

THE LEGENDARY EMPERORS

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

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

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

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

A note on reading ancient chronicles. Reading directly from primary sources is an important part of this course. G380 places higher value on learning to ask questions of texts and extracting useful information than it does on memorizing what others have already extracted. But frankly speaking (you will find this out anyway), ancient texts are not always dramatically thrilling. When you encounter

a selection that will not hold your attention through its literary value, you need to approach it as efficiently as possible so that you can retain information and avoid boredom. Consult the Study Questions at the end first, and then move *briskly* through the text noting down the basic information that will help you respond to those questions.

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

The Yellow Emperor

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

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

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

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

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

The Fire Emperor is sometimes reported to have been a brother of the Yellow Emperor. In this portion of the account and those that follow, it is easy to see that a series of discrete myths

concerning the triumph of culture heroes over evil demons have been blended together to create the story of the Yellow Emperor.

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

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

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

The Yellow Emperor traveled east to the sea, ascending Ball Mountain and the Exalted Peak, Mt. Tai. He traveled west to Hollow Tree and ascended Chicken Head Mountain. He went south to the Yangzi River and ascended Bear Mountain and Mt. Xiang. He went north as far as the lands of the Hun-yu people, distributing the estate tally embalmers at Kettle Mountain and enclosing a walled town at the elbow beneath Mt. Zhuo-lu.

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

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

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

He obtained the treasured tripods, met the sun's motions and calculated by means of the tallies. He appointed Lord Wind, Strong Shepherd, Ever First, and Grand Goose to regulate the people. He accorded with the guidelines of Heaven and earth, the divinations of the forces of dark and light, and the principles of life and death. He preserved the ancestral lines of those who had perished. In accord with the seasons, he broadcast the hundred grains and planted grasses and trees. He nurtured the transformations of the birds and beasts, insects and crawling things of the earth. He charted the sequences of the sun and moon, stars and planets, and of the tides, and differentiated the soils, stones, metals, and jades. He labored unflinchingly with his mind and his strength, his eyes and his ears, and rationed the use of water, fire, and the natural riches of the world.

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

The Yellow Emperor resided on the hill of Xuan-yuan and there he married a woman of the West Hill clan, Lei-zu. She became his principal wife and bore him two sons, each of whose descendants later ruled the empire. The first was named Xuan-xiao: he became known as Qing-yang and descended to live in the valley of the River Chiang. The second was named Chang-yi, and he descended to live in the valley of the River Ruo. Chang-yi married a woman of the clan of Shu Mountain, known as Chang-pu, and she gave birth to Gao-yang, who possessed sagely virtue.

When the Yellow Emperor died, he was buried at Mt. Qiao. He was succeeded by his grandson, Gao-yang, the son of Chang-yi. This was the Emperor Zhuan-xu.

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

Emperor Zhuan-xu

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

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

He went north as far as Dark Hill and south to Jiao-chi; he went west to Shifting Sands and east to Twisting Tree. Among the things of the world that move and those that are at rest, among the great spirits and the small spirits, among all the things upon which the sun and moon shine, none did not submit to him.

The Emperor Zhuan-xu had a son named Empty Locust. When Zhuan-xu died, Gao-xin, the grandson of Xuan-xiao succeeded him. This was the Emperor Ku.

Emperor Ku

Gao-xin, the Emperor Ku, was the great-grandson of the Yellow Emperor. His father was named Jiao-ji, whose father had been Xuan-xiao, and Xuan-xiao's father was the Yellow Emperor. Neither Xuan-xiao nor Jiao-ji had become emperor, but Gao-xin assumed the emperor's throne. Gao-xin was a fellow clansman of Zhuan-xu.

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

The Emperor Ku married a woman of the Chen-feng clan who gave birth to Fang-xun. He married a woman of the Zou-zi clan who gave birth to Chi.

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

The Emperor Yao

The Emperor Yao became a very important figure to Confucianism, and it is probably the Confucians of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. who embellished his legend into the text we have here. "The Canon of Yao" is the opening section of the Book of Documents, which became one of the five most sacred Confucian texts. The style of the text itself is so consciously archaic that it is nearly unreadable (it purports, after all, to date from about 2000 B.C.). This is reflected in the translation, which is largely based on that appearing in Waltham's Shu Ching: the Book of History (available on Library Reserve).

The Canon of Yao

Examining into antiquity, we find the Emperor Yao was named Fang-xun. He was reverent, intelligent, patterned, and thoughtful--naturally and without effort. He was sincerely reverent and capable of all complaisance. The bright influence of these qualities extended through the four quarters of the land and reached to all on high and below.

He shone forth his heroic virtue and thereby cleaved to all in the nine classes of his kindred. Once his kindred were in harmonious accord, he turned to regulate and polish the people of his domain, who came to shine with intelligence. Finally, he united and harmonized the myriad states. In this way, the black-haired people were transformed. The result was universal concord.

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

One of the legends associated with Yao in many texts is his initiation of astronomical observations to determine the calendar. The arts of astronomy were of critical importance to early agriculture in many cultures, because of the great dependence of society upon the weather and its effect on crops.

In cultures whose oldest calendars were purely lunar, as was likely the case in China, it was extremely difficult to separate the seasons from the weather and so measure the year and the intervals for crops that occurred within it.

He separately commanded the brother Xi-zhong to reside at Yu-yi, in what was called the Bright Valley, there respectfully to receive as a guest the rising sun, and to adjust and arrange the labors of the East. "The day," said he, "is of the medium length and the star is in the constellation of the Bird. You may thus exactly determine mid-spring. The people are dispersed in the fields and birds and beasts mate and breed."

He further commanded the brother Xi-shu to reside at South Junction, in what was called the Brilliant Capital, to adjust and arrange the transformation of the summer, and carefully to observe the exact limit of the gnomon shadow. "The day," said he, "is at its longest, and the star is in the constellation of Fire. You may thus exactly determine mid-summer. The people are more dispersed; the birds and beasts have their feathers and hair thin and change their coats."

He separately commanded the brother He-zhong to reside in the west, in what was called the Dark Valley, there respectfully to convey the setting sun and to adjust and arrange the harvest labors of the autumn. “The night,” said he, “is of medium length, and the star is in the constellation of Emptiness. You may thus exactly determine mid-autumn. The people feel at ease, and birds and beasts have their coats in good condition.”

He further commanded the brother He-shu to reside in the Northern Reaches, in what was called the Somber Capital, and there to adjust and examine the changes of the winter. “The day,” said he, “is at its shortest, and the star is in the constellation Mao. You may thus exactly determine mid-winter. The people keep in their houses, and the coats of birds and beasts are downy and thick.”

The Emperor said, “Ah! you brothers Xi and you brothers He, a round year consists of three hundred, sixty, and six days. By means of the intercalary month, you are to fix the four seasons and compute the determination of the period of a year. Thereafter, the various officers being regulated in accord with this, their accomplished tasks will shine forth with brilliance.”

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

The Emperor said, “Oh, who will search out for me a man whose abilities accord with the times, whom I can raise and employ?”

Fang Qi said, “Your son and heir Zhu is highly intelligent.”

The Emperor said, “Alas, he is insincere and quarrelsome. Could he do?”

This act is clearly meant to reveal the extraordinary nature of the Emperor Yao. He is most famous for his decision that his own son was inadequate for the throne and that it would be necessary to select a new ruler according to a criterion of merit, rather than birth.

Then the Emperor said, “Who will search out for me a man equal to the exigency of my affairs?”

Huan Dou said, “Oh, the merits of the Minister of Works have just been displayed on a wide scale.”

The Emperor said, “Alas, when all is quiet, he talks; but when employed, his actions turn out differently. He is respectful only in appearance, See--the floods assail the heavens!”

At this point in the narrative, a flood myth which had wide circulation in early China finds a place in the sequence of history. Our reconstructions of the myth suggest that in its original form, the tale involved both an evil force who caused or prolonged the flood, Gun (the written form of his name

includes the element for “fish”), and Yu, a hero part man and part beast. In this pseudo-historical account, Yu has become merged with the founder of the Xia Dynasty--he is the Emperor Yu, who starts his career in these texts as the Minister of Works of the Emperor Shun. Gun, who appears here as Yao’s Minister of Works, is transformed into the father of Yu, and is either an evil or an incompetent minister who is subsequently imprisoned by Shun.

The Emperor said, “Oh, Chief of the Four Mountains, the waters of the flood destroy far and wide. In their vastness they embrace the hills and overtop great heights, seeming to inundate the heavens. The people below groan and murmur! Is there a capable man to whom I can assign the correction of this calamity?”

The identity of the Chief of the Four Mountains is unclear, but he is pictured as a sagely high minister who represents the lords of territories in all directions.

All in the court said, “Ah, is there not Gun?”

The Emperor said, “Alas, how perverse is he! He is disobedient to orders and tries to injure his peers.”

The Chief of the Four Mountains said, “Well, but try him to see if he can accomplish the work.”

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

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

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

The Chief said, “I have not the virtue. I should disgrace the imperial seat.”

The Emperor said, “Show me someone among the illustrious, or set forth one from among the poor and mean.”

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

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

The Chief said, “He is the son of a blind man. His father is obstinately unprincipled his stepmother is insincere; his half-brother Xiang is arrogant, Shun has been able, however, by his filial piety to live in harmony with them and to lead them gradually to self-government, so that they no longer proceed to great wickedness.”

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

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

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

The Emperor Shun

The “Canon of Yao” and the “Canon of Shun” appear together in the Book of Documents.

The Canon of Shun

Shun carefully set forth the beauty of the five cardinal duties and they came to be universally observed. When he was appointed to supervise the many ministers, the affairs of every department were arranged in their proper seasons. Being charged to receive the princes from the four quarters of the land, they were all docilely submissive. When he was sent to travel into mountain woods, even amid violent wind, thunder, and rain, he did not go astray.

The Emperor said, “Come, Shun. For three years I have consulted you on all affairs, examined your words, and found that they can be carried into practice. Now you ascend the seat of the Emperor.”

Shun wished to decline in favor of someone more virtuous, and not to be Yao’s successor. On the first day of the first month, however, he received Yao’s retirement from the imperial duties in the temple of the patterned ancestors.

Shun examined the pearl-adorned turning sphere with its transverse tube of jade and reduced to a harmonious system the movements of the seven celestial directors.

Thereafter, Shun made special sacrifice to the Lord on High, sacrificed with reverent purity to the six honored ancestors, offered appropriate sacrifices to the hills and rivers, and extended his worship to the host of spirits.

Shun called in all the five jade symbols of rank. And when the month was over, he gave daily audience to the Chief of the Four Mountains and all the Pastors, returning to them the jade tallies they had presented to the throne.

In the second month of the year he made a tour of inspection eastward as far as lofty Mount Dai, where he presented a burnt offering to Heaven and sacrificed to the hills and rivers in order. Thereafter he gave audience to the princes of the east. He set in accord their seasons and months, and regulated the days. He made uniform the standard pitch pipes, the measures of length and of capacity, and the steelyards. He regulated the five classes of ceremonies. He directed that ritual objects brought to the ceremonies by the lords and officers--the five symbols of jade, the three kinds of silk, the two living animals and the one dead one--would be returned to them.

In the fifth month he made a similar tour southward as far as the mountain of the south, where he observed the same ceremonies as at Mount Dai.

In the eighth month he made a tour westward as far as the mountain of the west, where he did as before.

In the eleventh month he made a tour northward as far as the mountain of the north, where he observed the same ceremonies as in the west. He then returned to the capital, went to the temple of the patterned ancestors, and sacrificed a single bull.

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

In five years there was one tour of inspection, and there were four appearances of the princes at court. They gave a report of their government in words. This was clearly tested by their works. They received chariots and robes according to their merits.

Shun divided the land into twelve provinces, raising altars upon twelve hills in them. He also dredged the rivers.

He exhibited to the people the statutory punishments, enacting banishment as a mitigation of the five great inflictions; with the whip to be employed in the magistrates’ courts, the stick to be employed in the schools for officers, and fines to be paid for redeemable offenses. Inadvertent offenses and those which might be ascribed to misfortune were to be pardoned. Those who transgressed presumptuously and repeatedly were to be punished with death. “Be reverent! Be reverent!” he said. “Let compassion rule in punishment!”

Banishment would have been far more humane than the “five great inflictions”: death, castration, cutting off the foot, cutting off the nose, and tattooing.

Shun banished the evil Gong-gong to Dark Island, confined Huan Dou on Exalted Mountain, drove the chief of San-miao and his people into Three Chasms and kept them there, and held Gun a prisoner until death on Feather Mountain. These four criminals being thus dealt with, all under heaven acknowledged the justice of his administration.

This passage is a grab-bag of legendary villains, each most likely originally associated with an independent myth, chronologically grouped here in the reign of Shun. Some writers speculate that these myths originated as recollections of the gradual subjugation of various independent tribes by the expanding Chinese polity in the distant past.

After twenty-eight years the Emperor Yao died. The people mourned for him as for a parent for three years. Within the four seas all the eight kinds of instruments of music were stopped and hushed.

On the first day of the first month of the next year, Shun went to the temple of the patterned ancestors.

He deliberated with the Chief of the Four Mountains how to throw open the doors of communication between himself and the four quarters of the land, and how he could see with the eyes and hear with the ears of all.

He consulted with the twelve Pastors and said to them, “Be diligent! All depends on observing the timely seasons. Be kind to the distant and cultivate the ability of the near. Give honor to the virtuous and your trust to the good, while you discountenance the artful. In this way, even barbarous tribes will lead on one another to make their submission.”

Shun said, “Oh, Chief of the Four Mountains, is there any one who can with vigorous service attend to all the affairs of the Emperor? Whom I may appoint to regulate the many ministers and manage each department according to its nature?”

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

“Yes,” the Emperor said. “Oh, Yu! You have regulated the water and the land. In this new office exert yourself.”

This is the future Emperor Yu, here in his pre-imperial incarnation as the flood-subduing Minister of Works. His father, Gun, was dispatched into terminal incarceration several paragraphs earlier.

Yu did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Qi, Minister of Agriculture, or Xie, or Gao-yao.

The Emperor said, “Yes, but go and undertake the duties.”

The Emperor said, “Qi, the black-haired people are still suffering from famine. Let you, prince, as Minister of Agriculture, continue to sow for them the various kinds of grain.”

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

The Emperor said, “Xie, the people are still wanting in affection for one another and do not docilely observe the five orders of relationship. It is yours, as Minister of Instruction, reverently to set forth the lessons of duty belonging to those five orders. Do so with gentleness.”

The two ministers Qi and Xie were, in clan legend, the founders of the Zhou and Shang Dynasties, respectively.

The Emperor said, “Gao-yao, the barbarous tribes trouble our great land. There are also robbers, murderers, insurgents, and traitors. It is yours, as Minister of Crime, to use the five punishments to deal with their offenses. For the infliction of these there are the three appointed places. There are the five cases in which banishment in the appropriate places is to be resorted to, to which three localities are assigned. Perform your duties with intelligence and you will secure a sincere submission.”

The Emperor said, “Who can superintend my works as they require?”

All in the court replied, “Is there not Chui?”

“Yes!” said the Emperor. “Oh, Chui! You must be Minister of Works.”

Chui did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Shu, Qiang, or Bo-yu. The Emperor said, “Yes, but go and undertake the duties. Effect a harmony in all the departments.”

The Emperor said, “Who is equal to the duty of superintending the grass and the trees, with the birds and beasts, on my mountains and in my marshes?”

All in the court replied, “Is there not Yi?”

“Yes!” said the Emperor. “Oh, Yi! Let you be my Forester.”

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

The Emperor said, “Yes, but go and undertake the duties. You must manage them harmoniously.”

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

All in the court answered, “Is there not Bo-yi?”

“Yes!” said the Emperor. “Oh, Bo-yi! You must be the Arranger in the Ancestral Temple. Morning and night be reverent. Be upright, be pure!”

Bo-yi did obeisance with his head to the ground, and wished to decline in favor of Kui or Long. The Emperor said, “Yes, but go and undertake the duties. Be reverent!”

The Emperor said, “Kui, I appoint you to be Director of Music and to teach our sons, so that the straightforward shall yet be mild, the gentle shall yet be dignified, the strong shall yet not be tyrannical, and the impetuous shall not be not arrogant. Poetry is the expression of the will, singing is the prolonged utterance of that expression, the notes accompany that utterance, and the pitch pipes harmonize the notes. In this way the eight different kinds of musical instruments can be adjusted so that one shall not take form or interfere with another, and spirits and men are brought into harmony.”

Kui said, “I shall strike the stone chimes, for when I ring them, even the beasts all join one another in the dance!”

The Emperor said, “Long, I abominate slanderous speakers and destroyers of the right ways who agitate and alarm my people. I appoint you Minister of Communication. Morning and night give forth my orders and report to me, seeing that everything is true.”

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

The Emperor said, “Oh! you twenty-two men, be reverent; so shall you be helpful to the business entrusted to me by Heaven.”

Every three years there was an examination of merit, and after three examinations the undeserving were degraded and the deserving advanced. By this arrangement the duties of all the departments were fully discharged. The people of San-miao were discriminated and separated.

Shun was called to court in his thirtieth year of age. Thirty years he was on the throne together with Yao. Fifty years afterwards he went on high and died.

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

LIST OF KEY NAMES

Yellow Emperor

Emperor Yao

 The Brothers Xi and He

 Gun

Emperor Shun

 Yu (later Emperor)

STUDY QUESTIONS

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