A critique of Pine's construction theory of "Shanrang" in the Zhan Guo period from a historical writing perspective

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Abstract

Yuri Pines once proposed that shanrang (abdication) was a construction of the Zhanguo (Warring States) period, about 475 BCE to 221 BCE, and regarded shanrang as the historical invention of political thinkers of that era, especially equalitarians, rather than existing as a system in history. This article attempts to reexamine this viewpoint by existing literature in relevant fields (whether traditional Chinese books or the literature), and combining concepts, theories, and methods of history writing to comprehensively scrutinize the shanrang narrative in traditional Chinese history books, to discern whether and how shanrang should exist in history. After pinpointing shanrang's place in history as an historical process, Pines' theory was critically evaluated. The validation of this approach innovates in discussing ancient Chinese systems while revealing limitations in the shanrang construction theory during the Zhanguo period. These include an innately negative attitude about the existence of the shanrang system, and theoretical issues requiring attention that should inspire innovative thematic study of sinology.

Keywords: Yuri Pines, Shanrang system, Zhanguo period, History writing

1. Introduction

Renowned Israeli Sinologist Yuri Pines, in his article "Disputers of Abdication: Zhan Guo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign's Power," argues that the concept of Shanrang (禪讓, 'abdication') was a construct of the Zhan Guo Period (戰國, Warring States Period, BC476-221). (Pines, 2005, pp. 243-300) Pines' analysis is grounded in a wealth of research, including the intellectual history of the Zhan Guo era, scholarly literature on Chinese historical writing, and unearthed texts from the period. He posits that the Shanrang system was not a feature of the pre-dynastic historical record in China. Instead, Pines suggests that political debaters of the Zhan Guo Period utilized the narrative of Shanrang to articulate and legitimize their egalitarian ideologies. This historical construction, he argues, was a means for these theorists to indirectly influence the politics of their time.

Pines' theory has prompted scholars of Chinese history to critically reassess the historical narratives crafted by scribes of the Zhan Guo Period and to scrutinize the underlying historical concepts. Most importantly, it has instigated a reevaluation of the veracity of the Shanrang practice, compelling researchers to question the legitimacy of political systems and the reliability of historical accounts that precede the establishment of Chinese dynasties.

The concept in question, namely Shanrang, specifically denotes a political system predating the establishment of Chinese dynasties. Within this system, the reigning monarch voluntarily cedes power, peacefully transferring authority and status to a worthy successor. Traditional narratives depict the successor as one who ascends not through bloodline but by merit, having earned the favor of the reigning monarch and thereby securing a peaceful transition of power and status. Typically, such transfers occur when the incumbent is advanced in age or in declining health. This system has been lauded by subsequent Chinese scholars as an exemplar of virtuous governance. It also embodies the aspirations for stable political power and social harmony, which have become integral to the foundation of Chinese political philosophy.

Revisiting the discussion of this theory, all historical theories must adhere to a fundamental characteristic of historical scholarship—concordance with historical facts. This article reassesses the plausibility of the theory through textual analysis of historical evidence. The most critical aspect is to scrutinize the theory's underlying issues from the perspectives of historical thought, theory, and methodology. Michel de Certeau, a renowned French historian and a leading figure of the Annales School, explores the intricacies of historical writing in his book "L'Écriture de l'Histoire." He challenges traditional, mainstream, and static historical narratives from the vantage

point of historiography. In this work, Certeau delves into the subjectivity inherent in the historical process, suggesting that literary narratives and historical events may undergo distortion due to the historians' own subjectivity, which is intertwined with the complex dynamics of power, meaning, and historical practice. This implies that history is not merely an objective and singular factual record but also a form of individualized existence. Individualization here pertains to the personal interpretation of historical facts, entailing the construction and understanding of objective history through one's unique viewpoints, experiences, and thought processes. This reconstruction of history is connected to "La Pragmatique du quotidien" (everyday practice), where individuals can resist, adapt to, and reinterpret complex social structures through their everyday actions.

This article critiques the theory through a systematic process. Initially, it examines the actual occurrences and nature of Shanrang as documented in traditional Chinese classics and the scholarly works of predecessors. Subsequently, it undertakes a comprehensive and detailed discussion of the Shanrang narrative from the vantage point of historiography. Concurrently, the article re-evaluates the theory itself. Building on this foundation, the article presents a nuanced critique: it acknowledges the theory's originality and value while also offering critical perspectives.

2. Disputes over the Shanrang

2.1 Disputes over the Shanrang in traditional Chinese classics

In traditional Chinese classics, including unearthed literature, there are two principal types of controversies surrounding the concept of Shanrang: the first pertains to the very existence of Shanrang; the second concerns the specifics of its practice, assuming its historical reality is acknowledged.

The discourse on the Shanrang in the Zhan Guo period is marked by two distinct and opposing views, as reflected in the historical records of "Shiji" (史記, The Grand Scribe's Records) and "Zhu Jinian" (竹書紀年, Bamboo Annals). The former text posits the Shanrang as an authentic historical phenomenon, while the latter casts it as a purely fictional creation. A central point of contention is the succession narrative of Shun (舜), with divergent accounts detailing both voluntary abdication and usurpation. The historical record that supports the narrative of peaceful abdication includes the anecdotes of "Yao (wants to) give up the world to Xu You" (堯讓天下於許由) (Wang, 1987, p. 4) and "Xu You rejected the world" (許由讓天下)

(Han, 460). In opposition, the records that suggest a power struggle are found in statements such as "In the past, Yao's rule declined, and Shun imprisoned him" (昔堯德衰，為舜所囚也) (Fang & Wang, 1981, p. 63) and "(Shun replacing Yao) is a usurper, not bestowed by heaven (based on virtue)" (是篡也，非天與也) (Mencius, 2017, p. 206).

These conflicting historical records coincide with and emerge from the Zhan Guo period. Prior to this era, traditional Chinese classics hint at political traditions reminiscent of the Shanrang system, albeit with uncertain authenticity. A representative pre-Zhan Guo period account of a Shanrang-like event is found in the "Yaoyue" (堯曰, Yao said) chapter of "Lunyu" (論語, The Analects of Confucius), which records the words attributed to Yao (堯) in a story that later influenced the instructions given to Yu (禹). This passage is indicative of a political cultural tradition conducive to the context of Shanrang. Additionally, the political and cultural traditions of "Erwangsanke" (二王三恪, The system of venerating the families of previous supreme rulers), foundational to the Zhou Dynasty's enfeoffment system before the establishment of Chinese dynastic history, substantiate the historical validity of such events. In contrast, dissenting voices, such as the negation of Shanrang in "Shanhaijing" (山海經, the Classic of Mountains and Seas) which regards Shun's son Danzhu (丹朱) as Di (帝, Supreme ruler) contrary to other literature, are less prevalent (Hao, 1881, 3b).

Beyond the debate on the existence of Shanrang, there is further controversy surrounding the specifics of its historical narrative, assuming Shanrang to be a real historical phenomenon. The Zhan Guo period's recognition of Shanrang as a genuine historical event is marked by clear discrepancies in the details of its accounts. Notably, significant differences exist between the unearthed documents and the transmitted texts regarding the title of Shanrang and its associated remuneration. The unearthed literature from the Zhan Guo period credits the emergence of Shanrang to the achievements of a Shengwang (聖王, a ruler with the characteristics of a saint)—a ruler embodying saintly qualities—and attempts to trace its origins. In contrast, the biographical literature of the same period does not explore its connection to Shanrang, focusing instead on the concept of talent selection and merit-based promotion (Lin, 2016, pp. 80-96). This divergence in historical records is evidently due to the underdevelopment of historical recording practices, resulting in incomplete data. In the absence of comprehensive records, understanding the workings or existence of the system has become a subject of considerable debate.

The ongoing controversy is clearly rooted in the underdeveloped historical recording practices of the past, resulting in incomplete data. Without comprehensive records, the functioning

and existence of the Shanrang system have become topics of significant debate. From a historiographical standpoint, Michel de Certeau suggests that the 'other side' of history emerges from cultural faults (Certeau, 2012, p. 191). However, the continuous thread of Chinese civilization makes such a speculative approach unreasonable, necessitating alternative theories to explain the occurrence of these cultural faults. Dutch historian Franklin Rudolf Ankersmit, renowned for his work on narrative logic, has posited that noble historical experiences are often marked by fractures (Zhang, 2011, pp. 19-22). The historical experience of Shanrang is intimately connected with exalted notions such as ritual, myth, identity, and national ethics. It might represent another kind of fault, akin to what Gaston Bachelard refers to as "Failles épistémologiques" (Epistemological Faults). This epistemological divergence is evidenced by the intriguing phenomenon that historical records related to Shanrang have progressively become more detailed over time.

2.2 Disputes over the Shanrang in Previous research

The notion that Shanrang is a historical fiction is not originally attributed to Pines. The Chinese historian Gu Jiegang (顾颉刚) once suggested that the concept of Shanrang emanated from the Mohist school during the Zhan Guo period and was extensively utilized in scholarly debates. (Gu, 1982, pp. 30-116) The discourse on the historical authenticity of Shanrang remains contentious among contemporary historians. These divergent perspectives can be broadly categorized into three schools of thought: the fictional, the factual, and the reconciliatory. The first viewpoint, shared by Pines and Gu Jiegang, as well as Ye Shuxian (叶舒宪), posits that Shanrang is a political myth of Confucianism, with Ye Shuxian being the proponent of this stance. (Ye, 2016, pp. 37-47) Xu Zhongshu (徐中舒) represents the second perspective, substantiating the existence of Shanrang through ethnographic research. (Xu, 1958, pp. 115-128) The third approach reconciles the first two, attempting to mediate their differences. A case in point is the American scholar Sarah Allan, who, from a structuralist perspective, has proposed that a period of coexistence between abdication and hereditary succession preceded the history of Chinese dynasties. (Allan, 2015, p. 25)

3. Shanrang: analysis based on history writing

3.1 The positioning of the Shanrang narrative

Historical narration is inherently a representational act, and historiography, by its nature, cannot escape the linguistic constraints inherent in the description and interpretation of its

subject matter. Scholars such as Barthes and Munslow have highlighted these limitations in their works (Barthes, 1988, pp. 48-62; Munslow, 1947, pp. 18-19). The debate over the Shanrang system in the literature of the Zhan Guo period reveals that the historical accounts of Shanrang are, in fact, veiled statements. These narratives serve didactic purposes and act as a form of camouflage. The profound implications of this discourse, embodying the principle of "Weiyandayi" (微言大義, small words with deep meaning), can be discerned through the lens of historical linguistics. In pre-Qin and Qin-Han era texts, the term "Shanrang" is understood to have dual symbolism—representing both a political act and a moral concept (Yang, 2005, pp. 9-13). Collectively, these narratives construct a historical account of Shanrang that is intimately connected to the power structures of the time, reflecting an episteme shaped by epistemological fractures.

As previously discussed, the widespread discourse on Shanrang, particularly the prevalence of debate in historical narration, was a form of collective consciousness characteristic of the Zhan Guo period. Jacques Berque suggests that collective concepts often arise from responses to historical transformations (Berque, 1972, pp. 3-26). This implies that for a more profound understanding, it is essential to delve deeper into the historical context of that era.

3.2 Discussion: the historical background

The narrative of Shanrang, as previously discussed, is positioned as an epic closely intertwined with power. This positioning is examined through its historical backdrop, which is connected to two significant social and political historical currents of the time: the emergence and spread of the virtuous advocacy concept, and the ongoing consolidation of monarchical power. Documents such as "Chunqiu dashi biao" (春秋大势表, The General Situation Table in Spring and Autumn era), "Chu lingyin biao" (楚令尹表, The Table of The Lingyin of the Chu), "Song zhizheng biao" (宋执政表, The Table of The Zhizheng of the Song), and "Zheng zhizheng biao" (郑执政表, The Table of The Zhizheng of the Zheng) record instances where, upon a position becoming vacant, a nobleman would take over instead of his son. Cho-yun Hsu (许倬云) commented on this phenomenon, noting that the disappearance of the Shiqin (世卿, Hereditary nobility) during the Spring and Autumn Period signifies a reordering of the social class structure, which in turn implies an increase in class mobility (Xu, 1963, p. 566). This enhanced social mobility fostered the idea of advocating for capable individuals within society. The unearthed documents of "Zigao," (子羔) "Tangyu zhi dao," (唐虞之道) and "Rongchengshi" (容成氏) reflect Shanrang as

an embodiment of this ideology (Wang, 2016, p. 88). However, the historical context for the rise of Shanrang is even more complex, also stemming from its own historical origins.

Another historical trend was the strengthening of monarchical power, leading to a transformation in the role of state monarchs. Unlike the monarchs of the Spring and Autumn Period, who were described as "Politics is handled by Ningxi, and the ritualism is preferred over by me" (政由寧氏，祭則寡人), those in the Zhan Guo period possessed authority that shifted from hierarchical to absolute, prompting monarchs to pursue personal and familial interests (Lei, 1934, pp. 853-871). This historical trend was echoed by numerous commentators, such as the assertion that "The monarch is the noblest person in the country" (君者，國之隆也) (Xun, 1922, p. 14b) and the principle that "Ministers serve the monarch...Following this principle, the world enjoys times of peace and prosperity" (臣事君 順則天下治) (Han, 2018, p. 459).

Moreover, the phenomenon of fictional historical records was prevalent in the culture of that era. These fictions were not only pervasive in textual discourse but also manifested in the creation of apocryphal classics. For instance, "Yaodian" (堯典, Notes on the Deeds of Yao and Shun) within "Shangshu" (尚書, The Book of Documents) is believed to have been composed during the middle to late Warring States period (Chen, 2001, pp. 152-163). The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga posits that historiography serves as a cultural expression of a society's consciousness of its past (Krul, 1995, p. 284). From this perspective, the Shanrang history constructed by the politicians of the Warring States period can be seen as a cultural expression in itself, encapsulating the objectives of the political thinkers of that time. As Steven G. Crowell notes, historical narratives often have cognitive and normative dimensions (Crowell, 1998, pp. 220-244). Thus, the narrative of Shanrang should be understood not merely as a chronicle of actual events but as a narrative crafted to convey certain historical insights or to establish specific norms. The intent behind this fiction is clearly to employ 'Tuogugaizhi' (托古改制, Using history to reform existing systems), as Pines has argued in the context of political debate. Lv Simian (吕思勉) refers to all texts engaged in political discourse as allegorical literature rather than sources of historical information (Lv, 2020, p. 87). While this view may be seen as extreme, it significantly highlights the prevalence of historical fiction at the time and substantiates the role of fiction within Pines' theoretical framework.

Understanding the historical social and political currents and the cultural fictions of the time allows us to delve deeper into the historical context. A critical question arises: What drives the political transformation of reality through the fabrication of history? In the annals

of Chinese political thought, there is a notable phenomenon—Chinese political thinkers propose ideals rather than mere theories, aiming to construct an ideal political form. This strong purposiveness in their discourse aims to establish the so-called norms of reality as the ideal political form (Aleksandr, 1987, pp. 10-57). This ideal political form is often envisioned as a utopia of absolute monarchy. However, from a practical standpoint, absolute monarchy invariably faces a challenge: the unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the reality of monarchical rule (Zhang, 2004, pp. 624-721).

In the context of the strengthening of monarchical power at the time, discussions about ideal politics, particularly hereditary monarchy, became a sensitive subject. To circumvent the politically sensitive issue of hereditary monarchy, the advocacy of the historical concept of monarchical abdication, or Shanrang, and its associated events, served as a subtle entry point into broader political discourse (Graham, 1989, p. 293). From this vantage point, in conjunction with the previous discussion on the narrative of Shanrang, it can be deduced that the historical narrative of Shanrang is, in fact, a form of political argot, reflecting discontent with the actual state of monarchy. Historical practice shows that the concept of bloodline inheritance, as advocated by actual monarchies, often conflicts with the principle of honoring the virtuous.

Thus, the motivation behind the Shanrang concept is to idealize and reform the system through the crafting of historical narratives, aiming to realize the principle of honoring the virtuous within the framework of the system. From a historiographical perspective, how did political thinkers of the Warring States period convey this metaphorical purpose through their narratives on Shanrang? This question merits further exploration.

3.3 The narrative construction of Shanrang in the Zhan Guo period

Essentially, the narrative construction of Shanrang during the Zhan Guo period involves political thinkers endowing historical data with symbolic meanings, thereby creating a narrative that serves as an allegory for an ideal political order. The question arises: how did these thinkers transform raw historical data into a narrative with metaphorical significance that could be considered an experimental experience of an ideal polity? They achieved this by leveraging the selective affinity of language, constructing heterogeneity within the homogeneity of linguistic codes, and overlaying the original historical scenes with more realistic interpretations. In doing so, they utilized the narrative constructed by these symbolic codes to deliver a metaphorically

charged historical summary and critique. This approach aimed to fragment and re-envision the existing state of affairs in line with their political objectives.

However, this method of construction implies that there were inherent issues within the constructed narratives, leading to further questions: how did the political thinkers of the Zhan Guo period address these narrative challenges? In essence, they sought to fulfill certain political aims through historical practice. From a historiographical standpoint, the rationalization of historical interpretation and the allure of historical storytelling enabled a metaphorical narration of power strategies that corresponded to contemporary realities (Ni, 2012, pp. 13-14).

3.4 Build the problems and coping methods

The previous discussion highlighted the construction of the Shanrang narrative during the Zhan Guo period and the challenges inherent in this process. The most evident issue is the verification of this narrative against historical rationality and the historical records available at the time. Political thinkers of the Zhan Guo period crafted narratives replete with imaginative and fictitious elements, creating symbolic figures such as the lives of sages. In this worldview, the space for literal expression was upended by the power of imagination, while the veracity of the original historical events was obscured by dramatic storytelling. The seemingly divine realm of meaning is, in fact, founded on linguistic manipulation, and its narrative is ensnared in a paradox akin to "The Bed of Procrustes." These thinkers indeed acquired the authority to assess historical materials and to infer Realpolitik by reinterpreting the coherent significance of facts. However, this narrative, caught in the Procrustean dilemma, grappled with the challenge of reconciling truth and fiction—essentially, the "Scylla" and "vortex of Kharybdis/Charybdis" of narrative content. Such a predicament complicates the narrative's ability to withstand the scrutiny of historical rationality and the historical records of the era.

Political thinkers of the Zhan Guo period addressed the challenge of aligning their narratives with historical rationality and the historical records of the time through a grid of metaphorical meanings. This methodological framework gave rise to the formal content found in the discourse on Shanrang. To ensure the authenticity of their historical narratives, these thinkers relied on third-party references within contemporary historical records. Essentially, their task was to artistically process the objectively given historical subjects and to elaborate on the historical facts related to the Shanrang system as a series of comprehensive concepts.

These concepts were then scrutinized by historians of the time from an Olympian perspective. Within the metahistoriographical framework, the metaphorical meaning can be regarded as a hypothesis about historical reality (White, 1973). From the standpoint of historical data analysis, Shanrang can be characterized as a phenomenon within historical literature. Historical phenomena are, in fact, the outcomes of historical interpretation, where the subject of interpretation is the struggle and transfer of power (Ankersmit, 1983, pp. 88-89; Huang, 2011). This implies that the metaphorical meaning of the Shanrang system for the political thinkers of the Zhan Guo period is fundamentally a hypothesis or an interpretation of history, not a mere statement of historical facts. It skillfully balances the elements of reality and fiction, thus navigating away from the dilemma of "The Bed of Procrustes."

4 Critique of Pines' theory

4.1 Summary before criticism

Before delving into a critique of Pines' theory of Shanrang in the Zhan Guo period, it is essential to recapitulate the preceding discussion, which sets the stage for the forthcoming critical analysis. The previous content has elucidated that, from a historiographical standpoint, Pines' conception of Shanrang as a constructed theory can be encapsulated as follows: political thinkers of the Zhan Guo period endeavored to reconstruct history through texts imbued with teleological overtones, employing this reconstructed narrative as a vehicle for an ideal political metaphor. In Pines' own words, these thinkers sought to legitimize political theory by reconstructing history to build or dismantle counter-narratives that served their purposes (Pines, 2004, pp. 197-226).

4.2 Affirmation part of its doctrine and its value

I believe that Pines' discussion on the construction of Shanrang during the Zhan Guo period is indeed insightful, a viewpoint that finds support in the previous article. Consequently, this theory holds substantial significance for the study of the intellectual history of the Zhan Guo period and Shanrang itself, offering at the very least a novel perspective on the debate surrounding the existence of Shanrang. This significance extends well beyond merely discussing Shanrang and its system; it also paves the way for integrating concepts, methodologies, and theories from Western postmodern historiography into certain sinological studies. For instance, this article adopts a historiographical perspective to explore Shanrang and its system and critiques Pines' theory on that foundation.

Revisiting the discussion of this possibility, Pines' discourse can indeed stimulate thematic research within Sinology, much like the present article, which applies concepts, methodologies, and theories from postmodern historiography to rethink these thematic studies. It is worth considering whether these postmodern historiographical tools, when used for re-examining research and drawing conclusions, can play a distinctive role. The thematic study of Sinology addressed in this article encompasses, but is not limited to, the investigation of traditional Chinese systems, the history writing within traditional Chinese historiography, narrative and rhetoric in the history of Chinese thought, and the authenticity of systems within Chinese historical accounts.

4.3 Critique of its attitude towards comprehensive negation of existence

Pines' construction theory of Shanrang during the Zhan Guo period may have overlooked the potential historical validity of Shanrang and certain elements of its narrative. In the realm of Chinese mythology, which predates the formal history of Chinese dynasties and is characterized by myths and stories with mythological attributes, there exists a pertinent investigation into the historical substance within these myths. A quintessential case in point is Chang Xiaobing's (常晓彬) historical examination of ancient Chinese myths, including the flood narrative from the era of Yao. It is undeniable that Pines' theory tends toward an extreme negation of the actual historical existence of Shanrang (Chang, 2015, pp. 61-67).

Chris Lorenz posits that the binary logic of 'either/or' is primarily evident in metaphorical narrative analysis, which can be either an artifact of Positivist research or a construct of literary imagination (Lorenz, 1998, pp. 309-329). Pines' theory indeed interprets the political narratives of the Zhan Guo period regarding Shanrang as metaphorical. However, it does not employ Positivism, largely due to an absence of positivistic evidence, that is, historical data, which inevitably renders it a product of sheer literary imagination. As previously emphasized, from the vantage point of history writing, the political discourse-makers of the Zhan Guo period were more engaged in interpreting historical facts than merely presenting them, thus maintaining a subtle and effective equilibrium between creating and recounting history. Consequently, the notion that Shanrang might be a narrative born of misinformation warrants skepticism. From this perspective, Pines' construction theory of Shanrang for the Zhan Guo period exhibits limitations, particularly in its extremely negative stance.

4.4 Critique of its limitations: from the perspective of the authenticity of the existing historical materials

In contrast to some of the earlier criticisms, a more significant issue is that the contradictory objective situations documented in the literature pertaining to the Zhan Guo period as historical materials are not adequately addressed by Pines' construction theory of Shanrang for that era. The primary concern is that this theory fails to account for the historical records of Shanrang and analogous contentious circumstances that emerged prior to the Zhan Guo period, as previously mentioned (even if they were not as pronounced). Furthermore, regarding the actual existence of Shanrang, Pines' Zhan Guo period construction theory of Shanrang only examines the historical writings of the period's political thinkers as historical chroniclers. When it comes to the authenticity of the historical data on Shanrang, this theory falls short of providing a comprehensive explanation. This situation underscores the limitations or imperfections in Pines' construction theory of Shanrang for the Zhan Guo period, indicating a need for refinement or correction.

5. Conclusion

This article revisits the narrative of Shanrang through the lens of historiography, conducting a thorough exploration of existing literature. Building on this foundation, it subjects Yuri Pines' construction theory of Shanrang for the Zhan Guo period to renewed scrutiny. This critical examination of the theory yields a dual assessment: while the theory's innovativeness and value are acknowledged, particularly its challenge to certain entrenched myths within historical records, there are notable shortcomings that cannot be overlooked. These include an overly dismissive stance towards the historical existence of Shanrang and a neglect of pertinent historical materials. This dismissive stance likely stems from a lack of profound understanding of the objectives, strategies, and methodologies employed by political thinkers of the Zhan Guo era who leveraged the concept of Shanrang—a perspective this article seeks to address through historiographical analysis. Concurrently, it demonstrates the flawed understanding of Shanrang that Pines held at the time.

Acknowledgement

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