

The Disputes between Orthodoxy and Technical Nobility:  
Reinterpretation  
of Yaodian

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Table of Contents

I. Re- explanation of Yaodian .....	177
II. The era of governance without regime and the rising of technical nobilities .....	184
III. Early history of the coexistence of regime and governance power .....	187
IV. The Reformation of Shun.....	189
V. Conclusion: About the evaluation of Yao and Shun.....	190

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*Abstract*

*Yaodian recorded several disputes and games between Yao and the technical nobles who were controlling the governance power. It also accounted the new strategies and policies which were used to fight against the technical nobles since Shun took Yao's place. These kinds of struggles was a miniature of the political status in the era of Five Di. It was a time of governance without regime in Three Huang's era. And as Huangdi created Tianxia through the use of force to conquer, it entered into a time of both the Regime and Governance coexist and struggle. Tianzi who held the regime gained the legitimacy by monopolizing the order of Heaven. This pattern was created by Zhuangzi by disconnection of Heaven from Earth. The technical nobles who held the governance acquired the social influence and prestige by taking control of social governance.*

**Keywords:** Regime (政权); Governance (治权); Yaodian(尧典); Yao (尧); Shun (舜).

*Yaodian (尧典)*<sup>1</sup> is the first book of *Shangshu* (尚书), which was compiled by Confucius. The keystone of it, as suggested by traditional Confucians and historians, is a blessed memory of Yao (尧) and Shun (舜) and eulogy of the Abdication (禅让) institution. Standing on the position of the traditional classicists, this interpretation can be considered reasonable. However, taking account of *Yaodian* and some of the newly unearthed documents, such as *TangYu zhidao* (唐虞之道) and *Rongchengshi* (容成氏), there are two issues worth to rethinking: First, the story of the abdication from Yao to Shun in *Yaodian* was far less perfect than the description in *TangYu zhidao*, *Rongchengshi* and other literature in pre-Qin period. So, if the purpose of Confucius (or his students) including *Yaodian* in *ShangShu* was just for eulogizing the abdication institution, why did he choose such an imperfect narrative? Second, according to its contents, *Yaodian* is filled with all sorts of

<sup>1</sup> The *Canon of Yao* cited in this paper, include *The Canon of Yao* and *The Canon of Shun* in *Guwen Shangshu*. The publishing time of this text always had different opinions. In general, See ZHU Tingxian, "The Era of the Composition of the 'Yao Dian' Chapter," in *Studies on the Book of Documents*, at 323-34 (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1987).

political struggles, compromises and penalties during the times of Yao and Shun's ruling. One may wonder whether the major purpose of this book was to praise the virtue of Yao and Shun or something else.

To clarify these two doubts, there exists a good reason to re-interpret *Yaodian* and explore its true meaning. This mission is impossible unless we can re-understand the separation and struggle between the regime (政) and governance (治) in the ancient history of China on the basis of the legends about the early political history.<sup>2</sup>

### I. Re- explanation of Yaodian

The achievements of Yao as described in *Yaodian* can be roughly divided into three sections: the first section is from “Now on examining into the ancient (曰若稽古)”<sup>3</sup> to “reaching to heaven above and earth beneath (格于上下)”. It is a general description of Yao's virtues. The second section begins from “he was able to display his superior virtue (克明俊德)” and ends at “abundant merits will be universally diffused (庶绩咸熙)”. It tells about the achievements of Yao in aspect of the affairs belongs to Heaven (属天). The third section is the part between “the emperor said who will enquire for one (帝曰畴咨若时登)” and “the emperor said to them, take care (帝曰钦哉),” which is specifically referred to the affairs on the earth (属地).

Judging from these three sections, the clue is remarkably clear that the knowledge and political affairs had been separated into two parts which corresponded to Heaven and Earth. This pattern was created by Zhuanxu (颛顼) and the first symbol of it was called “disconnection of Heaven from Earth (绝地天通)”<sup>4</sup> In accordance with this design, the

<sup>2</sup> The conception of Regime (政) and Governance (治) in this paper was different from the meaning in general. They correspond to two of the special appearance of China's ancient political culture. Governance (治) means approximate to literal meaning. However, Its Objects include not only the human community, but also associated with the whole world outside of the people. Regime (政) refers to a entity of power overriding the entities of governance power in ancient China. The most typical representation was Tianxia (天下) which was established by Huangdi.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, all of the quote of *Shoo King* according to: W. H. Medhurst trans., *The Shoo King, or the historical classic: being the most ancient authentic record of the annals of the chinese empire: illustrated by later commentators*, At the Mission Press, 1846. It is a fact that this translation had many unsatisfactory. For more accurate expression, I made some changes at necessary, and attach the original Chinese for reference. In general, Chinese version base on Li xueqin (李学勤) ed., *ShangShu Zhengyi* (尚书正义), Beijing: Beijing University press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> It was documented separately about the affairs of Heaven and Ground in the second and the third section. It actually showed that the isolation of Heaven and Ground which created by Zhuanxu was still being maintain in the era of Yao. Moreover, there were no conflict in affairs of Heaven in *Yaodian*. It means the regime was still monopolizing the affairs of Heaven effectively based on Zhuanxu's pattern. Chuyu xia (楚语下) of Guoyu (国语) quoted the Guanshefu (观射父)'s interpretation of this event. He said that “(Zhuanxu) ordered Nanzheng whose name was Zhong to take charge of Heaven for divine, and ordered Huozheng named Li to take charge of Ground for people. the purpose of it was restoring previous order and keeping the Heaven and Ground disconnect. This policy restored to a previous state that affairs of Heaven and Ground never disturbed each other. It so called ‘disconnection of Heaven from Earth (绝地天通)’.” Academics

heavenly knowledge was monopolized by Nanzheng (南正), whose name was Zhong (重). Xihe (羲和), mentioned in *Yaodian*, clearly had a relationship with Zhong.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of “disconnection of Heaven from Earth (绝地天通)” was to achieve the legitimacy of regime by Monopolistic control of the knowledge of Heaven. Because of this foundation, the one controls the political power can domain the world as “Tianzi (天子),” which literally means “the son of Heaven”. In the era of Yao, Xihe was still granted by Yao to monopolize the knowledge of Heaven and to apply this knowledge to obtain the dominative legislative power, namely “respectfully to communicate to the people the seasons (敬授人时)”.

A stark contrast to Monopolistic control of the knowledge and affairs of Heaven by Xihe was the uncertainty of the affairs on the earth. These earthly affairs were the main contents of the third section, and several arguments between Yao and his minister were recorded in this part. We will now discuss these disputes at first, and then try to make an in-depth explanation.

(1) The dispute over whom should be elevated to be in power:

*The Emperor said, Who will enquire for one who, complying with these times, may be elevated to employment? Fangqi said, Your son and heir, Choo, is beginning to display intelligence. The Emperor said, Tush! He is insincere and litigious; can he do?* (帝曰: “畴咨若时登庸?”放齐曰: “胤子朱启明。”帝曰: “吁! 畀讼可乎?”)

*The emperor said, Who will enquire for someone, who can accord with my mode of managing business? Huandou said, Excellent! There is Gonggong Who has just consolidated his affairs, and displayed merit. The Emperor said, Tush! When there is nothing to do, he can talk; but employ him, and he belies his profession, while he has only the resemblance of respect, up to heaven.* (帝曰: “畴咨若予采?”驩兜曰: “都! 共工方鸠僝功。”帝曰: “吁! 静言庸违, 象恭滔天。”)

Actually, these two segments, which focused on “elevated to employment (登庸)” and “accord with my mode of managing business (若予采),” were both about finding the man to manage the affairs of the state. In the former segment, Fangqi (放齐) nominated the son of Yao, Choo (朱). But Yao denied this nominee on the basis of Choo’s moral defects that were insincere and litigious. The identity of Fangqi is difficult to verify, we can now only confirm that he was one of the

already had a lot of discussion on it. For example, see Yu Ying-shih, “Between the Heaven and Human: the origin of thought of ancient China,” Chen ruoshui ed., *New perspectives on Chinese history*, 11-95 (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> There are different definition of Xihe in *Yaodian*. *Shanhaijing, Lüshi Chunqiu* and so on. See Liuqiuyu, *Shangshu Jiaoshiyulun* (尚书校释译论), 33-34 (Beijing: Zhonghu Book Company, 2005).

high-ranking officials in Yao's court. The purpose of nominating the son of Yao is also hard to speculate.

The latter segment was about another nomination, that is, Huandou (驩兜) recommended Gonggong (共工). No matter what was the real scruple of this negation, Yao used the same high-sounding excuse to reject. He believed that the nominee again was morally defective. It is important to note the fact that both Huandou and Gonggong had significant status in Yao's court, but at last were exiled as "offenders (罪)" during Shun's ruling period. According to the records of *ShanHai Jing* (山海经), Huandou was the ancestor of Miao (苗).<sup>6</sup> Gonggong could also be traced back to the era of Zhuanxu. According to legend, he competed with Zhuanxu for the imperial crown, and knocked the Buzhou (不周山) Mountain down because of the failure. This act caused the disjunction of Celestial Pillar (天柱) and the terrain of China tilted from northwest to southeast ever since.<sup>7</sup> As for the origin of his name, there were several statements, most of which were related to the water.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there was record of his failure in controlling floods from *Zhouyu* (周语) of *Guoyu* (国语). On account of the above facts, it can be concluded that Gonggong was the representative of the technical nobilities who mastered the knowledge of the land and water in the era of Yao.

In view of this, it can be speculated that the second election was most likely under the pressure of a flooding problem. Therefore, although the defection of virtue was the pretext to abandon both Choo and Gonggong, the real reason was not the same. Choo was negated because he did not have the technical knowledge and ability to control the flood; but the reason of denying Gonggong was that Yao did not want to see a technical nobility who was already having enormous power in the court getting higher reputation through successfully controlling floods.

The personnel issue was held in abeyance after several disputes, however this postponement not only didn't solve the problem, but also made Yao face with more serious flooding disaster. Thus, we can see the next paragraph in *Yaodian* which was mainly about selecting a person to control the flood.

<sup>6</sup> There are many accounts of Huandou in the ancient books and fables. Most of them shows: 1. There were relationship between Huandou and Miao; 2. Huandou was executed at last by Yao or Shun. in general, see Ma shizhi (马世之), "Huandou and Chongshan," *Journal of Historical Science*, No.7 118-120 (2004).

<sup>7</sup> See "Tianwen xun (天文训)" in Huainanzi (淮南子) and "Shungu (顺鼓)," "Tiantian (谈天)" in Lunheng (论衡).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Zhaogong Shiqinian (昭公十七年) of Zuozhuan (左传) mentioned Gonggong "made Water troops and used the name of water (为水师而水名)." Zhengxuan (郑玄) noted that "Gonggong was a title of water official." 郑玄注《尧典》此文时说"共工，水官名."

(2) The dispute over whom should be sent to fight the flood:

*The Emperor said, Oh! Siyue, the swelling flood, occasions hurt; it spreads far and wide, it encompasses the hills, and overtops the mounds; vast and expansive it rises up to heaven; so that the lower people lament and sigh. If there be any persons of ability, I will set them to manage this matter. They all said, Lo, there is Gun. The Emperor said, Tush! Nonsense! He disobeys orders, and ruins his companions. Siyue said, notwithstanding. Just try if he can manage this matter only. The Emperor said,*

*Go; but take care. For nine years he labored, but did not accomplish anything.* (帝曰：“咨！四岳，汤汤洪水方割，荡荡怀山襄陵，浩浩滔天。下民其咨，有能俾乂？”金曰：“於！鲧哉。”帝曰：“吁！咈哉，方命圯族。”岳曰：“异哉！试可乃已。”帝曰：“往，钦哉！”九载，绩用弗成。)

In this section, when Yao asked whom can be appointed to deal with the flood, he got the identical suggestion from nearly all of the officials (金曰). They unanimously elected Gun (鲧). But Yao did not approve this candidate, because he firmly believed that Gun also had the virtue defects such as rebelliousness and destructiveness (方命圯族). At last, because of insistence from Siyue (四岳), Yao had no other option but to appoint Gun on trial.

From this paragraph, it can be clearly deduced that Siyue was a very prominent official in Yao's court. The origin of the name Siyue was quite vague. Most of Confucianism scribes treated it as an official position, but other scholars disagreed. For example, Liu qiyu (刘起釭) argued Siyue was the ancestral god of the tribe from northwest whose surname was Jiang (姜). While in *Guoyu*, Siyue was thought as Gonggong 's great grandchildren. Generally speaking, it can be assumed that Siyue was a technical nobility from northwestern, represented the interests of local aristocrats and wielded the power of governance in Yao's court.

Gun also was one of the technical nobilities with sanctity in Yao's court, since he mastered the techniques of employing the earth and water. Many of the early documents recorded his deeds. For instance, *Hainei Jing* (海内经) of *ShanHai Jing* (山海经) mentioned that "Gun stolen the God's Living Soil to clog up the flood without God's permission. (鲧窃帝之息壤以湮洪水,不待帝命)". Clearly, the one who was capable of stealing the sacred items from the God should have divinity himself. This is further proved by the expression in *Shangxian zhong* (尚贤中) of *Mozi* (墨子) that "in ancient times there was a nobility named Gun, who was the God's eldest son (昔者伯鲧, 帝之元子)." As we know from the above, Siyue and Gun both belonged to the technical nobilities. On one hand, Yao treated them as political opponents and tried to squash them; while on the other hand, Yao had to rely on their technics which he could not master to deal with the flood.

### (3) The dispute over succession of the throne

*The Emperor said, Oh! Siyue, I have now been on the throne seventy years; and since you are able to follow out my regulations, I will resign my throne to you. Siyue said, with my poor qualities, I should only disgrace the imperial throne. The Emperor replied, brought to light those who are in brilliant stations, and set forth those of low rank. [till we find one of sufficient virtue to succeed.] All the courtiers then addressed the Emperor saying, there is a solitary individual, in a mean station, called Yu-shun. The Emperor said, good! I have heard of him; but how are his qualities? Siyue said, He is a blind man's son, his father is stupid, and his mother iusiucere, while Xiang is overbearing; but he has been able to harmonize them by his filial piety, so that they have gradually advanced towards self-government, and have not gone to the extreme lengths of wickedness. The Emperor said, had I not better take him on trial! I will marry my daughters to this man, and thus observe his manner of acting with my two daughters. Having thus arranged matters, he sent down his two daughters to Kwei juy, and married them to Shun; when the Emperor said to them, Take care! (帝曰: “咨! 四岳。朕在位七十载, 汝能庸命, 巽朕位?” 岳曰: “否德忝帝位。” 曰: “明明扬侧陋。” 师锡帝曰: “有陂在下, 曰虞舜。” 帝曰: “俞? 予闻, 如何?” 岳曰: “瞽子, 父顽, 母嚚, 象傲; 克谐以孝, 烝烝乂, 不格奸。” 帝曰: “我其试哉! 女于时, 观厥刑于二女。” 厘降二女于妫汭, 嫔于虞。帝曰: “钦哉!”)*

This section is quite famous because of the gesture of abdication (禅让) in it. Nevertheless, its implications were not just as simple as abdication. As the description in the text, Yao was not completely free to determine who would be his successor. At first, He had to ask Siyue to take over the power. Even when Siyue rejected his invitation and many officials nominated Shun as the heir to the throne, he still needed Siyue's confirmation. This tells us that, firstly, Yao could not decide the heir by himself, which was quite different from the traditional idea of abdication. Secondly, it can be said that Yao elected Shun (舜) as the heir was the result of the compromise of various forces in the court.

Based on the analysis of the above three sections, we now can further discuss the meaning of these struggles in Yao's court. These three sections were all about the “the ground affairs,” that included issues of the official selection, the flood control and the election of the successor. The most notable point of them was that almost every decision was accompanied by disagreements, disputes and compromises between Yao and his ministers. We can barely see the status described in *Xici* (系辞) of *Zhouyi* (周易) as “making the world order just by sitting with the clothe flapping down (垂衣裳而天下治)” in Yao's era. Although Yao was the holder of political power and acted

as “Tianzi / Son of Heaven,” the power of dominating the court, the society and even the nature, was actually in the hands of local aristocrats and technical nobilities.

The disputes between Yao and his officials show that there was a separation and game between regime (政) and governance (治) in the era of Yao. As “Tianzi,” Yao owned the regime. He represented the legitimacy of the world called “Tianxia (天下)”. This legitimacy was granted by “the order of Heaven (天命)”. From the practical point of view, to possess the order of Heaven it is a necessity to monopolize the knowledge and technology of Heaven. Although Tianzi was at the highest level of Tianxia, he was not directly involved in earthly governance. In another word, he did not actually have the power to rule the world directly.

According to *Yaodian*, it is obvious that the governance power was held by local technical nobilities, including Siyue, Huandou, Gonggong and Gun. They were Yao’s main rivals. Through the above analysis, these characters possess two significant features: first, they were representatives of the local aristocracy; second, they all mastered some specific technics of the ground affairs. Gonggong, Gun, and Gun’s son, Yu (禹), all had the technics to govern the water. Siyue, who was related to Gonggong, also belonged to this sort. In fact, these two identities, local aristocracy and technical nobility, were inseparable in ancient political society.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship of regime and governance was established through the bond of these personnel. However, in traditional opinions, this kind of earthly power should exclusively belong to Yao, because only through Tianzi’s authority, a human being could wield the power legally. But the three sections analyzed show that there were many restrictions for the power of personnel. Firstly, Yao could only select someone in a small group of candidates whom was supported by technical nobilities. Because the using of governance power was associated with governing specific earthly affairs, and the final determining factor is the effectiveness of governance. If one wanted to rule effectively, he had to depend on the man who had relevant knowledge and technics, which had been long-termly monopolized by technical nobilities. Secondly, these nobles usually could build up prestige by effective governance. And from that, they could gain lots of charismatic authorities. Such prestige and authorities were the basis of their power to Intervene and restrict Tianzi’s regime power, especially through controlling the personnel affairs.

Moreover, since the authority of technical nobles became the threats to the legitimacy of the regime and even directly influenced the abdication, Yao had to argue with technical nobilities before almost

<sup>9</sup> Specific reasons will be argued in later.



every decision. In fact, the argument on personnel of the preceding three sections, can be treated as three performance of one big debate. It seems that Yao tried to find a man who had the ability to deal with earthly affairs on one side; and wanted to protect the regime away from the technical nobles' greediness on the other side. So he rejected to promote his son Choo, since he did not have the knowledge and technics to deal with specific issues like flood. But Yao was so clever to make this rejection useful in the next affairs. The virtue defect he used to reject the nomination of his son was also effective to prevent technical nobles who already had significant authority like Gonggong and Gun from acquiring the regime.

Shun was eventually appointed as Yao's successor. One condition of that was Gun, a technical nobility, failed to control flood. That provided an opportunity for Yao, since the arrogance of the technical nobles was temporarily ceased. It should also be noted that the next selection of the candidate for controlling flood did not happen until the time when Shun was already be in power. It is believed that Yao consciously used this vacancy to solve the problem of succession. Because if the flood, the most livelihood problem, was solved, the technical nobles would acquire unprecedented popularity and authority. Based on that, they might even got a chance to challenge Tianzi and grabbed the regime directly. In fact, the result that Shun finally abdicated to Yu, who was another technical noble with special techniques to control water, was the situation that Yao strived to avoid.

Shun's unique personal life was the other condition of his succession. He had the legal identity to take over the regime because of his blood relationship; meanwhile, his humble living situation made the technical nobles did not treat him as a threat to the governance power in their grasp. Therefore, this Abdication was a game result and compromise between Yao and the technical nobilities, namely between the regime and governance power.

Besides the legal identity, Shun's political ability and wisdom were also important to Yao and the regime. As Siyue said, Shun was "a blind man's son, his father is stupid, and his mother iusiucere, while Xiang (象 / his brother) is overbearing; but he has been able to harmonize them by his filial piety, so that they have gradually advanced towards self-government, and have not gone to the extreme lengths of wickedness." It means that Shun had the capacity to handle a very complicated family relationship. It was the same ability to handle the relationship between regime and governance. This was more apparent after Shun became Tianzi, that we will discuss in more details in section four of this paper.

To sum up, in the era of Yao, a rivalry between the regime and governance had been formed. As the representative of the regime, Yao monopolized the affairs belongs to Heaven. Siyue, Gonggong, Huandou, Gun were the representatives of governance, who were in

charge of the affairs on the ground. These man always had double identities: one was a local representative of the real power, the other was the monopoly holders of technical knowledge. They posed a challenge to the regime in Yao's court and the dispute on personnel was a good example of that intense situation.

This pattern, the opposition yet coexistence between regime and governance, had been there long before Yao's era. In the two parts below, we will discuss the formation and evolution of this pattern.

## II. The era of governance without regime and the rising of technical nobilities

Since the Pre-Qin and Han dynasties, the memories of ancient history were generally divided into three periods, namely Three Huang (皇), Five Di / Emperor (帝) and Three Wang / King (王).<sup>10</sup> There were so many theories to explain this division, from gradually declining of moral to evolution phases in archaeology, and so on. In my opinion, the most important meaning contained in such a division is the understanding of the major changes in politics and society in the ancient time.

There are several characters in the ancient legends that can provide some clues to find out what was the so-called "governance without regime" and how did the society run in that era. At that time, thousands of tribes in all directions (八方万邦) were self-governed. Since the evolution of the civilization, governance existed once there were social and community organizations. It lasted for a very long term, as said by Yang Zhu (杨朱) of Liezi (列子): "there were more than 300,000 years after Fuxi (伏羲)." In that period, in spite of the differences in the exact years, the tribes did not combine to a political entity or had a real political union. This also confirmed with the description in *Quque* (胠箝) of *Zhuanzi* (庄子). It reads:

*In the days of Yungch'eng, Tat'ing, Pohuang, Chungyang, Lili, Lihsu, Hsienyuan, Hohsu:, Tsunlu, Chuyung, Fuhsi, and Shennung, the people tied knots for reckoning. They enjoyed their food, beautified their clothing, were satisfied with their homes, and delighted in their customs. Neighboring settlements overlooked one another, so that they could hear the barking of dogs and crowing of cocks of their neighbors, and the*

<sup>10</sup> For example, Yangzhu of Liezi accounted "The things of Three Huang were between survival and death; the things of Five Di were between waking up and dreams; the things of Three Wang were between disappear and appear. There are less than one of a billion of them can be aware of." Jingcheng of Wenzi said, "Three Huang, Five Di, Three Wang had different affairs but the same intention. They also had different routes but the same destination."

*people till the end of their days had never been outside their own country.*<sup>11</sup>

These persons of Three Huang era, including Nüwa (女媧), Gonggong, Suiren (燧人), Zhurong (祝融), Shennong (神農), Youchao (有巢) etc., had very strong characteristics of the oriental culture.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, they were human not deities.<sup>13</sup> They were quite different from Zeus and Apollo in ancient Greek or Jupiter and Venus in ancient Roman. Secondly, descendants memorized them because of the unique technics they had instead of their forces or trickeries. Moreover, these technics themselves and the way of holding them, were the key to understand the formation and operation mode of the governance power in the era of “governance without regime”. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate in detail.

In contrast to the formation of human society, the organized political entities which centered on political power was subsequent. In another word, social organization and technology of social control were earlier than political power and regime. In Chinese history, Huangdi (Yellow Emperor / 黃帝) was the symbol of the rising of political society. It means that china didn't have regime until the era of Five Di. Prior to this, the governance of social organizations belonged to the man who had technics. Due to the technical knowledge itself had the sanctity of nature, the clans good at technics had the dominant position in their tribe. The effectiveness of application of this knowledge in social life was extremely decisive to bring prestige to its holders and make them automatically to a higher social status.

According to legend, Nüwa once refined stones to fill sky (炼石补天).<sup>14</sup> In fact, to refine stones (炼石) was a kind of metallurgy. No doubt it's a technique that meant a lot to people. ShenNong's achievements, can be attributed largely to the invention of farming and tasting herbs

<sup>11</sup> Yutang Lin trans., Chuang Tzu, . There were also many of tribes mentioned in Rongchengshi like “Zunlushi (尊盧氏), Haoxushi (赫胥氏), Qiaojieshi (喬結氏), Cangjieshi (倉頡氏), Xuanyuanshi (軒轅氏), Shennongshi (神農氏), Zhurongshi (祝融氏), Fubishi (氏),” etc. See Shanyuchen, “The New binder and interpretation of Rongchengshi,” Unearthed documents and Writing Research Center of Fudan University, [http://www.gwz.fudan.edu.cn/srcshow.asp?src\\_id=438](http://www.gwz.fudan.edu.cn/srcshow.asp?src_id=438), 2008/5/21.

<sup>12</sup> it's easy to notice that, there were two persons were absent from this series. They were Pangu (盤古) and Fuxi. Actually, they were quite different from the characters we list above. The stories of Pangu belong to myths and legends of Genesis, so he was not technical noble. And we'll discuss on Fuxi specially in In later.

<sup>13</sup> We should treat them as human but not deities, but we can't determine them corresponding to a real historical figure. They are more similar to the symbols which concentrated the qualities of the early tribes.

<sup>14</sup> Tangwen of *Liezi* accounted, “Heaven and earth are also objects. The object are always insufficient, so Nüwashi refined the five - colored stone to fill up the hole of sky.” Shungu of Lunheng said, “Nüwa melted the five - colored stone to fill up the sky.” We can also read this kind of story in *Diwang Shiji* (帝王世紀) and *Sanhuang Benji* (三皇本紀) and *Lushi* (路史). See Yuanke, *Chinese historical materials of mythology*, 13-14 (Chengdu: Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences Publishing, 1985)

for medicine. Both were techniques of using the plant.<sup>15</sup> The legend of Gonggong was mostly related to the soil and water,<sup>16</sup> which meant that the clan of Gonggong mastered the knowledge of controlling water in generations. Youchao, as his name suggested, was the inventor of construction technologies.<sup>17</sup> Suiren and Zhurong were both related to the usage of the fire.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, the key to decipher these legendary characters is their “technics”. According to the modern understanding, technics which can be used to change the nature and benefit mankind are significant to the human who have to struggle against natural environment for surviving. Since it obvious holds an idea of struggle between the human and universe, this opinion doesn’t fit the cultural environment of ancient China. To understand the ancient technics, two prerequisites should be noted: first, the human and world are homogeneous. Both are the representation of “Dao (道)”. Second, technology itself always has the sanctity. In this era, it was the world dominated by deities, which means that everything in the nature were divines or controlled by deities. At that time, when one tried to modify the natural world, it meant to build connection with deities. It’s unbearable to confront against the deities, and whoever did that would be punished inevitably. For example, Gun was exiled to death because he stole “the God’s ‘Living Soil’ to clog up the flood without God’s permission. (鲧窃帝之息壤以湮洪水，不待帝命)”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, every technics, whether for nature or for human body, must come from deities. In other words, all the technology available to the people belongs to divine. And because of that, man possessing the sacred technical knowledge certainly has the particularity, which represents a special gift from the gods.<sup>20</sup>

These men could benefit the others by using their technics and knowledge. Looking from another angle, they could gain the

<sup>15</sup> We can recognize the of Shennong (神农) in Zhushuxun (主术训) and Xiuwuxun (修务训) of Huainanzi (淮南子), Wuxing (五行) of Baihutong (白虎通), Chunqiu yuanmingbao (春秋元命苞), Zuopian (作篇) of Shibei (世本), Diwang shiji (帝王世纪), Soushenji (搜神记), Shuyiji (述异记), Shiyiji (拾遗记), etc.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Benjingxun (本经训) of Huainanzi (淮南子) said “Gonggong used a great flood to submergence Kongsang (共工振滔洪水以薄空桑).” Lüshu (律书) of Shiji (史记) mentioned “Zhuanxu used Gonggong’s array to fight the flood.” (颛顼有共工之陈，以平水害).”

<sup>17</sup> The most famous record of Youchaoshi (有巢氏) can be found in Daozhi (盗跖) of Zhuangzi (庄子) and Wudu (五蠹) of Hanfeizi (韩非子). It was all about Using wood to build house.

<sup>18</sup> The text record of Suiren and Zhurong was relatively fewer, See Yuanke, *Chinese historical materials of mythology*, at 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Hainci Jing of Shanhai Jing. There were lots of records of Gun in the text of Pre-Qin and Han. There were also many homogeneous legends in the ancient western culture. The most famous one of them was the story that Prometheus stolen the fire and been punished.

<sup>20</sup> Modern mythologist and anthropologist and historian pay particular attention to the priestess or shaman in early cultures or native culture because of their technics and influence on the culture. Actually, these technics were just one regular type of the technics in the culture of ancient China. It was only because they was marginalized by the later dominant ideology, so these technics seem special to us.

reputation and even power through this act. Hence, in that era, once a man controlled the technics, he would get the governance power. Furthermore, the technical nobles always monopolized these technics. And they even made sure that such knowledge only handed down in his clan for the purpose of holding the governance power. So, we can notice that *Shenshi* (慎势) of *Lüshi Chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) mentioned “Shennong continued for 17 generations. (神农氏十七世)” It means the knowledge and technics of agriculture and the power of governance were monopolized by the clan of Shennong for centuries.

### III. Early history of the coexistence of regime and governance power

When the Three Huang's era ended, there came the era of Five Di which was started by Huangdi. At that point, regime and governance began to coexist in China. This particular socio-political pattern was known as “Tianxia”. Before the establishment of “Tianxia,” there was a long preparing period in thoughts and culture started by Fuxi.

The achievements of Fuxi can be concluded into four categories: establishing Eight-Gua (八卦) system by imitating the universe; inventing characters through tying knots; creating marriage institution and contriving culinary skills.<sup>21</sup> In the contrast to the deeds of those technical nobles, all of the above belonged to the social culture. They represented the efforts to understand the world and make laws for the human world based on man's subjective initiative. In light of that, Fuxi can be treated as the first legislator in Chinese history.<sup>22</sup>

To understand more about the coexistence of the regime and governance powers, we need to go back to the source of Chinese culture, which was closely related to Fuxi and Nüwa.<sup>23</sup> There were lots of legends about them. Some said that they were siblings, and some said they were a couple. They both had man-head and snake-body. Many scholars explained their relationship in-depth from the

<sup>21</sup> The materials of Fuxi, see Xuzhanshun, *Study of era of Five Di*, 5-7 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou ancient books publishing house, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> On Fuxi's effect of Chinese political culture and thought, see Jiangshan (江山), “Empire of Eight Gua Morality of China (八卦帝国 道德中华).” In this article, Prof. Jiang made a unique interpretation for the Eight Gua system which was created by Fuxi. He introduces a “positive move (阳动)” concept. It means to understand the world and create institution and law basing on subjective initiative of human. It's opposite to the tradition of technical nobles which based on complying with the divine to anticipate the world and ruling society.

<sup>23</sup> On the relationship between Fuxi and Nüwa, see “Xici xia” of *Zhouyi* (周易·系辞下), “Chengxiang” of *Xunzi* (荀子·成相), “Renjianshi,” “Quque” and “Shanxing” of *Zhuangzi* (庄子·人间世), “Gengfa” of *Shangjunshu* (商君书·更法), “Delun” of *Baihutong* (白虎通·德论), “Qishi” of *Lunheng* (论衡·齐世篇), “Huangba” of *Fengsu tongyi* (风俗通义·皇霸), *Diwang shiji* (帝王世纪), *Shiyiji* (拾遗记), *Shiben* (世本), etc. Also can see Liling (李零), *The Study of Changsha Zidanku Silk manuscripts* (长沙子弹库楚帛书研究), 64-73 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985).

perspective of anthropology, comparative mythology or archaeology.<sup>24</sup> But there is another layer of metaphor which hasn't been fully considered. Fuxi and Nüwa could symbolize a clear division of the origin of Chinese culture. Fuxi, a male, was the representative of Yang (阳), which implied the creation of order and rules through human's initiative; meanwhile Nüwa, a female, was the representative of Yin (阴), which shows a tradition with a significant attribute of obeying God and monopolizing the technics. After Nüwa, the figures mentioned above such as Suiren, Shennong, Zhurong and Gonggong, were all representatives of technical tradition. So we can draw an inference that technical nobles occupied the leading position in the era of Three Huang. This was the "technology tradition" in the history of Chinese thought and culture. And this pattern maintained until the era of Yandi (炎帝), who was the last leader of Shennong's clan.

The first Challenger was Huangdi. He used force to conquer and built the Tianxia structure, under which one clan overruled all the other clans in the world. It was definitely a big turning point. Since then, China stepped into the political status based on the model of Tianxia.<sup>25</sup> Instead of depending on the technical monopoly or sanctity, the performance of Huangdi conformed to the type of Fuxi. Both exerted man's subjective initiative to reconstruct the world. I'd prefer to call this tradition as "orthodoxy" (道统).

Nevertheless, besides the construction the order of society, politics and culture, it was more important to establish the sanctity and legitimacy of the regime. Huangdi chose to embody the clans who handled technics, and he also cultivated himself to an immortal by monasticism. These means proved to be effective and carried on by his successors. Actually, the orthodoxy was continued in Five Di's era based on the regime of Tianxia. For that, Zhuanxu played a crucial role. He was the first legislator in the realm of ideology.<sup>26</sup> Because of his important move called "disconnection of Heaven from Earth," the regime had a basis of legitimacy by monopolizing the knowledge of Heaven.

These were the situation faced by Yao and Shun. However, the strength of technical nobles was largely enhanced in Yao's court which

<sup>24</sup> There were lots of research of it, see Wen yiduo (闻一多), "Study of Fuxi (伏羲考)," *Complete works of Wen yiduo*, 58-131 (Wuhan: Hubei People's Publishing House); Xu xusheng, *Legend era of the ancient history of China*, Chapter 6 "Ancient history before so called Yuanhuang period," (Beijing: heritage press, 1985); Dishan, *Study of religion and myth in ancient China*, 463-465 (Hong Kong: longmen joint book, 1961); Yu dezhang, "Explanation on portrait brick named 'Fuxi, Nüwa and twin dragon'," *Sichuan Cultural Relics*, No.3 46-48 (1984); Zhu bingxiang, *Fuxi and Chinese culture*, Wuhan: Hubei Education Press, 1996; Ma zhirong, "Study of Fuxi and the culture of Fuxi: enlightenment of Dadiwan," *Journal of Gansu University (Social Science Edition)*, Vol. 23, No.1 40-46 (2007.)

<sup>25</sup> I discussed this theme in my MA thesis. See Liping, "The Study of origin of 'Tianxia': political foundation of Chinese legal culture," *Thought History of Law in Pre-Qin period*, 13-34 (Beijing: Guangming Daily Publishing House, 2012)

<sup>26</sup> See Jiangshan, "Revolution of Law: From tradition to ultramodern," *China-review*, <http://www.china-review.com/sao.asp?id=3106>, 2001-3-1.

made Yao compromise again and again in the appointment of officials or successor. We can even assume that Yao abdicated and gave his place to Shun might be due to he couldn't handle this complicated situation already.

Therefore, interaction, exchange and struggle between orthodoxy and traditional technology existed in the evolution of early Chinese culture. It's the key to understand the disputes in Yao's court recorded in *Yaodian*.

#### IV. The Reformation of Shun

We can now go back to *Yaodian* and revisit the record of Shun based on the above interpretation of the contradiction between Orthodoxy and technical tradition.

The account of Shun's performance in *Yaodian* after he was in charge began from his managements of affairs of Heaven, which was similar to the records of Yao. Like Yao, Shun monopolized the power from the Heaven and hence got the legitimacy of his reign. Thereafter, it accounted three measures of Shun:

The first was to delineate geographical pattern again, namely "divide the Empire into twelve districts, and appointed the twelve of the hills (肇十有二州, 封十有二山)." Certainly, a "tour of inspection (巡狩)" in a wide area was held for preparation. This move actually weakened the local governance power which originally belonged to technical nobles.

The second move of Shun was to punish the "four offenders (四凶)"<sup>27</sup> Three of them (Gonggong, Huandou, Gun) were the powerful figure in Yao's court, and meanwhile the representatives of technical nobles. The other one, Sanmiao (三苗), represented the local aristocrats. There was no records about their crime in *Yaodian*, but we could presume that this was a political struggle for power.

The third move was to set up a new bureaucratic system called "Twelve Shepherds (十二牧)". The biggest feature of it was to add a series of "civil servant" officials to the administrative structure. In this system, four departments belonged to technical nobles, which were Yu (禹) as "Surveyor General (司空)," Qi (弃) as "Houji (后稷)," Chui (垂) as "Gonggong (共工)" and Yi (益) as "Forester (虞)". And there were five departments belonged to the new nobles, that were Qi (契) as "public instructor (司徒)," Gaoyao (皋陶) as "criminal judge (士)," Boyi (伯夷) as "arranger of the ancestral temple (秩宗)," Kui (夔) as "regulator of music (典乐)" and Long (龙) as "commander of troops (师)". Shun's reformation was elaborately designed so that those new

<sup>27</sup> The execution of Gonggong, Huandou, Gun and Sanmiao was sometimes considered as Yao's decision in the early literatures. It probably due to Yao was still the Tianzi when this punishment was resorted. Since there was nearly no historical evidences about it, I try to focus just on the symbolic meaning and function of this execution but not the "truth" in this paper.

nobles could enhance the reputation of regime by dealing with the specific affairs.

Actually there was the fourth decision that was made by Shun, but it wasn't recorded in *Yaodian*. As we all know, it was to appoint of Yu to deal with the flood.<sup>28</sup> This decision eventually led the regime been stolen by Yu. However, Yao had no other choice at that time. It confirmed the above-mentioned unique advantages of the technical nobles. Precisely due to technical nobles' exclusive ownership of earthly technics, Shun had to select one of them to deal with the flood, even though whose father was executed by him. Since the other candidate, Gonggong, was already exiled by Shun, Yu became the only option. We must not lose sight of the potential impact of his father's execution. When Yu got prestige and authority by successfully controlling the flood, he became the successor of Shun, and later created the "Nepotism (家天下)" by passing the throne to his son Qi (启).

The significant features of technical governance, such as privacy and standardization, were brought into the politics led by Yu and Qi. The Nepotism created by them was also private. Therefore, the political entity became the property of one family. This was a tipping point of Chinese ancient history. Since then, both regime and governance power turned into the means to obtain personal benefits for monarchs and nobles. The Orthodoxy started by Fuxi was interrupted until Confucius and Confucians established their Great Harmony (大同) theory.

#### V. Conclusion: About the evaluation of Yao and Shun

According to the previous discussion, it's obvious not proper to understand *Yaodian* as a simple eulogy of the abdication, instead, there was a deep meaning in it. During Yao and Shun's ruling, on one hand, the Tianxia structure created by Huangdi was still lasting, while on the other hand the technical nobles challenged the regime step by step by exerting their governance power. Introducing the ethical standards into personnel issues, is one of the most significant achievements of Yao. By doing that, he contained the technical nobles from getting the domination of Tianxia. From this point, Yao was the great defender of the Orthodoxy of the Tianxia and the founder of moral politics in Chinese history.

As his successor, Shun was a politician with remarkable virtue and wisdom. In accordance with Yao, his aim was to protect the regime and limit the expansion of governance power. But he used some more radical strategies, especially resetting the bureaucracy which was known as "Twelve Shepherds". This laid the groundwork for China's bureaucracy.

<sup>28</sup> The whole story was recorded in the "Dayu mo" of Guwen Shangshu. Based on Yanruoqu's textual research, we always confirm it as a forgery. But this story could also be found in Shiji and other early literature, so there was no reason to doubt the reality of this abdication.



In my opinion, these two aspects were the reason why Yao and Shun were respected so much by Confucius.