峰, “Sande’ suojian ‘Huanghou’ wei ‘Huangdi’ Kao <三德>所見“皇后”為“黃帝”考 [Textual Research on the “Huanghou” in *Sande* Being Huangdi],” *Qilu Journal* 5 (2008).

26 Liu Qiyu 劉起鈺, “Jici zuhe fenyun cuozade san huang wu di 幾次組合紛紜錯雜的三皇五帝,” in *Gushi xubian* 古史續辨 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1991), 94.

charge of the universe), Sishi Guan 四史官, and Liuxiang 六相, as per Luo Mi's [1131-1189] *Lushi houji* [路史·後紀], which describes setting up ministers in their posts.<sup>27</sup> Discussions on the Yellow Emperor in the *Four History Classic* [*Sishi* 四史] are less complex, as Wang Yinglin 王應麟 [1223-1296] of the Song dynasty [960-1279] notes in the *Xiaoxue gan zhu* [小學紺珠]: "The Yellow Emperor was recorded by four historiographers: Ju Song 沮誦, Cang Jie 倉頡, Li Shou 隸首, and Kong Jia 孔甲."<sup>28</sup>

Explanations by Confucius, and by researchers after him, on the Yellow Emperor's four ministers and four assistants connect them to his four faces. The emperor's four faces corresponded to four specific ministers and symbolized the four directions and the four seasons. Confucius gives the following explanation for the four faces: "the Yellow Emperor asked four people whose thoughts on running a country he shared to administer the four directions. These four people did not conspire and had a close relationship; they ruled successfully, and without prior agreement. These are the 'four faces.'"<sup>29</sup> Li Xueqin agrees that, "in fact, the 'four faces' are the four ministers who assisted the Yellow Emperor in governing."<sup>30</sup> However, according to records in the section "Establishing the Mandate [Li ming 立命]" in the *Ten Great Classics* found at Mawangdui, the four faces had yet another meaning:

Formerly the Yellow Emperor made observing Daoism a priority and made sincerity a moral excellence; he built a portrait based on his appearance; having four faces on all sides but only one mind meant that what the faces saw helped the mind think, so the Emperor could then carefully inspect all the twelve directions of the earth—three in the front, three in the back, three at the left, and three at the right; thus he was able to be the ruler of the world.<sup>31</sup>

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- 27 Luo Mi 羅泌 and Wu Hongji 吳弘基, *Chongding lu shi quanben* 重訂路史全本, Book 4, Riben zaodaotian daxue cang qingyoushan tang keben, 4b.
- 28 Wang Yinglin 王應麟, "Xiaoxue ganzhu 小學紺珠," in *Congshu jicheng chu bian* 叢書集成初編 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), 177-178.
- 29 Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 [*Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), scroll 79, "Huangwang bu si yin shizi 皇王部四引尸子," 369, lower column.
- 30 Li Xueqin 李學勤, "He Guanzi yu Liang Zhong Boshu <鶡冠子>與兩種帛書 [He Guanzi and Two Kinds of Silk Manuscripts]," in *Jianbo yishu yu xueshushi* 簡帛佚書與學術史 [*Lost Silk Manuscripts and the History of Thought*] (Nanchang: Jiangxi Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2001), 93.
- 31 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Huangdi sijing jin zhu jin yi* 黃帝四經今注今譯 [*Existing Commentaries and Translations of the Yellow Emperor's Four Classics*] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007), 426.

This record is very interesting, as it suggests that there were four portraits of the Yellow Emperor. I believe that who the so-called four ministers, four assistants, and four historians actually were is irrelevant; what matters is why there are such people, because as a sage the Yellow Emperor governed through *wuwei* 無為 [inaction]. “Four faces” has to do with the standard requirements for sages in antiquity: “a characteristic of sages is that they were omniscient.”<sup>32</sup> In ancient texts, the meaning of the character 聖 [*sheng*] was related to being intelligent, to listening. Having “four faces” made one sharp-eared and sharp-eyed enough: just as Laozi said, “Sages knew what was happening in the world without leaving the house and knew the Way without looking out of the window.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, if the fact that the Yellow Emperor could govern in peace and did not interfere with the world was thanks to the diligent work of all these ministers, it is highly likely that the tale of the Yellow Emperor’s “four faces” came into being to recognize their work.

Early historical records show that the Yellow Emperor also had several teachers. The “Table of Prominent People, Past and Present [Gujin renbiao 古今人表]” in the *History of the Han* records the “teachers of the Yellow Emperor” as Feng Ju 封鉅, Da Tian 大填, and Da Shan Ji 大山稽;<sup>34</sup> the section “In Praise of Learning [*Zan xue* 贊學],” in *Comments of a Recluse* mentions “the Yellow Emperor’s teacher Feng Hou 風后.”<sup>35</sup> The bamboo slip “Liang Chen 良臣,” kept at Tsinghua University, names his teachers Nühe 女和, Zhang Ren 章人,<sup>36</sup> and Bao Tong 保侗.<sup>37</sup> (These names are extremely rare in ancient documents.) These records on the Yellow Emperor’s teachers are very diverse. The reason for this is that the sheer variety of documentation in which he is mentioned—ancient legends, accounts constructed by many people on countless occasions over time—caused people in antiquity to have many different ideas about the story.

32 Li Ling 李零, *Qu sheng nai de zhen Kongzi: “Lunyu” zonghengdu* 去聖乃得真孔子: 〈論語〉縱橫讀 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2008), 115.

33 不出戶, 知天下; 不窺牖, 見天道。Gao Ming 高明, *Boshu laozhi jiaozhu* 帛書老子校注 [*Annotated Edition of the Silk Manuscripts of the Laozi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 50.

34 Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 [*History of the Han*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 868.

35 Wang Fu 王符, Wang Jipei 汪繼培, and Peng Duo 彭鐸, *Qianfulun jian jiaozheng* 潛夫論箋校正 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 1.

36 This *zhang* character should be written with a 黑 radical and 章 phonetic.

37 Research and Conservation Center for Excavated Texts, Tsinghua University 清華大學出土文獻研究與保護中心 and Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua daxue cang zhanguo zhujian* Vol. 3 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2012), 2: 157.

Summing up on the image of the Yellow Emperor among ancient rulers, it was probably later generations that supported the version of him as having several ministers. Emerging from narratives of his political ideals and stories of technological inventions is also his monarchic image, which reflects the beginning of his efforts to set up a state. From the point of view of ancient legends, these accounts depict the stage when society transitioned from the disintegration of the clan system to the emergence of a state.

### The Emperor in the Sacrificial Context

Some say that the designation “Yellow Emperor” stands for a deity. Ding Shan believes that oracle-bone script (Xu 續 5, 9 and 2; Tie 鐵 119, 12) mentions him as being a *huangshi* 黃示. According to him, “a straightforward interpretation for that *huangshi* is ‘*huangshen* 黃神,’” and “the Yellow Emperor of the Zhou dynasty, who derived from the *huangshi* of the Shang dynasty.”<sup>38</sup> Thus the Yellow Emperor is actually a combination of the Earth God [Huangtu Dishen 黃土地神] and the Heavenly Ruler [Huangtian Shangdi 皇天上帝]. In oracle-bone script, the characters 矢 [*shi*], 黃 [*huang*], and 寅 [*yin*] are quite easily mixed up, so it becomes rather difficult to establish the connection between *huangshi* 黃示 and *huangdi* 黃帝. Also, in Shang dynasty ideology, *di* 帝 is one with supreme powers, placed above everything else; Huangshi 黃示, Huangshen 黃神, or Huangdi 黃帝 do not appear to have as high a position. Therefore, in investigating the image of the Yellow Emperor in the sacrificial context, I do not use oracle-bone inscriptions as a source. When exploring this subject, it is actually rather difficult to avoid sources that I have used to look at the previous two images of the Yellow Emperor; I focus on material from the Former and Later Han period apocrypha and partly on textual material from archaeological finds.

The Five Color Emperors [Wuse di 五色帝], emperors of blue-green, vermilion red, white, black, and yellow, already appear in *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*. The twelve records in the *Annals* detail in full how the five elements are associated with numbers and beings, and this same system was continued in many Han apocrypha. Here the names of the emperors usually became Bluegreen Emperor Ling Weiyang 蒼帝靈威仰, Red Emperor Chi Biaonu 赤帝赤嫫怒, Yellow Emperor Han Shuniu 黃帝含樞紐, White Emperor

38 Ding Shan 丁山, *Zhongguo gudai zongjiao yu shenhua kao* 中國古代宗教與神話考 [An Exploration of Religions and Mythology in Ancient China] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1988), 420-423.



Bai Zhaoju 白帝白招矩, and Black Emperor Zhi Guangji 黑帝汁光紀. These five rulers were often associated with the five directions, the five elements, and the five planets. The same ideas are also picked up in the “Treatise on the Feng-Shan Sacrificial Ceremony [Feng-shan shu 封禪書]” in the *Records of the Grand Historian*; these are records on the establishment of places of worship under the Qin and Han dynasties: Duke Xiang of Qin sacrificed to the White Emperor in Xi 西, and Duke Wen of Qin sacrificed to him in Fu 酈; Duke Xuan of Qin sacrificed to the Bluegreen Emperor in Mi 密, Duke Ling of Qin carried out the Shang 上 and Xia 下 rites to the Yellow Emperor and the Red Emperor in Wuyang 吳陽, and Duke Xian of Qin sacrificed to the White Emperor at Qi 畦. At the rise of the Han dynasty, sacrifices were made in the north to the Black Emperor. In the second year of the Han emperor Gaozu 高祖 [205 BCE], the Yellow, Red, Bluegreen, White, and Black Emperors were all recognized, and joint sacrifices were made to them. During Emperor Wen’s reign, the alchemist Xin Yuanping of Zhao encouraged the emperor: “build a Five Emperor Temple on the northern bank of the Wei River, one hall for each emperor with five doors on each side, and each hall of the color of its emperor. The use of the sacrificial site and all ceremonies should also be like that at the five altars at Yong.”<sup>39</sup> We know that Emperor Wen made sacrifices to the Five Emperors in the area surrounding the capital and on two occasions erected shrines to the Five Emperors; he toured the kingdom and made *feng-shan* 封禪 sacrifices, changed the reign name of his era, and hoped that the nine cauldrons of the Zhou dynasty would be rediscovered. Through these reforms in sacrificial rituals, Emperor Wen of Han established a base for the religious unification that later took place under Emperor Wu 武 of the Han [156-87 BCE].

The aim in religious unification under Emperor Wu of Han was that of establishing a religious system that could match the unification of a nation. In the first place, this carried forward Qin Shihuang’s 秦始皇 [259-210 BCE] traditions, such as *feng-shan* rites, and make sacrifices at the Five Sacred Mountains [*Wu yue* 五嶽], the Five Altars at Yong, and *qibazhu* [齊八主]. Second, the aim was to found a large ancestral temple dedicated to the Great One [Dayi 太一], the God of Earth Houtu 后土, and the Five Emperors [*wudi* 五帝], and thereby unify minor religions by means of mainstream beliefs, and the old system by means of a new system.<sup>40</sup> Tian Tian has undertaken detailed research on

39 Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 1382-1383.

40 Li Ling 李零, “Zhongguo fangshu xukao ‘xinban qianyan’ 中國方術續考〈新版前言〉,” in *Zhongguo fangshu xukao* 中國方術續考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 9-10.



these actions of Emperor Wu of Han.<sup>41</sup> This great religious unification under Emperor Wu has left a lot of records in ancient scriptures on sacrificial offerings made to the Yellow Emperor. According to Li Ling's statistics, the Qin and the Han dynasties had 227 ancestral temples, of which 11 were dedicated to the Yellow Emperor.<sup>42</sup> These are direct observations from archaeological material on sacrifices to the Yellow Emperor under the Western Han dynasty.

In addition, a divine image of the Yellow Emperor stands out among his various appellations also in other textual materials from the Han dynasty; the ancient prescriptions "On 52 Ailments [Wushi'erbinfang 五十二病方]" and "Yangshengfang [養生方]" in the silk manuscripts of Mawangdui all mention a "Yellow Spirit [*huangshen* 黃神];"<sup>43</sup> also "Establishing the Mandate" makes mention of a "Yellow Ancestor [*huangzong* 黃宗]."<sup>44</sup> Rao Zongyi believes that these are both references to the Yellow Emperor.<sup>45</sup> The *Hetu woju ji* [河圖握矩記] says: "The Yellow Emperor was called Xuan 軒, he is the son of the Big Dipper 'Yellow Spirit'; his mother is Fubao, daughter of the Earth Spirit. While outdoors, a big lightning tied Fubao to the Big Dipper, whose stars sparkled; thereupon Fubao became pregnant and gave birth to Xuan, who had 'Yellow Emperor's son' written on his chest."<sup>46</sup> This account on the origination of antique sages is commonly seen in mythological accounts collected in apocrypha. The story of the Yellow Emperor stemming from the Yellow Spirit gave way to the story of Fubao being his mother. The "Yellow Spirit" stems from the "Star Spirit," and is a deity; the Yellow Emperor, however, was a sage who was born, and is a human. This paved the way for the image of the Yellow Emperor as one who was offered sacrifices to shift to a different system.

In the Eastern Han, under the influence of Daoism, talismanic objects started to appear on tombs. On them were carved funerary or Daoist writings

41 Tian Tian 田天, "Qin Han guojia jisi geju bianqian yanjiu—yi 'shiji fengshan shu,' 'hanshu jiaosi zhi' wei zhongxin 秦漢國家祭祀格局變遷研究——以〈史記·封禪書〉、〈漢書·郊祀志〉為中心" (PhD diss., Peking University, 2011), 82-129.

42 Li Ling, "Qin-Han cizhi tongkao 秦漢祠畤通考," in *Zhongguo fangshu xukao* 中國方術續考 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 142-156.

43 Mawangdui Han Tombs Silk Manuscript Compilation Team 馬王堆漢墓帛書整理小組, *Mawangdui hanmu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書 [*Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts*] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985), 4:72, 163.

44 *Ibid.*, 1: 61.

45 Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, "Daojiao yu chusu guanxi xin zheng—chu wenhuade xin renshi 道教與楚俗關係新證——楚文化的新認識," in *Rao Zongyi shixue lunzhu xuan* 饒宗頤史學論著選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 130-134.

46 Shanghai guji chubanshe, ed., *Weishu jicheng* 緯書集成 [*Complete Collection of Weishu Texts*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), 1144.

to keep the departed safe from misfortune and to ward off bad influences, and protect them from evil forces. In archaeological finds of Eastern Han tomb inscriptions, appellations such as “Yellow Spirit Envoy” and “Yellow Emperor” are often mentioned; the funerary inscription on a ceramic bottle that dates from the third year of the Yongping 永平 era [60 CE] of the Eastern Han dynasty found in the Shaanxi Province in 1999, is the earliest accurately dated inscription of this kind found so far. Part of the text says: “On October 9 of the third year of the Yongping era, the *bingshen* 丙申 year, the Messenger of the Yellow Spirit marked out an area for the dead to reside, providing a final resting place for the ancestors of the living, thereby protecting the living relatives of the dead from disaster and errors, and protecting generations of the dead’s descendants.”<sup>47</sup> Wu Rongzeng was the first to link the denominations of ‘Yellow Spirit’ and ‘Yellow Emperor.’<sup>48</sup> From looking at the characters alone, they should be the same person. Antique seals also contain many such references, which further leads us to believe these two figures are connected. In Chen Jieqi’s 陳介祺 [1813-1884] work from the Qing dynasty, the chapter “Government Seals [Guanyin 官印]” in *Selected Seals from the Shizhong Shanfang Studio* [*Shizhong shanfang yinju* 十鐘山房印舉] says that twenty records include two kinds of “Yellow Spirit” seals, and two kinds of “Yellow Spirit and Celestial Ruler” seals.<sup>49</sup> This shows that “Yellow Spirit [*huangshen* 黃神]” is probably an abbreviation of “Yellow Emperor Spirit [*huangdishesen* 黃帝神].” In recent research on funerary inscriptions and on Daoism, the funerary texts enumerated earlier that bear contents related to the “Yellow Spirit” have attracted more attention. Han dynasty shamanist or occultist traditions borrowed the longstanding Yellow Emperor image and transformed him into a “Spirit” with a divine character; this is quite dissimilar from the aforementioned being that was offered State sacrifice.

On the whole records in ancient texts that mark the transition from the Yellow Emperor 吳榮曾 as one who received State sacrifice to one who received folk sacrifice all date roughly from the Eastern Han. The chapter “Ying bu zhuan [英布傳]” in the *History of the Later Han* [*Hou Han Shu* 後漢書], says: “When

47 Xianyang Municipal Institute of Archaeology 咸陽市文物考古研究所, “Xianyang jiaoyu xueyuan hanmu qingli jianbao 咸陽教育學院漢墓清理簡報,” in *Wenwu kaogu lunji—xianyang wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo chengli shizhounian jinian* 文物考古論集——咸陽文物考古研究所成立十周年紀念 (Xi’an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2006), figure 6.

48 Wu Rongzeng 吳榮曾, “Zhenmuwen zhong suo jiandaode donghan daowu guanxi 鎮墓文中所見到的東漢道巫關係,” *Wenwu* 3 (1981).

49 Chen Jieqi 陳介祺, *Shizhong shanfang yinju* 十鐘山房印舉 [*Selected Seals from the Shizhong Shanfang Studio*] (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1985), 63.

Ying Bu was young, he had a lot of contact with guests, he was very chivalrous . . . later, once he became King of Chu, Ying Bu enjoyed reciting the words of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi, and held Buddhist sacrifices [仁祠].<sup>50</sup> The term *renci* 仁祠 in this text undoubtedly stands for ancestral halls or temples, or similar buildings with a sacrificial function that would certainly contain Buddhist imagery and idols to worship. However, since we are limited to concrete historical records, we do not have a very clear idea of what sacrificial rituals were like. We can nevertheless notice how among the upper-class society of the Eastern Han the Yellow Emperor had a very prestigious position in Huang-Lao doctrine. The opportunity of Buddhism just being introduced to China was also used, in that joint sacrifices were being made to Buddha, the Yellow Emperor, and Laozi. Joint sacrifices like those carried out by King Ying of Chu were widely praised and endorsed by the rulers at the time.

The image of the Yellow Emperor in the so-called sacrificial context was retained in current archaeological finds. In the early 1980s the cliffside images on Kongwang Mountain in Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province, were officially recognized as being late-Eastern Han dynasty Buddhist and Daoist imagery,<sup>51</sup> and since then have gained widespread attention in religious, artistic, and archaeological circles. A survey of these images revealed a total of 105 characters, among them, three stand out as human, non-Buddha. Of these three images, bust X68 in group 6 is the tallest, reaching 1m 14cm. It is seated with cupped hands, on the terrace beneath it are carved round chandeliers and a lotus throne, which proves that this is the most important character among the Kongwang Mountain sculptures, and also the most important to offer sacrifices to. As for the quality of its figure, this “is an image completely unrelated to Buddhism, but that it has been placed on the highest spot of the cliffs shows its status was higher than that of Laozi. And in Daoist beliefs, the only one with a status higher than Laozi is the Yellow Emperor. Therefore, X68 in Group 6 is certainly a representation of him.”<sup>52</sup>

From the above discussion we can see that in Chinese religious sacrificial tradition, there was originally an ancestral Yellow Emperor, who was naturally offered sacrifice by virtue of his status. This superior status was then further emphasized by pre-Qin through Han thought (such as the yin-yang and five

50 Fan Ye 範曄 and Li Xian 李賢, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 [History of the Later Han] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 1428.

51 Lianyungang Museum 連雲港市博物館, “Lianyungangshi kongwangshan moya zaoxiang diaocha baogao 連雲港市孔望山摩崖造像調查報告,” *Wenwu* 7 (1981).

52 Xin Lixiang 信立祥, “Kongwang shan moya zaoxiang zhong dao jiao renwu kao 孔望山摩崖造像中道教人物考,” *Zhongguo lishi bowuguan guan kan* 2 (1997).

elements doctrines) which made it spill over into other fields, and become a spiritual kind of image.

### A Brief Summary

Charles LeBlanc has pointed out that the image of the Yellow Emperor in pre-Qin through Han documents bears three connotations: one is “genealogical ancestry,” the second is “paradigmatic emperors,” and the third is that of a divine ruler.<sup>53</sup> These three images represent the Yellow Emperor in ancient genealogy records as a historical ruler and as a divine Emperor. As to the historical reliability of these portrayals, the one we find in the lineage context is rather credible and the one among ancient rulers comes second, while that in the context of sacrifice bears more of a religious significance. As for the distance between them, Qi Sihe finds that “originally, ‘Huangdi’ was used as name for a deity, which then gradually turned into a legendary monarch. Huangdi may have become ruler at a relatively late stage, but he was made to be the highest of them; through his popularity and the complexity of the legends surrounding him, he emerged supreme among the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors.”<sup>54</sup> I have some doubts on this statement. The earliest appearance of the Yellow Emperor should be in the genealogy context; then, as ancestral ruler, he came to exist as the earliest of Emperors, as a mythological monarch, and between these shows both his passage from the ancestral to the monarchic context, and the enormous shift from a system of enfeoffment based on blood relations towards a system of prefectures and counties based on regional ties. As to the ‘Huangdi’ in the sacrificial context, his existence is inseparably linked to the five elements theory of the yin-yang school from the end of the Warring States period. The generations that followed also linked this image to a Daoist context, and it thereby acquired a religious value.

The implied value of these three portrayals of the Yellow Emperor lies in a gradual change, and this point is in agreement with Gu Jiegang: “when researching the Yellow Emperor, do not be led to believe that this subject is pre-Xia history; it should be seen as Warring States period, Qin, and Han history, because legends about him only reflect the thought of Warring States,

53 Charles Le Blanc, “A Re-Examination of the Myth of Huang-ti,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 13/14 (1985-86): 45-46.

54 Qi Sihe 齊思和, “Lun huangdizhi zhiqi gushi 論黃帝之制器故事,” in *Gushi bian* 古史辨 [Debates on Ancient History], ed. Lü Simian 呂思勉 and Tong Shuye 童書業 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 7: 385.

Qin, and Han times, and only display culture from the Warring States, the Qin, and the Han Periods.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, it can be said of the image of the Yellow Emperor that the earlier we look, the more primitive the image is; the later we look, the more multifaceted it becomes. His existence in lineage records is likely the earliest, his appearance in the sacrificial context as a divine image came rather late, however this image is also the richest in content.

As to writings and imagery on the Yellow Emperor in Daoist scripts, the distribution range of Yellow Emperor literature is mainly among practical manuals of numerology and occultism. “The qualities of each Yin-Yang scholar and Daoist depended on their background. The ‘Huang’ of yin-yang scholars and Daoists and the ‘Huang’ of scholars and occultists are also interconnected in meaning.”<sup>56</sup> The two key themes of technological inventions and political ideals in later Yellow Emperor literature mainly relied on the further refinement of the aforementioned practical manuals; this happened particularly in the case of technological inventions. Technological inventions are more related to the context of ancient rulers and sacrifice. The reason why the Yellow Emperor as an ancient monarch has been attributed so many inventions is very closely connected to the expectations people at that time had of rulers and sages. Political ideals back then revolved around the lineage of the Yellow Emperor within the genealogy context and the ancient ruler context, and around the achievements of his entourage.

Of course, this statement is also not perfect; it is based on the Yellow Emperor, and is related to the scholarly practices of people in antiquity. It is also necessary to consider the latent ability for dialogue between different pre-Qin schools of thought, which in the middle of the Warring States period led to the embryonic stages of the Confucian and the Mohist schools of thought. Both of these liked to refer to their predecessors, and thereby set up a “utopia.” The development of Daoism happened after this, and they mention an even more remote ancestor than Confucians and Mohists—the Yellow Emperor, who then became the symbol of establishing their own doctrine of identity. This trait shows particularly clearly in pre-Qin Daoist texts. The narrative patterns of the chapters “Yuyan [寓言]” and “Chongyan [重言]” in the *Zhuangzi* also fall into this category.

Of course, these things may not have happened, the Yellow Emperor may not even have existed, these were legends that emerged and were continuously passed down. How should we see this phenomenon? Meng Wentong finds that

55 Gu Jiegang 顧頌剛, *Qin-Han de fangshi yu rusheng* 秦漢的方士與儒生 [*Alchemists and Classicists in the Qin and Han Dynasties*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005), 26.

56 Li, “Shuo ‘Huanglao,’” 280.

“during the late Eastern Zhou period, scholarly discourse was more relevant than political discourse and mostly incompatible with monarchical power; many books that supported it appeared during the late Warring States Period. At the beginning, relying on the past to put ideas in writing was normal. The chapters “Taigong [太公]” and “Yiyin [伊尹]” are examples of such works. Later on, the development of theories relied on discussing antiquity, as is quite common in the Six Classics compiled by Confucius. Books relying on antiquity to establish theories are of dubious authenticity, and theories based on events in ancient times are mostly biased.”<sup>57</sup> This statement is debatable. First, as mentioned earlier, we have to take note of the background discrepancies between the works of pre-Qin scholars that are based on different “ancestors”; second, titles of early documents are often the same as a person’s name, but this person’s lifetime will not necessarily correspond to the epoch they were written in; third, as in Ban Gu’s self-annotation of the “Treatise on Literature [Yiwenzhi 藝文志]” in the *History of the Han*, we can see how Ban Gu 班固 [32-92] often refuses to rely on peculiar matters or shallow language; this kind of text is particularly frequent among Daoist works and novels. We have to see the logic behind his way of doing so: Ye Gang believes that people like Liu Xiang 刘向 [76 BCE-6] and Ban Gu thought that history books should “speak bluntly,” “be based on actions,” “follow the ways of people,” and “discuss the roots of things,” and only then can they “be authentic.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore books we rely on are not necessarily false, and the same goes for Yellow Emperor literature.

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57 Meng Wentong 蒙文通, *Jing xue jue yuan* 經學抉原 [*Research on Confucian Classics*] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2006), 206.

58 Ye Gang 葉崗, “Zhongguo xiaoshuo fashengqi xianxiangde lilun zonghe—hanshu yiwenzhi’ zhongde xiaoshuo biao zhun yu xiaoshuo jia 中國小說發生期現象的理論總結——漢書·藝文志中的小說標準與小說家,” *Wenyi yanjiu* 10 (2005).



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