



Recipients of the Mandate: Contradictory Narratives in Baoxun(Instructions for Preservation) and Chengwu(Awakening at Cheng)

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Abstract. This essay explores two texts from the Tsinghua Slips, Baoxun and Chengwu, which offer conflicting views on the recipients of the Mandate. Baoxun portrays King Wen as the sole recipient, while Chengwu presents both King Wen and King Wu as joint recipients. By comparing these texts, the study highlights the contradiction of Western Zhou religious narratives to Eastern Zhou moralistic reinterpretations that coexisted in the same text, showing how the myth of the Mandate was reconstructed to address contemporary political challenges.

Keywords: Tsinghua Slips, Mandate of Heaven, Eastern Zhou Ideology.

1 Introduction

“Ming” , in English as “the Mandate of Heaven,” semantically meaning “mandate,” “command,” “order,” “fate,” “fortune,” and a great more, appeared repetitively in Chinese political history. For a long time, the debates surrounding Ming have highlighted the significance of this concept.[1] However, several unresolved questions regarding the origin of Ming remain the subject of scholarly discussion. Citing the famous quote in Shi, “There was a Mandate from Heaven, a Mandate for King Wen,”(有命自天，命此文王) no doubt that King Wen had accepted the Mandate (or Great Mandate, Great Order). But how King Wen accepts the Mandate is a question.

The discussions exhibit a degree of complexity and diversity. According to Zheng Xuan, the Mandate King Wen had received was institutional, not the Mandate of Heaven but of the contemptuous Shang King, while two groups of other scholars provide explanations based on religious aspects, “A red sparrow carried the vermilion book into Feng” and “King Wen received the Hetu(River Diagram) and Luoshu(Luo River Writing) diagrams.”[2] However, further confusion came from the expression of different recipients of the Mandate, “King Wen accepted the Mandate”(文王受命) and “King Wen and King Wu accepted the Mandate.”(文武受命) In Hezun何尊, it only mentioned, “(thereby) King Wen received the great Order”(肆文王受大兹),[3] while in Shangshu, “Only the Duke of Zhou loyally upheld the mandate bestowed upon King

Wen and King Wu”(惟周公诞保文武受命) appeared in chapter Luo Gao(The announcement of Luo). Since there's no direct account of King Wen and King Wu before the establishment of Western Zhou, the more important question is, why do variations appear in later compiled texts or inscriptions on whether or not King Wu accepted the Mandate? How did these variations reflect contemporaneous ideologies?

Despite discussions of former studies, the revealing of Tsinghua manuscripts may provide some new perspectives regarding this question. Dating back to the Warring States period, Tsinghua scripts reflected the relatively undisturbed debates during the Warring States. Further, the variation of the manuscripts that don't exist in transmitted texts could provide information crucial to today's perception. [4][5]

This essay selected two paragraphs that provide a significant discussion of Ming from Tsinghua scripts, which are Baoxun(Instructions for Preservation) and Chengwu (Awaking from a Dream at Cheng). Through these texts, we can see the contradictions between Western Zhou narration and Eastern Zhou ideology. The Western Zhou narrative is reflected in the separation of King Wen and King Wu as recipients of the Mandate, alongside the extensive use of omens and auspicious signs. In contrast, the Eastern Zhou ideology is conveyed by merging King Wen and King Wu together as the recipients of the Mandate, emphasizing moral behavior and minimizing religious elements. I attempt to recapture the Eastern Zhou people's intentionality in reconstructing Western Zhou political mythologies, reflecting their search for contemporaneous political solutions.

2 Receiving and Preserving the Mandate: Cases in Baoxun and Chengwu

Baoxun has been identified as the words of the deceased King Wen. Since a number of paragraphs, among other texts, had referred to King Wen's last words, the unearthing of Baoxun is the first revealing of its entirety.[6]

Baoxun primarily details how King Wen gathered his son, Fa, and instructed him on how to preserve the Mandate of Heaven. The text begins with a formal narrative that introduces the timing and the king's circumstances. This is followed by King Wen's speech, where he used two historical anecdotes to guide his son's understanding of rulership. He concludes with explicit instructions. Notably, at last, King Wen mentions “不及爾身受大命.” I considered the translation of both Li Ling and Dirk Meyer. The former translated it as “You can't receive this Great Mandate face to face,”[7] and the latter translated it as “It is not yet the time for you to receive the Great Mandate.”[8] Nevertheless, they both emphasize that, at least during the reign of King Wen, King Wu did not receive the Mandate.[9]

Then, reviewing back to the anecdotes used by King Wen. In the first anecdote, King Wen cited the story of Shun. “As Shun received ‘Zhong’...Thus, he set the thrice descended virtue. The emperor Yao praised him, and so bestowed the charge on him.”(舜既得中.....用作三降之德。帝堯嘉之，用授厥緒), illustrating that the legitimized succession of Shun from Yao is for he received “Zhong.” In the second anecdote, “Previously, [Shang Jia] Wei borrowed ‘Zhong’ from He [Bo] to revenge on You Yi”(昔微

假中于河，以復有易), then, he “returned the ‘Zhong’ to He Bo”(追中于河). After a long time, Cheng Tang “followed it very carefully without remiss”([成汤]微志弗忘) and “received the Great Mandate.”(用受大命). This incident explicitly showed that Tang receiving the Mandate was directly due to his obedience toward his ancestor (predecessor) Wei, who had interacted with Zhong several times. Clearly, the text reveals that King Wen deliberately emphasized Zhong's importance, and it similarly reflects the compiler's intention to establish a direct link between Zhong and the preservation of the Mandate.

The “Zhong,” which Meyer translated to “center,”[10] is a relatively complicated concept that I believe that translation is insufficient to capture its depth. Due to the particularity of Baoxun mentioning the concept of Zhong, several former studies have deeply investigated its ideology in early China. [11][12] I do not intend to take part in the semantic meaning of Zhong. In general, I took Zhong as a concept that combines features both from ethics and merits. On the one hand, Zhong can be observed. It comprised an aspect that could be obeyed as standards, like ethics, as Shun “had sought for Zhong”(恭求中). According to Li Ling’s translation, he added that by seeking Zhong, Shun had a standard to follow.[13] On the other hand, as Zhong could be appropriate by Wei and could be returned to He Bo, it reflects a disparity that goes beyond mere ethics. Since Shun had “received”(得) the Zhong through great effort, we could deduce that it was a quality obtainable by a qualified person. This gives it the aspect of merit. And, as Zhong embodies such a combination, through the intention of connecting Zhong to the Mandate, the text reflected an ideology of preserving the Mandate through a kind of performance that complied with certain principles and obtaining a kind of merit that qualified you as the recipient of the Mandate. [14]

For many scholars, the ideology of “the Mandate of Heaven is not constant”(天命靡常) emerged through an evolution of conceptual history. The connection between virtuous conduct and the receipt of the Mandate was fully developed within Eastern Zhou thought.[15] Considering that the Tsinghua scripts are from warring states, we could conclude that the ideology reflected in Baoxun is an Eastern Zhou perspective, and it was probably compiled to provide a perspective to contemporaneous Eastern Zhou social and political debates. This conclusion is supported by Meyer, who identified Baoxun as closely resembling the Guming(The Testamentary Charge) chapter The Ancient Version of the Shangshu, particularly in the frame. Meyer further deduces that Baoxun and Guming likely emerged from the same discourse or debate, comprising the reconstruction and recontextualization of an idealized past in the Eastern Zhou period.[16]

I agree with this perspective, but I would like to highlight a nuanced difference found between Baoxun and Guming. In Baoxun, King Wen and King Wu differed as recipients of the Mandate, but in Guming, they were combined together as a pair of recipients, as it states: “In days of yore, the lord’s Kings Wen and Wu displayed their repeated brilliance... In this way, they were able to reach Yin, and they succeeded in setting up the ‘Great Mandate’”(昔君文王、武王宣重光……用克達殷集大命), merging King Wen and King Wu as an ideal pair, both spreading virtue and receiving the Mandate. However, in Baoxun, the distinction between the two is significant, as the Mandate is

attributed solely to King Wen at one time. As Martin Kern observed, “[King Wen and King Wu’s] ideal image as the primordial double ancestors who through their succession and complementary virtues had established the dynasty became formulaic only centuries after their demise that is, at the time when the dynasty itself was heading toward collapse.”[17] According to Kern, the stabilization of this pair was closely connected to contemporaneous political situations. With the change of conditions, Zhou people’s concept of the Mandate went on a shift, shaping new ideological trends and memories of an idealized past—specifically, the time when the Zhou dynasty was founded. Notably, this recurring phenomenon during periods of crisis may align with the theme of preserving the Mandate in Baoxun and Guming during the Eastern Zhou period. We can imagine that in such times, as the Mandate, a key source of political legitimacy, hovered on the verge of disintegration, Zhou people sought guidance on Mandate preservation, a crucial issue amid political struggles and uncertainty.

Then, the clear separation of King Wen and King Wu in Baoxun appears unusual. Within the context of Eastern Zhou ideologies, this narrative introduces a Western Zhou perspective that seems misaligned with the rest of the text. Further, a similar occasion occurred in another text from Tsinghua scripts: Chengwu. Chengwu had been cited in many known texts, including *Yizhoushu* (The Lost Book of Zhou), however, not until the unearthing of the Tsinghua script did we see this whole story. Here, I followed the translation of Luo Xinhui and her division.[18] According to Xinhui, the second part of Chengwu, which contains King Wen’s speech and interpretation of the auspicious dream, is particularly interesting compared to the massive amount of omens in the first part.[19] However, the narration of religious conduct and the emphasis on the Mandate and Heaven is fully absent in the second part. According to King Wen’s speech, one should follow timeliness, dedicate oneself to harmony, and strive for the people, with the core of conducting virtuous behavior to qualify for the Mandate. Essentially, it is another instruction given by King Wu for the preservation of the Mandate.

Thus, the similar conflict of narrations we discern in Baoxun reoccurred in Chengwu, and the division is even more clear than that in Baoxun. The first part of the story probably was transmitted, being subjected to little change since Western Zhou, but then, like Baoxun, the story seemingly underwent a revision under Eastern Zhou ideology. In Chengwu, a clear statement reads, “The king and Crown Prince Fa jointly made obeisance on account of the auspicious dream and received the Shang Mandate from the August Supreme Thearch” (王及太子發並拜吉夢，受商命于皇上帝), indicating that King Wen and King Wu received the Mandate simultaneously.[20] As previously discussed, this merging of King Wen and King Wu likely occurred relatively late in the Western Zhou period and continued into the Eastern Zhou. However, many omens and religious conducts in the text still reflect a typical Early Western Zhou narrative style, creating an internal contradiction within the text.

These conflicts give the texts a similar argumentative style on how to preserve the Mandate, showing both of King Wu’s speeches in the two texts were surrounded by mysterious stories, but the specific approaches to preservation differ slightly. Contrary to the expression of “Zhong” in Baoxun, Chengwu emphasizes the value of acting according to the situation. However, both texts generally agree on the importance of virtuous behavior as a qualification for receiving the Mandate. Therefore, it is possible

that these texts emerged from the same debate, offering different suggestions on Mandate preservation. However, why they were formed like they did and how they reflected deeper ideological collisions are beyond the scope of my research.

We can hypothesize that the stories presented in Baoxun and Chengwu are just one version among several contemporaneous accounts. This could draw from the evidence that “received and excavated texts provide multiple examples of texts sharing the characteristic formal features of this type” citing Yegor Grebnev.[21] Not only does Baoxun portray King Wen’s words as those of the deceased, but it is also mentioned alongside many other contemporary texts.[22] In the case of Chengwu, the variation took place in a quote in *Qianfu lun*(Discourses of a Recluse)[23] where King Wu’s role in performing rituals after the auspicious dream is absent. As previously discussed, both texts may contribute to a larger debate on how to preserve the Mandate. To some extent, we might argue that the variation—whether King Wen alone or both King Wen and King Wu received the Mandate—served to construct King Wen’s ideological instructions in both texts. However, I cannot clearly conclude whether their compilers had a deliberate purpose in advancing their ideologies through this specific version of the story. Still, both texts contribute to a broader narrative tension between Western and Eastern Zhou accounts, reflecting, to some degree, the ideological confusion experienced by Eastern Zhou people due to the varying expressions found within a single text.

3 Conclusion

We have examined two texts from the Tsinghua Bamboo Scripts and identified potential conflicts within their narratives regarding the recipients of the Mandate. Baoxun and Chengwu comprised contradictions between Western Zhou narratives and Eastern Zhou ideology. While the Western Zhou account separates King Wen and King Wu as distinct recipients of the Mandate, relying heavily on omens and auspicious signs, Eastern Zhou ideology merges King Wen and King Wu as joint recipients of the Mandate, placing greater emphasis on moral behavior and undermining religious elements. Thus, the compilation of Eastern Zhou texts revealed a greater image of the complexity of the ancient intellectual world. According to these conflicts, especially through the claim of recipients of the Mandate, we may have drawn a conclusion that, besides the thoughts that Eastern Zhou people had developed the connection between Heaven and people’s performance, which seems against Western Zhou narrations of religion, they actually heavily relied on existing myths to exert their intentionality to search for a solution for contemporaneous political situations.

When wars have wrecked fields and buildings, people begin to reflect on the becoming blurry memories. It’s possible that whether King Wen or the pair of King Wen and King Wu taking the crucial role of the sage king became less important. Religion, meritocracy, and whatever could help to stabilize the reign on the verge of collapse or support the ambition to usurp the position became the intellectuals pressing concern. Through Warring States texts, we may sense their confusion and the hope of addressing part of their hope on account of different methods, including myths, which we originally thought were more or less absent in the Eastern Zhou period.

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