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The Motif of Legendary Emperors Yao and Shun in Ancient Chinese Literature*

Abstract: Yao and Shun are two of the legendary Five Emperors, considered to be China's rulers from 2355–2185 BC. Apart from archeological discussions on their historicity, they play a key role in classical Chinese culture as a distinctive literary motif. Both Confucius and Mencius put their beliefs into mouths of Yao and Shun because of the Confucian idealization of the past: wanting to justify some convictions, they argued that long since Yao and Shun certain customs or rules were in force. All stories about their life, e.g. the legend about Yao's decision of choosing Shun as his successor, were morality tales or, like in the case of other Confucian writer, Xunzi, served as examples illustrating the results of conducting ancient rituals. The aim of the paper is to show different roles in which Yao and Shun were functioning in ancient Chinese literature, providing examples from *The Analects*, *Mencius*, Xunzi's *On Learning*, *The Classic of the Virtue of the Tao* and Zhuangzi's *The True Classic of the Southern Flower*. The author argues that actually there are no essential differences in the usage of these figures between literary prose and historiography. This insight provides some arguments for interpreting Chinese historiography from the narrativist point of view, which is to say, as a kind of literature.

Key words: legendary emperors of China, ancient Chinese literature, historiography

Legends constitute an integral part of the literature while historical legends are one of the most inspiring kinds of legends. In case of Chinese civilization, which is the longest in its continuous development from the antiquity up to our times, the legends of the historical origins of the Middle Kingdom play a crucial role. Taking into account the absence of cosmogonic myths of the creation of the world in China, they can even be said to be culture-genic. Among those legends, one can find tales and historical descriptions of the two model emperors, Yao and Shun. As a result of numerous comments and conceptual metamorphoses of this figure, Yao and Shun became more and more abstract, so that they had been

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functioning mainly as a literary and philosophical theme, far away from what is usually called “historical fact”. The purpose of my article is to analyze the motif of Emperors Yao and Shun in Ancient Chinese Literature. I will limit myself to the Classical Historiography, represented by *The Book of Documents* and *The Annals* of Sima Qian, and philosophical literature, represented by *The Analects*, *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi*. In conclusion, I wish to make a theoretical analysis of the motif of legendary emperors by employing Hayden White’s historical narrativism and to provide some remarks on the relation between literature and historiography.

Between Legend and History

Debates on the first historical dynasty of China are still in progress. The interdisciplinary project “Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology”, conducted by approximately 200 experts under the guidance of Prof. Li Xueqin in the years 1996–2000, has determined that the Xia Dynasty (夏朝, *Xià Cháo*, 2070–1600 BC) was the first historical dynasty of China.¹ Despite some criticism of these research, I would like to assume that the legendary history of China include everything that happened before the Xia dynasty. The period preceding the Xia dynasty is usually called the times of “Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors” (三皇五帝, *sān huáng wǔ dì*). According to the tradition, this period covers the times from 2850 BC to 2070 BC. This era is widely considered as a “golden age” of Chinese culture. Thus, these particular sovereigns and emperors are associated with different inventions and discoveries, laying the ground for the further development of Chinese civilization. Precise attributions, as well as the list of *sanhuang wudi* itself, vary depending on historical sources. For instance, according to *Yùndòushū* (運斗樞) and *Yuánmìngbāo* (元命苞), Nüwa is the third sovereign, while *Shàngshū Dàzhuàn* (尚書大傳) and *Báihǔ Tōngyì* (白虎通義) claim that it was rather Suìrén (燧人), who had invented fire.² The most popular list of *sanhuang wudi* looks as follows:³

- I. Fuxi (伏羲, *Fú Xī*) – credited for the invention of hunting, fishing and cooking; according to “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, Fuxi and Nüwa were the original humans living on the mythological Kunlun Mountain;

1 *Xia Shang Zhou duandai gongcheng 1996—2000 nian jieduan chengguo baogao: jianben* [The Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project Report for the years 1996–2000 (abridged)], Shijie tushu chubanshe, Beijing 2000.

2 Liu Wei 刘炜, *Zhonghua wenming chuanzhen* [The Image of Chinese Civilization], vol. I, Shanghai cishu chubanshe, Shanghai 2001, p. 142–143.

3 Mieczysław Jerzy Künstler, *Mitologia chińska* [Chinese Mythology], Oficyna Wydawnicza Auriga, Warszawa 2006, pp. 48–49, 68–69, 99–101, 190–193, 230.

- II. Nüwa (女媧, *Nǚ Wā*) – a goddess known for creating mankind and repairing the pillar of Heaven; usually portrayed as half-snake, half-woman, braided with her brother (and the father of the first people at the same time);
- III. Divine Farmer (神農, *Shénnóng*) – as the legend has it, he taught the ancient Chinese practices of agriculture, irrigation and the use of tea; as the First Farmer, he invented the axe, plow and hoe along with other farm implements.
 - A. Yellow Emperor (黃帝, *Huángdì*) – as opening the list of Five Emperors, Huangdi was said to be the originator of the centralized state and Chinese civilization. At the same time, he is considered to be the ancestor of all Han Chinese people; Huangdi allegedly invented Chinese characters and Traditional Chinese Medicine, as well as astronomy, mathematics, calendar, etc.; he had been revered by Taoists even more than by Confucians, treated as equal to Laozi;
 - B. Emperor Zhuānxu (顓頊, *Zhuān Xū*) – he deepened astronomical knowledge and found more precise calendars, but also gave birth to many demons;
 - C. Emperor Kù (饁, *Kù*) – he was thought to be an inventor of musical instruments and a composer of first songs;
 - D. Emperor Yao (堯, *Yáo*);
 - E. Emperor Shun (舜, *Shùn*).

The issue of historicity of Yao and Shun is a subject of much research and it is very doubtful they lived as long and did as much as legend has it. Notwithstanding, I would like to briefly reconstruct main “historical facts” concerning those two emperors, as it is possible on the ground of Classical Chinese Historiography. Yao is considered to have lived between 2374 and 2255 BC. According to *The Bamboo Annals* (竹書紀年, *Zhúshū Jìnián*), Yao became the ruler at twenty.⁴ According to *The Book of Documents* (書經, *Shūjīng* or 尚書, *Shàngshū*), Yao had founded the first astronomic observatory in order to make a calendar. He himself taught the people how to interpret celestial phenomena: “He separately commanded the second brother He to reside at the west, in what was called the Dark Valley, and respectfully to convoy the setting sun, and to adjust and arrange the completing labors of the autumn. ‘The night is of the medium length, and the star is in Xu – you may thus

4 *Zhushu Jinian* IV, 1. I am basing on the version in: James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, vol. III, Trubner&Co, 1865.

exactly determine mid-autumn. The people feel at ease, and birds and beasts have their coats in good condition.”⁵

The same version can be found in later *Annals* (史記, *Shiji*) of Sima Qian (司馬遷, *Sīmǎ Qiān*, 145–86 BC). Interestingly enough, a sort of an ancient observatory – the oldest in East Asia, dating to 2300–1900 BC – has been found at Taosi, an ancient site in Shanxi. In conclusion, archeologists claim that “the design and placement of the structure is highly suggestive of the monopolization of ritualized sunrise observation by the Taosi elite who were buried close by, no doubt for reasons of control and prestige.”⁶ *The Bamboo Annals* states that the reign of Yao ended in his 73rd year of reign and he died at the age of 119. But then an intriguing difference arises. According to *Shiji*, Yao appointed Shun as his successor instead of his adopted son, Dan Zhu (丹朱, *Dān Zhū*). The reason why he did it is that the morality and skills of Shun prevailed, although he came from the lower social strata. It is clear that such a story had been made in order to justify the need (and the system) of national exams and relying on abilities instead of birth and blood: “Fangqi said, ‘There is your adopted son Danzhu, who is developing his intelligence’ Yao said, ‘Oh! he is unscrupulous and wicked; I cannot employ him’ [...] All the courtiers said to Yao, ‘There is an unmarried man of the lower orders called Shun of Yu’ Yao said, ‘Yes, I have heard of him, what is he like?’ The president said, ‘He is the son of a blind man; his father was unprincipled, his mother insincere, and his brother arrogant, but he managed by his dutiful conduct to be reconciled to them, so they have gradually improved, and not been extremely wicked.’ ‘Shall I try him?’ said Yao. He then married his two daughters to Shun, and watched his behavior towards them.”⁷ According to *Bamboo Annals*, Shun had overthrown Yao and left him in prison to die, while his son was banished.⁸ According to those two sources, Shun is considered to have lived between 2334 and 2234 BC. He “received” (whatever it means) the crown from the Emperor Yao at the age of 53 and died being 100 years old. Before his death he relinquished the seat of power to Yu the Great (禹, *Yǔ*), who established the Xia Dynasty. The difference shows that, apart from any evaluation of what Yao did or did not do, chronicles written by Confucians (such as *Shiji*) tended to

5 *Shangshu* I, 1, 2. I am basing on: J. Legge, *The Sacred Book of China. The texts of Confucianism (Sacred Books of the East vol. 3)*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1879.

6 David Pankenier et al., *The Xiangfen, Taosi site: A Chinese Neolithic ‘observatory’?*, “Archaeologica Baltica” 2008, vol. 10, p. 146.

7 *Shiji*, I, 1, 13–14. I am basing on the edition: Sima Qian, *Shiji. Diyibu*, ed. Zheng Futian 郑福田, Yuanfang Chubanshe, Beijing 2002.

8 *Zhushu Jinian* IV, 11–14.

idealize the times of Yao and Shun, creating the myth of abdication, perceived as a myth even by other ancient Chinese historians.

Both *Shujing*, which became the part of the Confucian Pentateuch, and *Shiji* linked purely factual description with solemn praise of their virtues: “[Yao] was reverential, intelligent, accomplished, and thoughtful – naturally and without effort. He was sincerely courteous, and capable of complaisance. The bright was felt through the four quarters, and reached to [Heaven] above and [Earth] beneath. He made the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of the nine classes of his kindred, who became harmonious.”⁹ “[Shun] carefully set forth the beauty of the five cardinal duties, and they came to be observed. Being appointed to be General Regulator, the affairs of every department were arranged in their proper seasons.”¹⁰ The concepts of unity between Heaven and Earth, the idea of harmony of social classes and, finally, the notion of five (not four, not six) cardinal duties are much more recent than the times Yao and Shun. Sima Qian follows this paradigmatic description, but he even goes further, comparing Yao and Shun with gods and claiming that knowledge and the practice of five social relationships became universal under their reign: “Emperor Yao was highly meritorious. His benevolence was like that of Heaven, and his wisdom that of a God [...]. Yao praised Shun and told him to carefully harmonize the five human relationships and when they could be obeyed. These became universal among the various officials [...] Shun raised the right virtuous ones to office, employing them to spread throughout the country a knowledge of the duties pertaining to the five social relationships.”¹¹

The idealization of the times of Yao and Shun is therefore even stronger, but Sima Qian insists on their historicity. To be sure, the concern is not whether the history related to *Shiji* is true, but whether Sima Qian makes such truth claims.¹² In this case, he referred to the methods he used in order to determine the story of Yao and Shun: “I have floated on rafts along the Yangtze and Huai rivers, and all the elders whom I met again and again talked of the places where the Yellow Emperor, Yao, and Shun dwelt.”¹³ Such justification actually magnifies the idealization of the times of Yao and Shun, arguing that this is not a idealization, but mere

9 *Shangshu* I, 1, 1.

10 *Shangshu* I, 2, 2.

11 *Shiji* I, 1, 11.14

12 Stephen Durrant, *Truth Claims in Shiji*. In: *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism and Ideology. Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. Jörn Rüsen et al., Brill, Leiden 2005, pp. 93–113.

13 *Shiji* I, 1, 28.

facts. Let me now show how Chinese philosophers dealt with this figure. In the end of this paper I will return to the issue of historical narration.

Tool of Rhetorical War

The purpose of philosophy is rather to explain the nature of the world and to put forward correct norms and justified values than to describe historical reality and pass it down to the next generations. As a result, the way Yao and Shun had been functioning in ancient Chinese philosophical literature is much more general than in case of *Shujing* or *Shiji*. The figure of Yao and Shun is not used anymore to tell us something about the Emperors themselves but to explain everything else: as a sort of ideal and practical pattern of conduct, they are brought into the process of justification of particular philosophical beliefs. The so-called *Confucian Dialogues* (論語, *Lúnyǔ*), which are not actually the work of Confucius (孔子, *Kǒngzǐ*, ca. 551–479 BC) himself but rather a varied and sometimes inconsistent work of later Confucians, edited by He Yan,¹⁴ contain many references to Yao and Shun. The literary figure of Yao and Shun is even used in order to make a rhetorical emphasis on the urgency of particular moral commandments: “Must he not have the qualities of a sage? Even Yao and Shun were still solicitous about this.”¹⁵ “He cultivates himself so as to give rest to all the people – even Yao and Shun were still solicitous about this”¹⁶. The authors of *Lunyu* had used this motif when they wanted to describe an ideal government. The moral pattern of an ideal rulership, fully convenient with the Confucian social ethics, was located in the times of Yao and Shun and embodied in their persons: “May not Shun be instanced as having governed efficiently without exertion (無為而治者, *wú wéi ér zhì zhě*)?”¹⁷ “Shun, being in possession of the kingdom, selected from among all the people, and employed Gao Tao, on which all who were devoid of virtue (不仁, *bùrén*) disappeared.”¹⁸ “Shun had five ministers and empire was well governed.”¹⁹ The last example is a very clear one: instead of saying that the ruler should not have

14 Józef Pawłowski, “Państwo” we wczesnej filozofii konfucjańskiej [“State” in the Early Confucian Philosophy]. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2010, p. 72.

15 *Lunyu* VI, 30. I am basing on the edition: *Lunyu-Mengzi-Laozi-Zhuangzi*, ed. Guo Qingcai 郭庆财, vol. I, Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, Tianjin 2005, pp. 3–181.

16 *Lunyu* XIV, 42.

17 *Lunyu* XV, 5.

18 *Lunyu* XII, 22.

19 *Lunyu* VIII, 20.

more than five ministers, because it is enough to govern well, we can read that Shun had five ministers. Trying to show Yao and Shun as an ideal of conduct and making politics, Confucians had to circumstantiate the distinguished position of those emperors. Linking the sphere of politics with its diachronic realization throughout the historical process, Confucian thinkers wanted to show Yao and Shun as executors of the plan of Heaven, 天 *Tiān*. Heaven cannot be misconceived and associated with Western notions of God, Absolute or Paradise (it is rather a Power of Nature). Notwithstanding, such a claim stressed their privileged status. If any ruler wanted to gain the Mandate of Heaven (天命, *Tiānmìng*), he had to follow Yao and Shun: “Great indeed was Yao as a sovereign! How majestic was he! It is only Heaven that is grand, and only Yao corresponded to it. How vast was his virtue! The people could find no name for it.”²⁰ “Oh! you, Shun, the Heaven-determined order of succession (天之曆數, *Tiān zhī lìshù*) now rests in your person. Sincerely hold fast the due Mean. If there shall be distress and want within the four seas, the Heavenly revenue will come to a perpetual end.”²¹ The last sentence is a kind of warning: in the case of Shun, there was no distress, but if a ruler is unable to follow Shun properly, Heaven will end his reign.

The great but not direct disciple of Kongzi, Mencius (孟子, *Mèngzǐ*, ca. 372–289 BC), also showed Yao and Shun as moral examples: “Mencius discoursed to him how the nature of man is good (性善, *xìng shàn*), and when speaking, always made laudatory reference to Yao and Shun.”²² The idea that human nature is primarily good is a theory of Mencius himself. The act of reference to Yao and Shun when delineating his own philosophy has to be considered as an intentional act of justifying the theory in a very normative sense. The remark that Mencius “always made laudatory references” to them, shows the range and importance of this figure. There is a plenty of examples. For instance, it is said that Shun shared another purely Mencian conception: “The great Shun had a still greater delight in what was good. He regarded virtue as the common property of the people (善與人同, *shàn yǔ rén tóng*).”²³ In the same way Mencius pointed out the rightness of his political theory: “He who does not serve his sovereign as Shun served Yao, does not respect his sovereign.”²⁴ Once again such a commandment takes the shape of rhetorical emphasis: “did it, because Yao and Shun have did it.”

20 *Lunyu* VIII, 19.

21 *Lunyu* XX, 1.

22 *Mencius* IIIA, 1. I am basing on the edition: Guo, op. cit., pp. 185–430.

23 *Mencius* IIA, 8.

24 *Mencius* IVA, 2.

Not surprisingly, Mencius also idealized the times of Yao and Shun. Their era has been described as a golden age, not only from the perspective of the people, but also from the point of view of the nature: “In the time of Yao vegetation was luxuriant, birds and beasts swarmed.”²⁵ One of the most popular Confucian beliefs was that after the golden age or since the collapse of Zhou sovereignty, traditional values are not respected and moral principles which guarantee the harmony between Heaven, Earth and man are no longer in use. This highly conservative attitude to history and respectively big dose of criticism of contemporary culture made the pattern of Yao and Shun even more ideal: “After the death of Yao and Shun, the principles of the sages (聖人之道, *shèngrén zhī dào*) fell into decay.”²⁶

But Confucians are to some extent inconsistent with this view. If conduct of Yao and Shun can never be practiced in their manner and if only because of living generations after the golden age we are not able to grasp their sense of morality, why even try to do it? Are not they ideal rulers? If it is so, maybe it is better to find new ways of conduct, matched up to our times, just like the Legalists (法家, *Fǎjiā*) claim? But Mencius did not agree with this Legalist statement at all: they are ideal not because their pattern could not be reached, but because this pattern of conduct should be followed by all people in all times: “Shun became an example to all the kingdom and his conduct was worthy to be handed down to after ages.”²⁷ As a result, Mencius held the Confucian view on Yao-Shun’s place in the plans of the Heaven, developing the theory of legitimization of power – if being like Yao and Shun means being convenient with Heaven’s demands, it is the only way to legitimize the reign: “Wan Zhang said, ‘Was it the case that Yao gave the throne to Shun?’ Mencius said, ‘No. The sovereign cannot give the throne to another.’ ‘Yes – but Shun had the throne. Who gave it to him?’ ‘Heaven gave it to him’, was the answer. ‘Heaven gave it to him – did Heaven confer its appointment on him with specific injunctions?’ [...] Mencius’s answer was, ‘The sovereign can present a man to Heaven, but he cannot make Heaven give that man the throne [...] Yao presented Shun to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him. He presented him to the people, and the people accepted him. Therefore I say, Heaven does not speak. It simply indicated Its will by his personal conduct and the conduct of affairs.’”²⁸

In the case of the work of Xunzi (荀子, *Xúnzǐ*, ca. 298–238 BC), who was the main opponent of Mencius within the limits of Confucianism itself, references to Yao and Shun are really rare. Moreover, Yao and Shun are mentioned together

25 *Mencius* IIIA, 1.

26 *Mencius* IIIB, 14.

27 *Mencius* IVB, 56.

28 *Mencius* VA, 5.

with Yu the Great and Xunzi prefers abstractive notion of former kings (先王, *xiānwáng*) than particular examples. What is more, he explicitly denies metaphysical aspects of their reign: “Heaven’s ways are constant. It did not prevail due to the Emperor Yao, it does not perish due to the Emperor Jie.”²⁹

One of the most interesting issues concerning the use of the Yao-Shun figure is that not only Confucians, but also Daoists (道家, *Dàojiā*) had been referring to their examples. As a quite opposite philosophical school, Daoism did not do it to reconcile with Confucians but, reversely, to use this figure in order to criticize their views or even to profane this ideal. The most polemical Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi (庄子, *Zhuāngzǐ*, ca. 370–287 BC) often put his own beliefs into the mouths of Yao and Shun, just like Confucians: “Yao replied: Many sons bring many fears, riches bring many troubles and long life gives rise to many obloquies. These three things do not help to nourish virtue and therefore I wish to decline them.”³⁰

Obviously, there is no Confucian philosopher who would be willing to decline the ideal of having many sons, who following the norm of filial piety would guarantee the harmony of family and, as a result, form the basis of social harmony (and social hierarchy). Zhuangzi continues his way of using this figure, attributing the idea of “non-action” (無為, *wúwèi*) to Yao and Shun: “Shun replied: When (a sovereign) possesses the virtue of Heaven, then when he shows himself in action, it is in stillness.”³¹ According to Zhuangzi, the Emperors Yao and Shun, instead of founding social institutions and rituals, did nothing but imitated the Way, 道 *Dào*: they did not look for the needs of the society but rather concentrate on their own self-realization: “Shun asked Cheng, saying: Can I get the Dao and hold it as mine?”³²

Because Dao is universal and can be obtained by all people, there is no difference between the so-called “common people” and Yao and Shun. There are also many sentences, in which Zhuangzi shows that younger Shun was wiser than Yao or both of them found other people wiser: “Xu You refuses to receive the throne from Yao, despite the fact that Yao is begging him to do so.”³³ “Shun teaches Yao

29 Xunzi XXVII, 1. I am basing on: *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, ed. John Knoblock, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1988.

30 *Zhuangzi* XII, 6. I am basing on the edition: *Lunyu-Mengzi-Laozi-Zhuangzi*, ed. Guo Qingcai, vol. II, Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, Tianjin 2005, pp. 495–791.

31 *Zhuangzi* XIII, 5.

32 *Zhuangzi* XXII, 4.

33 *Zhuangzi* I, 4.

that people will never rule better than nature.”³⁴ The idea that legendary Yao wanted to give his throne to rather unknown Xu You and that both Yao and Shun did not want to establish rituals, thanks to which there is a difference between human culture and nature, seems blasphemous to Confucians. Zhuangzi sometimes claims that Yao and Shun were misguided because they followed the Confucian ethics: “Yao has become so bent on his benevolence (仁, *rén*) that I am afraid the world will laugh at him.”³⁵

Although Zhuangzi’s line of polemics is really sharp, he did not want to derate the value of their wisdom and morality in order to disprove Confucianism, but rather tried to show that every kind of elitism, implying that some people have to follow the conduct of other people and to obey the laws of the ruler, is unacceptable: “Yao and Shun acted thus – how much more the people of Wei do so!”³⁶ “If we say that all men may be Yaos, is this allowable? Huizi replied: It is.”³⁷ Taking all those differences into account, we have to note that both Confucians and Daoists used the figure of Yao and Shun in quite similar ways:

Confucianism	Daoism	Both
Unapproachable ideal of moral and political conduct	Nothing but people	Moral examples
Executors of Heavenly mission (<i>except of Xunzi</i>)	Imitators of the Way	Used as figures evoking one’s own philosophy

Showing common features of the Yao-Shun figure, we finally get to the moment when we have to combine philosophical description with the one coming from historical chronicles and to interpret this motif using the most accurate tools.

From Comedy to Satire

The use of the Yao-Shun figure in Classical Chinese historiography showed that we cannot look at those Emperors through the prism of simple description (or even reconstruction) of historical facts, since the normative and metaphysical dimension of their reign is stressed to the utmost extent. The border between the historical narration and literary tools has disappeared. If we realize that Yao and Shun had been functioning as a rhetorical tool of the philosophical war between

34 *Zhuangzi* II, 10.

35 *Zhuangzi* XXIV, 12.

36 *Zhuangzi* XXIII, 2.

37 *Zhuangzi* XXIV, 5.

two main Chinese philosophical schools, that they were used to evoke particular and undoubtedly later concepts, we can see that the Yao-Shun narration was constructed in a quite strict manner, that it has some narrative structure, which serves as a key to understand Chinese historical imagination that created the story. For those reasons, I claim that the most accurate tool for interpreting this motif is White's historical narrativism. In his famous *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Hayden White presented a systematic theory of historical narration, claiming that people create stories using particular types of tropes, emplotments, modes, arguments and ideologies in order to fabularize events.³⁸ There is no place to describe White's narrativism in a more detailed manner, since the theory itself is well-known, mainly for initiating the so-called "narrativist turn". Therefore, let me apply this framework to the motif of Yao and Shun in ancient Chinese literature.

We have to match the Confucian and Daoist uses of this motif with a particular kind of literary trope, then link it with other categories just like they are linked together in White's narrativism, and finally apply those sorts of emplotment, mode, argument and ideology to our case. If we follow these rules, our reading should look as in the table below.

Yao & Shun in	Trope	Emplotment	Mode	Argument	Ideology
Confucianism	Synecdoche	Comedy	Integrative	Organicist	Conservative
Daoism	Irony	Satire	Negational	Contextualist	Liberal

White defines synecdoche and irony quite intuitively: "With Synecdoche, which is regarded by some theorists as a form of Metonymy, a phenomenon can be characterized by using the part to symbolize some quality presumed to inhere in the totality [...] Through Irony, finally, entities can be characterized by way of negating on the figurative level what is positively affirmed on the literal level."³⁹ Yao and Shun are used by Confucians as a sort of synecdoche, namely: as ideal rulers, they embody the ideal state and, finally, harmonious society living in convenience with the Confucian ethics. Zhuangzi used the Yao-Shun figure ironically: although on the literary level they were used to "justify" the Daoist beliefs, it is clear that Daoism did not need such a justification and rather derided the fact that Confucians always mention Yao and Shun in their discourse.

38 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore 1973.

39 Ibid., p. 34.

In the case of Comedy, one wants to give a definitive resolution of all apparently tragic conflicts, showing that the conflict between the individual and the society, the society and nature is not actually something we cannot overcome. It is clear that the Confucian narration of Yao and Shun is a Comic one: there is no conflict between individual (Yao and Shun) and social institutions they have established, there is no conflict between them and Heaven who fully accepts them and “promises” to protect them against all natural calamities if only they will obey Its rules. Satire, in turn, recognizes that the specific established truths are ambiguous and taught no general truths at all, it could be named “aesthetic counterpart of a specifically skeptical conception of knowledge and its possibilities.”⁴⁰ Zhuangzi who is usually called a “skeptical” or “relativist” thinker⁴¹ fits within this description. He doubts whether it is really possible to be such an ideal ruler as Yao and Shun and finally claims that they were nothing but human. As a result, their truths are not any truths but particular norms, such as benevolence or respect for elder people, which are ambiguous and do not have to be followed.

Synecdoche is integrative, which is why the Confucian narration is also integrative: it shows the unity between man, nature and society by means of describing ideal people (Yao and Shun) who had lived in the times this perfect harmony was preserved. It is also clear that Zhuangzi used the negational mode of characterizing Yao and Shun, signaling in advance a real disbelief in the truth of his own statements. Respectively, Confucianism represents Organicism kind of argument, defending the idea of the ideal human community. Confucians had denied purely causal (i.e. Mechanicist) type of argument, claiming that the story of Yao and Shun as such could serve as a moral norm: even for Confucian historians, evaluation was an intrinsic part of the proper narration rather than additive commentary to history. Zhuangzi’s argument is contextualist, which means that “explanation of historical events is provided when the various strands that make up the tapestry of a historical era are discriminated.”⁴² It is important to note that Zhuangzi introduces many interlocutors who characterize Yao and Shun from different points of view: apart from legendary emperors there are such persons as Xu You or Cheng (who are ministers), Confucius or Huizi (who are philosophers) or common people (that from the Wei country or all people, f. ex. those “laughing at Yao”).

Last but not least, ideologies which were evoked through the story of Yao and Shun (constructed in this particular way) are just the same ideology White’s

40 Ibid., p. 28.

41 Paul Kjellberg & Peter Ivanhoe, *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, SUNY Press, New York 196.

42 White, op. cit., p. 262.

narrativism assumes they have to be linked with mentioned tropes, modes, etc.: Conservatism and Liberalism. We have already described the Confucian attitude to history as “conservative”, since Confucians tried to persuade us that Yao and Shun are the only pattern of conduct which is worthy to be followed throughout next ages. The Daoist ideology is liberal, if not anarchist. The famous ideas of “non-action” of the ruler (who rules the country in such a way its civilians do not know there is any ruler) are also present in this case: because Yao and Shun only imitated the Way, that is the only method of government: letting things happen according to their nature.

Summing up, we can see that the motif of legendary emperors Yao and Shun was not one among other common literary motives, but had a great philosophical importance and probably even greater historical impact. Even in the nineteenth century this motif was still vivid, a fact which had been noticed by one of the greatest Sinologist of all times, James Legge, in his groundbreaking work *The Religions of China*: “A very intelligent Chinese gentleman, now in Europe, said to me, not very long ago: We have nothing in China the roots of which are not to be found in the Canons of Yao and Shun.”⁴³

43 James Legge, *The Religions of China: Confucianism and Taoism described and compared with Christianity*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1880, p. 24.