

On the Succession of the Thrones in Early Ancient China

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Abstract: This essay argues that the succession of the thrones possibly originated from Confucius, and then it was developed by his seventy famous disciples, and later it faded when confronted by Xunzi's strong assertion in the Rites system. This process reflects the arduous exploration of the pre-Qin Confucianist School into traditional Chinese political system from both theory and practice. The succession of the thrones is not only an innovation based on the historical facts in early ancient China, but also a reconciliation for the chaos back then. The scene of societal prosperity brought by the succession of the thrones is depicted at the beginning of chapter *Yao Code, the Book of History*. Also, in *the Analects*, the praise of the Kings Yao, Shun and Yu can be regarded as the praise of the succession of the thrones, yet it has an inner tension with the Rites system. The strong relationship between the primitive Confucianist School and *the Way of Tang and Yu* as well as *Rong Cheng Shi*, the bamboo slips unearthed in Hubei Province, negates the possibility that the latter are the works of the Mohist School. The succession of the thrones proposed by the pre-Qin Confucianist School was strongly suppressed both by the feudal lords for the sake of their vested interests and the traditional Rites system, which are the genuine reasons for the disappearance of the fore-mentioned and related literature. At the very core of the succession of the thrones, there exists a spirit of criticism on the reality at the time, which showed strong sympathy towards the masses who lived in adversity, and it is an important national resource in the process of China's modern construction of its political system.

Key words: The Pre-Qin Confucianist School, the Succession of the Thrones, Rites, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Reasoning and Potential

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Since the publications of *the Way of Tang and Yu*, *Zi Gao* and *Rong Cheng Shi*, the bamboo slips which were unearthed in the Chu tombs in Jingmen, Hubei Province, the issue of the succession of the thrones has become one of the most heated topics in the academia both home and abroad. It is argued that the succession of the thrones possibly originated from Confucius, and then it was developed by his seventy famous disciples, and later it faded when confronted by Xunzi's strong assertion in the Rites system. This process reflects the arduous exploration of the pre-Qin Confucianist School into traditional Chinese political system from both theory and practice. The succession of the thrones is not only a narrative of the early ancient Chinese history, but also a reconciliation for the chaos of the pre-Qin vassal states that "battled for land, and the battlefields were filled with the slain; battled for cities, and the cities were full of the slain" at the time. An in-depth study into this issue would not only assist the

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academia in further understanding the essence of the political philosophy of the pre-Qin Confucianist School and the development of Confucianism, but also sort out the political and philosophical resources of the Chinese nation from the perspective of the succession of the thrones, so that it would provide China with insights for its political system construction in the modern era.

The Background of the Succession of the Thrones

We argue that the primary significance of the discovery of *the Way of Tang and Yu* and *Rong Cheng Shi* is that they not only invalidated Gu Xiegang's assertion that "the legend of the succession of the thrones originated from the Mohist School", but also invalidated Tong Shuye's claim that the word "Tang and Yu" had not existed before Mencius. As Tong Shuye stated in his essay, *Probing into the Origins of Emperor Yao and the Taotang Tribe*, in the following:

In Chapter Wanzhang, the Book of Mencius, it writes: "Confucius said, 'The abdications of Tang and Yu, as well as the successions of the thrones throughout the dynasties of Xia, Shang and Chou, are of the same significance.'"

If the above quotation had not been added into the Book of Mencius by later scholars, then the word "Tang and Yu" first appeared here, hence the association of Tang and Yao. The consecutive order of "Tang" and "Yu" is rarely seen in the pre-Qin classics, yet quite common in the works of the scholars in Han Dynasty. ⁽²⁾

In today's research field of the unearthed bamboo slips and silk books, a consensus has been reached by scholars that the burial date of Chu slips at Guodian is between the eras of Confucius and Mencius. Therefore, Mencius' words proved that the use of "Tang" and "Yu" together as a word had emerged before him. The authenticity of this passage by Mencius could be confirmed in that Confucius did mention the successions of the thrones by the two kings "Tang" and "Yu". On top of this, the above statement cannot be invalidated until further contrary evidence is presented. In the following, we would further analyze the rationality of this statement based on the Analects. As Gu Xiegang, the standard-bearer of the modern skeptical school, pointed out in his essay, *A Study on the Origin of the Legend of the Succession of the Thrones from the Mohist School*, in the following:

The successions of the thrones by Yao, Shun and Yu were ancient history that everyone had held to be true; ever since Kang Changsu raised the issue of Confucius' reorganization of the political system with reference to the early ancient times, the dignity of those historical idols had started to shake gradually. However, even if people suspected the hypocrisy of the succession of the thrones, they had always believed that the idea was made up by Confucius and it was the crystallization of the pre-Qin Confucianist School. Nobody knew that such a legend wouldn't have appeared until the Warring States Period, and that it couldn't have been fabricated by the Confucianist School. Now, the purpose of this essay is to reassign the legacy, which was considered to have been inherited from the early ancient times or the Confucianist School, back to its true master—the Mohist School. The fake

(2) 童书业 Tong Shuye, 《童书业史籍考证论集》*Tong Shuye Shiji kaozheng lunji*[Textual Research Collections of Ancient Classics by Tong Shuye], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2005) · 100.

historical facts of Yao, Shun and Yu would need to be exposed to show the true spirit of the Mohist School!⁽³⁾

From Gu Xiegang's perspective, he insisted on drawing a clear boundary between the Confucianist School and the Mohist School, so that the ideas of the two were not confused with each other, yet such a way of thinking is quite controversial. Although unprecedented archaeological discoveries were made in Gu's time, the excavated literature did not change the state of "darkness and indistinctness" concerning knowledge of the early ancient times in the academia. Therefore, it is fair to say that Gu's study was not sophisticated enough, and that he lacked an understanding of the development of ancient Chinese academics shown in *Chapter Tianxia, the Book of Zhuangzi*.

According to Sun Yirang's research, Mozi was from the state of Lu. In *Chapter Yaolue, Huainanzi*, it says, "Mozi studied Confucianism and learned from Confucius. He thought that the Rites of Confucianism were cumbersome and unpleasant, the funerals were excessively extravagant and made the masses poor, people wore mourning clothes for too long, and their businesses became affected."⁽⁴⁾ Evidence could also be found in *Chapter Dangran, Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* that Mozi received education in the state of Lu. In his *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, Hu Shi stated clearly, "Mozi must have been influenced by the Confucianist School dramatically."⁽⁵⁾ Therefore, even though the Mohist School advocated "the succession of the thrones", it cannot be denied that the same theory had not been proposed by the pre-Qin Confucianist School.

If one considers this from the perspective of history, it cannot be said that the succession of the thrones had not existed before Confucius. In *Chapter Biluxun, Huainanzi*, it says, "King Yao had no corridor of more than a hundred chi (about 1.09 feet) in length, King Shun had no land to place his personal belongings", and that "King Yu never had a village of more than 10 households."⁽⁶⁾ Also, in *Chapter Zhiben, Yuliaozi*, it says, "There was no private knitting or farming, and everyone experienced the cold weather and famine together."⁽⁷⁾ With extremely low productivity and under extremely harsh material conditions in the primitive society, the society could only have been managed based on the principle of egalitarianism. In *History of the Pre-Qin Period*, Jian Bozan termed the eras of the kings Yao, Shun and Yu "the middle age of barbarism".⁽⁸⁾ Therefore, Gu's statement was categorical in that he claimed the legend of the succession of the thrones had been a "fake pseudo-historical fact". Moreover, even if the argued "succession of the thrones" had been "pseudo-history", there is no denying of its significance in China's intellectual history.

In addition, in *Chapter Xianxue, Hanfeizi*, it says, "Both Confucius and Mozi claimed that they had followed the true Way of the kings Yao and Shun, yet their practices were completely different; now that Yao and Shun are

(3) 顾颉刚Gu Xiegang, 《顾颉刚古史论文集》*Gu Xiegang gushi lunwenji*[Theses Collections of Ancient Chinese History by Gu Xiegang], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2011) · 119.

(4) 何宁He Ning, 《淮南子集释》*Huainanzi jishi* [Explaining the Book of Huainanzi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1998) · 1459.

(5) 胡适Hu Shi, 《中国哲学史大纲》*Zhongguo zhexueshi dagang*[Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy], (上海Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 1997) · 105.

(6) 何宁He Ning, 《淮南子集释》*Huainanzi jishi* [Explaining the Book of Huainanzi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1998) · 954.

(7) 华陆综Hua Luzong, 《尉繚子注译》*Yuliaozi zhuyi* [Explaining the Book of Yuliaozi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1979) · 44.

(8) 翦伯赞Jian Bozan, 《先秦史》*Xianqin shi*[History of the Pre-Qin Period], (北京Beijing: 北京大学出版社Beijing daxue chubanshe [Beijing: Beijing University Press] · 1990) · 88-96.

gone, who is to judge which school of thought is the authentic one?”⁽⁹⁾ It is thus obvious that both the Confucianist School and the Mohist School have advocated the succession of the thrones, since both schools of thought have inherited the same culture and been confronted by the same social issues, therefore it is entirely possible for them to offer similar strategies for the transformation of social systems.

As mentioned above, the succession of the thrones in the pre-Qin era originated from an early ancient legend. However, in the era of Confucius, scholars began to consider this issue rationally. Based on an in-depth study on *the Analects*, a few budding ideas about the succession of the thrones have already been proposed, as in the following:

(1) *Chapter Weizheng*

Aigong asks, “What needs to be done to make the masses obedient?”

Confucius replies, “If the upright and the just were chosen, then the people would obey them; if the dishonest were chosen, then people would not be convinced.”⁽¹⁰⁾

(2) *Chapter Yongye*

Zigong asks, “What if someone could love the masses extensively and help them? Is this benevolence?”

Confucius answers, “Such a person is more than being benevolent and he could be called a ‘sage’! Both King Yao and King Shun felt ashamed for they had not been capable of loving the masses enough! A benevolent man is someone who not only makes accomplishments himself, but also helps others do so; he not only becomes successful himself, but also helps others do so. If a person cares for others at all times, then we could say he would have practiced benevolence.”⁽¹¹⁾

(3) *Chapter Taibo*

Confucius says, “How great King Yao was! How sublime! Only Heaven would be the highest, yet Yao could be compared to the majesty of Heaven! How magnificent he was, that the masses did not know what language to use to express their gratitude! How accomplished he was, that the system he had formulated was so splendid and brilliant!”⁽¹²⁾

(4) *Chapter Taibo*

King Shun only had five ministers yet the country was ruled in order. King Wu says, “Now I have ten ministers to manage the country.”

Confucius says, “Sages are hard to come by, aren’t they? In the eras of the kings Yao, Shun and Wu of Zhou Dynasty, there was the largest number of sages. Among the ten ministers who worked for

(9) 王先慎Wang Xianshen, 《韩非子集释》*Hanfeizi jishi* [Explaining the Book of Hanfeizi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1998) · 457.

(10) 朱熹Zhu Xi, 《四书章句集注》*Sishu zhangju ji zhu*[Commentaries on the Four Books], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2012) · 58.

(11) 同上书 · 第91-92页。
Ibid., pp, 91-92.

(12) 同上书 · 第107页。
Ibid., pp, 107.

King Wu, there was even one woman. King Wen acquired two-thirds of the world's land, yet he still served the Yin Dynasty whole-heartedly. The moralities of the Chou Dynasty have been the highest.”⁽¹³⁾

(5) *Chapter Yanyuan*

Ji Kangzi asks Confucius a political question, “What do you think of killing those who did not abide by the Way in order to clear the path for those who did?”

Confucius answers, “Why would any king need to enforce the death penalty to manage a country? If he does good deeds, then the masses would follow! The morality of the king is like the wind, and the morality of the masses is like the grass: once the wind blows on the grass, the grass would surely be affected.”⁽¹⁴⁾

(6) *Chapter Zizhang*

“He who excels in learning should be promoted to be a government official.”⁽¹⁵⁾

How can “the upright” be promoted to leadership positions from among the masses? This issue wasn't discussed directly in *the Analects*. However, Confucius highly praised Zigong's claim that a leader should “give unselfishly to the masses and help them”, and his definition is “such a leader would be more than being benevolent and he could be called a sage! Both King Yao and King Shun felt ashamed for they had not been capable of loving the masses enough”, as shown in the quotation (2) above, which has reflected his yearning beyond words. From quotation (3), Confucius couldn't be any more emotional when he praised “Shun being the king”. He was also outspoken about the political achievements brought by the social management model of the succession of the thrones. Limited to its form, *the Analects* did not discuss the succession of the thrones in detail, yet it did not mean that Confucius had not witnessed the fact that the feudal warlords robbed the masses and treated them as private property, much less did it mean that the issue of the succession of the thrones had not been involved when Confucius had various discussions with his disciples. The excavation of the Chu bamboo slips *Zi Gao* shows exactly that Confucius held a strong critical view towards the prevailing phenomena of regime change at the time. From the above-mentioned quotations, it has also been clear that to fully realize the political ideals advocated in *the Analects*, the inevitable path can only be the implementation of the succession of the thrones. It is only through this approach that the ultimate goal, “the morality of the king as the wind”, could be achieved, and the proposal that “he who excels in learning should be promoted to be a government official” could become reality.

Therefore, Gu stated that “the succession of the thrones” was the embodiment of the Mohists' thought of “honoring the virtuous”. Gu also quoted Mozi as evidence: “If one would like to inherit the Way of the kings Yao, Shun, Yu and Tang, one must not disrespect the sages.”⁽¹⁶⁾ This assertion could neither be confirmed nor invalidated, yet if one can confirm that Mozi started his career from Confucius' teaching according to the quotations above,

(13) 同上书·第107-108页。.
Ibid., pp. 107-108.

(14) 同上书·第139页。.
Ibid., pp. 139.

(15) 同上书·第191页。.
Ibid., pp. 191.

(16) 孙诒让Sun Yirang, 《墨子闲诂》*Mozi xianqu*[Annotations of Mozi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company]·2001)·48-49.

one would be certain that either his “honoring the virtuous” or “the succession of the thrones” was based on the Confucianist School, or at least inspired by it.

In light of the texts of bamboo slips *the Way of Tang and Yu* and *Rong Cheng Shi* at Guodian, it is known that the thoughts are both from the Confucianist School and the Mohist School. With a more in-depth study, it is proved that these two works are closer in relation to Confucianism while further away from Mohism. Even if these two works are not downright Confucian, it can be inferred that there is a strong Confucian inclination. In *Rong Cheng Shi*, there are indeed traces of the Mohist School, yet there are also multiple inconsistencies.

The Succession of the Thrones Is an Aborted Dream

Based on a review of the handed-down literature of Confucius, his “succession of the thrones” is much weaker than his idea of “Rites”. According to Wang Guowei’s essay *On the Political Systems of the Yin and Chou Dynasties*, it is obvious that the system based on patriarchal blood kinship had ruled the whole China since the early Chou Dynasty. While advocating “benevolence”, Confucius also vigorously advocated the Rites system.⁽¹⁷⁾ Confucius said to his highly talented disciple Yanyuan, “Restraining oneself and acting according to the rules of Rites are called benevolence. Once this were achieved, then the world would be full of benevolence.” This results in the conclusion that the “Rites” are “benevolence”, and that if the Rites were implemented, then all the people would become “benevolent”. Therefore, the Rites have been pushed to the extreme: “One should look, listen, speak and act according to the requirements of the Rites and not the opposite”,⁽¹⁸⁾ which apparently, is Confucius’ attempt to reverse the situation of the “disintegration of the social institutions” during the Spring and Autumn Period.

It is worth noting that the Rites system in the pre-Qin period, as Yang Xiangkui put it, “No matter Chougong from the early Chou Dynasty or Confucius from the Spring and Autumn Period, their theories were all derivatives of the Rites and customs from the past.”⁽¹⁹⁾ In the early Chou Dynasty, the Rites had been elevated to the level of social norms which included looking, listening, speaking and acting. Therefore, when discussing the division of Jin Dynasty by the three schools, Sima Guang wrote, “Among a king’s duties, the most important one is to maintain the Rites, in which the most important thing is to differentiate the ruling and the ruled, and in which the most important thing is the rankings of officials. What are Rites? It is the law. What is differentiation? It is that the ruling and the ruled are different. What are titles? They are the rankings of officials, such as Gong, Hou, Qing and Dafu...Practicing the so-called Rites is to distinguish between the noble and the humble, to compare relatives to strangers, to categorize all things there are in the world, and to deal with daily affairs, for without a title one cannot articulate and without the object there is no form; only by using titles for people and names for things can the country be in order, and this is the very essence of the Rites. If there were no titles or names, how could the Rites exist on their own?”⁽²⁰⁾ The reason why Sima Guang’s book *History as a Mirror* started from “Jin Dynasty divided by the three schools of thought” is that he tried to use the situation to emphasize that the Confucian Rites

(17) 王国维 Wang Guowei, 《王国维论学集》 *Wang Guowei lun xue ji* [A Collection of Wang Guowei’s Works (北京 Beijing : 中国社会科学出版社 Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe [China Social Sciences Publishing House] · 1997) · 1-14.

(18) 朱熹 Zhu Xi, 《四书章句集注》 *Sishu zhangju ji zhu* [Commentaries on the Four Books], (北京 Beijing : 中华书局 Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2012) · 113.

(19) 杨向奎 Yang Xiangkui, 《礼的起源》 Li de qi yuan 【On the Origin of Li】 · 《孔子研究》 *Kongzi yanjiu* 【Confucius Studies】 · No. 1, (济南 Jinan: 中国孔子基金会 Zhongguo kongzi jijinhui 【China Confucius Foundation】 · 1986 · 34.

(20) 司马光 Sima Guang, 《资治通鉴》 *Zi zhi tong jian* [History as a Mirror], (上海 Shanghai : 上海古籍出版社 Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 1987) · 1.

were the most authoritative norms throughout Chinese history. The Rites advocated by Chou Gong had the same idea that Confucius pursued; therefore both had the same logic and were the same in essence. From the perspective of cultural inheritance, the very founder of the Confucianist School tried to use the ubiquitous “Rites” to reverse the situation of the “disintegration of the social institutions” in the Spring and Autumn Period. As in *Chapter Liqi, the Book of the Rites*, it says, “If one wished to understand things without the Rites, he would fail; if one acted without the Rites, he wouldn’t be respected; if one spoke without the Rites, he wouldn’t be trusted. Therefore, the Rites are the highest standards of all things.”⁽²¹⁾ Thus, it is true that this is a specific portrayal of the Rites system in the early Chou Dynasty.

Based on Wang Guowei’s research essay *Explaining Rites*, the word “Li (the Rites)” had already appeared in the oracle bone inscriptions, as he quoted on *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*: “Li is the norm of social etiquette: obeying the Rites is like people wearing shoes to walk. Abiding by the Rites leads to blessings.”⁽²²⁾ Thus, it is obvious that the Rites had always been a tradition throughout Chinese history. In addition, in *Chapter Yueji, the Book of the Rites*, it says, “The Rites are for people to restore their nature, to study the ancient Way, and not to forget its original intentions.”⁽²³⁾ In *Chapter Yueji, the Book of the Rites*, it also says, “The nature of Music is to give, and the nature of the Rites is to return”, and that “the meanings of the Rites and Music are indeed the same.”⁽²⁴⁾ In fact, the words “gu (ancient)” and “chu (the beginning)” referred to the ancestors who went through adversity to cultivate the mountains and forests. Therefore, it is concluded that the essence of the Rites is patriarchal blood kinship.

Regarding the origin and connotations of the Rites, the above quotations are not supposed to probe into the profound relationship between the Rites and patriarchal blood kinship, but to explain that since the very nature of the Rites is patriarchal blood kinship, upon which the political system was built, it can only result in a family-world, autocratic and centralized model in which the power is passed down from fathers to their sons. Although there are humanistic concerns in Confucius’ filial piety system, which has been revolutionary since the Shang and Chou Dynasties, they cannot cut off the complex relationships between fathers and their sons, as well as kings and the masses at the institutional level. If pushed to the extreme, the Rites are in fact an autocracy in which the power is inherited within the family. This is the inevitable result of the inseparability of the Confucianist’ ethics and political theory. From this, one can see the sharp conflict between the idea of Rites which were inherited from Chou Gong in *the Analects* and the idea of the succession of the thrones.

Regarding the issue above, answers have been sought from *Commentary on the Book of Changes*. As Zhang Xuecheng mentioned in *General Principles of History*, “*The Book of Changes* used the Way of Heaven to judge human affairs, while *the Spring and Autumn Annals* used human affairs to coordinate with the Way of Heaven, as examples can be found in the texts, which indicates that the sage should always be cautious.”⁽²⁵⁾ As far as “Qie Renshi” is concerned, it means that *Commentary on the Book of Changes* has a theoretical dimension of history,

(21) 孔颖达Kong Yingda, 《礼记正义》*Liji zheng yi* [Explaining the Book of the Rites], (上海Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 2008) · 1000.

(22) 许慎Xu Shen, 《说文解字》*Shuo wen jie zi*[Explanation of Script and Elucidation of Characters], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2013) · 1.

(23) 孔颖达Kong Yingda, 《礼记正义》*Liji zheng yi* [Explaining the Book of the Rites], (上海Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 2008) · 1000.

(24) 同上书·第1508页。

Ibid., pp. 1508.

(25) 章学诚Zhang Xuecheng, 《文史通义》*Wen shi tong yi*[General Principles of History], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2000) · 20.

culture, politics and the society. In *Xi Ci Zhuan*, it says, “Was the prosperity of *the Book of Changes* in the middle ancient times? Did the author not worry?”,⁽²⁶⁾ which has a spirit of reflection and a sense of anxiety. Although one cannot be sure if *Xi Ci Zhuan* was written by Confucius, there is no denying that Confucius had advocated such ideas in *the Book of Changes* based on the excavated silk books in Mawangdui—*Commentary on the Book of Changes* in Changsha, Hunan Province, let alone denying the fact that the core ideas of the handed-down *Xi Ci Zhuan* are indeed Confucius’. Based on the handed-down documents and the silk books unearthed in Mawangdui, Li Xueqin concluded that “in his later years, Confucius was very fond of *the Book of Changes*, and he also wrote *Commentary on the Book of Changes*, or he wrote part of it at least.”⁽²⁷⁾ He also added, “I certainly do not think *Commentary on the Book of Changes* in the pre-Qin era is the same version as the one we see today. The finalization of ancient books always required a long process, yet the main structure of *Commentary on the Book of Changes* had been constructed in the same era as *the Analects*, therefore it is closely associated with Confucius.”⁽²⁸⁾ Based on such a premise, one would not be surprised to discover that Chapter I of *Xi Ci Zhuan I* has a deep inner tension:

(7) Heaven is high and honorable, and the earth is low; Qian and Kun are determined accordingly. Things in the low and high are displayed; and they appear in order. Movement and stillness are constant, hence the distinction of the strong and the weak. Things of the same kind come together, and they are classified into different categories, hence the lucky and the unfortunate are produced.

(8) In Heaven there are signs and on earth there are forms, therefore transformations are seen. The hard and the soft interact with each other, and the eight trigrams are formed. Motivated by thunder and lightning, and fertilized by wind and rain, the orbit of the sun and the moon are created, hence the cold and the warmth. The Way of Qian makes the male and the Way of Kun makes the female.

(9) Qian brings the beginnings of all things, and Kun completes them. It is easy to perceive Qian through night and day, as well as Kun through all things in the world. The rules of Yi are easy to comprehend and follow. Such ease for comprehension would bring people closer to each other and such ease for implementation would help people achieve successes. Hence, Qian would be eternal and Kun would become spectacular, which would lead to the moralities and careers of the sages. With such ease, the Way of the world would be attained. With such attainment, people would then be able to find their places in the world.⁽²⁹⁾

From above, paragraph (7) is about the unchanging Rites, which means “Yi”; paragraph (8) is about change, which includes a view of historical development, either in order or chaos, and dialectics; and paragraph (9) is about how to comprehend the greatest morality. If one combined the three points above with the developments of

(26) 朱熹Zhu Xi, 廖明春Liao Chunming, 《周易本义》*Zhouyi ben yi* [The Original Meanings of the Book of Changes], (上海Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 2009) · 254.

(27) 李学勤 Li Xueqin, 《古文献丛论》*Gu wenxian cong lun* [On the Academics and Thoughts in Early Ancient China], (北京Beijing: 中国人民大学出版社Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe [China Renmin University Pres] · 2009) · 4.

(28) 同上书·第5页。

Ibid., pp. 5.

(29) 朱熹Zhu Xi, 廖明春Liao Chunming, 《周易本义》*Zhouyi ben yi* [The Original Meanings of the Book of Changes], (上海Shanghai: 上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 2009) · 221-223.

politics and history, he could see that Confucius had the budding idea or tendency to deny the immutable autocracy and the cyclical social model of ruling and disorder, and eventually advocated the succession of the thrones which led to a peak of Confucianists' moral politics—the Confucian “governance through inaction”. Such governance of Yi morality is the same as the morality mentioned in *Commentary on the Book of Changes*. If one combined Confucius' diligence in studying *the Book of Changes (Chapter Confucius' Life, Records of the Historian)* with his obsession in *Commentary on the Book of Changes (Chapter Yao, Commentary on the Book of Changes)* from the excavated silk books in Mawangdui) in his later years, one could deduce that the three lost classics, the *Way of Tang and Yu, Zi Gao* and *Rong Cheng Shi* might have had some direct or indirect relationship with Confucius.

It is known to all that Confucius was humble all his life and he never claimed to have been a “sage” or “benevolent man”, yet he had no modesty in his diligent and enterprising spirit in pursuing his ideals, as he said in *Chapter Shu'er, the Analects*, “I have been so hard-working that I always forget to eat; I have been so happy that I did not have any worries; and I did not even realize that I have grown old.”⁽³⁰⁾ In *Chapter Gongyechang, the Analects*, he said, “Even in a place as small as ten households, there must be people who are loyal and trustworthy like me, but they are not as eager to learn as I am.”⁽³¹⁾ As recorded in *Chapter Confucius' Life, Records of the Historian*, Confucius had been fond of the Rites at an early age, which led to the gathering of disciples from everywhere, and as a result turned his dreams into reality: the great cause of educating three thousand disciples, among whom there were seventy sages. However, one wonders, with the “hard-working and enterprising spirit” and throughout the adversities, if Confucius' further developed his ideals at all. Is it logically possible for him to go into self-denial? Regardless of whether the above reasoning is affirmed, the inner tension in the first paragraph from the above *Xi Ci Zhuan I* is obvious. An explanation is that Confucius had a very brave spirit of self-denial. Of course, the question raised could only offer one dimension for consideration, and one should not draw any conclusions based on the reasoning above. However, from the texts in *the Analects* and *Commentary on the Book of Changes*, one could discover the internal contradiction between Confucius' ideas on the Rites and the succession of the thrones, which shows that there were two kinds of directions of development that existed in the pre-Qin primitive Confucianism.

As a unique critique of regime change at the time, why did the succession of the thrones eventually disappear throughout Chinese history? The answers should be sought through the terms “reasoning” and “potential” from ancient Chinese history and philosophy. In the realm of ancient Chinese history and philosophy, there is a saying called “resisting the potential with reasoning”. If this saying were applied to the study of the succession of the thrones, one could probably state that the potential development of the Rites centered on the patriarchal legal system is “potential”; in his later years, together with a few figures among the seventy disciples, Confucius witnessed the severe harms caused by the feudal warlords and the social model of regime change, and then advocated his political ideal, the succession of the thrones, which is “reasoning”. In other words, even though the succession of the thrones in the era of the pre-Qin Confucianist School was appealing in theory, and although it did possess an incomparably critical spirit against the cruel reality of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, it was impossible to be implemented at the time.

(30) 朱熹Zhu Xi, 《四书章句集注》*Sishu zhangju ji zhu*[Commentaries on the Four Books], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2012) · 98.

(31) 同上书·第83页。
Ibid., pp. 83.

Therefore, the succession of the thrones is “reasoning”, and the development of the pre-Qin society had its profound and complex historical logic, which is “potential”. The interaction of “reasoning” and “potential” in the pre-Qin era resulted in the loss of the former. When faced with the long-standing and deeply rooted patriarchal kinship system, the rise of the succession of the thrones was like hitting a stone with an egg, which is the fundamental reason why documents related to the succession of the thrones had been lost since the middle of the Warring States Period.

After examining the classics of the pre-Qin Confucianist School thoroughly, one could deduce that the true killer of the succession of the thrones was the Rites system. Li Xueqin held that the demise of the succession of the thrones was related to the farce of “the succession of the thrones” in the state of Yan. However, this was just accidental. How can this farce have such a huge impact on the demise of this great, long-standing trend of thought? One could be suspicious, for the development of history cannot be oversimplified, and he would need to rely on positive evidence from the classics only.

We hold that the ideals of Xunzi, who was the leader of the Jixia Academy, represented the mainstream of thought at the time. It is through Xunzi that one could find out how the ideal of the succession of the thrones of the pre-Qin Confucianist School came to an end. In *Chapter Zhenglun, the Book of Xunzi*, a summative criticism was made regarding the succession of the thrones from the perspective of supreme monarchical power and a bird-view perspective of the Rites, which might have been the consensus of most scholars from the Jixia Academy. This also reflects the irreversible trend of autocracy and the centralization of power in the development of pre-Qin society.

First, Xunzi put forward his criticism on the succession of the thrones in his essay *Zhenglun*. Before his criticism, Xunzi respected the Rites proposed by Confucius on the surface, yet his Rites had already been very different. Even though Confucius inherited the Rites from Chougong, he particularly emphasized the spirit of “benevolence”, the beauty of “neutralization”, and the integration of the Rites and Music, which was full of humanism and humanitarianism. However, in his works, Xunzi set the Rites as the norms of the society and he claimed in *Chapter Zhenglun* that “The Rites were the root of everything else.”⁽³²⁾ The idea that “the superior acts and the inferior follows, as well as kings should set examples for the masses” was originally proposed by the pre-Qin Confucianist School, yet the representative works of the primitive Confucianist School, such as *the Analects* and *the Book of Mencius*, not only pursued the relationship between the superior and the inferior, but also emphasized the interaction of the two, as evidence could be found in *Chapter Lilouxia, the Book of Mencius*: “If the king treated the people like siblings, then they would treat him like a confidant; if the king treated the people like dogs or horses, then they would treat him like a stranger; if the king treated the people like dirt, then they would treat him like an enemy.”⁽³³⁾ In Xunzi’s view, the king was the criteria for the people, all the reasoning, and the source of existence. Thus, the spirit of equality and interaction was changed by Xunzi and it was replaced by the authoritativeness of kings who became the criteria for everything there was, which was a precursor for the “Three Cardinal Guides and the Five Constant Virtues”.

Second, Xunzi believed that if the Rites had been implemented all over the country, there would be sage kings, which would restrain a fatuous king like Jiezhou from stealing the supreme power of the state. “Jiezhou only stole the power of the state, not the power of the world”, as Xunzi argued in *Chapter Zhenglun*, “...A state is

(32) 王先谦 Wang Xianqian, 《荀子集解》 *Xunzi ji jie* [Explaining the Book of Xunzi], (北京 Beijing: 中华书局 Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1988) · 321.

(33) 朱熹 Zhu Xi, 《四书章句集注》 *Sishu zhangju ji zhu* [Commentaries on the Four Books], (北京 Beijing: 中华书局 Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 2012) · 295.

small, which could be owned by the inferior, obtained stealthily and maintained by a weak force; yet the world is big, which could not be owned, obtained or maintained in the same way.”⁽³⁴⁾ According to Xunzi, since the king rose above the Rites system, he should be entitled to holiness naturally. Therefore, the king has a supreme and unshakable position, as evidence can be found in *Chapter Zhenglun*:

The world must be ruled by the right people. In the world, the heaviest burden could not be carried by those who are not most powerful; the broadest scope could not be distinguished by those are not most intelligent; the largest number of people could not be harmonized by those who are not most brilliant. Such a mission could not be accomplished by those who are not sages, and those who are not sages could not run the world. Sages are those who have the best moralities and are perfect in every way and they are the criteria for everything in the world...Countries could be owned by the inferior yet they would perish; the world is the broadest and it could only be owned by sages.⁽³⁵⁾

From above, Xunzi separated “the state” from “the world”, and he treated them as two distinct concepts. In addition, he argued further and distinguished the ordinary feudal warlords of a state from the supreme sage kings in the world, and the latter the acme of all human relations. In any case, Xunzi’s arguments were of utopian nature, and they had only helped strengthen the mysteriousness of the power of the so-called “sage kings”, which had created a pavilion for China’s future kings who could only be looked up to and the masses had to be obedient. Of course, it is one thing that Xunzi’s theory is incomplete, it is another that his theory has been deliberately misused and transformed.

Third, it is therefore logical that according to Xunzi, in a country ruled by the unrealistic “sage king”, “King Yao and King Shun had perfect morals and wisdom. They sat facing the south and ruled the world, and there was no commoner who did not fear to obey, or did not get educated to bow before them, and there were no hermits or decent men who went missing. Everything said or done by Yao and Shun were right, so why would the succession of the thrones be necessary?”⁽³⁶⁾ From this point of view, Xunzi completely justified that the Confucianists’ Rites system he reformed would lead to the birth of “sage kings”, and everything would be perfect, so it was not necessary to implement the succession of thrones. In fact, according to Taishigong’s critique in *Chapter the Essential Ideas of the Six Schools, Records of the Historian*, Xunzi’s thoughts had a fatal flaw that “they were extensive but unessential, requiring much effort yet having little effect, so they were hard to comply with fully.”⁽³⁷⁾ In addition, according to Xunzi, the legend of the successions of the thrones of King Yao and King Shun, as he put it in *Chapter Zhenglun*, “is nonsense, and it is a rumor from the shallow, who had no sense of right or wrong, who didn’t have the right understanding of the country and the world, as well as the superior and the inferior, and who couldn’t comprehend the greatest truth of the world.”⁽³⁸⁾ Just as he failed to understand Mencius’ theory of

(34) 王先谦Wang Xianqian, 《荀子集解》*Xunzi ji jie*[Explaining the Book of Xunzi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1988) · 326.

(35) 同上书 · 第324-325页。
Ibid., pp. 324-325.

(36) 同上书 · 第331页。
Ibid., pp. 331.

(37) 司马迁Sima Qian, 《史记》*Shi ji*[Records of the Historian], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1959) · 3289.

(38) 王先谦Wang Xianqian, 《荀子集解》*Xunzi ji jie*[Explaining the Book of Xunzi], (北京Beijing: 中华书局Zhonghua shuju [Zhonghua Book Company] · 1988) · 3.

good nature, Xunzi didn't truly understand the value of the succession of the thrones due to the limitations of his era. Relying on the long-standing influence of the Rites system, Xunzi advocated the idea of the so-called "sage king" to replace the pre-Qin primitive Confucianist' "succession of the thrones", and hence indeed simplified a profound issue.

In fact, in more than two thousand years of history that followed, the Rites had indeed been implemented, yet there was never a "sage king" and the perfect scene depicted by Xunzi had never appeared. Thus, it can be seen that as an ideal from the early ancient times, the succession of the thrones still needs to be pursued through Chinese people's relentless efforts.

Conclusion

Throughout history, all great philosophers have been inevitably entangled in the past and future visions. The contradiction manifested in the theory of state power embodied by *the Analects* shows exactly the dilemma the majority of the intellectual was in when they were in a state of being torn apart by history. From the perspective of the Rites, it has a profound folklore foundation, that is, the "potential" of historical philosophy and has an irresistible historical inertia. From the perspective of the "succession of the thrones", it has extensive universality, and it is the greatest truth in the world. The introduction of the succession of the thrones by the pre-Qin Confucianist School shows their criticism of reality and that it is an attempt to "revolt against the potential with reasoning".

Undoubtedly, judging from the contents above, if one examined the chaotic situation of the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the ideal of the "succession of the thrones" had been extremely pedantic, and it had been nothing but a dream. It was crashed by the ruling class of multiple feudal states and the traditional Rites system, and this only led to a dead end. However, the succession of the thrones had a spirit towards criticism of reality, as well as deep sympathy for the vast number of people who lived in adversity. In the dark political arena of the pre-Qin era, the "succession of the thrones" was like a comet's light sparkling across the vast night sky and faded away within seconds. Other than being a utopia throughout a few thousand years of Chinese political history and manipulated by those who had tried to steal power, it never really played an important role. However, in today's era of economic globalization, the "succession of the thrones" seems to have become a bridge between ancient Chinese political culture and the modern "democratic system". The succession of the thrones was a dream of the Chinese ancestors a few thousand years ago which was never realized in the eras of ancient autocracy. It is worth noting that the succession of the thrones is only a political ideal, as well as a value and philosophy. It has profoundly reflected the Chinese people's thirst for the justice of the political system and power since the ancient times. This national psychology of "longing" might just be a bridge and cornerstone for the contemporary Chinese political system to meet the world.

In *Zi Gao*, it asks: "What would it take to be king?"⁽³⁹⁾ In *Parents of the Masses*, it also asks, "How could a king become the guardian of the masses?"⁽⁴⁰⁾ These two quotations have raised a question concerning the justice of political power. As *the Way of Tang and Yu* narrates in detail: "The successions of the thrones regard moralities

(39) 马承源Ma Chengyuan主编：《上海博物馆藏战国楚竹书》（二）*Shanghai bowuguan cang zhanguo chuzhu shu (er)* [Chu Slips of the Warring States Period from Shanghai Museum II] · (上海Shanghai：上海古籍出版社Shanghai guji chubanshe [Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House] · 2001) · 33.

(40) 同上书·第17页。

Ibid., pp. 17.

as the priority and therefore the power of the state should be given to the sages. With such kings, there would be justice in the world and the people would pursue the Way of Heaven and the Way of Man. Without such kings, there would be no better way to rule the world.”⁽⁴¹⁾This passage from *the Way of Tang and Yu* has raised a sharp question, that is, a country or regime should not only make the masses fed; more importantly, it should make the masses “comprehend the Way”. In other words, each independent individual must be an integration of the Way of Man and the Way of Heaven. It is only through this way that social intergrity and harmony can be established. The fundamental premise of these establishments is the legitimacy and justice of the political power. This is at least the very essence of the primitive Confucianists’ political philosophy that is seen today when one interprets the succession of the thrones of the pre-Qin primitive Confucianist School. As early as more than two thousand years ago, the Chinese ancestors had already had such political ideals, one should be very proud as heirs of the Chinese culture. However, if this ideal could not be realized through the means of modern science and democracy, then it would indeed be a shame.

(41) 李零Li Ling, 《郭店楚简校读记》*Guodian chu jian jiaodu ji*[Annotations on the Unearthed Bamboo Slips of Chu State Tombs at Guodian], (北京Beijing: 中国人民大学出版社Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe [China Renmin University Pres] · 2007) · 125.

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提要：禅让制的思想很有可能萌生于孔子，形成于七十子，在荀子的时代“礼”学强势面前衰落。这个过程反映了先秦儒家对中国传统政治体制在理论与实践层面的艰苦探索。禅让制既是对中国上古历史史实的发挥，也是直接面对当时的社会现实问题所开出的救世良方。《尚书·尧典》开门见山描述的就是禅让制的社会盛况。《论语》中对尧舜禹的称赞，就是对禅让制的称赞，但是与其“礼”学思想有内部的紧张。楚简文献《唐虞之道》、《容成氏》与原始儒学的深层关系否定了它们是墨家作品的可能性。先秦儒家禅让制的思想遭到了诸侯各国既得利益者以及传统“礼”制两方面的强烈挤压，这是《唐虞之道》和《容成氏》等相关文献湮没无闻成为佚籍的真正原因。禅让制思想的骨子里有一种对现实的批判精神，对生活在水深火热中的广大人民具有深刻的同情，是我们当今政治生活建设过程中的一笔重要的民族资源。

关键词：先秦儒家·禅让制·礼·孔孟荀·理与势