

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE SAGE-KING NARRATIVES:
IDEALIZED CONCEPTS OF RULERSHIP IN
WARRING STATES CHINESE THOUGHT**

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how contemporary scholarship interpreted sage-kings (聖王) narratives, commonly used in Warring States and Chinese philosophical texts to represent particular visions of ideal rulership, in their understanding of the historical and political contexts of the development of early Chinese intellectual history. Another aim is to find out how these narratives changed over time, and how they revealed the different political concerns of the Warring States philosophers.

This project uses a primarily historiographical approach and first surveyed the works of leading scholarship in the field that discusses the use of the sage-kings. Then, two particular narratives are examined in order to demonstrate their evolution over time. The first of these sage-king narratives was on the taming of the great flood by Yu 禹 and the rise of human civilization; the second was on the abdication of Yao 堯 to Shun 舜 and the issue of legitimacy in the transfer of political authority.

The results of the study shows that even though contemporary scholarship recognizes the importance of the sage-king narratives in understanding political concerns in the history of early China, and the evolution of these narratives over time, there is no consensus in the methodology best used to systematically integrate them. This thesis also concludes that the sage-kings were used not just as political ideals by texts like the *Analects*, the *Mozi*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, but were also often consciously constructed by the authors of these texts to fulfill this precise role. Furthermore, the results indicate that the sage-kings were also used as counter-narratives by the *Zhuangzi* and the *Hanfeizi*, as a way to criticize and undermine those texts that were proponents of the sage-kings. The principal conclusion of this thesis is that sage-kings narratives are more complex and multifaceted than previously thought and deserve a more nuanced and historically aware analysis in future research.

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誰言寸草心，報得三春暉。

To my parents.

1. Introduction

One of the most momentous turning points in early Chinese history was the creation of the first imperial state under the Qin 秦 in 221 BCE, which came at the end of the Warring States 戰國 period (c. fifth century–221 BCE).¹ Without exaggeration, one can say that Warring States history is one of the most popular research topics in Sinology, not least because of the wealth of extant textual sources that have survived into modern times, but also because of the nature of the fundamental changes that took place with respect to social organization, political structures, and especially philosophical ideas. As Yuri Pines points out, the Qin conquest and subsequent unification of China was a definitive realization of a vision held by many Warring States authors, who propagated their political ideals and sought to return All-under-Heaven 天下 to what they believed to be an idealized golden age, based on visions of the past, and whose intellectual legacies are the numerous philosophical texts that are extant to this day.² The vibrant literary and philosophical culture of the Warring States period would come to influence the development of the burgeoning imperial states of Qin (221–202 BCE) and Han 漢 (206 BCE–220 CE). This rich ideological heritage also, as Pines posits, was a significant contributing factor in the longevity of the Chinese imperial political culture.³

Recent discoveries of many archaeological manuscripts that can be dated to this very formative period in Chinese history, however, have begun to force many sinologists

¹ For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will use the *Hanyu Pinyin* 漢語拼音 for all romanizations of Chinese words and characters in my thesis. In cases where the original translations by other authors were in Wade-Giles, I will change them into *pinyin* with brackets to indicate the change.

² Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 222.

to question and reassess some of their most fundamental conceptions about the political and philosophical realities that have come to be accepted as facts. For example, some have come to question the idea that the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought contended against one another in the Warring States intellectual landscape, where each of these texts represented coherent philosophical lineages based around a robust master–disciple relationship.⁴ These discoveries have led Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe to argue in *China's Early Empires: A Reappraisal* that “the study of the early empires in China is itself at a crossroads, one wherein the old paradigms that ruled scholarship in the last fifty years of the twentieth century have given way...to new hypotheses.”⁵ Their observations “have caused us to rethink many of the old divisions between religion, literature, and philosophy” and reveal that there is much debate among academics with regards to how these newly discovered materials have contributed to our understanding of early Chinese history.⁶

Major breakthroughs in the study of early Chinese history and philosophy have been possible in part due to the insights offered by these manuscripts, even with some of the inherent philological difficulties working with archaeological texts. Even though some scholars have claimed that these archaeological manuscripts are somehow ‘better’ or more ‘authentic’ than the extant received texts, as Enno Giele has pointed out, however, the “value [of the archaeological manuscripts] depends on the questions one

⁴ Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, “Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China,” *T'oung Pao*, Second Series 89 (2003): 99.

⁵ Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe, eds., *China's Early Empires: A Reappraisal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

asks of them and on how the texts, whether excavated or received, are put into context.”⁷

In order to effectively carry out this kind of research the archaeological context itself is the most important, not only to date the manuscripts themselves, but also offer a more comprehensively contextualized understanding of the history of textual transmission.⁸

Within the limited scope of this thesis, however, it is not possible to fully extrapolate and effectively analyze the important contributions of these archaeological manuscripts. Instead, it is my primary goal to revisit a major theme recurrent in the development of Warring States intellectual history, namely, idealized concepts of rulership and governance as embodied by mythical figures known as the sage-kings 聖王. I address not only their philosophical significance within the context of the textual sources in which they appear, but I deal with them also in an attempt to understand and analyze how they were used by the authors as a means to assert the superiority of those authors’ own political visions over that of others.

1.1 Warring States Realities

In order to better contextualize this entire discussion, it is important first to understand some of the underlying circumstances that characterized the Warring States period in China. When the Zhou 周 Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) ultimately supplanted its predecessor dynasty, the Shang 商 (1600–1046 BCE), its members justified their conquest and legitimized their political claims to be rulers through what they claimed to

⁷ Enno Giele, “Excavated Manuscripts: Context and Methodology” in *Early Chinese Empires: A Reappraisal*, eds. Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 114.

⁸ Ibid.

be the Mandate of Heaven 天命.⁹ It was also claimed that the moral character and virtuous behaviours of the Zhou kings garnered their lineage the right to rule All-under-Heaven, and that the overthrowing of the Shang was due to its moral deviance and oppressive rule.¹⁰ The use of these kinds of foundation myths functioned both as political justification and as their claim to legitimacy. Similarly, the first Zhou kings, Wen 文 and Wu 武, were idealized as rulers who restored political order, one sanctioned by Heaven, to an otherwise disorderly world. The Zhou political order was maintained for several generations, but gradually declined through the Spring and Autumn 春秋 (c. eighth to fifth centuries BCE), and especially during the Warring States periods. This was caused by critical challenges such as inept rulers, political struggles, and its loss of a means to effectively field military forces to counter the rise of the power of regional lords led to the decline of the Zhou royal house.¹¹ Associated with this decline was the gradual erosion of the elaborate religious and ritualistic hierarchy that had the Zhou kings themselves at its pinnacle. As Mark Edward Lewis points out, the Warring States period was so named because it was characterized by intense competition and warfare between increasingly powerful states through the “progressive extension of military service, and the registration and mobilization of their population.”¹² During this period, the Zhou kings still held the title of Son of Heaven 天子, and they were at least nominally sovereign over the rulers of the individual warring states; however, in all practicality,

⁹ K. C. Chang, "Sandai Archaeology and the Formation of States in Ancient China: Processual Aspects of the Origins of Chinese Civilization," in *The Origins of Chinese Civilization*, ed. David Keightley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 496.

¹⁰ Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 292.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 328–331.

¹² Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 53.

they themselves were not only powerless to assert the royal ritual prerogatives long usurped by their nominal vassals, but they were also often hostages to the most powerful hegemony who had the military might to dominate the political landscape.¹³ This definitive decline and eventual end of the royal lineage was associated with the breaking down of the ritualistic political power wielded by the Zhou kings, while the regional lords began usurping the ritual practices that only the Zhou kings, as Sons of Heaven, were entitled to. This kind of disregard towards the royal house seems merely a minute detail in the grander scheme of Warring States conflicts; nevertheless, it highlights some fundamental transformations in the Zhou political order.

The fact was that the Zhou kings could no longer assert their authority, as they did not have effective power to curb the ebbing of their influence over the various regional lords. This attempt to dispense with ritual propriety on the part of the regional aristocracy is precisely the kind of thing that Confucius lamented in one of the chapters in the *Analects* 論語. Upon hearing that the Ji 季 family in the state of Lu 魯 had eight rows of dancers performing at a ritual, Confucius lamented, “If they can condone this, what are they not capable of?”¹⁴ This should be interpreted within the context where social rank, and the political power and legitimacy attributed to that status, were intricately associated with ritualistic practices. This example might seem to be a mere oversight, but to Confucius, it was nevertheless a clear offence against the Zhou royal house, the only ones entitled to this particular honour, and also an offence against what he perceived to be appropriate. This kind of sidestepping of the Zhou was symptomatic of the political

¹³ Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 342–351.

¹⁴ *Confucius Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 3.1, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 17.

realities of the era, and it was associated with the disintegration of political order and, by extension, with a descent of All-under-Heaven into chaos and destruction 天下大亂. On a more concrete level, the effective decline of Zhou royal authority allowed for regional rulers to compete with one another not only in terms of ritual and political wrangling, but also encouraged “constant wars of the...noble lineages [that] gradually led to the creation of ever larger territorial units through the conquest of alien states and the extension of central government control into the countryside.”¹⁵ These centralizing and bureaucratizing states sought to overcome their political rivals by resorting to more aggressive and violent policies of domination, both of their rivals and of their own populace.¹⁶ Ritual propriety and the idea that warfare ought to be sanctioned by Heaven via the Zhou kings became less important in amassing political authority; it was now more closely associated with the ability of the rulers to exert military control over their territory and to use violence to further their political aims. The most significant development that dominated this period was the rise of a new social structure based on this increasingly authoritarian and hierarchical relationship between the ruler, the state, and the rulers’ subjects.¹⁷

1.2 Sage-Kings

During the Warring States and early imperial eras, tales about the sage-kings were central in many mythological “accounts of ancient history and the emergence of human

¹⁵ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15; 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

civilization,” which were some of the most salient ways through which the early Chinese were able to conceptualize their cosmological views and to express their understanding of their own positions within that framework.¹⁸ Of the many myths about the sage-kings, some of the more important ones include the following:

- 1) Yu 禹, who was responsible for taming the great flood and for the construction of irrigation¹⁹;
- 2) Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, who were not only moral exemplars and virtuous rulers, but who also yielded the throne to those whom they deemed more worthy²⁰;
- 3) Shennong 神農, who was credited with the invention of agriculture and medicine²¹; and also
- 4) Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor, who created a government and demarcated human society from the wild animals.²²

These purported achievements and the individuals’ characterization as semi-divine humans are what come to mind when the sage-kings narratives are discussed. Despite the centrality of these figures in the discourses of the time, they are difficult to clearly define and analyze—not only because of their elusive mythological origins, but also because of the many ways in which they were continuously being redefined in different texts and

¹⁸ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 167.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 169; Mark Edward Lewis, *Flood Myths of Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 16–17.

²⁰ Julia Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China: The Heart of Chinese Wisdom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59; Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco, CA: Chinese Materials Center, 1981), 27–28.

²¹ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 168; A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1989), 66.

²² Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 174; Michael J. Puett, "Sage, Ministers, and Rebels," *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 98–99.

contexts.

These challenges aside, however, the concept of the sage-kings was employed liberally by most authors who composed during the Warring States period.²³ It is this prevalence among the texts that makes the concept a useful category of analysis to employ in an attempt to understand the political ideals that each of the texts represented, due to the central role that the sage-king concept plays within their intellectual frameworks. Furthermore, by examining how these narratives of the sage-kings were employed by the authors themselves, it will be possible to appropriately contextualize them within the greater context of Warring States intellectual history through comparisons with other contemporary texts. In essence, by basing their own political ideals in the supposed teachings of the sage-kings of old, or by offering their own interpretations of what those teachings entailed, the authors of these texts were able to find not only sanctions for their claims, but even political legitimacy, to the detriment of those who held different opinions.²⁴

²³ Shinjiro Yoshinaga, “Mōshi ni okeru Sēō to Seinin: sono Bokka shisō no juyō” 孟子における聖王と聖人その墨家思想の受容, *Akita Daigaku kyōiku gakubu kenkyū kiyō: jinbun kagaku shakai kagaku* 秋田大学教育学部研究紀要 人文科学・社会科学 48 (1995): 53; Deng Guoguang (Tang Kwok Kwong) 鄧國光, *Shengwang zhi Dao: Xian Qin zhuzi de jingshi zhihui* 聖王之道—先秦諸子的經世智慧 (Beijing, China: Zhonghua shuju chubanshe, 2010), 158. According to Yoshinaga, “sage-king” 聖王 as a set phrase does not occur in the received versions of the following texts: *Book of Odes* 詩經, *Book of Documents* 書經, *the Analects* 論語, *the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋, *the Sunzi* 孫子, *the Daodejing* 道德經, and *the Zhuangzi* 莊子; it does, however, occur in the following texts: *the Mozi* 墨子 (121 instances), *the Guoyü* 國語 (eight instances), *Zuo Commentaries* 左傳 (three instances), *the Mencius* 孟子 (one instance), *the Guanzi* 管子 (forty-five instances), *Book of Lord Shang* 商君書 (five instances), *Stratagems of the Warring States* 戰國策 (two instances), *the Xunzi* 荀子 (thirty-seven instances), *the Classic of Ritual* 禮記 (ten instances), *the Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (nine instances), and *the Annals of Lü* 呂氏春秋 (twenty instances). Deng cites Yoshinaga and further points out that “sage-king” can be observed from the *Yanzi Chunqiu* 晏子春秋 as well.

²⁴ Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 123.

As much contemporary scholarship has pointed out, the sage-kings were an integral aspect of Warring States thought, especially serving as the locus for much of the discourse when it came to idealized rulership. One suggestion posited by Julia Ching is that these sage-kings were the humanized forms of deities from earlier shamanistic traditions.²⁵ Another view posited by Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan is that they were largely reconstructed figures in later periods, characterized by the features of multiple primitive deities, and that they were generated for specific intellectual or religious debates about cosmology, human nature, and political legitimacy, just to name a few uses.²⁶ Some contemporary scholars such as Pines and Sarah Allan have depicted the concept of the sage-kings in the development of Chinese political thought over the last two millennia as its integral central feature, which essentializes the entire political experience.²⁷ Others have merely recognized the concept as an idealized embodiment of political order and legitimacy, divorced from the real exercises of power and the exertion of political control of the imperial centre over the periphery.²⁸ One of the most fundamental features in Warring States thought was the employment of sage-kings as moral exemplars by authors who urged rulers to aspire to realizing the vision of unifying All-under-Heaven by emulating their sagacious governance. In this vein, Lewis conveys a very succinct image of the sage-kings, who were described thusly:

...superhuman beings whose wisdom allowed them to recognize the celestial patterns hidden in nature and bring mankind into accord with them. To the sages were attributed all the tools and procedures that formed the Chinese civilization, and the invention of tools...became a hallmark of the sage-kings denied to lesser beings. [Furthermore, they] introduced all those values, institutions, and regular

²⁵ Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship*, 5.

²⁶ Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan, "Constructing Lineages," 99.

²⁷ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 109; Allan, *Heir and the Sage*, 3-6.

²⁸ Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 123.

practices that made possible a truly human existence as this was understood.²⁹

In addition, the historicity of the sage-king figures themselves is a question that, although interesting, has already been discussed by prominent Chinese scholars in the larger context of the *doubting the antiquities* 疑古 movement during the early part of the twentieth century, led by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 and his associates with the journal *Gushibian* 古史辨 (*Discriminations on Ancient History*). One of the major contributions of Gu to the study of early Chinese mythologies is the claim that it seems that in the earliest texts, only the sage Yu is utilized; however, in later texts like the *Analects* and the *Mozi* 墨子, sages such as Yao and Shun were added to the pantheon of sage-kings who were deemed even more ancient than Yu. This process continued throughout the Warring States and early imperial eras, so that figures such as Huangdi, Shennong, the Three Sovereigns 三皇, and eventually even Pangu 盤古 were introduced.³⁰ In other words, as Puett very succinctly points out, “the later the text, the older were the sages portrayed therein.”³¹ This led to the well-known conclusion that many of the mythologies surrounding the revered sage-kings prevalent in early Chinese texts were presumably Warring States and early Han inventions, fabricated for particular narratives or to fulfill specific rhetorical or philosophical purposes of the authors of these texts.

The above scholars have all defined the sage-kings slightly differently, and they emphasize different features that collectively create the heterogeneous nature of this

²⁹ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 167.

³⁰ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 93

³¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

concept. Excepting notable scholars like Puett and Lewis, there have been very few who have attempted to reexamine this often overlooked concept systematically. It is with this in mind that I believe it is appropriate to focus my research on summarizing and assessing the current state of academic research on the sage-kings, with the goal of questioning our current understanding of this important feature in the development of early Chinese political philosophy.

1.3 Statement of Research Questions

Many sinologists have explicated, to varying degrees, the concept of the sage-king in their research, and there is a general recognition that this concept is an important part of our understanding of the historical development of early Chinese political thought. Based on this consensus, my research seeks to survey and analyze how these scholars have conceptualized the use of the sage-kings by the authors of the Warring States texts, and especially how those authors used the idea to promote their own specific political ideals. Furthermore, I will argue that the tales of the sage-kings were not mere mythological or historical accounts. Rather, they form narratives that encapsulate the intention of the authors of these texts, and the ways in which the texts were defined, redefined, and utilized were constantly changing. Focusing on how the sage-kings were used allows for a better understanding of the historical contexts that brought these authors to espouse the ideas that they did and to compose these treatises in the ways that they did.

With this in mind, my thesis will first survey and examine how contemporary scholarship has attempted to reconstruct and understand the development of Warring

States political philosophy through the use of the sage-kings. To this end, I will examine how scholars have addressed the following topics: 1) the crucial tension between mythology and history in the formulation of the sage-kings concept, 2) the putative role that sage-kings played as the primogenitors of civilization, and 3) the divergent ways that Warring States texts have used and presented the sage-king figures and how best to systematically extricate them from the texts in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the constantly changing political realities of the time. Having done that, I will proceed to examine two examples of the sage-kings being portrayed in the Warring States texts, for their significance with respect to political narratives and their demonstration of the evolution of these narratives. I will give a preliminary analysis of how each of these narratives addressed particular political needs at their inception and whether the texts' interpretation by Warring States authors changed over time or largely stayed the same. Specifically, I will be looking at the following:

- 1) the myths pertaining to the taming of the great flood by Yu 禹, which can be interpreted as a way to rationalize both the creation of human civilization from disorder and chaos as well as the formation of boundaries that distinguish what is essentially human from the non-human; and
- 2) the example of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, which illustrates the important question of legitimate succession and the transfer of political power from one ruler to the next.

1.4 Methodological Matters

The methodological practices employed in this thesis are primarily inspired by Professor Michael Puett, whose very careful analysis of existing secondary scholarship and emphasis on properly contextualizing Warring States texts and the various philosophical debates within their original historical contexts in both *To become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* as well as *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, have been truly illuminating for my own research. I find his methodological approach not only effective in contextualizing my own research within the existing historiography of the concept of the ideal ruler in Warring States thought, but it also will allow me to take a more global approach when I attempt to analyze primary source documents using the theories that contemporary scholarship has advanced. As Puett has argued, “[t]he method of analysis should be to isolate the tensions that generated the debates, analyze the history of those debates, and, when comparing, to do so only when one has isolated in other cultures similar problems.”³² That is to say, rather than focusing on merely drawing comparisons, and in turn conclusions, from particularities of individual ideas within larger debates across cultures, it would be more appropriate first to identify and then to understand the larger contexts in which those debates were taking place.

It is with this in mind, then, that I attempt to survey the current field of research with the focus on secondary scholarship, in order to, if not reconstruct, at least to gain a relatively macroscopic picture of what scholars have been conveying in the past two

³² Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 20.

decades. I will spend the first half of this thesis extrapolating various arguments and observations with regards to the issue of sage-kings that have been made by leading scholars published in English as well as by a limited number of East Asian scholars who have published their research in Chinese and Japanese. This is to serve as a basic foundation upon which to adequately construct manageable categories of analysis of the concept of the sage-king. By no means will this thesis be able to conduct a truly exhaustive analysis of all the sage-kings in Classical Chinese texts, nor will it be able to look at all the different instances in which the authors of these texts postulate concepts of ideal rulership. Much of this is something that I plan to pursue in my future research, especially with the intention of using the information derived from newly discovered archaeological manuscripts.

2. Sage-King Narratives: A Contemporary Tale

During the Warring States and early imperial periods, tales about the sage-kings were central in many mythological “accounts of ancient history and the emergence of human civilization,” which were some of the most salient ways through which the early Chinese were able to conceptualize their cosmological views and to express their understanding of their own positions within that framework.³³ It is posited by many scholars that much of the Warring States discourse regarding the sage-kings was largely mythological in nature and the different sources of these myths could be used to explain the divergent interpretations by these texts. That being said, the sage-kings were interpreted differently not just by the authors of the various Warring States texts. Scholars today, too, offer many different opinions with regards to the origins of these narratives, how they came to be integrated within the collective public consciousness of the Warring States authors, and also what their significance was and what kinds of insights could be extrapolated to shed light on the political and intellectual realities of the time.

2.1 Myth, Shamanism, and Sage-King Narratives

In any discussion of the sage-king narratives and the role that they play within the intellectual consciousness during the Warring States period, it is absolutely essential to examine their relationship to the historical conceptions of the past on the part of the authors and also, inevitably, to examine the dynamic between history and mythology. The narratives of the sage-kings were constructed by authors who lived during a time

³³ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 16.

when the development of states “devoted to centralization, strong legal structures, and a large-scale mobilization of peasants for the sake of war” was taking place.³⁴ These kinds of fundamental changes in state organization and state-society relations not only defined the kinds of philosophical debates that were occurring, but they also reveal the fact that not everyone wholeheartedly agreed with the kinds of developments that were being undertaken by these warring states. It is this kind of historical context in which intellectuals at the time attempted to comprehend, legitimize, or altogether undermine these political developments through the use of the sage-king concept within the historical and mythological discourses about the origins of the state and kingship in the distant past. One more point of contention, then, is whether the authors of these texts themselves recognized the fact that these sage-king figures were merely mythological, or whether they in fact interpreted them as genuine historical rulers who existed in the past. Furthermore, it will inevitably affect the ways in which current scholars interpret these texts and, in turn, formulate their own understandings with regards to the sage-kings.

It is perplexing to me how it is demonstratively evident that sage-king figures were mythological figures, yet on the other hand, they held considerable influence over the historical development of political discourses during the Warring States period. For the purpose of my research, I have opted to follow Lewis’s definition of myths, which he posits are “stories which ‘express dramatically the ideology under which a society lives,’ that reflect the rules and traditional practices without which everything within a society would disintegrate.”³⁵ Despite the efforts of many scholars during the twentieth century

³⁴ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 92.

³⁵ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 167.

to organize and pinpoint the origins of these myths, just as Derek Bodde reveals, these materials are “usually so fragmentary and episodic that even the reconstruction from them of individual myths—let alone an integrated system of myths—is exceedingly difficult.”³⁶

With regards to this question of the inherent conceptual mystique and authority of the sage-kings, Ching attributes them to earlier, more primitive concepts of kingship that arose out of the shamanic tradition.³⁷ As she points out, “The sage-king paradigm arose out of the experience of ancient shamanic rulers, even if, in some ways the gradual eclipse of ecstasy was accompanied by the growth of ethics and exegesis.”³⁸ That is to say, as the mystique and claims to transcendental authority of shamans either decreased or were transformed into that based on a more robust systematic framework of moral and political philosophies, the sage-king developed both as a political concept and as a philosophical ideal.

It is interesting to note that the view that early Chinese notions of kingship were indeed shamanic is not without its own controversies, and there exists disagreement within current scholarship. For instance, despite reservations, Lothar von Falkenhausen agrees with Ching in principle, and both accept K. C. Chang’s proposed explanatory framework, which suggests a certain degree of correlation between shamanistic practices and the development of concepts of kingship in early China.³⁹ Chang points to the

³⁶ As cited in Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 92–93.

³⁷ Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

³⁹ K. C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 44–55; Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles, CA: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA,

importance of divination and to the use of ritual bronze sacrificial vessels with animal designs in the Shang and Zhou polities, as means both to commune and to interact with the spiritual world.⁴⁰ In particular, von Falkenhausen argues that while a concise definition of “shamanism” is still subject to debate, the fact is that it is “not a particular kind of religion, but a religious technique that can be...employed in the service of the most diverse theologies.”⁴¹ In other words, rather than interpreting “shamanic” as a term that reveals the complexities of the theology in early Chinese religion, one can use it to describe some of the religious practices that have been observed.

Nonetheless, others like David Keightly reject this direct connection between shamanism and political institutions in the Shang, arguing that instead, the hierarchical and “bureaucratic” religious beliefs and practices of the Shang could be “characterized as nonreligious, nonmysterious, and—because so explicitly goal directed—rational, in [their] logic.”⁴² On the other hand, Puett questions both of these interpretations of the sacral, religious aspects of kingship in early Chinese thought, criticizing the prevailing assumption of an inherent harmony between the spiritual and human worlds and claiming that ritual practices were instituted “to domesticate the spirits and thereby render them controllable.”⁴³ Thus a rather more complicated picture of their relationship to the spiritual world and their correlation to political authority can be extrapolated from these different interpretations. Understanding this background is indispensable in treating the

2006), 47.

⁴⁰ Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, 54; 80.

⁴¹ Von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, 47.

⁴² David N. Keightley, “The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture,” *History of Religion*, 17 (1978): 214.

⁴³ Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 50–54.

analysis of the concept of the sage-king, mostly because of the significant conceptual role that it plays in both the philosophical discourses and political rhetoric of the time.

In spite of these conceptual connections with the shamanistic tradition, however, Ching claims that regarding the historicity of these sage-kings, it is more likely that the sage-kings were mythological, while there is a stronger possibility that the so-called Five Emperors might have indeed been real, owing to the fact that there is more textual information about them.⁴⁴ Claims like these are clearly problematic, not least because the mere abundance of textual materials on these figures not only does not prove those figures' existence, but it merely demonstrates the fact that they were prominently invoked as literary figures in the texts that were compiled at the time. Ching recognizes this point as well and points out that sage-kings, as such, most likely never existed in reality and were instead mythical creations of later periods, used in order both to allude to the "vague memory of shamanic rulers of the past" and also "for the sake of having real rulers emulate such mythical figures as Yao and Shun."⁴⁵ What is interesting about her observation here is that perhaps the reasons why the sage-kings were so prevalent as a concept in the intellectual discourse of the time was precisely that they were so malleable yet undoubtedly commanded a certain level of reverence among the ruling classes. What is unclear in her explications here, however, is why in particular the sage-kings were chosen and used by the philosophers of the time both to reinforce and legitimize their political ideals.

Ching claims that even if these sage-kings were not actual historical figures and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xii.

were mythical fabrications, their significance in the overall development of Chinese political thought over the past two millennia was still substantial. For despite the “moral and historical ambiguity surrounding these early legends and historical accounts,” the significance lies in the fact that those champions of the sage-kings, namely the philosophers, “promoted the idea that the wise were fit to govern, if not as rulers, then at least as councillors.”⁴⁶ Ching recognizes that what she calls the “sage-king paradigm” ultimately changed and transformed over time, and that regardless of its mythical origins stemming from notions of sacral kingship with all the rituals that came with that, this paradigm would continue to play a significant role within the early Chinese cosmological conceptual framework for centuries to come.

Many scholars like Ching have posited that the myth of the sage-kings arose from the shamanistic traditions and practices in prehistoric times in early China. Nonetheless, it is also just as likely that the sage-kings largely came out of an earlier oral mythological tradition and came to be recorded during the Spring and Autumn as well as during the Warring States periods. It remains to be ascertained, with further archaeological and philological research, whether or not this was indeed the case. Just as Lewis points out, these prominent myths with “the scattered references to the various sage-kings in surviving documents lack the tidy, systematic character” as many scholars who have undertaken myth reconstruction would discover.⁴⁷ These myths reflect, on the one hand, their disparate origins ranging from various shamanistic traditions across different regions to folklore that has been transmitted orally for generations before being recorded

⁴⁶ Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship*, 60.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 168.

in historical documents, and on the other hand, the various changes and transformations that could have taken place as they were recorded and posited by various authors for their own purposes. While it is difficult to delineate a clear process by which this took place, what contemporary scholars do recognize and can argue is that these myths and narratives, regardless of their origins, developed and changed over time and were constantly reacting to different influences.

Having discussed the role that shamanistic historical developments played in the formation of the sage-king narratives, it would be appropriate to examine some of the many different ways that the Warring States authors chose to depict these mythological figures.

2.2 Sage-Kings and the Philosophical Masters

From the shamanistic prehistoric past to the successive development of state structures by the Shang and Zhou dynasties, narratives about deities turned into tales about past cultural heroes in the form of sage-kings who, as Schwartz points out, “may be individuals but they are also superhumans who embody public truth.”⁴⁸ The sage-kings, in turn, became virtuous moral paragons, creators of righteous governance, defenders of nature, inventors of laws and measures, or champions of the triumph of human civilization, depending on which texts are used in an attempt to systematically create concrete definitions and characteristics. Another indispensable aspect of the sage-king

⁴⁸ Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 401.

figures is their role as technological innovators, cultural heroes, and ultimately their perceived status as the primogenitors of what would become “Chinese” civilization. Clearly, there are times when the traits are complementary, for instance, it was possible for the sage-kings to champion human civilization and create government bureaucracies at the same time; however, contradictions were similarly likely.

What, then, is the reason behind the fact that these authors all recognize and call upon a common set of figures, only to define and characterize them differently? In essence, the sage-kings became mouthpieces for these authors, who sought to advance their own philosophical ideals. Through the sage-kings’ perceived significance either in history or mythology, philosophical masters came to formulate ideas and compose treatises that eventually became the foundation of Chinese philosophy. This section will first look at how different texts depicted the sage-kings, how they constantly changed, and what different political ideals they represented within the broader context of the developing narratives about the warring states. Then it will address how scholars have attempted to mitigate the clear discrepancies in the portrayal of the sage-kings by the authors of these texts.

For the purpose of this discussion, the significance of these sage-kings lies not in what they were presumed to have done, but in what they represented in the minds of the Warring States thinkers.⁴⁹ Similarly, while traces of the philosophical distinctiveness of each of the sage-kings were retained as time went on, they nevertheless began to share common attributes with one another. Narratives about these sage-kings “gradually

⁴⁹ Michael Puett, “Sages, Ministers, and Rebels: Narratives from Early China Concerning the Initial Creation of the State,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 58 (1998): 427.

formed a coherent, meaningful body of myths that articulated the interests, concerns and dilemmas” of the ruling elite and “constituted a mythology of statecraft” that dealt with major themes of governance and political legitimacy.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as Lewis points out, the sage-kings as a collective entity, for instance in the myths of Yao and Shun, dealt with issues of political succession and heredity of power, while the legends of Huangdi dealt with matters of political violence and the triumph of humanistic order against chaotic, animalistic nature. The virtuous governance of these sage-kings was said to be unmatched, and thus the people under their rule lived in peace and prosperity.

Indeed, this idea that humanity and human civilization has been in essence the work of sage-kings was a common theme among the many Warring States texts; how they differed, though, was in defining and portraying the ideals that these sage-kings would have wanted human society to aspire to. The texts would often start off by addressing various issues and problems that they perceived to be the cause of the malaise that plagues human society, be they either harsh political realities or the negative effects of the policies of others. Then they would explicate their own ideals, usually employing the sage-king figures as a way to bolster the legitimacy of their claims and to justify their policies as the most efficacious. In doing so, just as these authors were able to construct what they perceived to be the ideal methods to establish political order, reorganize society, and regulate the relationship between these two through the use of these myths, in turn, the myths themselves were recreated and transmitted for use by future generations.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 169.

As can be seen in texts like the *Analects*, the *Mencius* 孟子, and the *Mozi*, these mythical figures represented a “Golden Age of the past when the people enjoyed peace and prosperity under the government of ideal rulers assisted by wise ministers.”⁵¹ While the *Mozi* is the only text among these three that uses the specific phrase “sage-king” systematically throughout, both the *Analects* and the *Mencius* would readily invoke the individual figures of sage-kings themselves to illustrate their own particular ideals.⁵²

To illustrate this, the sage-kings in the *Analects* were the ones who created music and ritual in order to regulate the relationships between humanity and the world. Though as Roger Ames questions: “Yao and Shun, the sage rulers of high antiquity, accorded with the Way [道] in their governments, as did the early [Zhou] rulers, and yet Confucius looks to the latter as his primary exemplars... Why then does Confucius favor the Chou rulers over Yao and Shun?”⁵³ In fact, one of the ways in which the figure of Confucius of the *Analects* differs from other later texts like *Mencius* or *Xunzi* 荀子 is his trust in the Zhou cultural institutions, ones that he believes have been established in accordance with the Way. Thus, perhaps in the mind of Confucius, since the times of Yao and Shun are long past and all that he does know for certain are the cultural inheritance and institutionalized rituals of the Zhou, those are the ones that he extols and attributes to the sage-kings. Similarly, following the teaching of Confucius, moral education will give the ability to any person, but especially to someone in the ruling elite, to transform his moral self and to transcend the circumstances that he was born into and become a gentleman.

⁵¹ Puett, *To Become a God*, 38.

⁵² Yoshinaga, “Mōshi ni okeru”, 53; Deng, *Shengwang zhi Dao*, 157.

⁵³ Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 3.

Despite his “trust...and love [of] the ancient ways” as well as his insistence that he “transmits rather than innovate[s],” in many ways, Confucius was truly a revolutionary figure by proposing that it was through moral cultivation and education that one could attain the virtuous legitimacy to rule.⁵⁴ Thus the political vision of the *Analects* was not merely returning the chaotic world under the rule of a sage-king, as this was also the aim of the other texts, but the vision was to do so within a very specific framework based on ritual propriety and filial piety, with a great emphasis on educating virtuous human beings.

There even exist diverging views within two texts that both claim the legacy of being heirs to the ideals of Confucius, the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*. The first of these was one of the most prominent texts in traditional Chinese political thought, especially after the dominance of neo-Confucianism and of highly influential figures such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130 - 1200 CE), who were instrumental in its revitalization. According to the *Mencius*, and akin to a similar idea exhibited in the *Analects*, the sage-kings were the first ones who were concerned about the primordial disorder, where everything was presumed to be in chaos. It was the sage-kings who created and “taught the people the basic aspects of culture and morality” that were already innate in them; the sage-kings were merely teachers and organizers, not creators.⁵⁵ The significance of this was that while Confucius never quite made it explicit what precise role the sages-kings played during the formative years of humanity, the *Mencius* was unequivocal in positing that they were merely awakening all that was already innate in all human beings in order for them to realize

⁵⁴ *Analects*, 7.1, trans. Slingerland, 64.

⁵⁵ Puett, *Ambivalence*, 109.

“the true hierarchy of nature.”⁵⁶

In other words, the *Mencius* continued the same theme as the *Analects* in insisting that bringing about moral education was precisely the sage-king’s political role. Furthermore, it argues that even “if they are well fed and have warm clothing and are comfortably lodged and are not taught, then they are close to beasts.”⁵⁷ That is to say, mere technological advances and external developments of civilization are not sufficient to ensure that humans are truly distinguished from animals without also self-cultivation and the development of their internal inclinations for humaneness, or *ren* 仁. In contrast, the *Xunzi* would emphasize quite the opposite and would insist on the need to cultivate the principles of ritual and righteousness in the people to save them from their natures.⁵⁸ In other words, the sage-kings in the *Xunzi* relied heavily on what Puett calls “Heaven-given faculties” to distinguish what is proper and what is not, in order to train and educate the people in such a way, leaving very little potential for the humans’ own natural tendencies to deviate from that order.⁵⁹ Thus the important role of the sage-kings in the *Xunzi* is to create institutions and social structures that are inherently external to humans, but necessary for human society. Even though the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* both invoke sage-king figures in their political ideals, and both emphasize the importance of moral education in their respective intellectual frameworks, they differ in their interpretations of what the sage-kings were thought to have done to bring about order in the world.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 269

⁵⁸ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 37; Geoffrey MacCormack, “Mythology and the Origin of Law in Early Chinese Thought,” *Journal of Asian Legal History* 1 (2001), 5.

⁵⁹ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 68.

Opposed to Confucius's ideals, however, were ideas presented in texts such as the *Mozi*, in which the sage-kings were the ones who established laws, weights, measures, and proper names for different things in order to distinguish humans from beasts.⁶⁰ In particular, the *Mozi* argued that in primitive times, humans "used the terms of moral judgment in whatever manner [they] chose;" thus the sage-kings regulated the use of language, especially with regards to moral judgments, to make social organization possible.⁶¹ It is interesting to note that many of these issues were also ones that the *Xunzi* addresses, and that the later developments of these ideals about the sage-kings were either influenced by, or were composed as a response to the critiques of the *Mozi*. Similarly, in these texts, rather than the Confucian commitment to ritual propriety, what was given as the primary contribution of the sage-kings was the institution of law and punishment. As Puett discusses in his work, the *Mozi* argued that the reason for All-under-Heaven having fallen into a state of chaos was not that the sage-kings wrongly instituted the system of names and of law and punishments. Rather, it was because those very institutions were being wrongly utilized by wicked rulers to further their selfish needs.⁶² The *Mozi* argued, particularly against the Confucian emphasis on placing filial piety and one's family at the core of one's social interactions, that impartiality is the key to right the many wrongs that their contemporary rulers, and also the Confucians, had inflicted upon the world. To this end, the necessity for the sage-kings to practice impartiality was revealed in the *Mozi* thus: "Heaven is all-inclusive and impartial in its activities, abundant and impartial in its blessings, lasting and unfailing in its guidance. Hence the Sage Kings modeled

⁶⁰ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 28; MacCormack, "Mythology and the Origin of Law", 4; Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 170.

⁶¹ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 170.

⁶² Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 106.

themselves upon it.”⁶³ As a matter of fact, the *Mozi* abundantly uses the exact phrase, “sage-king,” as it appears in this text over a hundred times, more so than in any of the other Warring States texts.⁶⁴ However, the author of the *Mozi* also criticizes the tyrants, and it could be argued that in reality, all of the many explications of the “sage-king” were actually targeted at those very tyrants. Deng argues that it could be extrapolated from this that “the ancient sage-kings” were not in reality the historical virtuous kings and illuminated rulers, but were instead used as antitheses to what the author considered to be the reality of his time; the sage-kings were in fact the ideal rulers in the minds of the author.⁶⁵

In contrast, the sage-king figure in the *Daodejing* 道德經 would “abide in the business of non-action” in order to “empty the people’s heart [-minds] and fill their bellies” to return the people to the state of nature.⁶⁶ That is to say, even being in a position of great political power, the sage-king would, in effect, carry out no actions and would attempt to ensure that there would be nothing else to disturb this “natural” progression of things. This idea is notable, as it represented one of the most prominent trends of primitivist thought, which regarded all artificial creations such as rituals, music, government, laws, and so forth, as being harmful to human nature. In this particular perspective, the sage-kings were the ones who engaged in no active governing, as

⁶³ *Mozi* Chapter 4, Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A History of Chinese Political Thought: Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Sixth Century A.D.*, trans. F. W. Mote (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 243.

⁶⁴ Yoshinaga, “Mōshi ni okeru”, 53.

⁶⁵ Deng, *Shengwang zhi Dao*, 172. Traditionally the *Daodejing* is said to be composed by a person named Laozi, which is the reason that sometimes this text is also called the *Laozi*. Like most of the other Warring States texts, the actual author or compiler of the *Daodejing* itself remains unknown.

⁶⁶ Philip J. Ivanhoe, trans. *The Daodejing of Laozi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 2; Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 37; MacCormack, “Mythology and the Origin of Law”, 5.

humans were not separated from the animals, and the authors of the *Daodejing* attributed all the chaos and warfare that plagued the Warring States period to these artificial creations by lesser rulers. As a result of their particular vision of ideal rulership, however, they denied the title of “sage” to figures like Yao and Shun and reserved that title for the ruler that would eventually return the world into its natural primal state, without the evils of human artificiality.

2.3 Late Warring States Critiques of Sage-Kings

As the development of the Warring States period continued and the use of sage-king narratives started to evoke responses from different philosophers, not everyone was convinced that emulating and following the way of the sage-kings was truly what was best for restoring order to All-under-Heaven. A primary critic of the sage-kings was the text *Zhuangzi* 莊子, which was a “full length book for the individual who wants to live his own life free of the burdens of office...[and was] in effect an anthology of writings with philosophies justifying withdrawal to private life.”⁶⁷ It should be noted that the *Zhuangzi* has been recognized to be a heterogeneous text, and some of its contents are only related to the main themes of the book, as depicted in the Inner Chapters, only marginally.⁶⁸ The Inner Chapters depict the “free and wandering” sages grounded in the Dao, as well as the “relativity of all conceptual categorization and equanimity towards

⁶⁷ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 172.

⁶⁸ H. D. Roth, “Chuang tzu,” in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley, CA: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993), 56.

life and death.”⁶⁹ Within the Inner Chapters, it is possible to find sages who actively engage in the practices of society, even some of the Confucian practices that the more primitivist chapters criticize. It is from within these chapters that it is possible to extract a different kind of critique against the sage-kings in the late Warring States intellectual landscape. Interestingly, the *Zhuangzi* does not use the term “sage-king” at all, its critiques against the sages and its utter disdain for the ways of the sage-kings is unequivocal, as can be observed from passages like the following:

Then along came the sage. Limping and staggering after Humanity, straining on tiptoes after Responsibility, they filled everyone in the world with self-doubt. Lasciviously slobbering over music, fastidiously obsessing over ritual, they got everyone in the world to take sides. ...unless you drop the [Way] and its Virtuosity, how can you take up [Benevolence] and [Righteousness]? Unless our inborn nature and our uncontrived condition are dismembered, what use will there be for ritual and music? ...The destruction of the [Way] and its Virtuosity to make [Benevolence] and [Righteousness] is the fault of the sages.⁷⁰

In essence, these kinds of critiques, especially against the kinds of virtues that are held dear by the Confucians, are very standard for the more *Zhuangzi*. It questions whether or not the values that these sages are deemed to represent, such as benevolence and righteousness, are not merely hypocritical values that actually distract from the overall soteriology of becoming attuned with the Way, which would have been fully compatible with human nature had it not been for the superfluous artificialities like ritual and music.

A similar sentiment is reflected in the “Robber Zhi” 盜跖 chapter, in which the author not only lambastes the purported moral character of the sage-kings but also mocks

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Zhuangzi : The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Chapter 9, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2009), 61–62. 及至聖人，蹙躄為仁，跢跢為義，而天下始疑矣；澶漫為樂，摘僻為禮，而天下始分矣。道德不廢，安取仁義！性情不離，安用禮樂！毀道德以為仁義，聖人之過也。

their actions:

Huang Di was unable to sustain virtue: he fought Chi You at the Zhuolu fields, and the blood flowed for a hundred miles. When Yao and Shun appeared, they established multitudes of ministers. [Then] Tang banished his sovereign, and King Wu killed [his ruler], Zhou [紂]. From then on, the strong oppressed the weak; the many abused the few. Since the time of Tang and Wu, everybody follows these calamitous people.⁷¹

First of all, it should be pointed out that the sage-king figure of Huang Di was probably a Warring States creation, as he does not appear in any of the surviving documentary sources that predate this period. Nonetheless, the *Zhuangzi* would definitely take issue with Huang Di, as he was perceived to be a militaristic figure, especially associated with the “organized use of violence by the state, either in terms of punishing the wicked, subjugating rebels, or dealing with barbarians, as sanctioned by the divine Heaven.”⁷² The comment here about Huang Di not being able to “sustain virtue” is a clear critique of the states’ increasingly rampant use of military means to achieve their political goals. Similarly, the creation of a bureaucracy in the form of “multitudes of ministers” by Yao and Shun is equally problematic for a philosopher whose ideal is to retreat from worldly engagements. Perhaps the most damning of all indictments in this passage are the final two, lobbed against rulers who are traditionally considered sagacious but who are instead criticized as being usurpers. With the main message being that not only are the ways of the sage-kings abhorrent, making matters worse is the fact that the contemporaries of the author “[follow] these calamitous people.” As a whole, it is clear that the development of the sage-kings narrative has indeed taken a change during the Warring States period, for

⁷¹ *Zhuangzi* “Dao Zhi” Chapter, trans. Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 79-80. 然而黃帝不能致德，與蚩尤戰於涿鹿之野，流血百里。堯、舜作，立群臣，湯放其主，武王殺紂。自是之後，以強陵弱，以眾暴寡。湯、武以來，皆亂人之徒也。

⁷² Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 111.

not only were the sage-kings not respected by the *Zhuangzi*, they ultimately become targets for ridicule and become a means that the opponents of those who subscribe to these narratives can use to relentlessly attack them.

Another late Warring States text shares with the *Zhuangzi* a similar sense of disdain for the sage-kings. The *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 is traditionally categorized as one of the fundamental so-called Legalist texts, along with others attributed to Shang Yang 商鞅, Shen Dao 慎到, and Shen Buhai 申不害. Compiled around the middle of the third century BCE, it is generally considered to be one of the latest Warring States texts and thus not only has it been considered to be an “aggregation, systematization, and clarification” of pre-Qin Legalist doctrines, but it is also capable of addressing many of the different arguments posited by some of the other prevailing thinkers on how best to solve the challenges of the time.⁷³ I am mostly interested in the *Hanfeizi*, because it represents a very specific and particular historical context, that of the late Warring States period, on the eve of the Qin conquest in 221 BCE. Furthermore, it is presented as a primarily ruler-centric political philosophy of state organization. The combination of these two features allows it to be historically aware of where it can situate its own arguments against those of the other authors, and furthermore, makes very clear the kinds of serious concerns that are relevant to the rulers who actually have the means to carry out the kinds of political practices that it proposes.

It is true that many of the other Warring States texts, too, offer various suggestions to rulers on how best to rule and exert their power by means of self-

⁷³ Ames, *Art of Rulership*, 84.

cultivation or by implementing reforms in their governance. But none of them seem to be nearly as single-minded in the focus of enabling the ruler to amass absolute control and power over the state. Furthermore, while the utter disregard and even dismissal of moral virtues in the *Hanfeizi* has maligned this text in the eyes of many later scholars influenced by Confucian teachings, the fact remains that the underlying political philosophy, comparatively devoid of interest in the ruler as a person and being more interested in the ruler as a component and embodiment of the state, is what I find particularly interesting.

For the *Hanfeizi*, the ideal ruler would emphasize the use of laws and standards through the two handles of government, rewards and punishments, in order to reward the worthy and to punish those who went against the proper order as determined by the ruler. Just as this succinct summary by Ames suggests, this kind of legalist “political philosophy might be described as ‘government of the ruler, by the ruler, and for the ruler.’”⁷⁴ This sentiment and the *Hanfeizi*’s conception of the ideal ruler are also reflected in the “Zhudao” 主道 (Way of Rulership) chapter. This chapter begins by very briefly discussing the cosmological significance of the ruler and his relationship to the supposed “Way of the Ruler,” as prescribed by the Dao. Nonetheless, the author spends a majority of this chapter in explicating what he perceives as the proper power dynamics between the ruler and his ministers and subjects. While he does not go into detail with regards to the organization of actual administrative structures, he is unequivocal in presenting the different responsibilities for the rulers and the ministers, what they should do and how they should act in carrying out the governance of the state. He also outlines the various threats and dangers to the state, and by extension to the ruler’s authority, and how they

⁷⁴ Ames, *Art of Rulership*, 50.

ought to be dealt with. Interestingly, while the ruler as conceptualized in the *Hanfeizi* is omnipotent and omniscient, he in fact does not carry out any of the governing in reality, relegating all of those tasks to his ministers. He merely creates and maintains law and standards while functioning as someone who measures and controls the ministers by means of the “two handles of governance:” rewards and punishments. Overall, this chapter summarizes most of the major concepts and themes in the *Hanfeizi* quite effectively. Most importantly, it highlights the qualities that an ideal ruler ought to have and how this ideal ruler should act in the running of the state bureaucracy.

One of the first observations that can be made with regards to the philosophy of the *Hanfeizi* is the references that the author makes to the Dao, which is vacuous, primordial, creative, transcendental, and limitless. Many scholars have readily recognized the correlation between the thought of the *Daodejing* and the ideas in *Hanfeizi*, beginning as early as Sima Qian 司馬遷 of the Han dynasty in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Record of the Grand Historian*).⁷⁵ While it is not in the scope of this project to fully examine the implications of how earlier texts such as the *Daodejing* and others in the so called “Huang-Lao” 黃老 tradition have influenced the development of the *Hanfeizi*, it is nonetheless interesting to note the borrowing of terminology among different ideological traditions. There are traits that, according to the *Hanfeizi*, are common to both the Dao and to concepts of *fa* 法, interpreted most commonly as law.⁷⁶ Just as the Dao is all-encompassing and the origin of all beings, the *Hanfeizi* would argue that *fa* is at the core of the state and that it ought

⁷⁵ Hsiao-Po Wang and Leo S. Chang, *The Philosophical Foundations of Han Fei's Political Theory* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 15.

⁷⁶ Lai Yanyuan 賴炎元 and Fu Wuguang 傅武光, *Xinshi Hanfeizi* 新釋韓非子 (Taipei, Taiwan: Sanmin shuju, 2007), 17.

to be treated as the basic foundation of the ideal political order, which is precisely the kind of sentiment in Chapter 19 “Shi Xie” (飾邪, Rectifying Disorder):

故先王以道為常，以法為本

Therefore, the former kings deem the *Dao* to be the constant, and consider *fa* to be the root.⁷⁷

The notion of the *Dao* itself is not the primary point that is being expounded upon in the “Way of Rulership” chapter; it is considered to be the underlying principle in the political ideals that are being extolled here. For example, this chapter begins as follows:

道者，萬物之始，是非之紀也。是以明君守始以知萬物之源，治紀以知善敗之端。

As for the *Dao*, it is the beginning of the myriad things, [it is also] the standard of “this” and “not-this.”⁷⁸ This is the reason the enlightened ruler preserves the beginning in order to know the source of the myriad beings, [and] regulates these standards in order to know the roots of good and bad.

It is not particularly surprising to point out that the *Hanfeizi* based its entire philosophical structure on the notion of the *Dao*, as it seemed to be the common practice among contemporary intellectuals to variously define and ground their ideals on their own interpretations of this term. It is, however, intriguing to note how the *Dao* in this particular case is supposedly used by the enlightened ruler to understand the source of the myriad beings and to regulate the roots of goodness and wickedness. It is within this understanding, that is, that the *Dao* is at the source of all things, that the concept of *fa* can be interpreted.

⁷⁷ Translations of the *Hanfeizi* in this section are my own.

⁷⁸ Or “right” and “wrong,” in other words, making distinctions.

It is interesting to note, however, that while sage-king figures do appear in the *Hanfeizi*, they are more often than not depicted in a negative light.⁷⁹ Within the overall iconoclastic and antihistorical attitudes of these reformers who believed that “To imitate antiquity is to be behind the times; to follow the status quo is to be bogged down in the face of changing circumstances.”⁸⁰ As circumstances change over time, the author of the *Hanfeizi* is unequivocal in emphasizing the importance of political practices corresponding to the needs of the times. Most importantly, the *Hanfeizi* is adamantly against the sage-kings because they were modeled upon the past, and it is made very clear that political practices ought to reflect current circumstances, appropriate to the actual needs of the state, and not merely be based on moralistic ideals that were formulated in the past where the situation was different. This point is made painfully clear in the *Hanfeizi*:

Those who know nothing of proper government are certain to say: ‘Don’t change old ways! Don’t alter regular practices!’ As for changing or not changing, the sage is not interested. His only concern is proper government. This being so, whether or not he changes old ways or alters conventions depends on whether they will meet the present contingency.⁸¹

That being said, that is not to say that the sage-king narratives are completely abandoned; rather, historical sage-king figures are now used as a way for the author of the *Hanfeizi* to critique and mock his ideological adversaries, most of whom use these very sage-kings to lend authority to their own arguments. This critique can be observed in the “Eminence in Learning” 顯學 chapter:

⁷⁹ 聖王 “Sage-king” has a total of nine occurrences in the *Hanfeizi*, eight of them in a single chapter, the “Shuoyi” 說疑.

⁸⁰ Ames, *Art of Rulership*, 10–11.

⁸¹ Ames, *Art of Rulership*, 11.

Confucius and Mozi both followed the ways of Yao and Shun, and though their practices differed, each claimed to be following the real Yao and Shun. But since we cannot call Yao and Shun back to life, who is to decide whether it is the Confucians or the Mohists who are telling the truth? ...If we cannot even decide which of the present versions of Confucian and Mohist doctrine are the genuine ones, how can we hope to scrutinize the ways of Yao and Shun, who lived three thousand years ago? ...Hence it is clear that those who claim to follow the ancient kings and to be able to describe with certainty the ways of Yao and Shun must be either fools or imposters. The learning of fools and imposters, doctrines that are motley and contradictory—such things as these the enlightened ruler will never accept.”⁸²

While the critiques here are levied against the Confucians and the followers of the *Mozi*, they could very easily be applied to any author who employs the sage-king narratives for his own rhetorical purposes. It could be argued that the *Hanfeizi* in many ways maintains a similar rhetorical device within the narrative tradition by replacing the sage-kings with different terms that all ultimately mean “enlightened ruler” 明主.⁸³ Nonetheless, its disavowal of the sage-king figures, and its discrediting of the power of tradition and history is a revolutionary one.

Even though the *Hanfeizi* seems to stay within the narrative tradition of using idealized figures to engage in intellectual debates with the other philosophers of the time; however, it is able to address and criticize the rival contemporary explications on political affairs by discrediting the historical sage-king figures. Clearly, the author of the *Hanfeizi* was quite cognizant of the different kinds of intellectual debate that were taking place at the time and used it to the advantage of his own political ideals. This kind of historical self-awareness on the part of the author of the *Hanfeizi*, while not unique, is especially

⁸² *Han Feizi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 119–120.

⁸³ In the *Hanfeizi*, the following phrases can be observed, with the number of individual occurrences in parentheses: 明主 “enlightened ruler” (94 occurrences), 明君 “enlightened monarch” (31 occurrences), 明王 “enlightened king” (six occurrences), 聖主 “sagacious ruler” (three occurrences), and 聖君 “sagacious monarch” (one occurrence).

intriguing, as it allows for clearly defined positions of his own ideals and explications against those of the others; furthermore, it is possible to make very cynical criticisms of the other philosophers by incisively disputing their claims, while using their own terminology and concepts.

Further elaborating on that point, *Hanfeizi* was also against the moralistic rhetoric of the many other authors of the time, claiming that much of their explication about proper virtues being absolutely necessary for good government was false. Its disdain for this kind of ideology can be extrapolated from the following passage:

If someone were to go around telling people, “I can give you wisdom and long life!”, then the world would regard him as an imposter. Wisdom is a matter of man’s nature, and long life is a matter of fate, and neither...can be got from others. ...Likewise, to try to teach people to be benevolent and righteous is the same as saying you can make them wise and long-lived. ...You may talk about the benevolence and righteousness of the former kings all you like, but it will not make your own state any better ordered...[the importance should be to] make your laws and regulations clear and your rewards and punishments certain... The enlightened ruler pays close attention to such aids to rule, and has little time for extolling the ancients. Therefore he does not talk about benevolence and righteousness.⁸⁴

At the outset, it is clear that the tone of this passage is quite cynical and profoundly realistic. Not only does it liken many of its contemporary authors to imposters, but it essentially discounts their explications as not actually effective at all in terms of bringing about order and proper governance. Similarly, the author also reveals his basic distrust of the traditions from the past and of the sage-king figures whose virtues were extolled at great length, further emphasizing his claim that government policies ought to reflect the realities of the time and not merely rely on beguiling words and history. As a whole, the

⁸⁴ *Hanfeizi*, “Eminence in Learning”, trans. Watson, 128.

iconoclastic and perhaps even revolutionary undertones of the political ideals of the *Hanfeizi* are still within the same kind of rhetorical structure as the sage-king narratives that he discounts. But in this case, he has merely replaced the sage-king figure with an idealized “enlightened ruler” and presents this figure in a way that is both convincing and practical, especially to the rulers who were presumed to be his primary audience.

It could be argued that these kinds of political ideals reflect the kind of realpolitik that was already the norm among the warring states at this time, not only fully justifying the increasingly powerful bureaucratizing state apparatus, but also giving the authoritarian rulers the kinds of ideological legitimization needed for exerting control over the other vested interests who had traditionally competed with or even supplanted the rulers. For instance, as Ames points out, in the *Hanfeizi*, one of the greatest obstacles to the ruler’s fully exercising his power is the established order of ministers and the hereditary privilege of the powerful families who dominate the courts; the author’s principles would effectively render this establishment obsolete.⁸⁵

2.4 Sage-Kings as Conscious Fabrications

It is questionable what, in the minds of these thinkers, the sage-kings were or might have been like in reality; what truly mattered was that these were figures that contemporary rulers could aspire to become, by manifesting or cultivating specific qualities that these thinkers attributed to the sage-kings. To take this point even further, some scholars have even argued that “the revered sages of early Chinese antiquity were in all likelihood the inventions of authors from the Warring States and Han periods;” that

⁸⁵ Ames, *Art of Rulership*, 9–10.

is to say, they were artificial devices constructed consciously to further arguments and to lend legitimacy to the political views of those authors who employed them.⁸⁶ Similarly, even some of these authors recognized that, by and large, the sage-kings were often used as dialectic devices in their debates with one another in order to secure a sense of legitimacy. This was the case in a rather sarcastic passage of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, in which the author revealed that “[t]he average modern person holds the ancient in high esteem...Those who work out methods must attribute them to Shennong and Huangdi, and only then will they be admitted into the debate.”⁸⁷ In other words, it was clear even to authors at the time that in order to be able to participate in the ongoing debates, they had to resort to using concepts such as the sage-kings in their discourse, even if their ideas originally had nothing to do with these mythical figures.

Thus, if the same ideal rulers, the sage-kings, were to appear and be depicted in the texts of different authors, it would be inaccurate to presume that they would be one and the same. Reflective of the historical context of the time, they were only the same insofar as their names were identical; even their origins might not have been the same sources. The ways the sage-kings have been so differently characterized by different texts are representative of two things. First of all, the characteristics and achievements of the sage-kings differed from author to author in order to reflect what they themselves thought were the qualities that ideal rulers ought to exhibit. Secondly, these texts were, in all likelihood, written at different times, in different localities, and certainly by different groups of intellectuals who were active during the conflict-prone centuries of the Warring

⁸⁶ Puett, “Sages, Ministers, and Rebels,” 427.

⁸⁷ Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan, “Constructing Lineages,” 97.

States period. What they shared was a similar cultural heritage that was composed of religious and mythological thought and a belief that there were solutions to what they perceived to be the greatest problems that plagued their harsh realities.

All in all, it is unlikely that the inherent discrepancies that exist between these different political ideals can be easily integrated. Despite the fact that these sage-kings were all perceived to be the same mythological figures from times past, the reality was that they were created from completely different contexts. Nevertheless, precisely because of the existence of these inherent differences, they have become an effective mirror from which we can gain insight into not only the circumstances that led to the formation of these texts but also into the ideas that they attempted to transmit. This process of textual and conceptual evolution continued throughout the entire Warring States period, and it was not until the early imperial eras that it comparatively slowed down. Though even then, it did not completely stabilize and become canonical until much later.⁸⁸

Most scholars generally recognize these inherent disagreements between the natures of the sage-kings as postulated by different authors. Some scholars like Graham, Lewis, and Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan go so far as to claim that these authors were consciously aware that they were attributing characteristics to sage-king figures for their own rhetorical purposes. Upon further investigation of this claim, it is difficult to find direct references in the texts themselves where the authors admit that they were merely using the sage-king as a convenient way to put moral authority behind their political

⁸⁸ Ibid., 99.

ideals. Nonetheless, it is possible to find many critiques, especially in later Warring States texts like the *Hanfeizi*, of the fact that different authors will claim to represent the true vision of the sage-kings, yet all of them are different.

This being the case, leading contemporary scholarship has attempted to deal with these discrepancies differently. Some, like Lewis in *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, following in the footsteps of eminent scholars like Marcel Granet, Gu Jiegang, Bernhard Karlgren, and Henri Maspero, systematically organize and reconstruct particular sage-king myths in order to analyze how they were a part of larger Warring States narratives that sought both to rationalize and to legitimize the changing nature of sanctioned state violence.⁸⁹ Puett, however, argues that attempts to extrapolate deeper meaning from reconstructed myths of the sage-kings is problematic, mostly because they oversimplify and even obscure some of the more contentious and contradictory narratives.⁹⁰ While they disagree in the particularities of their methodologies, as a whole, it is clear that scholars recognize that these narratives did indeed change over time and that the scholars' divergent approaches merely reflect a different way of extrapolating the significance of these changes from the texts themselves.

Having roughly traced the origins of the sage-kings and the development of philosophical narratives that revolved around these mythical figures, it is important to note that much of their evolution took place not only due to the changing political circumstances of the centralizing states, but also especially as a result of the interactions and reactions between different philosophical and political ideologies. I believe that it is

⁸⁹ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 165–212.

⁹⁰ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 99–100.

because of this latter point that there exist many inherent contradictions within the broader problematique of sage-king narratives. I do not believe that the most important task for scholars is to attempt to reconstruct these myths, nor is it to accurately pinpoint the exact origins of these tales, at least not without some collaborative work with archaeological sources. I agree with Puett in his evaluation of this situation, in that the more important task is actively to question and redefine our interpretation of these narratives in order to gain a more multifaceted understanding both of these texts in the greater scheme of Warring States intellectual history and also of the kinds of political interests and concerns that gave rise to those very ideals in the first place.

It is with this in mind, then, that I next turn to analyze in a very preliminary way some particular narratives that form common threads between different Warring States texts, which deal with different themes of political importance.

3. Sage-King Narratives and Political Concerns: Two Cases

Despite the abundance of textual sources and the emphasis of scholars who focus on the mythological accounts of the past as enshrined in these Warring States texts, it should be pointed out that these narratives about the sage-kings are largely hypothesized in our understanding of both history and the development of philosophy in early China. Much of how the sage-kings were depicted in these texts reveal particular concerns that their authors with respect to different aspects of the changing political circumstances. The different perspectives and goals of these authors, all attempting to claim the right to define and present the sage-kings in their own ways, gave rise to the problem of contradictions and incompatibilities between myths about the same figures.

For instance, as Puett points out, “in some narratives acts of creation are ascribed to Huangdi, while in others they are ascribed to ministers or rebels;” the important thing in these cases, then, is not to find ways to make the inherent contradictions fit within the mythological model and dismiss those that don’t fit as merely erroneous.⁹¹ Instead, under the hypothesis that many of these Warring States narratives are “retellings of a limited number of stories” that cover different themes that mattered to their authors, the focus should be on questioning and analyzing which figures were employed, what actions have been attributed to them, and what this reveals about the contexts in which they were written. This practice of attributing characteristics to “historical” figures was common practice among these authors. As D. C. Lau points out, each intellectual tradition often had “its favourites among the ancient kings... [furthermore, these] ancient personages

⁹¹ Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 97.

were made concrete embodiments of moral qualities. ... Yao was the embodiment of kingly virtue, and Shun, beside being a sage king was also the embodiment of filial virtue.”⁹²

The differences among these texts in the portrayal of particular narratives that involve sage-king figures reveal a fundamental malleability in their construction as rhetorical devices. Furthermore, the fact that there exists a much greater level of complexity also reveals particular political and ideological concerns that were significant to their authors. To this end, I will examine two sample narratives that correspond to significant issues regarding the formation of human civilization and the state, as well as political legitimacy in term of succession, with different interpretations. The first narrative of interest is that of the great flood and its role in the conceptual formation of the triumph and birth of human civilization against unrelenting natural forces, through the sage-king Yu. The second will deal with the question of legitimate ways for the transfer of political authority, which in essence raises questions about whether hereditary or meritocratic principles would take precedence in not only matters of royal succession but also of office holding, through the narrative of the sage-kings Yao and Shun.

3.1 Flood Taming Narratives of Yu and Human Civilization

The tales of Yu and the great flood are some of the earliest that have been recorded in written documents that predate the Warring States period. As Lewis points out, citing Gu Jiegang, “there are no less than six references to Yu in Zhou [*Book of Odes*]

⁹² *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau (London, UK : Penguin Group, 2004),187.

詩經 that date from between ca. 1000 and 600 B.C.,” and similarly, there are even more references to Yu in the *Book of Documents* 書經, where even two chapters have been named after this sage-king figure.⁹³ Like most of the other myths that make up much of our understanding of how the early Chinese conceptualized their world, however, these narratives of the great flood and its taming by the great Yu are scattered and not at all systematic. That being said, a general commonality among many of these narratives, as reconstructed by scholars like Allan, is that they function largely as myths about creation and most importantly as historical accounts of fashioning a particularly humanistic order from the primal chaos, as a way for demarcations to be drawn both literally in the world and also reflected in the organization of human society.⁹⁴

These myths, then, could be interpreted, on the one hand, as fundamental for cosmogonic conceptualizations, especially addressing the origins of human society and the political organizations that are inherently required as part of that society’s development. On the other hand, the myths could be interpreted as sanctions for that very political authority; they attempt to give philosophical justification for the warring states that were aggressively changing their relationship with the land through dramatic transformations and through exerting direct control over both the land and those who lived on it.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, depending on the perspectives of the authors who adapted these narratives for their own uses, these accounts of the flood and the taming of the flood continued to evolve over time. In this vein, I would like to compare earlier accounts

⁹³ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 28.

⁹⁴ Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997), 39–41.

⁹⁵ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 169.

of sage-king Yu and the taming of the flood with later accounts in the *Mencius*, where tales about human efforts in habilitating the primal world of chaos evolved into an analogy for an internalized process of self-cultivation.

As mentioned earlier, even though some of the earliest recorded references to Yu as the tamer of the great flood can be found in the *Book of Odes*, many of these references date to a time prior to the Warring States period. However, these passages merely refer to the figure known as Yu, and some associate him with the flood without offering any explanation or details about his actual deeds and achievements. Actual accounts and proper narratives can only be found in the *Book of Documents*, and as Lewis suspects, they were most likely Warring States compositions and depict the problem of the great flood.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, the significance of the evolution of the flood controlling narratives between the earlier and later accounts is twofold. First of all, it is clear by the examples in the *Book of Odes* that narratives regarding the great flood and the sage-king Yu existed even before the dawn of the Warring States period; the only issue is that it may be impossible to find out what those narratives entailed without further evidence. Secondly, it matters not whether forms of these narratives recorded during the Warring States period were true to their earlier counterparts, at least for the current inquiry, because it is sufficient to compare those narratives with other versions also composed during the same period in order to gain a better understanding of the intent of their respective authors.

Most of the accomplishments of Yu were depicted in the “Tributes of Yu” 禹貢

⁹⁶ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 28–29.

chapter of the *Book of Documents*, and one particularly telling passage as translated by Lewis is as follows: “Yu [divided] the land, he followed the mountains and cut down the trees, to establish the highest mountains and the greatest rivers.”⁹⁷ In this passage, it can be understood that the author of this text likens the taming of the flood by Yu to practices of domesticating the physical landscape, effectively shaping it in such a way as to be hospitable for human society. Furthermore, it presents a very particular kind of relationship between humanity and nature. It frames nature as something that requires conscious effort to control and cultivate, and at the same time, these natural forces, as represented by the “highest mountains and the greatest rivers,” ought to be clearly separated from human society.

The chapter continues on to name and describe the various geographical features that were demarcated by Yu in his attempt to tame the flood and, in the process, to settle the lands. The chapter finally concludes with a summary of Yu’s accomplishments in the following passage:

The nine provinces formed a unity, with the usable land to the four edges of the earth all having been made into habitations. The nine mountains had roads carved through their forests and offerings presented to them. The nine rivers were dredged and flowing, while the nine marshes had all been embanked. Everything within the four seas converged [at the capital]. The six treasures [all natural resources] were all completely put in order. They myriad soils [of the different regions] had all been correctly evaluated, so as to scrupulously imposed a levy on resources. He had completely modeled the three soil types to perfect the levies of the central states.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 30–31. 禹敷土，隨山刊木，奠高山大川。

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 32. 九州攸同，四隩既宅，九山刊旅，九川滌源，九澤既陂，四海會同。六府孔修，庶土交正，底慎財賦，咸則三壤成賦。

In this passage, the basic units of political organization are clear, as All-under-Heaven is now divided into the nine provinces, a division which still had a certain ideological significance in the minds of the Warring States authors, even if in reality these nine provinces no longer corresponded to the actual territories under the control of the various warring states. Nonetheless, the fact that “the nine provinces formed a unity” is not insignificant, for it holds the connotation that regardless of divided political realities, the world ought to be a single unit, under the rightful ruler as the Son of Heaven. The subsequent sections about road building, river dredging, and marsh embanking again are continuations of the narrative that the natural landscape requires human control. Finally, perhaps what is even more interesting than the physical management of the lands is the evaluation of resources and the measuring of “soil types,” presumably for purposes of taxation. Again, while a more profound analysis of this observation is outside the purviews of my research, the fact remains that this discourse represents a particular kind of politically motivated narrative that not only legitimizes the state in exerting absolute control over the land but also gives it the kind of ideological justification for taxation. It does this especially by giving these practices authoritative power by associating them with “history,” even if in reality these kinds of policies might not at all be what were practised in the times of Yu.

The political implications of the narrative of the flood taming by Yu can be interpreted even further, according to Lewis, as it “provided a mythical prototype for the irrigation and water control projects of the Warring States period.” One of the major technological developments during this time was the creation of various hydraulics projects, which allowed for increases in areas that could now be both habitable and

suitable for agriculture.⁹⁹ A similar depiction of the same narrative can be seen in the *Mencius*, where Shun is portrayed as employing Yu to tame the uncontrollable floods that have rampaged since the time of Yao:

In the time of Yao, the water reversed its natural course, flooding the central regions and the reptiles made their homes there, depriving the people of a settled life. In low-lying regions, people lived in nests; in high regions, they lived in caves... Yu was entrusted with the task of controlling it. He led the flood water into the seas by cutting channels for it in the ground and drove the reptiles into grassy marshes. ...Obstacles receded and the birds and beast harmful to men were annihilated. Only then were the people able to level the ground and live on it.¹⁰⁰

The first important observation that should be made here is the fact that the *Mencius* makes it very clear that the great flood is a result of the water not acting in its natural course, which is a sentiment that did not exist in the earlier accounts of the flood in the *Book of Documents*. Another interesting observation is the fact that due to the unnatural flood waters, human beings are reduced to living like animals, in nests and caves, which again reinforces a particular kind of moralistic ideal, that human beings are distinct from animals and that that distinction is of the utmost importance to maintain. The coming of the flood has washed away all of those important distinguishing factors.

The inherent importance attributed to these artificial boundaries will be seen in the next passage. The flood narrative is repeated elsewhere with a slightly different emphasis:

In the time of Yao, the Empire was not yet settled. The Flood still raged

⁹⁹ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 19; Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 165.

¹⁰⁰ *Mencius* III.B.9, trans. Lau, 72. 當堯之時，水逆行，汎濫於中國。蛇龍居之，民無所定。下者為巢，上者為營窟。禹掘地而注之海，驅蛇龍而放之菹。險阻既遠，鳥獸之害人者消，然後人得平土而居之。

unchecked, inundating the Empire... Yu dredged the Nine Rivers, cleared the Courses of the Chi and the T'ia to channel the water into the Sea... Only then were the people of the Central Kingdoms able to find food for themselves. [Then] Hou Chi taught the people how to farm and grown the five kinds of grain. When these ripened, the people multiplied. This is the way of the common people: once they have a full belly and warm clothes on the back they degenerate to the level of animals if they are allowed to lead idle lives, without education and discipline. This gave the sage King further cause for concern and so he appointed Hsieh as the Minister of Education whose duty was to teach the people human relationships: love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends.”¹⁰¹

In this second passage, the beginning seems to be essentially the same as the other passage, except that in this case, the emphasis is really on the proceeding developments in human civilization that Yu's taming of the flood made possible. Not only were the people finally able to fend for themselves, but they were also finally able to practice agriculture. Perhaps the next point is even more intriguing, as the *Mencius* points out that there is nothing that truly distinguishes humans from animals, as both are likely to be content to be fed and be comfortable, unless humans are taught, presumably, the virtues of the sage-kings. This is an interesting point, as it emphasizes again the division between human civilization and animalistic nature, and it stresses that what truly distinguishes the one from the other are the teachings of the sages, much as sage-king Yu was able to physically divide the world and demarcate the boundaries between the human and the inhuman.

This is where *Mencius*'s philosophical ideals are then introduced as the crucial

¹⁰¹ *Mencius* IIIA4, trans. Lau 59–60. 當堯之時，天下猶未平，洪水橫流，汜濫於天下。禹疏九河，濬濟漯，而注諸海...然後中國可得而食也。后稷教民稼穡。樹藝五穀，五穀熟而民人育。人之有道也，飽食、煖衣、逸居而無教，則近於禽獸。聖人有憂之，使契為司徒，教以人倫：父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信。

factor that will protect humans from falling back into being no better than animals. Namely, the proper human relationships between the following: father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, the old and the young, and finally between friends. The proper maintenance of these social relationships is necessary for the maintenance of this distinctively humanistic order, and this reveals the kind of importance that the author of the *Mencius* places on this specific ideal. It is in the vein of this kind of great flood narrative, then, that we find that the *Mencius* is able to port a familiar imagery, using it to deemphasize the more overtly political aspects of the rhetoric, instead focussing on how it can be applied to a more personal self-cultivation of virtues and to a discussion about human nature. This is the situation here in the following passage:

[Bo Gui] said, “In dealing with water I am better than Yu.”

“You are mistaken,” said Mencius. “In dealing with water, Yu followed the natural tendency of water. Hence he emptied the water into the Four Seas. Now you empty the water into the neighbouring states. When water goes counter to its course, it is descried as a ‘deluge’, in other words, a ‘flood’, and floods are detested by the benevolent man. You are mistaken, my good sir.”¹⁰²

Superficially, this passage can still be considered part of the flood taming narrative, especially extolling the virtues of sage-king Yu. Nonetheless, a much more telling moralistic tone is exhibited by the author of the *Mencius* in the depicting of water going “counter to its course,” as the proper flow of water has now taken a much deeper moralistic connotation, representing human nature. This analogy is made in another chapter when the *Mencius* argues that “It is certainly the case...that water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and

¹⁰² *Mencius* VI.B.11, trans. Lau, 141. 白圭曰：「丹之治水也愈於禹。」孟子曰：「子過矣。禹之治水，水之道也。是故禹以四海為壑，今吾子以鄰國為壑。水逆行，謂之洚水。洚水者，洪水也，仁人之所惡也。吾子過矣。」

low? Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.”¹⁰³

Taken together, then, these two passages demonstrate the kind of evolution that the narrative of the great flood underwent; it indeed was changed and was used by the author of the *Mencius* to assert a particular philosophical point that was most likely not previously expressed. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty whether or not the author deliberately associated the taming of the flood to the particular methods of moral self-cultivation that he was advocating, or deliberately associated the kind of “unnatural” practices of his intellectual rivals with the chaotic primordial flood. As Lewis so incisively points out, in order to understand the profound significance of the great flood narrative within the intellectual context of early China in general, it is necessary to understand that “At every level, the early Chinese perceived the threat of a looming chaos, and argued for the necessity of maintaining clear lines of division to prevent a collapse back into this void.”¹⁰⁴ These concerns about division and separation can be observed in questions about the following issues: the inner and outer self; fundamental familial relationships, man-woman, father-son, elder-younger, ruler-ruled, and so forth; and especially also the living and the dead.¹⁰⁵ The sage-king figures (or in the case of the *Hanfeizi*, the enlightened ruler) too, it could be argued, played a significant role in this entire discourse, as they were the ones that initially established the boundaries, the ones who succeeded in maintaining these separations and ensuring that human order did not give way to natural chaos. As a whole, especially during the Warring States period, just

¹⁰³ *Mencius* VI.A.2, trans. Lau, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Lewis, *Flood Myths*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

as the changing political circumstances affected the state-society relations, the sage-king ideals too were employed by these intellectuals who attempted to interpret the changes they witnessed within their own philosophical frameworks.

3.2 Yao and Shun: Narratives of Rightful Succession or Usurpation

Another set of narratives that can be dated to as early as those about the great flood are those regarding the abdication of sage-king Yao to the virtuous Shun, and eventually the abdication of Shun to Yu. As Allan points out, two closely related ideas have traditionally been interpreted as Chinese dynastic history: namely, the cyclical nature of the rise and fall of dynasties as well as the political legitimacy of the ruling dynasty being linked to the so-called Mandate of Heaven and its transferability.¹⁰⁶ This is another important fundamental issue within the development of early Chinese political philosophy, because in these narratives about legitimate political successions, there is an inherent tension between the principles of hereditary rights and the meritocratic rule by virtue. Despite the fact of the violent overthrow of the Shang by the Zhou, and the equally violent replacement of inept rulers, the Zhou royal house managed to remain Sons of Heaven for well over six centuries.¹⁰⁷ During this time, even though the Zhou no longer held the kind of power and influence over the other states that it had once held, none of the rebels who challenged the Zhou claimed to have the Mandate of Heaven, nor did any of the regional lords replace the Zhou until 256 BCE, when the Qin state finally extinguished their rule.

¹⁰⁶ Allan, *Heir and the Sage*, 4–5.

¹⁰⁷ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 58.

That being said, even though the various warring states did not see the Zhou royal lineage posing any real threat in their conflicts with one another, questions of legitimate succession were nonetheless important issues that many of the Warring States texts attempted to address through the sage-king narratives of Yao and Shun. One possible explanation for this interest could very well be associated with the partition of the state of Jin 晉 in 403 BCE by its vassal states of Zhao 趙, Wei 魏, and Han 韓; as well as the usurpation of the Qi 齊 state by one of its ministerial families, the Tian 田. Thus, it could be argued that these texts also reflected the historical context and political climate of the time, with the hereditary principle for political succession being subverted, as well as the increasing popularity of meritocratic principles for political appointments and perhaps even for succession.

Within the scope of my research, it is not possible adequately to address all of the issues that can be extrapolated from this topic; it has already been analyzed to a much more thorough extent by Allan in her work. My focus instead will be on particular narratives about succession in relation to sage-king figures, in the attempt to understand the kinds of political concerns of those authors who explicate either for or against the theory of succession by the virtuous.

The willingness of Yao in yielding the throne to Shun, the most virtuous and capable of his ministers, and the subsequent abdication of Shun in favour of Yu for the same reasons have been extolled by later Confucians as demonstrative of these rulers' virtues, for their being completely selfless and for caring for the public good rather than for their own interests. As Lewis points out, in the act of giving up their positions as ruler

to the most capable, both of these sage-kings “defined the character of public rule by setting it apart from the claims of kinship and inheritance;” this, too, would later be used as the justification for the transfer of political authority between different dynasties.¹⁰⁸ For instance, regarding the issue of Yao’s selection of Shun to be his successor, it is depicted thusly in the *Analects*:

Yao said, Oh, you Shun! The orderly succession of Heaven now rests upon your shoulders. Hold faithfully to the mean. If those within the Four Seas should fall into hardship and poverty, Heaven’s emoluments will be cut off from you. Shun charged Yu with the same words.¹⁰⁹

Two major ideas can be extracted from this passage: firstly, the idea of allowing for the worthy to succeed, and secondly, how to maintain Heaven’s good will by guarding the people from “hardship and poverty.” There remain ambiguities with regards to the question of succession, but it is very clear from looking at this passage what the perceived role of the sage-kings was, namely, to safeguard the interests of the people. Yao’s yielding the throne to Shun, who was perceived to be the most capable, created a sense of historical precedent that allowed for those deemed worthy to claim political power or legitimized the practice of supplanting the ruling dynasty with another.¹¹⁰

That being the case, there is an inherent complication in this entire narrative that Allan addresses and which I find intriguing, regarding the proper transfer of political authority. By looking at the four sample sets of nonhereditary transfers of power between the supposed reign of Shun and that of King Wu, two of them (Yao to Shun, and Shun to Yu) were “characterized by a gesture of ritual abdication and the possible absence of

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence*, 165.

¹⁰⁹ *Analects*, 7.1, trans. Slingerland, 231.

¹¹⁰ Allan, *Heir and the Sage*, 27–33.

violence,” while in comparison, the transfer between Jie 桀 and Tang 湯 as well as between Zhou 紂 and King Wu “must include some element of force and never a ritual abdication,” in addition to a certain degree of moral righteousness on the part of the successors.¹¹¹ Thus, it could be argued that while the philosophy behind the nonhereditary transfer of power remains the same, that is to say, the morally righteous and the virtuous have the right to succeed to the throne, the circumstances and perspectives are completely different between the former two cases and the latter two cases. In the former, these abdications were initiated by the ruler currently in power, as is presumably his prerogative as a representative of Heaven; in the latter, the usurpers claim to have the will of Heaven and use force to contest those very claims.

According to the *Mencius*, however, it is not at all the current ruler who decides, but Heaven. Thus, even though both Yao and Shun chose the most worthy amongst their ministers, while Yu’s successor was his own son, the *Mencius* would argue that they all followed the exact same principle of succession by the worthy. This is depicted in this passage: “If Heaven wished to give the Empire to a good and wise man, then it should be given to a good and wise man. But if Heaven wished to give it to the son, then it should be given to the son,” who was presumably also virtuous.¹¹²

Even though these narratives about succession are centred on the rulers and Sons of Heaven, it was probably more likely that these ideas of giving offices based on merit and not on familial inheritance were being applied much more broadly to government posts in general. This was something that the *Mozi* emphasized greatly, as “[t]he ancient

¹¹¹ Ibid., 54.

¹¹² *Mencius* V.A.6, trans. Lau, 106.

sage-kings were not partisan toward fathers and brothers; did not lean toward the noble and the rich and did not favor beauty. If there were men of worth they promoted them.”¹¹³ As a part of the overall evolution of these narratives during the Warring States, however, the concept of “virtuous abdication” on the one hand and “righteous rebellion” on the other became embedded in the political discourses of the time through the use of the sage-kings.¹¹⁴ That being said, even as Yao and Shun became fully entrenched within the Warring States intellectual consciousness, there was never a systemic inclusion of these accounts of abdication among all of the texts, while some of them openly ridicule the idea and discount it altogether. Furthermore, as both Pines and Graham point out, any kind of discussion regarding nonhereditary succession in these texts must be treated with care and much sensitivity by the authors themselves, as it effectively challenges the established norms of inheritance and is subversive. Nonetheless, this is where embedding such radical ideals could be safe within historical narratives like this, as they are considered merely tales and pose no real threat to the established political order.

Just as there were Warring States texts that extolled the virtuous Yao and Shun for yielding their thrones for greater public good, not all agreed. As Lau points out, “according to the *Bamboo Annals*, Shun imprisoned Yao and Ch’i [the son of Yu] put Yi to death.”¹¹⁵ The accuracy and authenticity of these accounts aside, the fact of the matter is that if we take the depiction of the succession narrative as interpreted by the *Bamboo Annals* into consideration, then not only was Shun hardly the virtuous sage-king at all, but he was a master political manipulator who managed to force his ruler to abdicate in

¹¹³ *Mozi* Chapter 9, trans. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 29.

¹¹⁴ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 63.

¹¹⁵ *Mencius*, trans. Lau, 188. Yi was assumed to be a virtuous minister who could possibly challenge the claims of Ch’i to the throne.

his favour, all the while still ensuring that his public image would not be tarnished. Similarly, the virtuous son of Yu who inherited the throne from his father and thus continued the illustrious Xia 夏 dynasty turns out to be a cold-blooded political murderer. Neither of these accounts is particularly flattering, and it makes me wonder whether or not these figures were being maligned deliberately because of authors' disagreement with the nonhereditary ideals that they represented. A similar sentiment is expressed in the following passage from the *Hanfeizi*, which reflects the cynical pragmatism through which the author often explicates his critiques:

The so-called sage-rulers and enlightened kings of antiquity succeeded their predecessors not as juniors succeeding seniors in the natural order, but because they had formed parties and gathered influential clans and then molested their superiors, murdered the rulers, and thereby sought after advantage... Shun intimidated Yao, Yü intimidated Shun, [Tang] banished [Jie], and King Wu censured [Zhou 紂]. These four rulers were ministers who murdered their rulers, but All-under-Heaven have extolled them.¹¹⁶

First of all, this passage starts off immediately by accusing the “so-called sage-rulers” of being usurpers of a throne that they were not entitled to, as they lacked the hereditary legitimacy that would have been necessary. Worse yet, it is claimed that these usurpers were merely after profits. It is made abundantly clear that the author finds the sage-kings abhorrent, not only because these usurpers were capable of intimidation and murder, but also because their misdeeds have been extolled instead of condemned.

Within the particular ruler-centric context of the *Hanfeizi*, the author's concerns

¹¹⁶ *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzŭ: a classic of Chinese Political Science, Volume II*, “Shuoyi” 說疑 Chapter, trans. W.K. Liao (London, UK: A. Probsthain, 1959). 古之所謂聖君明王者，非長幼弱也及以次序也。以其構黨與，聚巷族，偏上弑君而求其利也... 舜偏堯，禹偏舜，湯放桀，武王伐紂，此四王者，人臣弑其君者也，而天下譽之。

would definitely make sense. Furthermore, the *Hanfeizi* proceeds to critique how modeling oneself after the sage-kings is actually contributing to the continuation of the chaos:

[All-under-Heaven] approves the Tao of Yao and Shun and conforms to it, [this is the reason] there are murderers of rulers and rebels against fathers. Yao, Shun, [Tang], and Wu, each in his turn, acted contrary to the right relationship of ruler and minister, and the moral of the subsequent generations has consequently been upset. Yao, while ruler of men, made a minister his ruler. Shun, while ministering to a ruler, made the ruler a minister. [Tang] and Wu, while ministering to rulers, murdered the sovereigns and dismembered their bodies. Yet All-under Heaven have honoured them. This is the reason why All-under-Heaven has hitherto not attained political order.

Indeed, the so-called intelligent ruler is one who is able to keep his ministers in his service; the so-called worthy minister is one who is able to make laws and crimes clear and to attend to his official duties so as to support his master. Now, Yao, assuming himself to be enlightened, could not keep Shun in his service; Shun, assuming himself to be worthy, could not continue supporting Yao; and [Tang] and Wu, assuming themselves to be righteous, murdered their masters and superiors. That was the way "enlightened" rulers would give and "worthy" ministers would take. In consequence, hitherto there have been sons robbing their fathers' houses and ministers robbing their masters' states. Thus, fathers give way to sons and rulers give way to ministers.¹¹⁷

From the onset, the *Hanfeizi* points out both the fact that the succession narratives of Yao and Shun were not only widely known and praised, but because of these misleading tales abhorrent acts of regicidal and patricidal violence came to be encouraged. Similarly, the fact that these narratives demonstrated that challenging and supplanting one's ruler can be justified at all, is also the reason why much disorder has plagued the later generations, and especially during the Warring States period. Both of these claims of the *Hanfeizi*

¹¹⁷ *Complete Works of Han Fei Tzŭ* "Zhong xiao" 忠孝 Chapter, trans. Liao. [天下]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。

demonstrate its heavily ruler-centric political ideals, and also attempt to deprive moral justification and legitimacy of any subversive minister and subject. Furthermore, it could also be interpreted as a critique of Warring States political realities. Ideally, rulers ought to be able to keep their ministers in control, and the ideal ministers ought to do all that they were prescribed to do in order to honor their rulers. It could be argued that in this particular use of the Yao and Shun narrative, the *Hanfeizi* is also criticizing the fact that, during the Warring States, these transgressions between ruler-minister and father-son, were occurring with increasing frequency due to the prevalence of these myths.

Both of these sage-king narratives, first of the flood and also of the succession, demonstrate the fact that, by and large, Warring States authors not only had different interpretations sometimes of the same tales, but even more significantly, that it is often possible to observe when they manipulate these narratives in order to present their own particular ideals or react to the explications of others. In particular, just as some texts would readily use the sage-king figures to extol their virtues, there are others that will formulate counter-narratives using the same figures and concepts.

4. Conclusion

In this project, I have demonstrated that sage-king figures are crucial components in the formulation of Warring States narratives about political ideals and are indispensable as a means to understand the narratives' conceptualizations of the world. Similarly, far from being mere mythological and historical accounts about an imagined past, these narratives constructed around the sage-kings often underwent evolutionary changes, as different authors interacted and reacted with the ideas that they would come to represent. I surveyed a number of primary and secondary sources in order to present a more comprehensive picture, both in contemporary scholarship as well as in the Warring States texts. In the process of my research, I managed to corroborate the theories and practices of many current leading scholars, such as Puett and Lewis, in the field of early Chinese intellectual history.

As a whole, my project was meant to serve as a preliminary survey of contemporary scholarship, especially with respect to how to treat this age-old idea, the sage-kings, as a way to understand or reconstruct the original historical contexts from which these fascinating accounts about the past were formulated. I was able to challenge the notion that sage-king figures in early Chinese thought were concrete and essentialized representations of philosophical ideals and political legitimacy, and instead demonstrated that they were in fact constantly undergoing changes at the hands of the Warring States authors. In particular, what I found to be significant is the fact that the same sage-kings were harshly criticised by some authors, and despite their centrality within the larger discourse, not everyone subscribed to what they represented as manifestations of ideal

rulers from the past.

Overall, I believe the strength of this project was my historiographically inclined interdisciplinary approach and the breadth of materials that were surveyed. Through a more historically conscious research process, as inspired by Puett, I attempted to conceptualize and present my findings within the original contexts from which they would have been first created. There are obvious limitations to this project as well; in many ways, I attempted to cover too much ground, and thus my analysis of the materials was not as in-depth and profound as what I would have liked. Similarly, most of the translations that I used were drawn from different scholars, and thus it is inevitable that there are some inconsistencies with terminology. Similarly, a more thorough and systematic inclusion of even more primary texts and other sage-king narratives would have allowed me to more effectively buttress my claims.

It is my goal to use the findings of this project to further expand my survey of early Chinese political and intellectual history, as a basis for my doctoral research. Especially in light of the discovery of historically significant archaeological materials in the past several decades, both in the form of manuscripts and artefacts, I am hoping that these new materials will challenge us to re-evaluate our previous perceptions and understanding of the political, religious, and philosophical realities of the Warring States. Some of the most intriguing discussions among scholars have been how exactly to best interpret and understand the historical significance of all these recent archaeological finds and what kinds of theoretical approaches are most appropriate to integrate these new findings within the current academic discourse. In order to effectively carry out this kind of research, the archaeological context itself is most important, as it not only gives us

clues as to these writings' authenticity as texts, but it also helps us to date and understand the history of textual transmission as well as possibly the texts' original purposes. All of this work will not be possible without a more clearly conducted survey of current scholarship, and I believe I have been able to do just that.

As a whole, the Warring States texts are only as significant as we are able to extrapolate and effectively contextualize what they reveal about early China. Through my research, I have been able to demonstrate that an idea such as the sage-king, integral to the development of early Chinese thought merely to represent the political ideals of the texts, is actually a lot more complicated, and deserving of more than just a superficial recognition. In approaching this analysis with a more nuanced and historically aware approach, I have been able to suggest the necessity of questioning and also challenging some of these long-held notions about the development of early Chinese history, in hopes that scholars will be able to gain a more accurate and meaningful understanding for future research.

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