IN SEARCH OF THE SHU KINGDOM: 
ANCIENT LEGENDS AND 
NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES 
IN SICHUAN 

BY 

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Abstract 

Legendary accounts on the ancient history of Sichuan are reevaluated in the light of recent archaeological discoveries. The transmitted texts allow distinguishing two different strains of such accounts, one that emphasizes indigenous lore, and another that integrates it into the master narrative of Chinese civilization. The archaeological materials suggest that both may reflect some elements of historical reality. The author makes a preliminary attempt to coordinate specific archaeological finds with each of the five major rulers or ruling groups of ancient Shu. Rather than being successive dynasties, these may have inhabited western Sichuan simultaneously, taking turns in unifying the area under their rule.

Two legendary traditions 

The rich lore of legends and myths concerning the ancient history of Sichuan, transmitted since the Warring States period and especially since the Han 漢 dynasty, is so divergent that it has given rise to much controversy. In my opinion, however, we can divide the extant legends into two basic types. One of them is indigenous to the area of the ancient state of Shu 蜀 and was compiled into the Shu wang benji 蜀王本纪 (Basic Annals of the Shu Kings)1 by Yang Xiong 楊雄 (53 BC–AD 18) (or by Qiao Zhou 諡周 [AD 200–270], according to Xu Zhongshu’s 徐中舒 theory), who had collected the regional folklore (Meng Wentong 1981: 35–49; Zheng Dekun 1946: 15; Xu Zhongshu 1981: 138). Yang Xiong and Qiao Zhou were famous scholars native to Shu. According to the Jin 晉 dynasty scholar Chang Qu 常璩 (ca. AD 300–360), author of another

1 The Shu wang benji has been lost for a long time. For a compilation of quotations from this text, see Quan Hanwen 53.
important work on regional history, the *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志,\(^2\) they were not the only ones to have collected old biographies and legendary records: such native scholars as Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (178–117 BC), Yan Junping 嚴君平 (Late Western Han), Yangcheng Zixuan 陽城子玄 (Late Western Han), Zheng Boyi 鄭伯邑 (d. AD 110), Yin Pengcheng 尹彭城 (ca. middle of Eastern Han), and Ren Xi 任熙 (ca. AD 230–290) also wrote books with such titles as *Shu wang benji* or *Shu benji* 蜀本紀 (See *Huayang guozhi* “Xuzhi” 序志; Ren Naiqiang 1987: 723). Although these books have been lost for a long time, we know from Chang Qu’s criticism that, just like Yang Xiong’s *Shu wang benji*, they were all full of ancient legendary and mythical accounts that exaggerated the antiquity and achievements of historical figures. Chang Qu, by contrast, insisted on orthodox ideas and rationalism in historiography.

To judge from Yan Kejun’s 嚴可均 (1762–1843) compilation of quotations from Yang Xiong’s lost original in other ancient books, books of the *Shu wang benji* genre generally agree that the Shu kingdom lasted for a very long time and was, by and large, under the reign of five successive dynasties: the Cancongshi 蠻叢氏, the Baiguanshi 白蠻氏, the Yufushi 魚賦氏, the Duyushi 杜宇氏, and the Kaimingshi 開明氏. In 316 BC the Shu kingdom was annexed by Qin 秦. Moreover, according to these books, the five royal families were not all descendants of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), whom the orthodox historical tradition of the Central Plains regarded as the common ancestor of all the Chinese (Huaxia 華夏) nationalities since the Warring States period and especially the Han dynasty. For the latter point, we have two pieces of evidence.

First, the compilation of quotations from *Shu wang benji* contains no records that would indicate that the five royal families of Shu could trace their ancestry to the Yellow Emperor. If this had been the case, given the high value accorded to consanguinity in ancient times, records to that effect would surely appear in the preserved quotations about the five dynasties of Shu and would have been used by the commentators on other ancient books to support the veracity of the legends surrounding the Yellow Emperor.

Second, one quotation from *Shu wang benji* asserts that the Shu kingdom lasted for a total of 34,000 years from the Cancongshi to the Kaimingshi dynasties (see *Quan Hanwen* 53: 5a). According to another, perhaps more credible quotation from the same text (in *Taiping yulan*

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\(^2\) The best modern edition of this text is Ren Naiqiang 1987.

\(^3\) This would imply that the reigns of Cancongshi, Baiguanshi, and Yufushi each lasted for several hundred years, which seems plausible.