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The Formation Pathways, Mechanisms, and Political Functions of the "Sinful Father–Virtuous Son" Narrative in Ancient Chinese Mythology: The Cases of Gun and Yu, and Gonggong and Goulong

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Abstract. The two pairs—Gun and Yu, and Gonggong and Goulong—exhibit a binary "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative pattern. Through layered textual analysis, this paper traces the formation and development of this narrative from the Western Zhou to the Han dynasties, revealing its processes of character differentiation, deification and political functions. The fathers' images were progressively associated with guilt and transgression, while the sons' identities were increasingly associated with merit and sanctity. As these texts were repeatedly reinterpreted over time, the two father–son pairs gradually became contrasting figures with distinct divine statuses. The paper also identifies two narrative mechanisms, which I call "momentum-building" and "context." In both cases, the fathers' negative identities opened up space for the sons' positive identities and gave them a framework of meaning. Together, these mechanisms turned patrilineal relationships into a way of explaining moral succession and political legitimacy. The study shows how rewriting myth could link kinship, moral values, religious status, and political authority in ancient China.

Keywords: Sinful Father–Virtuous Son, Gun and Yu, Gonggong and Goulong, Textual Accumulation, Political Legitimacy

1. Introduction

Myths embody the value systems and cultural traditions of ancient peoples. The portrayal of mythological figures in ancient China was deeply influenced by historical context and compilers' perspectives, resulting in varied texts yet a relatively coherent narrative system. Shang mythological thinking shaped much of later Chinese philosophy and cosmology, and myth itself changed along with shifts in ideology and political ethics [1].

Gun–Yu and Gonggong–Goulong are two closely related father–son pairs in ancient flood myths. Both show a clear "sinful father–virtuous son" contrast. Scholars have studied these figures from many angles, but few have compared all four within a single framework. Nor have they paid much attention to how father–son relationships shape the way divine status is divided. This paper traces

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how their stories changed over time through a layered reading of the texts. It then asks how father–son relationships helped build patrilineal ethics and political legitimacy, and how the separation of divine status took place and what political work it did.

2. The cumulative development of the "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative and the path of divine separation

From the Pre-Qin period through the Han dynasty, the images of these two father-son pairs were gradually differentiated and reconstructed as ideological, political, ethical, and ritual systems evolved. This chapter traces textual accumulation from the Western Zhou to the Han, clarifying the complete separation of these two pairs—from a shared narrative origin to a dichotomy of good and evil and divine opposition.

2.1. Pre-Qin textual accumulation and narrative differentiation (Western Zhou–Warring States)

2.1.1. Western Zhou to spring and autumn: independent co-existence of the four figures

The earliest extant textual evidence concerning Yu dates to the Western Zhou, while Gun appears in early textual records as a figure associated with flood control. Yu is the earliest figure recorded in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions. The mid-Western Zhou "Suigong Xu" reads: "Heaven commanded Yu to spread the earth, level mountains and deepen rivers, and thereby establish the land and set the boundaries" [2]—the earliest known record of Yu's achievements. The inscription describes only Yu's feat of establishing the Nine Provinces; Yu appears as an independent deity, with no mention of Gun or any father-son narrative. Archaeological evidence indicates that during the Western Zhou, Yu was an independent ancestral Earth Deity, and the father-son relationship between Gun and Yu appears to have been consolidated through later textual synthesis [3].

Scholars differ on the Gun–Yu myth's archetype. Some view it as an "earth-diver" creation myth, but this hypothesis lacks sufficient support [4]. From a narrative perspective, early Chinese flood stories provided a framework for personifying natural forces [5]. The Shangshu: Hongfan states, "Gun was put to death, and Yu rose to succeed him" [6]—one of the earliest extant accounts of Gun. Gun was executed for failing to control the floods, and Yu succeeded him. Here, Gun and Yu appear more as two ministers succeeding each other than as father and son. Gonggong first appears in the Shangshu: Yao Dian as outwardly respectful but inwardly arrogant [6], indicating an early negative moral characterization rather than a developed mythological identity. "Goulong" first appears in the Zuo Zhuan and Guoyu, both compiled during the Warring States. The Zuo Zhuan: 29th Year of Duke Zhao records him as "the son of the Gonggong clan" who served as Houtu, the Earth Deity [7]; the Guoyu: Lu Yu, Part 1 states he was honored as the Earth Deity because he "was able to govern the lands of the Nine Provinces" [8]. From the Western Zhou through the Spring and Autumn, Gun and Yu existed independently, with comparisons focused solely on flood control. Gonggong and Gun were both placed within the "Four Criminals" framework and punished. At this stage, the mythological nature of Gun, Yu, and Gonggong was not yet evident.

2.1.2. Warring States: establishment of father–son relationships and narrative divergence

During the Warring States, the father-son relationships were formally established, and the images diverged, with "the father's guilt" and "the son's sanctity" increasingly emphasized. The Songs of

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Chu: Heavenly Questions states that "Bo Yu was born from Gun's womb", which facilitated the Gun–Yu father-son relationship [9]. Gun's narrative became dehumanized and increasingly negative: after death, he transformed into Huang Neng (a mythical creature resembling a bear), then regarded as Taowu, one of the "Four Fiends", and finally portrayed as a feudal lord dissatisfied with Yao and Shun. Gun thus transformed from a "flood-control failure" into a "sinful father" embodying a "subhuman monster," one of the "Four Fiends of a Turbulent Age," and a "treasonous minister." During the same period, legends about Yu spread widely. From his diligent character to his flood-control achievements, and further to "spending eight years away from home (in some texts, thirteen years) and passing by his door three times without entering" [10], his image as a "virtuous son" was layered and enriched by the Hundred Schools of Thought. Yu gradually transformed from a "flood-control engineer" into a "sage king entrusted with the Mandate of Heaven."

Goulong first appears in Warring States texts. The Zuo Zhuan (29th Year of Duke Zhao) identifies him as "the son of Gonggong" [7], while the Guoyu (Lu Yu, Part 1) records that he was enshrined as the Earth Deity for governing the Nine Provinces [8]. The Liji, a later ritual text compiled during the Han, also preserves this tradition (Liji: Jifa) [11]. By this point in the Warring States, Goulong had evolved from a mere "son of the Gonggong clan" into a deity with independent merits who received state sacrifices. In early texts, Gonggong is often portrayed as a rebel, closely linked to flood narratives, and frequently mentioned with Yu [12].

During this period, Gonggong's "paternal transgression" narrative intensified. In the early Warring States, his negative image was primarily moral depravity: Guoyu: Zhouyu (Part II) records that he "indulged in debauchery and lost his virtue" [8]; Zuo Zhuan: 18th Year of Duke Wen calls him an "unworthy son" of the Shaohao clan, condemning him for "betraying trust, abandoning loyalty, and glorifying malicious speech" [7]. In the middle and late Warring States, Gonggong evolved into a rebel who brought chaos, becoming the target of sage kings' campaigns. The Mencius: Wan Zhang, Part 1 lists him with Gun among the "Four Criminals," exiled to Youzhou [10]; the Xunzi: On Military Affairs records that he and the "Four Criminals" were subdued by the "army of benevolence and righteousness" [13]; the Xunzi: On the Appointment of Ministers regards him as a "menace to the people," whose expulsion contributed to Yu's achievements [13]; and the Lüshi Chunqiu: On the Abolition of the Army describes him as "persistently instigating rebellion" [14]. During the Warring States, Gun and Gonggong as "sinful fathers" reached their peak, standing in complete opposition to orthodox order; simultaneously, Yu and Goulong's "virtuous son" achievements were reinforced. Yu became associated with power succession, while Goulong formally emerged with independent achievements and was deified.

2.2. The solidification of images and the separation of divine status during the Han Dynasties

During the Han, the four figures gradually solidified. The Gun–Yu flood myth contains a complete narrative: Gun's failure and execution, Yu's continuation of his legacy, and his three passes by his home without entering [15].

In the Western Han, Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of the Xia Dynasty states, "After nine years, the waters had not subsided... so Gun was executed at Yushan and died" [16], establishing Gun's status as a "criminal minister". The statement, "Yu's father was named Gun... neither of them attained the throne, but remained ministers," established the Gun–Yu father–son relationship and imperial lineage. Wang Chong's Lunheng: The Chapter on Death and Deception and Zhao Ye's Wu Yue Chunqiu mention the legend "Gun died and was transformed into Huang Neng" [17, 18]. Gun was portrayed negatively because his actions violated communal ethics, disrupted the sovereign's political order, destroyed cosmic harmony, and brought punishment [19].

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This ethical interpretation demonstrates that "a father's guilt" is not an ancient original legend, but later social ethics projected onto mythological figures.

Yu's image as a "virtuous son" was standardized during the Han. Sima Qian portrayed him as "quick-witted, capable, and diligent, his virtue unwavering, his benevolence endearing, and his words trustworthy," noting that "he lived away from home for thirteen years and, passing by his own door, dared not enter" [16]. The Huainanzi: Fanlun Xun records: "Yu toiled for the world, and thus upon his death he became the Earth Deity" [20], extending Yu's influence to posthumous worship. Zhao Ye's Wu Yue Chunqiu added mythical elements such as "obtaining divine scriptures, acquiring sacred talismans, and subduing dragons" [18]. During the Han, Yu's image became deeply intertwined with orthodox authority through the deification of his achievements, providing a basis for legitimizing royal power.

Gonggong's image as an "evil deity" took shape during the Han. Sima Qian's Annals of the Five Emperors, drawing on the "Four Criminals" framework, described Gonggong as "eloquent in speech, yet deviant in conduct, appearing respectful yet defying heaven," citing his "trial as a Minister of Works" as proof that he was "indeed depraved and perverse" [16]. The Huainanzi: Treatise on Astronomy records that Gonggong, having failed in his struggle with Zhuanxu for the throne, "in a fit of rage struck Mount Buzhou," causing "the pillar of heaven to break and the bonds of the earth to snap," reducing him to a "defeated rebel" who disrupted cosmic order [20]. The Book of Han: Treatise on Criminal Law presents him as an example executed for refusing to submit to moral instruction [21]. During the Han, Gonggong became the "sinful father," embodying the triple identities of political traitor, cosmic destroyer, and historical villain.

Goulong's status as the Earth Deity was formally established during the Han. The Liji: Jifa, a Han ritual text, reiterates that Goulong "pacified the Nine Provinces and was enshrined as the Earth Deity" [11]; the Shiji: Fengshan shu states, "Since the rise of Yu, the ritual of sacrificing to the Earth Deity has been observed" [16], linking Goulong's worship to Yu's founding of the Xia. Cai Yong's Duduan and Ying Shao's Fengsu Tongyi systematically summarized Goulong's origins and veneration [22, 23]; the Book of the Later Han: Treatise on Sacrifices details the She and Ji altar system, designating Goulong as the She deity (a type of Earth Deity) [24]; the Baihu Tong: She and Ji stipulates sacrifice procedures, clarifying the Earth Deity's status and the importance of She and Ji sacrifices [25]. Goulong thus transformed from a traditional deity "honored for his merits" into a state-recognized deity, completing his deification from "human to divine."

3. The mechanism of formation and political functions of the "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative

3.1. Conditions for the emergence of the "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative

In early Chinese patrilineal society, the "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative cannot be understood apart from the question of legitimate descent. The Gun–Yu story works through the idea of a son inheriting his father's unfinished task. Because Yu was Gun's son, his rise to power could be presented as a succession within the family line rather than an outside takeover. Yu's achievements in flood control could then be read as making up for his father's failure, which in turn made the transfer of power appear smooth and morally justified within the patrilineal order. The Gonggong–Goulong narrative follows a similar but not identical pattern: a son compensates for his father's failings. Goulong's achievement of "leveling the earth" served to counter his father's reputation as a rebel. It helped turn him from the descendant of a criminal into a recognized deity. In this way, the father's guilt and the son's merit become linked in a relationship of compensation. The narrative

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gains moral weight and a sacred dimension, and it does not read simply as a political move of rejecting the father while embracing the son.

3.2. The narrative mechanism of the "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative

The "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative did not appear all at once. It took shape over time within a patrilineal ethical framework. The Zhou reread older myths through an ethical idea of "Heaven," which gave rise to the notion of "aligning virtue with Heaven" [26]. This supplied an intellectual basis for the later narrative pattern. The Shang did something comparable: they reshaped the figure of "Di" (High God) to support their own ruling authority [27]. In both cases, myth was reworked in the service of royal power. The narrative, then, is not a straightforward historical record. It is better understood as a later attempt to make sense of how power was passed down.

Within the narrative itself, the fathers' guilt works to throw the sons' virtue into sharper relief. What I call "building momentum" describes a simple pattern: the father's failure opens a space for the son to take over the unfinished task and, often, to surpass it. Gun and Yu offer a clear example. Gun failed to control the floods, and this failure gave Yu a ready-made justification for continuing his father's work when he took over. The worse the father looks, in other words, the more the son's virtues stand out.

"Context" works differently. Here the father's negative reputation sets up a framework within which the son's divine status can be established. Gonggong and Goulong illustrate this. Because Gonggong is remembered as a rebel, Goulong can step in as the one who sets things right. His actions then carry the meaning of correcting his father's mistakes.

3.3. Sinful father–virtuous son: the political function of the narrative

The "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative helped solve a practical problem: how to appoint the son of a criminal official without provoking moral criticism. In early Chinese politics, a father's serious crime could bring punishment or dismissal upon his sons as well. But if the son was genuinely talented and deserved a post, appointing him directly could still invite criticism, since he was, after all, the descendant of a criminal. The narrative drew a line between the father's guilt and the son's virtue, and in doing so it redefined what "filial piety" meant. A son no longer owed obedience only to his biological father; he now owed it to the larger patrilineal order. When Yu accepted Shun's order to control the floods, this could be read in two ways at once: as loyalty to his ruler, and as filial devotion in continuing his father's unfinished work. This worked because, in early China, discussions of human–deity relations were closely tied to questions about the sacredness of royal authority [28]. Once the father's bloodline was placed within a larger framework of patriarchal order and the Mandate of Heaven, obeying the ruler no longer meant betraying one's biological father. It meant atoning for him instead.

The narrative also turned political maneuvering into a moral story. Natural disasters and tribal conflicts were reduced to Gonggong's personal misdeeds, while the stability of the state was credited to Goulong's virtue. The narrative downplayed the political arrangement behind "Yu succeeding Gun in controlling the floods." It stressed instead that Heaven appointed Yu because of his own merits and virtues. Political success and failure were thus explained through individual virtue and the Mandate of Heaven. More complex historical factors, such as institutional change and power struggles, were pushed to the background.

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4. Conclusion

This paper examines the two sets of "sinful father–virtuous son" myths—Gun and Yu, and Gonggong and Goulong—to trace the cumulative development of related texts from the Western Zhou dynasty through the Han dynasties, as well as the gradual differentiation of the divine statuses of the fathers and sons. These two sets of father-son myths were not originally presented as binary oppositions but were gradually constructed through multiple generations of textual rewriting. Pre-Qin texts gathered much of the basic character material and set up the father–son relationships within these myths. By the Han dynasty, historians and state ritual systems had reshaped the stories further. Only then did they settle into a clear pattern: the father bears the blame, and the son inherits the merit.

The "sinful father–virtuous son" narrative grew out of patrilineal ethics, and it took shape in response to a practical need: legitimizing political power. Because patrilineal kinship could not be divided or denied, the narrative could turn the father's sins into evidence for the son's virtue. This allowed ruling authority to pass from one generation to the next without overturning patrilineal inheritance itself. The narrative gave political succession an ethical reading. Power could now be inherited in a way that carried a sense of atonement. Over time, this became an important way of dealing with the problem of "inheritance tainted by fault" in ancient Chinese political culture.

This paper draws mainly on extant textual sources. Excavated manuscripts and iconographic materials are used only to a limited extent here. Future research could apply this framework to other ancient mythological lineages. Combined with excavated texts and archaeological imagery, it might further test how this narrative model interacted with early political ethics.

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