

Confucian Discourse Being Formed: Transmutation of Bo Yi and Shu Qi Allegory in Early China

Qiusi Li^{1,a,*}

¹*Central China Normal University, Wuhan, 430079, China*

a. Liqiusiccnu@126.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Through the process of sanctification over generations, Bo Yi and Shu Qi, the two adherents to Shang, have, to some extent, become the moral models in Chinese cultural memory. While their starvation to death for the sake of the Right Way has been extolled by non-imperial and imperial scholars, it must not be neglected that the account of Bo Yi and Shu Qi is naturally marked by an inescapable contradiction: their sage allegiance to the Shang Dynasty was, in fact, a very dismantling of the legitimacy of Zhou in the sense of “Heavenly Mandate” that the Zhou had constructed. Scholars of ancient China had shaped and presented the two as models for their times and future generations, but almost none of them showed direct interest in boldly discussing the contradiction. By focusing on how Chinese classics in an early stage dealt with the dilemma of judgment between the moral paragons and the legitimacy of an ideal era in accounts of the Bo Yi allegory, this paper demonstrates the changing process from the abstract and general narration of Confucius and Mencius to the comprehensive, paradoxical, and dialectical narration of Sima Qian, reflecting Confucianism’s progression in maturity in early China.

Keywords: ancient Chinese classics, Bo Yi, Shu Qi, Confucius, Mencius, Sima Qian

1. Introduction

The political philosophy of ancient China has been through a process of improvement. Initially, its theories were presented as uni-dimensional, incarnated in a few flawless moral paragons, yet, gradually, scholars started to question, reflect, and re-elucidate those principles of political ethics, demonstrating the genealogy of ancient Chinese philosophy in progression. Previous studies mostly focus on the transmutation of fundamental concepts such as “people as root”, overlooking the early scholars’ ideas in incarnation where explicit elaborations have not been formed. Taking the persona of Bo Yi and Shu Qi as examples, this paper explores how scholars from the pre-Qin to Western Han period, namely, Confucius, Mencius, and Sima Qian were confronted with the contradictions and dilemmas between the mandate of heaven and humanity. By viewing from a small but unique entry point, the author aims to see the features of the genealogy of Confucian thoughts of political ethics through observations of the construction and destruction of both the legitimacy of the Zhou and the Bo Yi brothers’ morality.

2. Heavenly Mandate: The Construction of Zhou's Legitimacy

The Zhou had never contributed their conquest of “all under heaven” to its military force. Though they did not shy from mentioning warfare in the myths of their origin, they regarded it more as the invention and practice of agriculture and minimized the accounts of details of battles [1]. In the *Wenian*, the Zhou ancestors are presented as farmers who take advantage of lands and fields instead of warriors to expand their territory and plunder [2]; and in the *Documents*, King Wu, or sometimes the Duke of Zhou, has always been stressing that their overthrowing of the Shang is but “executing respectfully the punishment appointed by Heaven” instead of seeking the throne of themselves, and it is the Shang king's misrule that leads to its appointment being taken away and its fall ultimately [3].

Justifications and superiority of the Zhou have been constructed through scholars' efforts in demonstrating that they were the favor of Heaven. As is stated in “The Numerous Officers”, the substitution of the old regime for Zhou is described as natural, righteous, and inevitable. Those officers of the royal house of Yin must follow the Zhou, perform the role of ministers “with zealous activity” and obedience, and never murmur against the Zhou ruler, otherwise, “the utmost Heaven's inflictions” would be carried on them [3].

The Zhou civilization and its justifications originated from the heavenly mandate according to themselves, and later Confucian classicists continued emphasizing its government's moral superiority, intentionally or unintentionally avoiding referring to the military conquest.

3. The Sages and the Golden Age in Classics

3.1. Confucius' Approbation and Avoidance

Confucius often extolled Bo Yi and Shu Qi with the least parsimony, explicitly titling them sages of antiquity. The two were regarded as “having no degradation of their will, no disgrace to their bodies”; and because they did “not brood on old hatreds”, they felt little resentfulness [4]. Significantly, the approbation above focuses chiefly on their sage virtue, but none of it refers to the criticism of the Zhou or the awkward juncture of Shang and Zhou, which, to some extent, might be seen as Confucius' intentional avoidance of the taboo for the dynastic founder.

Confucius' glorification of Zhou, on the other hand, often concentrates on its ritual civilization; his direct comments on King Wu of Zhou or Zhou's overthrowing of Shang, either, just as he did when praising Bo Yi and Shu Qi. The only case Confucius implying his attitude toward King Wu in the *Analects* is his comment on the Music of Shao and the Music of Wu, where he has allusively pointed out that the latter was of the ultimate beauty but not perfect, as is interpreted by later imperial scholars, indicating his slight dissatisfaction with the violence of King Wu's attack on the Yin. What is noteworthy is that he once commended the Zhou for it “owned two-thirds of all under heaven” yet served the Yin reverently, and acclaimed its virtue as the supreme [5]. From Confucius' perspective, it is, not its conquest of, but its allegiance and obedience to the Shang despite its strength during the reign of the Earl of the West that has elevated the Zhou in the sense of morality. Although it is not suggested to associate every single fragmented quote in the *Analects* to conclude Confucius' general ideas, he did underline very often that the sage's conduct should be subject to the reign of his time. In the light of Confucius' philosophy of life in troubled times that “if there is the Way of Right under heaven, emerge and serve; if not, hide”, the two worthies fleeing into the Shou-yang Mountain might be interpreted as the Zhou's absence of Way of Right, which is surely a paradox for those eulogists of Zhou, and what they did is to neatly sidestep the contradiction.

The approbation of the two men's nature of Right and the avoidance of mentioning the military conquest demonstrate scholars' struggle between the moral paragons and the ideal era. Confucian

classicists have expressed and elucidated their opinions confined to the framework of positive comments on both the two sages and the Zhou dynasty ever since, continuing the *Wenbi* rhetoric of minimizing the percentage of military conquest in their accounts but concerning more the flourishing civilization achievements.

3.2. Mencius' Step Forward

Potentially affected by Confucius, Mencius also rated Bo Yi highly in laudatory terms. By accumulating fragments about Bo Yi in the *Mencius* and piecing them together, it is found that Bo Yi was a sage. He escaped King Zhou's tyranny at the Northern Sea and went to the Earl of the West for shelter. His virtue could render ravenous and obstinate men honest, and enable a coward to have his determination.

More significantly, Mencius remarked that Bo Yi "did not serve the king if he was not the one" [5]. If this remark is merely directed at Bo Yi's escaping the rule of Shang, it undermines nothing of Zhou's justifications. However, Mencius' absence of Bo Yi's deed gives rise to the other possibility: it may be speculated that the story scheme is based not only on his approbation, but the story version of *Zhuangzi*, in which the allegory goes as Bo Yi and Shu Qi of Gu-zhu had heard that the Zhou king ruled according to the Right Way, and so they went there, only to be offered high offices and wealth and feel extremely disappointed, finding it not the Right Way they had expected, and thus fled into hiding to maintain their purity and ultimately starved to death. It is not difficult to see from this story that King Zhou is not the only ruler that Bo Yi tried to elude. King Wu is also a ruler whom he was reluctant to serve and pay homage to. This potential interpretation damages the image of both King Wu and the Zhou dynasty, subtly reducing the Zhou to unprecedented inferiority.

Apart from the possible, indirect criticism of Zhou, Mencius goes a step forward regarding comments on Bo Yi. Though compliments are still preponderant, it is noticeable that Mencius criticizes Bo Yi as being too "narrow" [5], presenting a more comprehensive and rational evaluation of him, and, more importantly, rehabilitates the justification by indicating Bo Yi's narrowness in the face of a sage-king.

The greatest leap in Mencius, however, must be the discussion of the legality of regicide. Questions and doubts of regicide were first proposed and discussed in the *Mencius* though the *Documents* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* had already referred to the notion. It initiated debates of tension between rulers and subjects, transcending the existing evaluation system. In a chapter of *Mencius*, King Xuan of Qi argued with Mencius over the matter of King Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou, both of whom ended the misrule of their former dynasty respectively. King Xuan pungently asked whether it is justifiable for a subject to regicide his ruler, and Mencius replied that he had only heard about the deed of killing a tyrant called Zhou, but had not heard of regicide [5]. In this debate, King Xuan argued the illegitimacy of subjects' regicide within the framework of the ruler-subject correlation, whereas Mencius expanded the topic to the discussion of whether the tyrant still has his legitimacy to the detriment of the people [6], rationalizing the execution of a ruler violating the Way of heaven, presenting the Zhou's overthrowing Shang as righteous with obedience to and reverence for the heavenly mandate.

4. Dilemma of Judgement: Sima Qian's Narration

The first "Tradition" in Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* is the one of Bo Yi, which is anomalous not merely because it concerns a figure uncommonly from pre-Eastern Zhou, but also due to its stylistic uniqueness: Sima Qian's evaluation and thoughts constitute the major part of this chapter. Scholars have long been convinced that this anomaly full of personal doubts and thoughts

is placed at the head of all “Traditions” out of Sima Qian’s intention to render it an introduction to the entire section [7]. The Bo Yi story is presented full of contradictions, including conflicts between the father’s order and primogeniture, filial piety and mission to end misrule, allegiance to the former regime or to the new one, etc., and through their choices, the two brothers have become moral paragons for audiences of Sima Qian’s time and later generations, who incarnated virtues in the face of all those dilemmas.

It is the two sages who rebuked the Zhou in their song of picking bracken ferns as “brute force for brute force” that were acclaimed [4], whereas the Zhou dynasty has always been a golden era for Confucian scholars. Sima Qian, the great follower of Confucius thus is placed in the dilemma of judgment: on the one hand, the brothers’ sage actions of the Right Way are conspicuous; on the other, the Zhou terminated a regime of tyranny following the mandate from heaven [1], which rendered it imperative for the self-proclaimed and widely-acknowledged second Confucius to defend the Zhou justifications while glorifying the two paragons of antiquity.

Fair as he might be, Sima Qian added an episode at the end of the story. After their stinging rebuke, the brothers’ lives were at the mercy of the Zhou, that is, it is first the Zhou’s dilemma--whether to execute the bold and discouraging brothers or to keep them alive. Then the king’s party’s action situates the two on the edge of death; but Tai-gong’s preventing the “offensive” two from being put to sword pulls them back, through which the dramatic tension has been constructed, and, more importantly, the Zhou justification that has been impaired by criticism is re-achieved, at least partly, by Tai-gong “helping them up and sending them away” [4], showing benevolence to them, and acknowledging their Way of Right.

What the story was like before Sima Qian can be seen from a chapter of *Zhuangzi*. Given that other classics of the Warring States and Western Han period are not generous with accounts of details, Bo Yi and Shu Qi’s deeds are usually condensed into short phrases. In *Zhuangzi*, the story is an entirely different one in the level of the framework, describing the two rejecting the high offices and wealth that the Duke of Zhou offered and finally starving to death out of disappointment [8]. Though it might be unlikely to shed light on the composition and documents selection of the Biography of Bo Yi, it seems that Sima Qian’s story version came from another genealogical line, or, if not being too bold, it might be assumed that he “created” the two brothers detaining King Wu’s horse to criticize him, and the episode of Zhou showing benevolence to them is but his own addition out of ideological purposes to rehabilitate Zhou’s legitimacy through the construction of its mercy.

If the Zhou exerts a destructive influence on the two, their later refusal to eat the grain of Zhou could be less struggling. But the Zhou’s choice in the dilemma is nowhere near negative, and thus their tolerance for the brothers has transferred the moral conflict of whether to retain their allegiance to Shang or to serve the future Zhou king who is merciful to them into the brothers’ inner struggle and intensified it. Most importantly, the narration has returned to the safety zone of Confucian scholars, and the Zhou’s perfect presence has been redeemed. Furthermore, the struggle of the two loyal men of right shows us audiences an inevitable paradox: Both sides of this conflict have their reasons to defend the justice that they believe in, and thus, history, as Sima Qian has admitted in the biography that he was extremely confused about, is paradoxical and multi-dimensional. Though he did not directly point out the ruler-subject paradox as Mencius, his confusion and struggle facing the dilemma of judgment indeed demonstrates his reflection.

5. Growth in Humanity: Objective and Progression of Confucian Political Ethics

Confucian scholars have made great efforts to set up models for their time and future generations. They were not merely re-presenting history; instead, what they did is undoubtedly to reshape historical figures and construct a Confucian discourse, cultivate a group of moral advocates [9], and

equip them with the spirit of martyrs in order to respond to the needs of their time [10], that is, to rehabilitate social order, redress evil, and establish moral standards. The scholars, in their (re)construction of the two, accomplished their very objective of moral order, forging an unshakable bond between the brothers' name and virtues: people in the Confucian context shared a collective memory of the sage brothers' persona, whose name and deed served as a signifier of morality and sense of right. The often highly-condensed phrases regarding Bo Yi (and Shu Qi) may thus indicate the possible common phenomenon that educated audiences in the Warring States and early imperial period could understand immediately when Bo Yi's name was simply mentioned without any further explanation.

Their methodology of lovingly and enthusiastically retrospecting the golden era of Three Dynasties drives them to both maintain the justifications of the Zhou and the two's high morality--either of them being negated could lead to chaos in ideology, and thus viewpoints that are too bold or subversive have never been proposed. Scholars' re-creation of the Bo Yi allegory continues the narrative feature of "Great Court Hymns" and the *Documents* that it is the mandate of heaven, rather than its military conquest, that constitutes the justification of Zhou, and martial details are supposed to be minimized or omitted, while the flourishing civilization of ritual and music, high morality of sage-kings or sage-ministers are what needs to be emphasized most.

Confucius stressed the significance of being tactically enterprising or inactive in the light of the absence or presence of the Way of Right, the ruler's morality, and how the regime conducts itself. If a worthy man is unvalued and not listened to in a time of chaos, he should resort to his inner world where he achieves his virtue. Bo Yi and Shu Qi's voluntary death does no harm to both their allegiance to the Shang and the rule of Zhou. Under the influence of the introverted tendency, their voluntary death was seen as lofty and in accordance with the Right Way. Therefore, the evaluation of Bo Yi and Shu Qi in Confucius' time was usually grand. They were praised as the sacred and lofty paragons who were most willing to die for their conviction without the least resentfulness, whereas the potential influence of this approbation, that is, the damage on the image of Zhou, was to the greatest extent avoided. The comments changed, however, on the one hand, from the broad glorification of their virtue to a more down-to-earth and concrete level, acknowledging their defect of narrowness; on the other, the paradox of regicide was proposed, transcending the specific case and coming to the theoretical level. When it comes to Sima Qian's accounts, the story was historicized and detailed, adding new episodes to demonstrate and intensify the inner struggle of the two, making them more "human" than the persona of them in Confucius' context through Sima Qian's implication that they died indeed with resentfulness. Meanwhile, Sima Qian succeeded in dedicating himself to presenting the multi-dimensions of history, politics, and the paradoxical juncture of Heaven and Man.

6. Conclusion

From Eastern Zhou to the early Han period, the persona of Bo Yi and Shu Qi has been through a process of "sanctification" and "disenchantment". Although they remain paragons in the cultural memory of later Chinese intellectuals, the allegories concerning the two gave rise to reflections and debates over the paradoxical topics of ruler-subject correlation, the relationship between social order and people's well-being, allegiance to the old government and obedience to the "mandate of heaven", etc. This paper analyzes the transmutations of Bo Yi story, and draws to a conclusion that through the reconstruction of the allegory and re-evaluation of the two's persona, the Confucian moral and political discourse are improved philosophically, while a genealogy line of early Confucianism is relentlessly evolving and demonstrated as well.

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