

To Rebel is Justified? The Image of Zhouxin and the Legitimacy of Rebellion in the Chinese Political Tradition*

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The notion of legitimate rebellion, as exemplified in the story of the overthrow of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE)¹ by its Zhou (周, 1046–256) contenders, is one of the most peculiar legacies of China's pre-imperial age. Being associated with the activities of two paragon rulers – Kings Wen (文王, d. c. 1047) and Wu (武王, d. 1043) of Zhou, and immortalized in the would-be canonical documents of the *Shang shu* 尚書, this concept became part and parcel of traditional Chinese political culture. Yet in marked distinction from the Occident, where the parallel idea of tyrannicide could at time fuel republican and anti-monarchistic arguments, in China the notion of legitimate rebellion existed within a rigid framework of almost unanimously approved principle of monarchism. How this coexistence became possible, and how the monarchistic tradition succeeded to accommodate the potentially subversive justification of anti-dynastic insurrection is the focus of the present study.

My discussion of pre-imperial views of legitimate rebellion closely follows fluctuations of the story of the overthrow of the last Shang ruler, Zhouxin 紂辛, by the Zhou dynastic founders.² This focus on a single story is not incidental. It was a long tradition in Chinese political thought to embed one's ideas on sensitive topics in a seemingly innocent historical narrative, which could be modified, reinterpreted or even outright invented to serve one's ideological goals. Thus, I hope to demonstrate that excessive demonization of Zhouxin in the texts of the Warring States may be related to the thinkers' desire to accommodate the story of the Zhou rebellion while minimizing its potentially disruptive effect on contemporaneous political *mores*. Yet I shall also show that aside from producing competing historical narratives, certain thinkers tackled in a more direct way foundational problems concerning the right to rebel against the erring monarch. Their disparate answers contributed toward maturation of the concept of legitimate rebellion and its eventual incorporation into traditional Chinese political culture.

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1 Hereafter all the dates are Before Common Era, unless indicated otherwise. For the dates of the Shang and early years of the Zhou, I follow the suggestions of the Xia-Shang-Zhou chronology project (see Xia Shang Zhou duandai gongcheng zhuanjia zu 夏商周斷代工程專家組, *Xia Shang Zhou duandai gongcheng 1996–2000 nian jieduan chengguo baogao* 夏商周斷代工程1996–2000年階段成果報告 (Beijing: Shijie tu chubanshe, 2000).

2 I transliterate the last Shang ruler as Zhouxin in order to distinguish him from the Zhou dynasty; in most texts he appears as either Zhou 紂, Shou 受 or Thearch Xin 帝辛, his official posthumous title.

Claiming the Mandate: The Zhou Ideology

The Zhou overthrow of the Shang was a momentous event in Chinese history. While centuries of dynastic propaganda, literary embellishments and tendentious interpretations skewed the account of this event almost beyond recognition, its factual skeleton can still be reconstructed. It appears that on the *jiāzǐ* 甲子 day, the first day of the sexagenary cycle in early 1046 (or 1045?), allied forces under the leadership of King Wu of Zhou had decisively defeated the Shang army led by Zhouxin. The Shang capital was occupied, Zhouxin reportedly committed suicide to be posthumously dismembered, and the Zhou swiftly asserted their leadership in the formal Shang heartland and much beyond. In a few years, after wiping out the rebellion of the Shang loyalists and of the disgruntled members of the Zhou royal house, the Zhou leaders succeeded to establish an impressively extensive and relatively stable political entity, which shaped political history of the Chinese world for centuries to come.³

Traditional historiography firmly holds that the Zhou were originally subordinate to the Shang; hence their action should be qualified as a rebellion *strictu sensu*. While the degree of the Zhou subordination to the Shang is disputable, there is little doubt that the Zhou were in an inferior position to the Shang, at least insofar as eastern parts of the then “Chinese” realm are concerned.⁴ Therefore, immediately after the conquest, the victors had to legitimate their control over the Shang heartland; and this task became ever more urgent in the wake of the anti-Zhou rebellion circa 1042. As is well known, the Zhou developed a peculiar notion of their legitimacy, claiming that the overthrow of the Shang was decreed by the supreme and impartial deity, Heaven (*tian* 天), which was apparently coterminous with the Supreme Thearch (*Di* 帝) of the Shang pantheon.⁵ The ensuing concept of Heaven’s Mandate/Decree (*tian ming* 天命) duly became an essential feature of Chinese political thought.

It is not my intention here to discuss in detail the Zhou concept of Heaven’s Decree as this task had been performed elsewhere; rather I shall focus on specific justifications for the overthrow of the Shang as they appear in early Zhou materials.⁶ In the earliest Zhou texts,

3 The single most reliable evidence to the Zhou conquest of the Shang is the Li-gui 利簋 inscription, cast shortly after the conquest campaign (see details in Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Sources of Western Zhou History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 87–95. For what may be the most detailed and relatively reliable textual evidence to the conquest campaign, the “Shi fu” 世俘 chapter of the *Yizhou shu* 逸周書, see Shaughnessy, “New Evidence of the Zhou Conquest,” in idem, *Before Confucius: Studies of the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 31–68. For the Western Zhou history in general, see Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

4 For many interesting observations regarding the nature of the Shang-Zhou relations, based on the information scattered in the Zhou oracle bones, see Wang Hui 王暉, *Guwenzi yu Shang Zhou shi xingzheng* 古文字與商周史新證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003).

5 For different interpretations of the emergence of Heaven’s Mandate and the relation between *Tian* of the Zhou and *Di* of the Shang, see, e.g., Du Yong 杜勇, “‘Shang shu’ Zhouchu bagao yanjiu 《尚書》周初八誥研究” (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1998), 204–225; Zhang Rongming 張榮明, *Yin Zhou zhengzhi yu zongjiao* 殷周政治與宗教 (Taipei: Wunan tushu, 1997), 44–68.

6 For a good introduction to the theory of Heaven’s Mandate, see Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 81–100. When this concept emerged is still a matter of controversy, which derives primarily from the doubts regarding the provenance of the early

such as the so-called “Eight Proclamations” (*ba gao* 八誥) of the *Shang shu*, the primary justification for the anti-Shang rebellion is not the Shang badness but rather the Zhou goodness. These documents repeatedly praise King Wen (and, rarely, King Wu), for his ability “to care for the widowers and widows, to employ the people properly and to be respectful and awesome”; to “use virtue, and to sacrifice properly to gods and to Heaven” and to “make the multitudes compliant.” It is for these reasons that King Wen received Heaven’s support, and it is probably for this reason that he was posthumously granted a dwelling in Heaven, in the vicinity of the Supreme Thearch.⁷ Evidently, these exceptional merits of the Zhou were viewed as the most compelling justification for Heaven’s support of their cause.

A second major argument in support of dynastic change is historical: namely, invocation of the putative replacement of the Xia dynasty (夏, c. 2000–1600 BCE) by the Shang in the remote past. Whatever the historicity of this event, from the early Zhou period it was referred to as a paradigmatic case of dynastic change, much akin to that of the recent Zhou overthrow of the Shang. The historical argument serves to legitimate anti-Shang rebellion and turn it from an exceptional into a normal, or even normative event. The Zhou leaders were aware of the possibility that this precedent would be applied to their dynasty as well; hence the documents contain the repeated warning that the gloomy fate of the Xia and the Shang should serve as a “mirror” to the Zhou leaders: carelessness would bring about irreversible loss of Heaven’s Decree.⁸

Finally, the third major argument employed in the Zhou documents to legitimate the overthrow of the Shang is the badness of the last ruler of that dynasty, Zhouxin. Expectedly, Zhouxin is portrayed as a depraved and wicked sovereign; yet in sharp distinction from later accounts, early Zhou documents contain surprisingly few details about his alleged wickedness. Zhouxin (sometimes along with his immediate predecessors) is blamed for being excessive (*yin* 淫, a term which alternatively may refer to licentiousness) and lax (*yi* 逸); in particular, his heavy drinking is singled out as a singularly inappropriate feature. He obviously lacked sufficient virtue (*de* 德 – a sacred substance that was crucial for maintaining Heaven’s support) – and also failed to perform sacrifices properly. In addition, the “Shi fu” 世俘 chapter of the *Yizhou shu* 逸周書,

documents of the *Shang shu*. See Vassilij M. Kryukov, *Tekst i Ritual: Opyt Interpretatsii Dremekitaiskoj Epigrafiki Epokhi In’Chzhou* (Moscow: Pamiatniki Istoricheskoy Mysli, 2000); Kai Vogelsang, “Inscriptions and Proclamations: On the Authenticity of the ‘Gao’ Chapters in the *Book of Documents*,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74 (2002): 138–209. The concept of Heaven’s Mandate is raised in the He-zun 无尊 inscription, cast in 1036, at the very beginning of Zhou rule (see Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou Bronze Inscriptions,” in idem, ed., *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts*, [Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1997], 77–78). However, as Maria Khayutina recently pointed out in an on-line discussion of the Warring States Project, the identification of both the content and the dating of the inscription remains problematic. Thus, while few would dispute that my discussion presents Western Zhou views, it is possible that the emergence of ideas about Heaven’s mandate occurred later than is usually accepted.

7 See respectively *Shang shu zhengyi* 尚書正義, annotated by Kong Yingda 孔穎達, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, comp. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), “Kang gao” 康誥; “Duo fang” 多方; and *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, annotated by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, reprinted in: *Shisanjing zhushu*, “Wen wang” 文王.

8 For the invocations of the Xia precedent, see, e.g., *Shang shu*, “Shao gao” 召誥, “Duo shi” 多士 (which mentions Shang documents related to the overthrow of the Xia), “Duo fang”.

which Shaughnessy identified as one of the earliest accounts of the conquest of the Shang, mentions “one hundred evil servants” (e chen 惡臣) of Zhouxin who were personally executed by King Wu, and also notifies of execution of two of Zhouxin’s concubines.⁹ The text provides no further specifications about these servants’ or concubines’ possible crimes, but, as we shall see, in later texts these *topoi* will be more fully developed. Yet insofar as early Zhou accounts are concerned, Zhouxin appears as an inept ruler but surely not a monster.

At this point, one should warn against over-reliance on the *argumentum ex silentio*. The amount of authentic Western Zhou materials currently at our possession is too limited to allow decisive conclusions about the image of Zhouxin in that age. It is quite possible that other, more vicious attacks against Zhouxin existed elsewhere – e.g. in the original “Tai shi” (泰誓, “Great Pledge”) document, which is cited in several pre-imperial texts, but which was lost and replaced by a forged counterpart in the early imperial period.¹⁰ It is possible, therefore, that some of the later accusations against Zhouxin, surveyed below, derive from an earlier source.

These reservations notwithstanding, I think that the relatively lenient treatment of Zhouxin in the early Zhou texts is consistent with the ideological atmosphere of these texts. The abundance of warnings against the imminent threat of the loss of the Zhou Decree suggests that at the dawn of the Zhou rule violent replacement of the ruling dynasty was not perceived as an exceptional event but as a very imminent threat, which might happen even under an averagely inept ruler. Insofar as Zhouxin’s fate served as a warning to the Zhou kings, it was reasonable not to blacken him (and his predecessor, Jie 桀 of the Xia) beyond imagination. The Zhou documents repeatedly warn: any incompetent ruler can face rebellion and violent replacement of his dynasty, and even slightest neglect of the monarch’s responsibilities may have grave results, as “the Decree is not constant.”¹¹ It is the expectedness and the normality of the dynastic overthrow that critically distinguishes the Zhou documents from those of the later age.

The Forgotten Tyrant? Zhouxin in the Aristocratic Age

The notion of Heaven’s Decree is so pivotal in early Zhou documents and is so essential for the later imperial ideology that only few scholars noticed how surprisingly marginal it was during the centuries following the establishment of the Zhou rule.¹² Evidently, as centuries passed and the hereditary principle of rule became firmly established on each level of the Zhou sociopolitical pyramid, the very idea of dynastic change began losing its relevance.¹³

9 See, respectively, *Shang shu*, “Duo shi,” “Jiu gao” 酒誥, “Wu yi” 無逸; *Yi Zhou shu quanyi* 逸周書全譯, annotated and translated by Zhang Wenyu 張聞玉 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 2000), “Shi fu” 世俘 37:145.

10 For the history of the “Tai shi” document, see Jiang Shanguo 蔣善國, *Shang shu zongshu* 尚書綜述 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1988), 213–225.

11 See *Shang shu*, “Kang gao” 14:205c; *Mao shi*, “Wen wang” 16:505a.

12 A welcome exception to this general negligence is Michael Loewe’s “The Authority of the Emperors of Ch’in and Han,” rpt. in Loewe, *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 88–93 (although, as the following discussion suggests, some of Loewe’s observations require modification).

13 The hereditary principle of rule was maintained not only for the Zhou monarchs but in each of the regional states, ruled by local lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯), and below in each of the aristocratic lineages which

Thus, we have no evidence for the invocation of the Heaven's Decree principle during instances of internal turmoil in the Zhou house, such as the overthrow of Kings Li (周厲王, r. 878–841) and You (幽王, r. 781–771). If any of the Zhou opponents claimed that they possess Heaven's Decree and tried to replace the Zhou, their voices are nowhere to be heard.

This apparent indifference toward the possibility of dynastic change characterizes the subsequent Chunqiu (春秋, “Springs and Autumns,” 771–453) period, the heyday of aristocratic rule in China's history. The *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, our major repository of Chunqiu history and thought, is all but silent with regard to the notion of Heaven's Decree. The very compound *tian ming* appears in the *Zuo zhuan* almost exclusively in the context of discussing personal destiny, and occasionally the right to rule a single state, but never in the context of universal rule as it is used in the early documents of the *Shang shu*.¹⁴ Nowhere the idea of legitimate rebellion is discussed or Xia and Shang precedents are raised. While Zhouxin is mentioned occasionally in the *Zuo zhuan* as an example of a bad ruler, his putative excessiveness, oppressiveness and haughtiness do not single him out as an exceptionally wicked monarch; nor does his example serve to warn reigning sovereigns of the possibility of dynastic overthrow.¹⁵

This evident lack of interest in the idea of anti-dynastic rebellion is not incidental. After many centuries of aristocratic rule, the very idea that the ruling dynasty is replaceable became an oddity. Throughout the late Western Zhou and Chunqiu period, many rulers were killed or expelled by their nominal subjects; but these were invariably “family affairs,” as a killed or an ousted sovereign was routinely replaced by one of his kin. Just like in the lineage, where an individual leader could be sacrificed to allow survival of the kin group, so in a state, the replacement of a monarch was considered as a means of preserving the dynasty and not as a challenge to dynastic rule. This view was summarized in one of the ideologically most important speeches in the *Zuo zhuan*, allegedly pronounced in 559 by Master Kuang 師曠 of Jin 晉. Kuang explained to his ruler the principles of Heaven's supervision of the sovereigns:

天生民而立之君，使司牧之，勿使失性。有君而為之貳，使師保之，勿使過度。是故天子有公，諸侯有卿，卿置側室，大夫有貳宗，士有朋友，庶人、工商、皂隸、牧圉皆有親昵，以相輔佐也。善則賞之，過則匡之，患則救之，失則革之。¹⁶

gradually carved mini-states of their own under the regional lord's jurisdiction. During the first six centuries of Zhou history, not a single ruling house had been replaced by its underlings.

14 For the only instance in the *Zuo zhuan*, where the concept of Heaven's Decree is directly related to universal rule, see Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, annot., *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhuyi* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981, hereafter the *Zuo*), Xuan 3:672. This passage is in all likelihood a Han dynasty interpolation (see Hong Ye 洪業, “*Chunqiu jing zhuan yinde xu*” 春秋經傳引得序, in: idem, ed., *Chun qiu jing zhuan yinde* 春秋經傳引得 [Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1983], xc–xcii). In the Chunqiu period bronze inscriptions, *tian ming* appears in the context of possibly universal rule in a series of Qin inscriptions, for which see discussion in Yuri Pines, “Biases and their Sources: Qin history in the *Shiji*,” *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005–2006), 18–21 and Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shib-buang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), 59–105. See also Shu Yi-zhong 叔夷鐘 which mentions the decree received by the founder of the Shang dynasty, Cheng Tang 成湯 (Shirakawa Shizuka 白川靜, *Kinbun tsushaku* 金文通釋 [Kōbe: Hakutsuru bijutsukan, 1962–1984], vol. 38, no. 61, p. 363).

15 For references to Zhouxin, see e.g., *Zuo*, Zhuang 11:188; Zhao 4:1247; Zhao 7:1285.

16 *Zuo*, Xiang 14:1016–1017.

Heaven gives birth to the people and sets up the ruler to serve as their supervisor and pastor, not to make them lose their nature. As there are rulers, they are given helpers to teach them and protect them and to prevent them from exceeding [proper] measures. Hence, the Son of Heaven has his lords, regional lords have ministers, ministers have collateral lineages, nobles have collateral branches, *shi* 士 have [young] brothers and sons, commoners, artisans, merchants, lackeys, shepherds and grooms all have close relatives and associates who help and assist them. When [the ruler] is good he is rewarded; when he exceeds he is corrected; when he is in distress he is rescued; when he loses [the proper way] he is replaced.

Kuang's speech summarizes Chunqiu political experience. Heaven supposedly supervises the lords and prevents them from abusing their power – but this is done primarily through the help of the lords' closest kin. In a kin-based order, each member of the social pyramid is assisted and corrected by his relatives, who, in the extreme situation, are allowed to “replace” (*ge* 革) an erring leader. What is remarkably absent from this speech is a reference to a possibility of the overthrow of the ruling dynasty. It seems that after five centuries of unbreakable dynastic rule throughout the Chinese world, the precedents of the Shang and Zhou rebellions lost their relevance to political thinkers. Naturally, Zhouxin also became a marginal figure in contemporaneous political discourse.

This said, Kuang's speech indicates increased awareness of the precarious situation of many ruling houses in the regional states which comprised the Chunqiu world. By the sixth century BCE, powerful ministerial lineages, some of which were not related to the local dynasty, began systematically challenging their lords, at times reducing the latter to the position of hapless puppets. The progressive weakening of the rulers' power caused some thinkers to renew interest in the reasons for the dynasties' rise and fall. In 517, an unprecedented situation emerged in the state of Lu 魯, where a coalition of three ministerial lineages, led by the Ji 季 (Jisun 季孫) line, ousted Lord Zhao of Lu (魯昭公, r. 541–510) and, instead of establishing a puppet ruler, preferred to maintain power independently. The triumvirate ruled the state for seven years, until hapless Lord Zhao died in exile. These events resulted in several discussions, recorded in the *Zuo zhuan*, about the nature of the ruler's authority and the conditions for the dynasty's cessation. Of these, the most interesting analysis was presented by Scribe Mo 史墨 of Jin in a conversation with his master, Zhao Jianzi 趙簡子:

物生有兩、有三、有五、有陪貳。故天有三辰，地有五行，體有左右，各有妃耦，王有公，諸侯有卿，皆有貳也。天生季氏，以貳魯侯，為日久矣。民之服焉，不亦宜乎！魯君世從其失，季氏世修其勤，民忘君矣。雖死於外，其誰矜之？社稷無常奉，君臣無常位，自古以然。故《詩》曰：『高岸為穀，深穀為陵。』三后之姓於今為庶，主所知也。在《易》卦，雷乘乾曰大壯☳，天之道也。¹⁷

Living things have pairs, threes, fives and even numbers. Hence, Heaven has three celestial bodies, Earth has five elements, the body has right and left, everyone has his spouse. The king has dukes, lords have ministers, everyone has his deputy. A long time ago, Heaven gave rise to the Ji lineage to be deputies of the lords of Lu. Is it not appropriate that the people submitted to them [the Ji lineage]? For generations the Lu rulers were losing power, whereas the Ji lineage for generations diligently improved its position. The people have forgotten their ruler, and although he died in exile, who pities him? Altars of soil and grain have no constant protector, rulers and ministers have no constant position; since the ancient [days] it is so. Hence, the *Poems* say, “High banks turn into val-

17 *Zuo*, Zhao 32:1519–1520.

leys, deep valleys turn into cliffs.”¹⁸ The clans of the three rulers have turned into commoners, as you know.¹⁹ In the *Yi [jing]*, when *Zhen* (Thunder) mounts *Qian* (Heaven), it is called *Da zhuang* (Great Prowess) – this is the way of Heaven.²⁰

Scribe Mo’s speech resembles in many aspects that of Master Kuang, pronounced two generations earlier, but it contains also a revolutionary departure. Not just an individual lord can be replaced, but the entire ruling house can lose its position as protector of the “altars of soil and grain” (the sacred symbols of the polity) and be relegated to the commoner’s status. The rare invocation of the fate of earlier dynasties indicates the shift from the analysis of individual rulers’ misfortunes to the more foundational principle of dynastic change. From this point of view, Mo’s speech inaugurates the era of intensive debates around the principle of dynastic rule in general, as outlined below.

Taken from a different perspective, Scribe Mo’s speech appears as politically dangerous or even outright subversive. His analysis of dynastic change in the past and the present as inevitability could easily pave the way to ministerial coups and usurpations in the future. Mo’s intentions become more suspicious should we remind that his master and interlocutor, Zhao Jianzi, was precisely one of the “scheming ministers” who triggered the process of destruction of the ruling house in the state of Jin. Later Confucian moralists were specifically appalled by Scribe Mo’s bold claim that “rulers and ministers have no constant position,” considering this statement in a given context as particularly detrimental to political propriety.²¹ Indeed, if unchecked, such ideas could easily legitimate ministerial assault on the ruler’s power. Later thinkers had therefore to search for the ways as to accommodate the principle of dynastic change without undermining the very foundations of the dynastic-based political order. It is against this background that the figure of Zhouxin reappeared at the front of ideological debates.

The Ultimate Villain: Changes in Zhouxin’s Image

The Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221) was an age of overall political, social and intellectual changes, some of which undermined the theretofore almost inviolable hereditary principle of rule. The decline of the ruling dynasties in major regional states, such as Jin, which was divided among its powerful ministerial lineages in 403, proved the correctness of Scribe Mo’s assessment: “Altars of soil and grain have no constant protector, rulers and ministers have no constant position.” Concomitantly, proliferation of meritocratic ideas of “elevating the worthy” (*shang xian* 尚賢) had profoundly shattered the pedigree-based social order, which in turn caused some thinkers to ponder the possibility of abandoning the dynastic principle of rule in general.

18 See *Mao shi*, “Shi yue zhi jiao” 12:446 (Mao 193).

19 Yang Bojun suggests that Scribe Mo refers to the descendants of the Yu (虞, Shun’s 舜 legendary “dynasty”, Xia and the Shang (see his gloss on p. 1520).

20 According to Du Yu 杜預, the Heaven (*Qian* 乾) trigram ☰ symbolizes the Son of Heaven, whereas the Thunder (*Zhen* 震) trigram ☳ symbolizes a regional lord (supposedly, the underling of the Son of Heaven). In the hexagram *Da zhuang* 大壯, *Zhen* is the upper part: hence, a subject may “mount” his ruler (see Yang Bojun’s gloss on p. 1520).

21 See, e.g., Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞, *Jingxue tonglun* 經學通論 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 4:44–46.

The increasing skepticism with regard to the desirability of dynastic rule is well attested in the abdication legend, according to which paragon rulers of the past did not transmit the power to their progeny but rather abdicated in favor of worthy ministers.²² Yet while this imagined narrative of non-hereditary transfer of power became fairly popular in the first half of the Warring States period, the historically verifiable idea of “righteous rebellion” did not gain thinkers’ support. The reason for the visible uneasiness with which the overthrow of the Shang is treated in most texts of the Warring States is not difficult to assess: it directly contradicted the prevalent tendency of strengthening the ruler’s authority during that period.

As I have extensively discussed elsewhere, the Warring States period was an age of rapid proliferation of monarchism as the guiding political principle and the most important ideological construct.²³ Thinkers of various convictions and intellectual affiliations came to an almost unanimous conclusion that preservation of sociopolitical order would be impossible unless “All under Heaven” is unified under the aegis of a single omnipotent Monarch. While this did not mean idealization of contemporaneous rulers, who were frequently bitterly criticized, the idea of violent replacement of the reigning monarch had been generally rejected. Indeed, during the Warring States period only a handful of coups are recorded – in marked contrast to the preceding Chunqiu age.²⁴ It may be asserted that the power of individual rulers considerably increased, while the legitimacy of the dynastic principle of rule, conversely, decreased. The new political and intellectual situation required a reappraisal of the already canonical story of the overthrow of the Shang dynasty. It is on this background that new versions of the story of Zhouxin’s dethronement came into existence, in which this monarch was progressively demonized and thereby distinguished from the average inept and lax rulers, who were consequently “saved” from the danger of overthrow.

“Mu shi”

The inflation of Zhouxin’s crimes might have begun with a *Shang shu* chapter, “Mu shi” (牧誓, “Pledge at the Muye”), which presumes to come from the moment of the Shang overthrow, but which was probably composed on the eve of the Warring States period or slightly later.²⁵ “Mu shi” enumerates Zhouxin’s crimes as following:

22 For the proliferation of the abdication legend in the middle Warring States period, see Pines, “Disputers of Abdication: Zhanguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign’s Power,” *T’oung Pao* 91.4–5 (2005), 243–300.

23 I use the term “monarchism” in emulation of the term *Wangquanzhuyi* 王權主義, proposed by Liu Zehua 劉澤華 (*Zhongguo de Wangquanzhuyi* 中國的王權主義, Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2000). For a detailed discussion of the evolution of the monarchistic principles during the Warring States era, see Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Period* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 13–111.

24 See details in Yin Zhenhuan 尹振環, “Cong wang wei jicheng he shi jun kan junzhu zhuanzhi lilun de zhubu xingcheng,” 從王位繼承和弑君看君主專制理論的逐步形成, *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* 4 (1987), 17–24.

25 For the dating of the “Mu shi”, see Jiang Shanguo 蔣善國, *Shang shu zongshu* 尚書綜述 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1988), 226–227. This dating is disputed among others by Wang He 王和 who treats the text as reflecting authentic Western Zhou experience. See his “Guanyu lilun gengxin duiyu Xian Qin shi yanjiu yiyi de sikao – cong jiedu ‘Mu shi’ de qishi tanqi” 關於理論更新對於先秦史研究意義的思考——從解讀《牧誓》的啓示談起, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 4 (2003), 5–13.

王曰：「古人有言曰：『牝雞無晨。牝雞之晨，惟家之索。』今商王受，惟婦言是用。昏棄厥肆祀，弗答；昏棄厥遺王父母弟，不迪。乃惟四方之多罪逋逃，是崇是長，是信是使，是以為大夫卿士；俾暴虐于百姓，以奸究于商邑。」²⁶

King [Wu of Zhou] said: The men of old have a saying: “A hen does not call at sunrise. When a hen calls at sunrise, this means that the house is disordered.” Now, King Shou [=Zhouxin] of the Shang listens only to his wife; in a muddled way he abandoned his sacrifices, so that his offers are not responded; in a muddled way he abandoned his maternal uncle, unable to employ him. It is only the criminal fugitives of the four quarters, whom he really admires and makes into superiors, trusts and employs, turns into nobles and officers. He lets them violently oppress the hundred clans and engage in their evildoing in the Shang capital.

The concentration of Zhouxin’s crimes in this short passage surpasses that of almost all earlier texts together. An entirely novel *topos* is the supposedly negative role played by Zhouxin’s wife or concubine (identified elsewhere as his *femme fatale*, Daji 妲己). This accusation, of which we know nothing from earlier texts, may well derive from retroactive projection of the story of another *femme fatale*, the spouse of King You of Zhou, Baosi 褒姒, whose scheming caused succession struggles directly leading to the demise of the Western Zhou in 771.²⁷ Another accusation, namely Zhouxin’s alleged dismissal of his uncle and employment of “criminal fugitives” (probably turncoats who fled from the courts of Zhouxin’s rivals) echoes similar misdeeds of several Chunqiu rulers, whose attempts to get rid of hereditary ministers and employ personal favorites were a frequent source of coups throughout the sixth century.²⁸ These accusations, in addition to more “traditional” ones (mishandling sacrifices and oppressiveness) suggest that the authors tried to turn Zhouxin into a paradigmatic evil ruler, whose misdeeds equaled to or surpassed all the known misdeeds of other “bad” sovereigns. Although Zhouxin is not portrayed here as extraordinarily monstrous, there is an unmistakable sense of escalation of anti-Zhouxin polemics.

Mozi

Mozi (墨子, c. 460–390), one of the earliest eminent thinkers of the Warring States period, was also the first to considerably expand the Zhouxin’s legend. An innovative thinker, Mozi exemplifies both major ideological trends depicted above: doubts regarding the desirability of hereditary rule, but also explicit dislike of openly defying the sovereign. Ideally, as Mozi explains in the “Elevating Uniformity” (or “Conforming Upwards,” *Shang tong* 尚同) chapters, the ruler should be “the most benevolent man in All under Heaven” and his subjects are supposed “to approve whatever the Son of Heaven approves, and to disapprove whatever the Son of Heaven disapproves.”²⁹ But what happens when the ruler is not an ideal one? Mozi suggests that such a sovereign may indeed be replaced; but he emphasizes that the task of

26 *Shang shu*, “Mu shi” 牧誓, 11:183b.

27 For historical Baosi and her role in the fall of the Western Zhou, see Li Feng, *Landscape and Power*, 198–203.

28 See, e.g., *Zuo*, Cheng 17:900–903; Zhao 3:1243; Zhao 7:1296, see also Zhao 7:1283–1285 where soon-to-be-overthrown King Ling of Chu tries to harbor fugitives from the courts of his subordinates and is directly compared to Zhouxin.

29 天子之所是，皆是之，天子之所非，皆非之。《*Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注，compiled and annotated by Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), “Shang tong shang” 尚同上 III.11:110.

dethronement should be performed only after the supreme deity, Heaven, endorsed it, as it did when Jie and Zhouxin reigned amid awful atrocities, :

天以為不從其所愛而惡之，不從其所利而賊之，於是加其罰焉，使之父子離散，國家滅亡，扞失社稷，憂以及其身。³⁰

Heaven thought that they hate those whom Heaven loves and harm those whom Heaven benefits; hence it increased their punishment, causing fathers and sons [of their state] to be scattered, their state and family destroyed, altars of soil and grain lost, and the calamity reaching them personally.

Under which circumstances does Heaven intervene against a reigning monarch? Mozi's answer is embedded in a few stories, which enumerate the circumstances concerning the replacement of Jie and Zhouxin. Thus, in a discussion about the nature of the deities' (*gui* 鬼) intervention in politics, he states:

昔者殷王紂，貴為天子，富有天下，上詬天侮鬼，下殃傲天下之萬民，播棄黎老，賊誅孩子，楚毒無罪，剝剔孕婦。庶舊鰥寡，號咷無告也。故於此乎，天乃使武王至明罰焉。武王以擇車百兩，虎賁之卒四百人，先庶國節窺戎，與般人戰乎牧之野，王乎禽費中、惡來，眾畔百走。武王逐奔入官，萬年梓株，折紂而繫之赤環，載之白旗，以為天下諸侯僂。³¹

In the past, King Zhou[xin] of the Shang in terms of status was Son of Heaven; in terms of richness, he possessed All-under-Heaven. Yet above he reviled Heaven and insulted spirits; below he brought disasters and behaved haughtily to the multitudes. He exposed the aged and murdered the children, tortured the innocent and dissected pregnant women. The common people and the widows and the widowers cried aloud, but were not heard. Thereupon Heaven commissioned King Wu to carry out the numinous punishment. With a hundred selected chariots and four hundred tiger-warriors King Wu appointed his officials and reviewed his forces. He battled the armies of Yin [Shang] in Muye, capturing Fei Zhong and E Lai; and [the Shang] multitudes deserted and fled. King Wu rushed into the palace of myriad-years catalpa trunks. He executed Zhou[xin] and hung him on a red ring with [his crimes] enumerated on a white flag, to make an exemplar execution for the regional lords under Heaven.

In this passage, Zhouxin for the first time turns from an ordinary wicked ruler into the heinous villain, who “exposed the aged and murdered the children, tortured the innocent, and dissected pregnant women.” It is hinted that only the accretion of such awful crimes and the resultant plight of the multitudes brought about Heaven's intervention and its support of King Wu's uprising. Under an average incompetent ruler, we may conclude, the rebellion would lack Heaven's support and hence be illegitimate. This exceptionality of Jie and Zhouxin's cases is emphasized in a stronger way in the “Fei gong xia” (非攻下, “Contra Aggression C”) chapter, where Mozi discusses instances of legitimate political violence:

遷至乎商王紂，天不序其德，祀用失時，兼夜中十日，兩土于薄，九鼎遷止，婦妖宵出，有鬼宵吟，有女為男，天雨肉，棘生乎國道，王兄自縱也。赤鳥銜珪，降周之岐社，曰：「天命周文王伐殷有國。」泰顛來賓，河出綠圖，地出乘黃。武王踐功，夢見三神曰：「予既沈漬殷紂于酒德矣，往攻之，予必使汝大堪之。」武王乃攻狂夫，反商作周，天賜武王黃鳥之旗。王既已克殷，成帝之來，分主諸神，祀紂先王，通維四夷，而天下莫不賓。焉襲湯之緒。此即武王之所以誅紂也。

30 *Mozi* “Tian zhi xia” 天志下 VII.28:320.

31 *Mozi*, “Ming gui xia” 明鬼下 VIII.31:342–343.

When we come to the King Zhou[xin] of the Shang, Heaven did not prolong his virtue; his sacrifices were not according to the seasons. The night lasted for ten subsequent days;³² it rained soil for ten days at [the Shang capital,] Bo; the nine cauldrons moved from their place;³³ witches appeared in the dark and ghosts sighed at night. Some women turned into men; flesh came down from Heaven like rain; thorny brambles covered up highways in the capital, yet the king became even more dissolute. A red bird holding a *gui* tablet by its beak descended on Zhou altar at Mt. Qi, proclaiming: “Heaven decrees King Wen of Zhou to attack Yin [Shang] and to take possession of its capital.” Tai Dian then came to be minister to (King Wen). The River generated charts; Earth generated *chenghuang*.³⁴ As King Wu ascended the [Zhou] throne [after King Wen’s death], he dreamt of three deities saying [on behalf of the Thearch?]: “Now that I have deeply submerged Zhou[xin] of Yin in ale-muddled virtue, go and attack him! I shall certainly let you destroy him.” Then King Wu set out and attacked the mad fellow [Zhouxin], rebelling against the Shang and creating Zhou. Heaven gave King Wu the Yellow Bird Pennant. Having conquered Yin he accepted the Thearch’s gift, divided responsibilities for [worshiping] the deities; sacrificed to the ancestors of Zhou[xin], established connections with the aliens of the four borders, and none in the world dared to show disrespect. Then he continued [the Shang founder,] Tang’s achievements. Thereupon, King Wu put Zhou[xin] to death.³⁵

Mozi’s narrative is fairly interesting, not only for its possible incorporation of what appears to be early mythological materials related to the overthrow of the Shang, but also for its hidden message. While Mozi ostensibly endorses King Wu’s righteous war, a careful reading of the narrative leads to a more qualified conclusion. The fantastic accumulation of portents and omens, endless stories of cosmic disasters during the reign of Zhouxin, the repeated interventions by Heaven’s representatives urging Kings Wen and Wu to act – all this creates an almost satiric effect. At the very least, the plausibility of the entire story looks seriously impaired. What is the aim of this inflated narrative? I believe it hints at a conclusion that only a comparable accumulation of omens and portents would justify war or rebellion in the future. Mozi turns the overthrow of Jie and Zhouxin into exceptional events, which are of limited relevance to the present. Under normal circumstances, nobody should claim that he is a new recipient of Heaven’s Decree.

Rong Cheng shi

Multiplication of Zhouxin’s crimes was a common characteristic of most texts from the Warring States period; but it could serve different political agendas. Thus, in the “Mu shi,” Zhouxin appears as a synthesis of the previous rulers’ misdeeds, while in the *Mozi* his exceptionality serves to limit the appeal of anti-dynastic rebellion. In a slightly later text, the recently unearthed *Rong Cheng shi* 容成氏, published by the Shanghai Museum, Zhouxin’s crimes are narrated with a different agenda in mind. The *Rong Cheng shi* is one of the longest and the best preserved texts from the Shanghai Museum collection, and it focuses exclusively on dynastic changes in the past. As I have shown elsewhere, the text is designed primarily as to buttress the desirability of the ruler’s abdication as the only laudable mode of power transfer, while it

32 The sentence is not clear; an alternative translation would be that ten suns appeared simultaneously in the night.

33 The nine cauldrons are the ultimate symbol of the royal power.

34 Charts from the Yellow River (*He tu* 河圖), writings from the river Luo (*Luo shu* 洛書) and the appearance of the magical animal, *chenghuang* 乘黃, became by the Warring States period attributes of the new Decree-bearer (see glosses in *Mozi*, 238, notes 114–115).

35 *Mozi* “Fei gong xia” V.19:220–221.

remains skeptical both with regard to the dynastic rule and with regard to righteous rebellion.³⁶ This complex approach is reflected in the narrations of the Xia and Shang history in the *Rong Cheng shi*, which are limited almost exclusively to the misdeeds of the last monarchs of these dynasties and their subsequent overthrow:

湯王天下三十又一世而紂作。紂不述其先王之道，自爲芑（昏）爲，於{42}是乎作爲九成之臺，置孟炭其下，加圓木於其上，思（使）民道之，能遂者遂，不能遂者，內（墜）而死，不從命者，從而桎梏之。於是{44}乎作爲金桎三千。既爲金桎，又爲酒池，厚樂於酒，溥夜以爲淫，不聽其邦之政。{45}

[Descendants of] Tang [湯, the Shang founder] ruled All under Heaven for thirty-one generations, and then Zhou[xin] appeared. Zhou[xin] did not follow the Way of the former kings, behaving in the muddled way.³⁷ Thus he made a nine-layered terrace, placing beneath it a *yu* vessel full of charcoal.³⁸ Above he placed a round wooden [beam], letting the people to walk on it; those who were able to tread on it, passed; those who failed fell down and died; those who refused his orders were fettered in the shackles. Then he created three thousand metal fetters; also he built ponds of ale, extensively delighting himself in ale, extending the night for his debauchery, and refusing to attend governmental affairs.

The *Rong Cheng shi* adds further dimensions to Zhouxin's wickedness: his sadistic predilection to torture his innocent subjects certainly makes him illegitimate. Yet the authors do not wholeheartedly endorse the idea of rising up, even against such a vicious tyrant:

於是乎九邦叛之：豐、鎬、舟、□（石邑？）、子、鹿、{45}耆、崇、密須氏。文王聞之，曰：“雖君無道，臣敢勿事乎？雖父無道，子敢勿事乎？孰天子而可反？”紂聞之，乃出文王於{46}夏臺之下而問焉，曰：“九邦者其可來乎？”文王曰：“可。”文王於是乎素端褰裳以行九邦，七邦來服，豐、鎬不服。文王乃起師以嚮{47}豐、鎬，三鼓而進之，三鼓而退之，曰：“吾所知多盡，一人爲無道，百姓其何罪？”豐、鎬之民聞之，乃降文王。文王持故時而教民{48}時，高下肥瘠之利盡知之，知天之道，知地之利，思民不疾。昔者文王之佐紂也，如是狀（莊）也。{49}

Then nine countries rebelled: Feng, Hao, Zhou 舟, Shiyi (??), Yu, Lu 鹿, Li, Chong and the Mixu lineage.³⁹ Hearing about this, King Wen said: “Even if a ruler lacks the Way, how would the subject dare not to serve him? Even if a father lacks the way, how would the son dare not to serve him?”

36 See Pines, “Disputers of Abdication”, and idem, “Subversion Unearthed: Criticism of Hereditary Succession in the Newly Discovered Manuscripts,” *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005–2006), 159–178. For the original publication of the *Rong Cheng shi*, see Li Ling 李零, ed., *Rong Cheng shi*, in *Shanghai bonnguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhusu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, edited by Ma Chengyuan 馬承源. Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, Vol 2 (2002), 247–293. My discussion closely follows the alternative rearrangement of the text by Chen Jian 陳劍, “Shangbo jian *Rong Cheng shi* de zhujian pinhe yu pianlian wenti xiaoyi” 上博簡《容成氏》的竹簡拼合與編連問題小議. In: *Shangbo guan cang Zhanguo Chu zhusu yanjiu xubian* 上博館藏戰國楚竹書研究續編, edited by Shanghai daxue gudai wenming yanjiu zhongxin 上海大學古代文明研究中心 and Qinghua daxue sixiang wenhua yanjiu suo 清華大學思想文化研究所 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2004), 327–334. In what follows in figure brackets I indicate the slip's number according to the original publication; invariably, I use modern Chinese characters instead of the original ones.

37 Following Liu Jian 劉劍, “Rong cheng shi' shi du yi ze” 《容成氏》釋讀一則, in: *Shangbo guan cang Zhanguo Chu zhusu yanjiu xubian*, 351–352, I read the disputed character 芑 as 芑, which is a loan for 昏.

38 Maria Khayutina (personal communication) suggested that the oddity of the shape of the Shang period *yu* vessels might have fuelled the imagination of the Warring States observers causing them to suspect that the vessels represented something strange and evil.

39 For a tentative identification of these localities, see Qiu Dexiu 邱德修, *Shangbo Chu jian 'Rong Cheng shi' zhuyi kaozheng* 上博楚簡《容成氏》注譯考證 (Taibei: Taiwan guji chubanshe), 2003, 612–619.

Who can rebel against the Son of Heaven?” Hearing about this, Zhou[xin] released⁴⁰ King Wen from beneath the Xia Terrace, and asked him: “Can the nine countries be forced to come [and submit]?” King Wen answered: “They can.” Then King Wen wearing plain [mourning] clothes and girding his loins traveled through the nine countries. Seven countries submitted, while Feng and Hao – did not. King Wen then raised an army and approached Feng and Hao; he drummed thrice and approached; drummed thrice and retreated, saying: “My knowledge has many limits, but if one person lacks the Way, what is the guilt of the hundred clans?” When the people of Feng and Hao heard this, they submitted to King Wen. King Wen then, being attached to the times of old, taught the people [proper] seasonal [activities], introducing them comprehensively to the advantages of high and low, of fertile and non-fertile [terrain]; introduced [them] to the Way of Heaven and advantages of Earth, thinking how to dispel the people’s maladies. So thriving was then King Wen’s support of Zhou[xin]!

King Wen explicitly denies legitimacy of any rebellion against an acting ruler. Instead of joining and leading the rebels, he quells their activities, threatening the more stubborn of them with military action. King Wen’s activities in Zhouxin’s service may well indicate that even under a vicious ruler the good minister can attain certain achievements.⁴¹ The authors laud this conciliatory policy of King Wen; but King Wen’s heir, King Wu, discontinued it.

文王崩，武王即位。武王{49}曰：“成德者，吾斂而代之。其次，吾伐而代之。今紂爲無道，昏者百姓，至(制)約諸侯，天將誅焉。吾勵天威之。”武王於{50}是乎作爲革車千乘，帶甲萬人，戊午之日，涉於孟津，至於共、滕之間，三軍大範。武王乃出革車五百乘，帶甲三千，{51}以小會諸侯之師於牧之野。紂不知其未有成政，而得失信於民之辰（朕？）也，或亦起師以逆之。武王於是乎素冠冕，以告{52}閔于天，曰：“紂爲無道，昏者百姓，至約諸侯，絕種侮姓，土玉水酒，天將誅焉，吾勵天威之。”武王素甲以陳於殷郊，而殷{53}recto}

When King Wen died, King Wu assumed the position [of the Zhou king]. King Wu said: “If my virtue is complete, I shall convince him [Zhouxin] to be replaced; alternatively I shall invade and replace him. Now, Zhou[xin] lacks the Way, muddles the hundred clans, constrains the regional lords; Heaven is going to punish him. I shall support Heaven, overawing him.” Then King Wu prepared a thousand war chariots and ten thousand armored soldiers. On the *wumu* day he marched through [the Yellow River] at Meng Ford, arriving at a location between Gong and Teng. The three armies were greatly ordered. King Wu then dispatched five hundred war chariots and three thousand armored [soldiers] to make a small meeting with the army of the regional lords at the Shepherds’ Wild (Muye). Zhou[xin] was unaware of failures of his government and of his loss of trust by the people; hence he raised the army to oppose [King Wu]. Thus King Wu, wearing plain clothes and hat, declared to Heaven saying: “Zhou[xin] lacks the Way, muddles the hundred clans, constrains the regional lords; exterminates his kin and destroys his clan; he [treats] jade as earth, and ale as water. Heaven is going to punish him. I shall support Heaven, overawing him.” Wearing white armor, King Wu arranged his troops at the outskirts of [Zhouxin’s capital,] Yin, but Yin ...

This part of the *Rong Cheng shi* narrative differs from the well-known versions of the Zhou victory over the Shang. Unfortunately the last slip(s) of the text is missing,⁴² which prevents us

40 Following a well-known legend of King Wen’s imprisonment by Zhouxin I translate here *chu* 出 as “to release,” although nowhere the text indicates that King Wen was initially imprisoned by Zhouxin.

41 A similar notion of King Wen’s support of Zhouxin is mentioned in the *Liushi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋, compiled and annotated by Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1990), “Xing lun” 行論 20.6:1389–1390, where, however, it is interpreted as a sophisticated propaganda aimed at gaining popularity rather than a genuine support of the ruler’s unequivocal legitimacy.

42 Since the name of the text, *Rong cheng shi*, appears on the verso of the last extant slip (#53), it is unlikely that more than a few slips of the entire text are missing.

from reconstructing the narrative in its entirety, but it is clear that it gives only partial support to the notion of righteous rebellion. King Wu twice declares his intention to support Heaven in overawing (*wei* 威) rather than punishing Zhouxin, and he appears cautious with regard to military action, sending only a smaller part of his army to Muye. Ultimately, no military encounter between the opposing sides is recorded, supporting Asano Yūichi's conjecture that King Wu's goal was simply to display military might in order to convince Zhouxin to yield the throne rather than directly overthrow him.⁴³ The overthrow of the Shang may thus be a kind of misunderstanding rather than the case of justified rebellion.

Three texts depicted above – the “Mu shi,” Mozi and *Rong Cheng shi* – slightly differ in their political emphases but they follow a common pattern of inflating Zhouxin's crimes, ultimately turning him into a monster. This accretion of Zhouxin's misdeeds continued throughout the Warring States and beyond, adding such colorful (and/or macabre) details as creating ponds of ale and forests of meat, among which mass orgies were commanded by Zhouxin; dissecting Zhouxin's righteous cousin, Bigan 比干, pickling or boiling regional lords and consuming their flesh and the like.⁴⁴ Surely not all of these additions derived from hidden political agendas – some were evidently fuelled by literary considerations, a kind of ancient Chinese “yellow journalism” – but their accretion further buttressed exceptionality of Zhouxin's case. Generally, demonization of Zhouxin served as the most convenient way to diminish the relevance of his overthrow for current political struggles. It may be summarized, then, that for most narrators, the Zhou rebellion against the Shang was surely justified – but under normal circumstances it was not an appropriate way of changing the erring sovereign or replacing his dynasty.

Debates about Rebellion in the Late Warring States Period

Chinese thinkers' predilection to embed sensitive political discussions in a historical narrative is well illustrated by fluctuations of the Zhouxin narrative discussed above. Yet by the second half of the Warring States period aside from the ongoing embellishment of Zhouxin's legend, one can observe a new trend toward deeper analysis of the overthrow of the Shang and its implications for the issue of legitimate rebellion in general.⁴⁵ In particular, three of the most important thinkers of that age, namely Mengzi (孟子, c. 380–304), Xunzi (荀子, c. 310–230) and Han Feizi (d. 233), presented innovative views of rebellion. As their three approaches conveniently summarize the entire range of attitudes toward rebellion in the late pre-imperial discourse, they deserve a more detailed summary.

43 Asano Yūichi 淺野裕一, “*Rong Cheng shi* de shanrang yu fangfa” 《容成氏》的禪讓與放伐, in Asano Yūichi, *Zhangguo Chunqiu yanjiu* 戰國楚簡研究, trans. by Sato Masayuki 佐藤將之 (Taipei: Wanjuan lou, 2004), 97–100.

44 For an attempt to enumerate all the items of Zhouxin's atrocities in pre-imperial and early imperial texts, see Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, “Zhou e qishi shi de fasheng cidi” 紂惡七十事的發生次第, rpt. in *Gu Jiegang gushi lunwenji* 顧頡剛古史論文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), Vol. 2, 211–221.

45 This trend toward analytically more sound argumentation is consistent with what was observed for the late Warring States period by Sato Masayuki in his *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xun Zi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

Mengzi

Mengzi's views of rebellion appear to be by far more radical than those of other known thinkers. While being unwaveringly committed to the ruler-centered order, Mengzi firmly believed that this order is maintainable only under a truly moral sovereign. The ruler's morality is of utmost importance for the morality of his subjects: "When the ruler is benevolent – everybody is benevolent; when the ruler is righteous – everybody is righteous; when the ruler is correct – everybody is correct."⁴⁶ But what happens when the throne is occupied by an immoral sovereign, one of those whom Mengzi dubbed "criminals," "devourers of human flesh" and "those who have proclivity to kill humans"?⁴⁷ Mengzi audaciously proclaims that such a sovereign loses the right to rule. In a putative conversation with King Xuan of Qi (齊宣王, r. 319–301), Mengzi clarifies his views.

齊宣王問曰：「湯放桀，武王伐紂，有諸？」孟子對曰：「於傳有之。」曰：「臣弑其君，可乎？」曰：「賊仁者，謂之賊；賊義者，謂之殘。殘賊之人，謂之一夫。聞誅一夫紂矣，未聞弑君也。」⁴⁸

King Xuan of Qi asked: "Did it happen that Tang expelled Jie, while King Wu attacked Zhou[xin]?" Mengzi replied: "This is reported in the *Traditions*." [The king] said: "Is it permissible that a minister murders his ruler?" Mengzi said: "One who commits crimes against benevolence is called 'criminal'; one who commits crimes against righteousness is called 'a cruel one.' A cruel and criminal person is called 'an ordinary fellow.' I heard that an ordinary fellow Zhou[xin] was punished, but did not hear of murdering a ruler."

In his reply to the king, Mengzi departs from Mozi's or the *Rong Cheng shi's* mode of emphasizing Zhouxin's unusual atrocities and his subsequent punishment by the almighty Heaven. To the contrary, the thinker refers to routine violations of the norms of benevolence and righteousness as a sufficient justification to overthrow and execute the culprit. Any reader of Mengzi's philippics against contemporary rulers will not fail to notice that those do not differ considerably in his eyes from Jie and Zhouxin. What is then a practical conclusion from this analysis? Should contemporary rulers face execution and overthrow just like the past tyrants? And if so, who will decide upon such an execution? Most remarkably, Mengzi fails to mention Heaven (which elsewhere in the *Mengzi* is attributed with important political tasks)⁴⁹ as the major factor behind the demise of Jie and Zhouxin. Does this mean that the rebellion is a normative action against an immoral sovereign? Mengzi does not raise this dangerous question in a conversation with the king,⁵⁰ but a clue to an answer may be obtained from another statement of his:

46 君仁莫不仁，君義莫不義，君正莫不正。 *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注, annotated by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), "Li Lou shang" 離婁上 7.20:180.

47 See respectively, *Mengzi*, "Gaozi xia" 告子下 12.7:287; "Li Lou shang" 7.14:175; "Liang Hui Wang shang" 梁惠王上 1.6:12–13.

48 *Mengzi*, "Liang Hui Wang xia" 梁惠王下 2.8:42.

49 For the role of Heaven in the *Mengzi*, see, e.g., *Mengzi*, "Wan Zhang shang" 萬章上 9.5–9.6:219–222.

50 Remarkably, Mengzi justified rebellion in a putative conversation with the reigning monarch (or so at least Mengzi's disciples want us to believe). A possible explanation of this audacity may be that King Xuan of Qi had a problematic background (his ancestors deposed the line of legitimate lords of Qi), and that he might have even be glad for Mengzi's legitimation for the dynastic overthrow. Needless to say, this conjecture cannot be verified.

孟子曰：「待文王而後興者，凡民也。若夫豪傑之士，雖無文王猶興。」⁵¹

Mengzi said: “To await for King Wen and only then to rise up, is [the behavior] of a common folk. As for the truly outstanding *shi*, even if there is no King Wen, they would rise up.”

This statement is usually interpreted as hinting at a positive moral impact of a ruler like King Wen; the term *xing* (興 “to arise”, “to rise up”) is interpreted as “to be moved and inspired.”⁵² This interpretation is not necessarily correct, however. Those who awaited King Wen to stand up were participants in his rebellion against the Shang (which was the single most important activity of King Wen). Does Mengzi imply that a truly outstanding *shi* 士 should rise up even without a glorious leader such as King Wen? In the light of the above conversation with King Xuan, this interpretation cannot be easily dismissed. Mengzi then appears as almost a revolutionary, a person who calls upon fellow *shi* to arise and put an end to Zhouxin’s current counterparts!

If the above interpretation is correct, Mengzi should be considered the most radical of Warring States period thinkers in terms of his attitude toward the contemporary rulers’ authority. He certainly accepts rebellion as a legitimate political means, and his fascination with the “righteous wars” launched by the founders of the Shang and Zhou further suggests his uncompromising support for the victory of the morally superb monarchs.⁵³ This radicalism had, however, dangerous implications. Insofar as Mengzi’s views were voiced to the rulers only, as a radical kind of remonstrance, they were tolerable; but should they disseminate among the educated elite as a whole, they could easily become a source of rebellious activities. This may explain why nowhere in the texts of the Warring States can we find anything comparable to Mengzi’s outspokenness.⁵⁴

Xunzi

Xunzi is frequently identified as an “authoritarian” thinker, whose views regarding the indispensability of a ruler – any ruler – as a guarantor of sociopolitical order make him a less likely

51 *Mengzi*, “Jin xin shang” 盡心上 13.10:304.

52 興者，感動奮發之意。Cited from Zhu Xi’s (朱熹, 1130–1200 CE) gloss in *Sishu zhangju ji zhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), “Mengzi jizhu” 孟子集注 13:352; for similar glosses by Zhao Qi (趙岐, d. 201 CE) and Sun Shi (孫奭, 962–1033 CE), see *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (rpt. *Shisanjing zhushu*) 13:2765a. This interpretation was successful enough to allow retaining this passage in the abridged version of the *Mengzi* (*Mengzi jienwen* 孟子節文, compiled by Liu Sanwu 劉三五, rpt. in *Beijing tushuguan guji zhenben congkan* 北京圖書館古籍珍本叢刊 [Beijing: Shumu, 1988], 7:1006), which the Hongwu (洪武, 1368–1398) Emperor purged of potentially “subversive” sayings. For further details, see Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 80–81.

53 See, e.g., *Mengzi*, “Liang Hui wang xia” 2.11:45–46, “Teng Wen gong xia” 滕文公下, 6.5:147–148.

54 The *Tuan* 象 commentary on the 49th hexagram, Ge (革, Overturn), of the *Zhou yi* 周易 states among others: “Heaven and Earth overturn, and the four seasons are accomplished; by overturning the Decree [the Kings] Tang and Wu complied with Heaven, and responded to men. Great is indeed the timeliness of ‘Overturn!’” (*Zhou yi zhengyi* 周易正義, annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達; rpt. *Shisanjing zhushu*, 5:60c). Some scholars overemphasize this passage as justification of righteous rebellion (see, for example, Liu Xiaofeng 劉小楓, *Rujia geming jingshen yuanyuan kao* 儒家革命精神源流考 [Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 2000], 33–44). Without denying the importance of the *Zhou yi* in imperial times, I doubt that this specific commentary had a true impact on the Warring States period discourse; nor was the idea of the “inevitability” of violent “revolutions” present anywhere outside the *Mengzi*.

candidate to endorse the notion of righteous rebellion. This observation notwithstanding, the *Xunzi* abounds in warnings to the rulers that their position cannot be taken for granted; thus the text cites an anonymous tradition: “The ruler is a boat; commoners are the water. The water can carry the boat; the water can capsize the boat.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Xunzi is even more outspoken: after enumerating malpractices of contemporaneous sovereigns, he warns:

是以臣或弑其君，下或殺其上，粥其城，倍其節，而不死其事者，無它故焉，人主自取之。⁵⁶

Hence when some ministers murder their rulers, when inferiors kill their superiors, when [the people] are timid about defending the walls, turn back on their obligations, and are not ready to die in [the rulers'] service – it is for no other reason than the ruler had chosen this himself.

The harshness of this pronouncement cannot be ignored. A ruler who behaves improperly loses his right to rule; he bears the sole responsibility for his future dethronement and “while he was enfeoffed as a regional lord and is named ‘a ruler’, he does not differ from a mere fellow and a robber.”⁵⁷ This saying directly resembles those of Mengzi and ostensibly places Xunzi among radical supporters of “righteous rebellion.”

Xunzi’s surprising support for the right to rebel may derive partly from his admiration of the Zhou dynastic founders, especially the architect of the Zhou state, the Duke of Zhou. Indeed, like most other thinkers who adopted the early Zhou documents as a quintessence of political wisdom, Xunzi could not possibly reject the rightness of rebellion in principle. Yet Xunzi is much more careful than Mengzi in his support of the former rebellions. Not only does he explicitly deny the right to rebel to a minister who lives under a cruel tyrant,⁵⁸ but also his analysis of the overthrow of Jie and Zhouxin differs considerably from that of Mengzi. Xunzi clarifies his views in the “Zheng lun” (正論, “Discussing the correct”) chapter, one of the most interesting polemical sections of the *Xunzi*:

世俗之為說者曰：「桀、紂有天下，湯、武篡而奪之。」是不然。以桀、紂為常有天下之籍則然，親有天下之籍則[不]然，天下謂在桀、紂則不然。⁵⁹

The vulgar people say: “Jie and Zhou[xin] possessed all under Heaven, while Tang and Wu usurped and robbed it.” This is not so. Indeed, Jie and Zhou[xin] happened to inherit the regalia of All under Heaven; they indeed personally possessed the regalia⁶⁰ of All under Heaven – but it is untrue that All under Heaven was possessed by Jie and Zhou[xin].

55 傳曰：「君者，舟也，庶人者，水也。水則載舟，水則覆舟。」*Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, compiled by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), “Wang zhi” 王制V.9:152. For detailed analysis of Xunzi’s views of rulership, see Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 82–97.

56 *Xunzi*, “Fu guo” 富國 VI.10:182–183.

57 如此者，雖封侯稱君，其與夫盜無以異。*Xunzi*, “Zheng ming” 正名 XVI.22:431.

58 “When encountering a calamitous age, living in poverty in a violent state and having nowhere to escape, you should praise [the ruler’s] fine character, hail his goodness, avoid [exposing] his badness, conceal his mistakes; speak of his advantages and do not mention his shortcomings.” (*Xunzi*, “Chen Dao” 臣道 IX.13:251–252) The rebellion is not an option even in “a violent state”!

59 *Xunzi*, “Zheng lun” XII.18:322.

60 Following Wang Xianqian I omit the negation 不 from the second sentence (see his gloss on pp. 322–323).

Like Mengzi, Xunzi asserts that Jie and Zhouxin were fraudulent monarchs. Yet the reasons for their failure do not just lie in the moral realm, but, rather, in the realm of politics, where they displayed woeful ineptitude:

古者天子千官，諸侯百官。以是千官也，令行於諸夏之國，謂之王。以是百官也，令行於境內，國雖不安，不至於廢易遂亡，謂之君。聖王之子也，有天下之後也，執籍之所在也，天下之宗室也，然而不材不中，內則百姓疾之，外則諸侯叛之，近者境內不一，遙者諸侯不聽，令不行於境內，甚者諸侯侵削之，攻伐之。若是，則雖未亡，吾謂之無天下矣。⁶¹

In antiquity, the Son of Heaven had one thousand officials, the regional lords had one hundred officials. He who properly employs one thousand officials, and whose orders are implemented throughout the Xia (“Chinese”) states, is called the [True] Monarch. He who properly employs one hundred officials, whose orders are implemented within the borders [of his domain], and whose state, even if unsettled, still does not deteriorate toward decline and loss – is called a [regional] ruler. The descendants of sage kings and the posterity of the possessors of All under Heaven – those are the owners of power and regalia, they are the dynastic trunk of All under Heaven. Yet if they lack talents and are unfitting, then inside, the hundred clans resent them; outside, regional lords rise against them; then, nearby the territory within the boundaries is not unified, and farther away [regional] lords do not heed their orders. When the orders are not heeded within the boundaries, then in the worst case regional lords diminish their domain, attacking and invading it. In that case, even if they are not lost, I call this “having no possession of All under Heaven.”

It was only due to complete collapse of political authority that Jie and Zhouxin deserved being overthrown. Their failure created in turn favorable conditions for their rivals who promptly utilized their chance:

天下無君；諸侯有能德明威積，海內之民莫不願得以為君師；然而暴國獨侈，安能誅之，必不傷害無罪之民，誅暴國之君，若誅獨夫。若是，則可謂能用天下矣。能用天下之謂王。湯武非取天下也，脩其道，行其義，興天下之同利，除天下之同害，而天下歸之也。桀紂非去天下也，反禹湯之德，亂禮義之分，禽獸之行，積其凶，全其惡，而天下去之也。天下歸之之謂王，天下去之之謂亡。故桀紂無天下，湯武不弑君。⁶²

When there is no ruler in All under Heaven, while among the regional lords there is one who is able to clarify his virtue and accrete awesomeness, then among the people within the seas, each one turns to him hoping that he would become a ruler and a leader. In that case, when vicious states behave excessively, he will punish them without harming innocent people, punishing their rulers as if punishing a single fellow. If so, he can be named one who is able to make use of All under Heaven. He who is able to make use of All under Heaven is the [True] Monarch.

Tang and Wu did not seize All under Heaven. They upheld their Way, implemented their righteousness, elevated common benefit of All under Heaven, exterminated common harm of All under Heaven, and All under Heaven turned to them. Jie and Zhou[xin] did not abandon All under Heaven. They turned their back to the virtue of [their dynastic founders] Yu 禹 and Tang 湯, wreaked havoc in the distinctions of ritual and propriety, behaved as beasts and birds, accumulated their vice, fully [manifested] their evilness, and All under Heaven abandoned them.

He, to whom All under Heaven turns, is the [True] Monarch (*wang* 王); he, whom it abandons is lost (*wang* 亡). Hence, Jie and Zhou[xin] did not possess All under Heaven, while [kings] Tang and Wu did not commit regicide.

61 Xunzi, “Zheng lun” XII.18:322–323.

62 Xunzi, “Zheng lun” XII.18:323–324.

Xunzi shifts the discussion of legitimate rebellion from Mengzi's realm of pure morality to that of political performance. The rebellion is legitimate only when a reigning ruler fails to exercise his foundational task of upholding the political order. In these conditions, as the society faces imminent collapse, a morally upright subject of the erring sovereign becomes the default choice of the populace and acquires exceptional political legitimacy. Thus, the rebellion loses its "rebellious" aspect but becomes instead a punitive operation performed by a would-be world sovereign against a criminal who lost his monarchic aura. Since what matters in the failure of Jie and Zhouxin is their political and not merely moral ineptitude, Xunzi's account of their alleged wickedness is surprisingly brief:

桀、紂者，其知慮至險也，其至(志)意至闇也，其行為至亂也；親者疏之，賢者賤之，生民怨之。禹、湯之後也，而不得一人之與；剝比干，囚箕子，身死國亡，為天下之大謬，後世之言惡者必稽焉，是不容妻子之數也。⁶³

As for Jie and Zhou[xin]: Their thought was extremely dangerous; their desires extremely benighted; their behavior extremely calamitous. Their relatives were estranged from them; the worthies despised them; the people resented them. Despite being the descendants of Yu and Tang, they had nobody to support them; they dissected Bigan, arrested Jizi;⁶⁴ they were personally killed and their state overthrown; they were greatly punished by All under Heaven, and those in later generations who talk of wickedness refer to their [case]. This is the way of not providing for your wife and children.

Xunzi's depiction of the badness of Jie and Zhouxin appears modest in comparison to the *Mozi* or *Rong Cheng shi*. While asserting that they were indeed depraved tyrants, Xunzi does not treat them as exceptionally monstrous. The real focus of his discussion is the political failure of these sovereigns, which caused them to lose the support of relatives, worthies and the people, becoming an easy prey to their adversaries. Xunzi summarizes:

故至賢疇四海，湯、武是也；至罷不容妻子，桀、紂是也。今世俗之為說者，以桀、紂為有天下而臣湯、武，豈不過甚矣哉！

Hence, the worthiest inherit [all within the] four seas; those are Tang and Wu. The extremely unworthy cannot provide for their wife and children: those are Jie and Zhou[xin]. Now, the vulgar people of the age say that Jie and Zhou[xin] possessed All under Heaven and had Tang and Wu as their servants – is it not too excessive?⁶⁵

Xunzi completes his reinterpretation of the story of the dynastic overthrows of the past. In exceptional situations the principle of "elevating the worthy" is indeed applicable at the very top of the government apparatus. This is not done, as some earlier thinkers asserted, through a peaceful process of the ruler's abdication in favor of a worthier candidate,⁶⁶ but, rather amidst great violence. This violence, however, derives from the "unworthy" ruler's inability to maintain political order, his loss of the reins of power and the resultant woeful turmoil. It is only

63 *Xunzi*, "Zheng lun" XII.18:325.

64 Both atrocities are attributed to Zhouxin. Bigan was his righteous uncle, whose heart Zhouxin reportedly ordered to dissect to verify whether or not the sage's heart has seven openings. Jizi remonstrated and being unheeded fled the state. See Sima Qian 司馬遷 et al., *Shiji* 史記, annotated by Zhang Shoujie 張守節, Sima Zhen 司馬貞 and Pei Yin 裴駟 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997) 3:107–108.

65 *Xunzi*, "Zheng lun" XII.18:325.

66 For Xunzi's staunch opposition to the notion of the ruler's abdication, see Pines, "Disputers of Abdication," 289–291.

under these circumstances of complete political disintegration – and not just due to the tyrant’s moral failures – that replacement of a “fraudulent” sovereign becomes inevitable, and hence justifiable. Behind the familiar clichés of Jie and Zhouxin’s wickedness, Xunzi shifts the justification of their dethronement from the realm of punishment of evildoers to the realm of restoring political order. As long as the ruler’s power remains efficient it is sacrosanct – even under an evil monarch – and it ceases to be so only when the ruler fails to maintain his basic sociopolitical tasks. In these exceptional circumstances, a righteous contender for power has the right and the duty to replace the nullity on the throne; otherwise, the ruler’s underling has no choice but to heed his master’s commands.

Han Feizi

Xunzi’s unknown opponents, the “vulgar people” who denied legitimacy of any rebellion, including that of the founders of the Shang and the Zhou, represented what may be a novel trend in the late Warring States period monarchistic thought. The complete and unequivocal rejection of any insurrection figures prominently in the text associated with Xunzi’s disciple, Han Feizi. No other thinker had identified himself so squarely with the interests of the rulers, and no other text is so abundant with repeated warnings to the sovereigns that they should guard themselves against their scheming underlings.⁶⁷ Not only imminent plots endanger the rulers, but the very proliferation of subversive discourse, such as talks of rebellions and abdications in the past, is detrimental to the ruler-based order. In the chapter on “Loyalty and Filiality” (“Zhong xiao,” 忠孝) Han Feizi clarifies:

天下皆以孝悌忠順之道為是也，而莫知察孝悌忠順之道而審行之，是以天下亂。皆以堯、舜之道為是而法之，是以有弑君，有曲於父。堯、舜、湯、武，或反君臣之義，亂後世之教者也。堯為人君而君其臣，舜為人臣而臣其君，湯、武為人臣而弑其主、刑其尸，而天下譽之，此天下所以至今不治者也。夫所謂明君者，能畜其臣者也；所謂賢臣者，能明法辟、治官職以戴其君者也。今堯自以為明而不能以畜舜，舜自以為賢而不能以戴堯，湯、武自以為義而弑其君長，此明君且常與，而賢臣且常取也。故至今為人子者有取其父之家，為人臣者有取其君之國者矣。父而讓子，君而讓臣，此非所以定位一教之道也。⁶⁸

All under Heaven affirm the Way of filiality and fraternity, of loyalty and compliance, but they are unable to investigate the Way of filiality and fraternity, of loyalty and compliance, and to implement it precisely; hence All under Heaven are in chaos. Everybody affirms the Way of Yao and Shun, and models himself accordingly: hence, some murder their rulers and some behave hypocritically toward their fathers.

Yao and Shun, [kings] Tang and Wu: each of them opposed the propriety of ruler and minister, wreaking havoc in the teachings for future generations. Yao was a ruler who turned his minister into a ruler; Shun was a minister who turned his ruler into a minister; Tang and Wu were ministers who murdered their masters and defamed their bodies; but All under Heaven praise them: therefore until now All under Heaven is lacking orderly rule. After all, he who is called a clear-sighted ruler is the one who is able to nurture his ministers; he who is called a worthy minister is the one who is able to clarify laws and regulations, to put in order offices and positions and to support his ruler. Now Yao

67 See detailed discussion in Pines, *Emissioning Eternal Empire*, 97–106.

68 *Han Feizi jijie* 韩非子集解, compiled by Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), “Zhong xiao” 忠孝 XX.52:465–466.

considered himself clear-sighted but was unable to feed Shun,⁶⁹ Shun considered himself worthy but was unable to support Yao, Tang and Wu considered themselves righteous but murdered their rulers and superiors: this means that the clear-sighted ruler should constantly give, while a worthy minister constantly take. Hence until now there are sons who take their father's patrimony, and ministers who take their ruler's state. When a father yields to a son, and a ruler yields to a minister this is not the Way of fixing the positions and unifying the teaching.

Han Feizi shares the premise of earlier thinkers, notably including his erstwhile master, Xunzi, that maintaining the ruler's position is of pivotal importance for preservation of the moral social order based on "filiality, fraternity, loyalty and compliance," and he takes this observation to its logical conclusion. If the ruler is the apex of this order, then any assault on his position is deplorable, and the hereditary monarchy itself is also sacrosanct. Han Feizi dismisses both alternatives to the dynastic principle of rule: either abdication or rebellion undermine the very foundations of the monarchical institution and *mutatis mutandis* of the social order in general. Logically, preservation of the ruler's supreme authority becomes the most important task of a thinker and a statesman, and this is indeed what Han Feizi focuses on throughout most of his chapters.

Safeguarding the ruler's interests from any potential threat may be considered Han Feizi's single most prominent contribution to Chinese political thought. But what happens if this perfect system of preserving the ruler's power is abused by a wicked tyrant of Zhouxin's type? Han Feizi does not ignore this possibility, nor does he ignore Zhouxin's ill-doings. Yet as he explains, the occurrence of extremely wicked monarchs is an exception and not a rule, and its potential negative impact should not be exaggerated:

且夫堯、舜、桀、紂千世而一出，是比肩踵踵而生也。世之治者不絕於中，吾所以為言勢者，中也。中者、上不及堯、舜，而下亦不為桀、紂。抱法處勢則治，背法去勢則亂。今廢勢背法而待堯、舜，堯、舜至乃治，是千世亂而一治也。抱法處勢而待桀、紂，桀、紂至乃亂，是千世治而一亂也。且夫治千而亂一，與治一而亂千也，是猶乘驥騁而分馳也，相去亦遠矣。⁷⁰

Yao, Shun, Jie, and Zhou[xin] appear once in one thousand generations; they are like a living creature whose shoulders are behind his heels. Generations of rulers cannot be cut in the middle, and when I talk of power of the authority, I mean the average. The average is he who does not reach Yao and Shun above, but also does not behave like Jie and Zhou[xin] below. When one embraces the law and acts according to the power of his authority, then there is orderly rule; when one turns his back on laws and on the power of authority, there is calamity. Now, if we abandon authority, turn back to law and wait for Yao and Shun, so that when Yao and Shun arrive there will be order, then in a thousand generations, one will be well ruled. If we endorse the law and locate ourselves within the power of authority, and then await Jie and Zhou[xin] so that when they arrive there will be calamity, then in a thousand generations, one will be calamitous. So, to have one orderly generation among thousand calamitous ones or to have one calamitous generation among thousand orderly ones – this is like galloping [in opposite directions] on the thoroughbreds Ji and Er: the distance between them will be great!

Han Feizi is aware of the possibility that a perfect system such as the one he is seeking would serve a tyrant, an ultimately bad ruler who would utilize his unlimited power to achieve his

69 Referring to Shun's humble position under Yao's rule before his sudden elevation, see *Han Feizi*, "Nan yi" 難一 XV.36:349–350.

70 *Han Feizi*, "Nan shi" 難勢 XVII.40:392.

sinister aims, bringing calamity and destruction on himself and his subjects. However, for Han Feizi this is a regrettable, but unavoidable price for the proper social order under an ordinary sovereign. A realist, Han Feizi does not expect a truly enlightened sovereign to reign frequently, but similarly, monsters like Jie and Zhouxin are also exceptions. Hence, rebellious activities should never be endorsed – and even praise of the past rebellions should be castigated:

故人臣毋稱堯、舜之賢，毋譽湯、武之伐，毋言烈士之高，盡力守法，專心於事主者為忠臣。⁷¹

Thus, the minister should not praise the worthiness of Yao and Shun, should not extol the punitive expeditions of Tang and Wu, should not talk of the loftiness of zealous *shi*. [Only] he who with the utmost force preserves the law and focuses whole-heartedly on serving the ruler is a loyal minister.

After centuries of debates about righteous rebellion, Han Feizi proposes to abolish this dangerous discourse altogether and to eliminate thereby any potential danger to the unshakeable principle of the ruler's absolute authority. Those who explore Zhouxin's badness and justify thereby his overthrow are plotting against the current rulers and are undermining the very foundations of the ruler-centered political order. Their voices – as one of the most brilliant political analysts of the Warring States era proposes – should be simply disallowed.

Epilogue: Legitimate Rebellion in the Imperial Era

Shortly after Han Feizi died in the Qin custody, failing to meet the king of Qin, his ideas witnessed a momentous triumph. The king of Qin unified the Chinese world, proclaimed himself the First Emperor (秦始皇帝, r. 246–221–210), and inaugurated a new era in Chinese history. This era of “Great Peace” (*tai ping* 太平) was supposed to last indefinitely under the Emperor's descendants, and the Emperor promised that “warfare will never rise again.”⁷² As the Emperor attained his power not through insurrection but through annexation of “the powerful and unruly” regional kings,⁷³ the very idea of Heaven's Decree in its early Zhou interpretation appeared to be irrelevant to Qin's experience, which explains its absence from the Qin imperial proclamations. In the world reigned by the “Great Sage” (*tai sheng* 泰聖) the very notion of righteous rebellion had become illegitimate, and it may be plausibly assumed that it was among the targets of the infamous biblioclasm against the *Speeches of the Hundred Schools* initiated by the Emperor and his chancellor, Li Si 李斯 in 213.⁷⁴

71 Han Feizi, “Zhong xiao” 52:468.

72 For identifying Qin with “Great Peace”, see the Kuaiji 會稽 inscription of the First Emperor; for the promise that “warfare will never rise again”, see the Mt. Yi 嶧山 inscription (221 BCE); this inscription is not recorded in the *Shiji*. See Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation*. New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000, 49 and 14.

73 See the Langye 琅邪 inscription (Kern, *Stele*, 32).

74 For the First Emperor's self-identification as “the Great Sage,” see the Kuaiji inscription (Kern, *Stele*, 45 n136); see also the Zhifu 之罘 inscription (Kern, *Stele*, 35). For an excellent discussion of Qin inscriptions, Qin history, and the Qin biblioclasm, see Kern, *Stele*; see also Pines, “The First Emperor as a Historical Junction,” paper presented at the workshop “The Birth of Empire: The State of Qin Revisited,” Jerusalem, Dec 10–19, 2008.

Yet as is well known the Qin dynasty, which was supposed to last “myriad generations” was short-lived. A series of massive popular uprisings which swept it away, appear as fulfillment of Xunzi’s prediction: the commoners “capsized” the ruler’s boat. How did the rebels justify their daring act? Surprisingly, the issue of legitimacy of anti-dynastic rebellion occupied only a marginal portion of their propaganda, as reflected in the *Shiji* 史記. Possibly, followers of Chen She (陳涉, d. 208), Xiang Yu (項羽, d. 202), Liu Bang (劉邦, d. 195) and their ilk either viewed Qin as a conqueror and not as a regular dynasty, or were more concerned with glory and riches they would attain in case of victory rather than with the need to legitimate their act. If the *Shiji* is to be trusted, then the interest in the dynastic legitimacy and the right to rebel resurfaced only in the aftermath of the establishment of the Han dynasty (漢, 206 BCE–220 CE). Its resurgence may be related to the renewed confirmation of the emperor’s ties with Heaven as the supreme source of his power, which is evident already in Liu Bang’s sacrificial hymns.⁷⁵

The Han debates of the right to rebel developed in the entirely new intellectual and political atmosphere from that of the Warring States. The great sensitivity of this topic is evident in the *Shiji* account of a debate between two early Han scholars, Yuan Gu 轅固 and Mr. Huang 黃生. The latter disapproved of the rebellions by kings Tang and Wu against Jie and Zhouxin, while the former presented a traditional view according to which the tyrants’ cruelty caused the people to flock to Tang and Wu. To this, Mr. Huang replied:

黃生曰：“冠雖敝，必加於首；履雖新，必關於足。何者，上下之分也。今桀紂雖失道，然君上也；湯武雖聖，臣下也。夫主有失行，臣下不能正言匡過以尊天子，反因過而誅之，代立踐南面，非弑而何也？”⁷⁶

Even when a hat is worn out, it is still to be put on head; even when shoes are new, they are still put on feet. Why is it? Because of the distinction between superiors and inferiors. Now, although Jie and Zhou[xin] lost the Way, they still were rulers; although Tang and Wu were sagacious, they still were subjects. When a ruler has some misdeeds, while his subject is unable to preserve the dignity of the Son of Heaven by correcting his words and rectifying his mistakes, but instead uses the ruler’s errors to punish him and replace him, facing south and assuming the ruler’s position – what is it if not regicide?

This resort to Han Feizi-related arguments was dismissed by Yuan Gu:

轅固生曰：“必若所云，是高帝代秦即天子之位，非邪？”⁷⁷

So, then was it the fault of [the Han founder,] Gao Di, [Liu Bang, r. 206–195] to replace the Qin and assume the position of the Son of Heaven?

By redirecting the discussion from exploration of abstract principles of righteous rebellion to the sensitive issue of the Han legitimacy, Yuan Gu effectively prevented his opponent from replying. It was the emperor who intervened and decided to stop the debate:

75 For the analysis of Liu Bang’s hymns, see Martin Kern, “In Praise of Political Legitimacy: The *miao* and *jiao* Hymns of the Western Han,” *Oriens Extremus* 39.1 (1996), 29–67. Qin inscriptions contain no reference to either Heaven’s Mandate or Heaven as a supreme deity; this *topos* apparently reappeared in China’s imperial discourse only in Liu Bang’s times.

76 *Shiji* 121:3123.

77 *Shiji*, 121:3123.

於是景帝曰：“食肉不食馬肝，不為不知味；言學者無言湯武受命，不為愚。”遂罷。是後學者莫敢明受命放殺者。⁷⁸

Jingdi said: “A meat-eater who does not eat the liver of the horse is not accused of lacking good taste; a scholar who does not debate the Decree of Tang and Wu is not accused of being stupid.” He dismissed the discussion. Thereafter no scholar dared to discuss who received the decree and who expelled or murdered [his ruler].

This anecdote may serve as a useful summary of the new intellectual atmosphere under the unified empire. The issue of the right to rebel became too sensitive to allow open debates. The Han, like most of the subsequent dynasties, came to the throne amidst resurrection against their predecessors, and as such its leaders could not reject the right to rebel outright. Nor could they endorse such a right enthusiastically, however, as they had to be doubly cautious with regard to potential rebellions in the future. The result was a curious mixture of early views. On one hand, rebellion-related discourse was discouraged, even if not as resolutely as Han Feizi would recommend. On the other hand, in light of both ancient and recent precedents the rebellion continuously served as a potent threat against monarchical abuses. The possibility that the subjects would follow Mengzi’s dictum and “rise up” was never explicitly discussed, but it might have well stood at the background of the willingness of many rulers to mend their ways in order to prevent potential violent response of their underlings.⁷⁹ Yet in the long term it was Xunzi whose analysis of the rebellion proved most appropriate. Throughout the imperial history, rebellions against cruel monarchs occurred much rarer than Mengzi would imagine: and insofar as these monarchs continued to firmly hold power in their hands, these rebellions could never get sufficient support, as examples of Han Wudi (漢武帝, r. 141–87 BCE), Wu Zetian (武則天, r. 684–705 CE) and the Ming Hongwu Emperor (洪武, r. 1368–1398) exemplify. The insurrection was gaining legitimacy only when the monarch was failing to preserve the reins of power in his hands, allowing the state to sink into overall turmoil. Under these conditions, a rebel could reasonably accept support in his capacity as a restorer of sociopolitical order, and the rebellion itself became instrumental in saving the monarchic principle of rule rather than undermining it. It seems that with regard to the issue of rebellion, just as with regard to many other topics, it was Xunzi who had grasped the essential features of Chinese political culture.⁸⁰

78 *Shiji*, 121:3123.

79 For a summary of the views of the right to rebel in the imperial period, see Zhang Fentian 張分田, *Zhongguo diwang guanlian – shehui pubian yishi zhong de ‘jun jun – zui jun’ wenhua fanshi* 中國帝王觀念—社會普遍意識中的“尊君—罪君”文化範式 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2004), 369–387.

80 For other instances of Xunzi’s “prescience” (or, more precisely, his direct contribution to the imperial political culture), see, e.g., Pines, “Disputers of the *Li*: Breakthroughs in the Concept of Ritual in Preimperial China,” *Asia Major* (third series) 13, no. 1 (2000): 1–41; idem, “Friends or Foes: Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China,” *Monumenta Serica* 50 (2002): 35–74.