

Dual-Source Co-Ancestry: Reinterpreting the Yan-Huang Mythos through Archaeology and Textual Criticism

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Abstract:

Traditional historiography, epitomized by Sima Qian's *Shiji*, has long established a Yellow Emperor-centric narrative, marginalizing the Yan Emperor as a defeated antagonist. However, a multidisciplinary examination utilizing the "Double Evidence Method"—integrating excavated texts like the Chu Silk Manuscripts and *Yi Zhou Shu* with archaeological findings from the Shijiahe site—reveals a suppressed historical stratum. This study argues that the Yan Emperor represents a distinct, highly developed civilization originating in the Yangtze River basin, characterized by rice agriculture and a cosmic order independent of the Central Plains. The textual fissures and archaeological correspondences suggest that the "Yan-Huang" relationship was not a binary of victor and vanquished, but a convergence of dual sources. Furthermore, the linguistic ordering of "Yan-Huang Zisun" (Descendants of Yan and Huang) serves as a "living fossil," preserving the memory of the southern lineage despite the hegemony of northern written records. This paper concludes that Chinese

civilization originated from a "Dual-Source Co-Ancestry" model, advocating for a shift from a monolithic "Central Plains" perspective to a "Pluralistic Unity" framework where the Yan and Huang lineages shine with equal brilliance.

Keywords: Yan Emperor; Yellow Emperor; Shijiahe Culture; Chu Silk Manuscripts; Dual-Source Co-Ancestry; Pluralistic Unity.

Introduction: The Paradox of "Descendants of Yan and Huang"

The term "Descendants of Yan and Huang" (Yan Huang Zisun) is ubiquitous in Chinese cultural life. It resonates in the background of the national anthem, permeates educational textbooks, and anchors ancestral veneration rituals. It is as natural as breathing and as unquestionable as blood. Yet, when one truly gazes at these four characters—noting that "Yan" precedes "Huang"—an unsettling question emerges: If the Yan Emperor and the Yellow Emperor are indeed the co-ancestors of the Chinese nation, why is it that our collective historical consciousness recognizes almost exclusively the Yellow Emperor?

Who exactly was the Yan Emperor? What did he accomplish? Why are we collectively ignorant of his deeds, yet enshrine his name at the very

forefront of our ancestral lineage? This constitutes a profound cultural paradox, a historical fissure that has been collectively bypassed but never truly examined.

When consulting the most authoritative orthodox histories of China, the *Records of the Grand Historian Shiji*), specifically the *Annals of the Five Emperors*, initiates its genealogy with the Yellow Emperor and continues with Yu the Great. The lineage of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors unfolds majestically. However, the Yan Emperor—the very figure placed first in the title "Descendants of Yan and Huang"—is entirely denied an independent annal. He makes only a fleeting appearance at the Battle of Banquan, depicted as a villain who "sought to oppress the regional lords," a harbinger of chaos following the decline of the Shennong lineage, and merely a foil and stepping stone for the Yellow Emperor, who "fought three battles before achieving his ambition" [Sima Qian, 1959, 1-5]. In Sima Qian's narrative, the Yan Emperor is neither a creator nor a founder of civilization; he is a defeated "prequel" character destined to be replaced. If one of our co-ancestors appears in orthodox history solely as a defeated figure, then who is truly speaking through the phrase "Descendants of Yan and Huang," and in whose name?

Even more remarkably, this narrative is not monolithic. In the *Yi Zhou Shu*

(Lost Book of Zhou, specifically the Changmai chapter), the Yan Emperor (also known as the Red Emperor) is depicted as a victim of aggression by Chiyao who sought assistance from the Yellow Emperor, rather than a villain targeted by punitive expeditions [Huang Huaixin, Zhang Maorong, & Tian Xudong, 1995, 782–783]. Why did one of these diametrically opposed narratives become enshrined in orthodox history as the definitive truth, while the other was relegated to the margins of forgotten texts? Such selective memory is by no means accidental.

The core thesis of this paper posits that the Yan Emperor was not a supporting character in history. Rather, he was a human ancestor systematically marginalized by the political and cultural centers that monopolized the power of textual writing since the Shang and Zhou dynasties. He and the Yellow Emperor were originally parallel dual sources—the Yan Emperor representing the civilizational tradition of the Yangtze River basin, and the Yellow Emperor representing that of the Yellow River basin. The juxtaposition of "Yan and Huang" is not a forced appendage to the Yellow Emperor's supremacy, but the surviving memory of obscured dual-source co-ancestors.

To unravel this obscured historical truth, this paper proceeds through four dimensions: First, the fissures in official history: sifting through the

selective narratives in historical texts like the Shiji to uncover scattered clues about the positive image of the Yan Emperor; Second, discoveries outside official histories—from the creation myths in the Chu Silk Manuscripts to the lineage of inventors in Records of Emperors and Kings, reconstruct the independent standing of the Yan Emperor; Third, Testimonies from Archaeology, which explores how the Shijiahe site and the Yangtze River civilization provide material and spatial correspondences for the Yan Emperor legends; and Fourth, The Politics of Textual Power, which analyzes how the monopoly on writing since the Shang and Zhou dynasties shaped a northern-centric historical narrative, while leaving an alternative voice preserved in the cultural memory of the Chu state.

This inquiry is not merely a historical revisionism; it is a fundamental interrogation of identity: Who are we? Does our civilization truly possess only a single point of origin?

The Defeated "Prequel": Selective Narrative and Political Logic in the Shiji

When opening the Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), the first chapter

encountered is the Annals of the Five Emperors. Sima Qian initiates his narrative with the Yellow Emperor, proceeding sequentially through Zhuanxu, Ku, Yao, and Shun, before transitioning to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. The genealogical system of the Five Emperors is complete, and the lineage of the Three Dynasties is clear. But where is the Yan Emperor?

This is a question worthy of profound contemplation. In the collective memory of the Chinese people, the four characters "Descendants of Yan and Huang" are considered as sacred as "Descendants of the Dragon." However, when tracing back to the roots and returning to the text later revered as the "ultimate masterpiece of historians," one discovers that the reality is far from simple. The Yan Emperor has no independent chapter, no detailed genealogy, and not even a single positive narrative. His few brief appearances serve almost exclusively as a foil for another figure: the Yellow Emperor.

His first appearance characterizes him as the impotent remnant of a decaying old order: "In the time of Xuanyuan [the Yellow Emperor], the lineage of Shennong [the Yan Emperor] was in decline. The regional lords engaged in mutual aggression, tyrannizing the common people, yet the

Shennong clan was unable to subjugate them" [Sima Qian, 1959, 1-5]. In a mere few words, the Yan Emperor (identified here as Shennong) is frozen as a terminal monarch incapable of reversing the tide, helplessly watching the realm descend into chaos. As the lords waged war and the people suffered, the Shennong clan "was unable to subjugate them" (fu neng zheng)—three characters that signaled the definitive end of an era.

His second appearance is even more damning in nature: "The Yan Emperor sought to oppress the regional lords, and all the lords turned to Xuanyuan. Xuanyuan then cultivated virtue and mobilized his forces... to fight the Yan Emperor in the wilderness of Banquan. After three battles, he finally achieved his ambition" [Sima Qian, 1959, 1-5]. If the first instance merely highlighted an "inability to act," this second instance directly indicts a "moral failing." The Yan Emperor is explicitly categorized as a villain seeking to oppress the lords, prompting the lords to flock to Xuanyuan. And what of the Yellow Emperor? "Cultivated virtue and mobilized forces" (xiu de zhen bing)—with "cultivating virtue" preceding "mobilizing forces," the image of a righteous army, persuaded by virtue and forced into a defensive war, leaps off the page. After three battles, the Yellow Emperor "achieved his ambition," and the Yan Emperor exited the stage entirely.

Ultimately, Sima Qian delivers a cold, definitive epitaph: "Replacing the Shennong clan was the Yellow Emperor" [Sima Qian, 1959, 1-5]. An old era was terminated, and a new one commenced. The Yan Emperor was moved from the center of the historical stage to its margins, and from the margins pushed into the shadows, ultimately reduced to a mere stepping stone for the Yellow Emperor's great expedition—a defeated "prequel."

But this raises a deeper inquiry: Why did Sima Qian orchestrate the narrative in this manner?

The answer lies hidden within the political logic of historical writing. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, the newly unified empire required a historical narrative commensurate with its political reality. The Yellow Emperor, who "regulated the five energies, cultivated the five grains, pacified the myriad people, and surveyed the four quarters" [Sima Qian, 1959, 3], was constructed as the perfect founding monarch. He possessed both "virtue" (cultivating virtue) and "force" (mobilizing forces); he could unify the lords and pacify the people. Sima Qian needed to provide the Han Empire with a singular, clear, and positive historical starting point—a chain of legitimacy stretching from antiquity to the present. On this chain, there could be only one protagonist, only one

narrative, and only one orthodoxy. The Yan Emperor, as a symbol of Yangtze River basin civilization and a remnant of pluralistic origins, could only be compressed, marginalized, and shaped into an obstacle that the Yellow Emperor's rise had to overcome.

A more profound issue emerges here: This is not an "objective recording" of history, but a "selective construction" of historical writing. Yet, precisely because of the authoritative status of the Shiji—because it stands at the apex of orthodox histories and was recited by scholars for two millennia—this construction was mistaken by later generations as "historical fact" itself. We have grown accustomed to narrating Chinese history starting from the Yellow Emperor, and to viewing the Yan Emperor as a failed interlude, without ever asking: Who determined this starting point? Who selected this protagonist? And who quietly concealed another equally ancient source of civilization in the footnotes?

Herein lies an unsettling contradiction: If the Yan Emperor was truly nothing more than a defeated loser, a villain who "sought to oppress the regional lords," and a declining ruler incapable of holding onto his own realm, on what grounds do we call ourselves "Descendants of Yan and Huang"? How can a defeated supporting character stand alongside the

victor as a co-ancestor of the entire nation? [Wang Mingke, 2006, 7-8]

This question cannot be answered from within the text of the Shiji itself. It compels us to step beyond this great historical tome, venturing into forgotten texts, marginalized traditions, and buried archaeological sites, to ask: Before Sima Qian, beyond orthodox histories, and prior to the establishment of a Yellow River-centric narrative, did the Yan Emperor ever possess another visage?

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