

Jizha's Dilemma: *Rethinking Rang* 讓 ("Renunciation") in Confucian Moral and Political Philosophy

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Abstract

This study examines a Neo-Confucian debate on the virtue of *rang* 讓 ("renunciation"), sparked by the case of Jizha 季札, the youngest prince of the state of Wu 吳國, who voluntarily abandoned the crown prince position designated by his father and elder brothers. Early Confucians and Han scholars generally viewed Jizha's decision as consistent with both the Confucian moral value of *rang* and political traditions in Zhou ancestral legends. Later, however, commentators such as Cheng Yi 程頤 and Zhu Xi 朱熹 criticized Jizha's action by stressing its negative outcome of political instability and grounding their critique in the principle of *lixian* 立賢 ("establishing the worthy"). These critiques generated a centuries-long controversy with Jizha's defenders, yet its significance for Confucian reflections on political morality and rationality has been little appreciated by modern scholarship. This article provides an account of the complexity of Confucian judgments that balance moral ideals with outcome-based reasoning, and of the tension between leadership excellence and secure succession. It argues that Jizha's critics articulated sophisticated principles for evaluating *rang* in practice, but their model of *lixian* faced serious feasibility issues. The article also introduces alternative perspectives to reconsider Jizha's case and the Confucian discourse on political morality.

Keywords: Confucian humility, outcome-based reasoning, public interest, establishing the worthy, mechanism of succession

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I. Introduction

As Doil Kim (2023) indicated, *qianxun* 謙遜 (“Confucian humility or modesty”) is a long and highly esteemed virtue in Eastern Asian societies. However, its complexities require a more comprehensive understanding of its historical roots in the Confucian tradition.¹ This study delves into a key idea of “Confucian humility”—*rang* 讓—and its practicing way in a prince’s political life during the Zhou dynasty period of ancient China (ca. 1200–250 BCE).² In Zhou’s ancient legends and historical narratives, some virtuous princes would voluntarily relinquish their political power, without coercion or violent overthrow, for the harmony and prosperity of the state and family. Early Confucians and Han scholars praised such stories of “renunciation” as aligned with the Confucian virtue of *rang* (*rangde* 讓德). This article focuses on a Neo-Confucian debate on *rang* sparked by a problematic practice by Jizha 季札 (ca. 575–485 BCE).³

Jizha was the youngest but most capable prince of the state of Wu 吳國 (ca. 1150–473 BCE). His father and elder brothers abolished the tradition of primogeniture and designated him as the crown prince, but he repeatedly abnegated the position. Since Confucius, mainstream Early Confucianism and Han Scholarship from the 500s BCE to the 200s CE commonly recognized Jizha’s practice as a representative case of the Confucian virtue and Zhou’s convention of *rang*.

However, later commentators found that Jizha’s story had a problematic end. After Jizha’s renunciation of power, Jizha’s nephew King Helü 吳王闔閭 (ca. 537–496 BCE) bloodily usurped the throne from Jizha’s half-brother King Liao 吳王僚 (ca. ?–515 BCE) in 515 BCE. The contrast between Jizha’s virtuous image and Wu’s violent conflict then sparked a six-century-long controversy over Jizha’s morality and

¹ Notably, the recent works on political humility and Chinese culture by John Keane (2009; 2017; 2018) have significantly influenced the writing of this article.

² Here, I include the legendary period of Zhou’s ancestors.

³ Figures in ancient Chinese history often had several different names. For instance, Jizha was also called Yanling Jizi 延陵季子 or Prince Zha 公子札, 公子割. To make the article more consistent and accessible, this article has standardized the various names of the same figure into a common name.

reasoning among more than forty scholars from different generations and branches of Neo-Confucianism and other schools. Jizha's critics—led by Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), and their students and followers—developed sophisticated moral principles to reassess Jizha's decision-making of *rang*. They supported the moral ground and inheritance plan of *lixian* 立賢 (“establishing the worthy”) adopted by Jizha's father and elder brothers. In opposition, Jizha's defenders formulated a number of counterarguments grounded in Jizha's moral and rational concerns about the traditions of primogeniture and ethical hierarchy, or rational decision-making for self-preservation. Both camps developed several argumentative theses on Jizha's case, but neither could completely refute the other.

Unfortunately, the Neo-Confucian debate on Jizha's story has been long undervalued in Chinese academia since the 1650s, when a number of Qing scholars unified a dogmatically moral judgment on Jizha's *rang* as aligning with the absolute hierarchies of ruler-minister relationship and brotherhood (Li 2016, 119). The latest literature review shows that contemporary Chinese studies of Jizha's case since the 1980s are usually “repeating old discussions,” “too general,” or “lacking in-depth research”; only a few scholars have attempted to restart the debate over Jizha's case (see Yang and Dai 2022, 257–60). This long-term underestimation of the controversy has also influenced English academia. Due to the lack of research attention and the limited number of secondary Chinese studies and English translations, most of the existing English literature merely engages in historical and cultural studies of Wu.⁴

In this article, I provide a thorough account of both the complexity of Confucian judgments on moral pursuit and outcome-based reasoning and the deep tension between excellence of leadership versus precise and uncontentious mechanism of succession. By collecting, reorganizing, translating,⁵ and analyzing primary Chinese

⁴ Noteworthy, Wai-ye Li (2015, 82) mentions the complexity of Jizha's case in a footnote of her article on Wu's cultural identity; her meticulous work directly inspires the writing of this article.

⁵ All translations of the primary Chinese literature in the article are mine, if not otherwise noted.

texts, I aim to fill in this lacuna in the English literature, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of *rang* in Confucian moral and political philosophy, and offer a solid foundation for more extensive and detailed analyses of Jizha's case in the future. It should be noted that the historical corpus is somewhat "flawed" with several self-contradictory or unclear details. However, the analysis and reinterpretation of Jizha's case are still necessary and of high value due to their unique significance in exploring Confucian views about political morality and rationality.

In Section II, I define and summarize the specific meanings and practices of *rang* as "renunciation" in the Confucian tradition and Zhou's history, highlighting its sophisticated features as both moral values and political convention. In Section III, I gather, integrate, and translate the detailed narratives of Jizha's story to trace the sequence of his decision-making and the competition for Wu's throne. In Section IV, I collect and categorize the commentaries from Jizha's critics and defenders, with an introduction to the context of the Neo-Confucian debate over public interest versus private interest. In Section V, I argue that Jizha's critics propose sophisticated moral principles for critically evaluating *rang* in real-world political practices on the one hand; but on the other hand, their inheritance plan of *lixian* has significant feasibility issues. Finally, I list some other unsolved questions and alternative perspectives to rethink Jizha's case and *rang* in Confucian moral and political philosophy, which could guide future research.

II. *Rang* as Confucian Virtue and Zhou's Political Convention

As Doil Kim (2023, 158–63, 174) clarified, the virtue of *qian xun* in the Confucian tradition is distinct from other concepts of "humility" (such as in Christianity or some modern individualist critiques); Kim states, "the humble person in the Confucian sense treats others as better and avoids highlighting their own achievements or self-worth," and such treatment can be extended to an idealistic vision of social harmony without arrogance and self-proclaimed superiority (see also Kim 2020; Rushing 2013; Shun 2021). This article's research focus—

rang—is one of the most sophisticated ideas in the ideal of “Confucian humility” (see *Lunyu Zhushu* 論語注疏 8.1).⁶ According to He Yan 何晏 (ca. 195–249 BCE), the core value behind *rang* in the *Analects* is *buzheng* 不爭 (“avoiding competition or conflict”) (see *Lunyu Zhushu* 4.13). As Alexis McLeod (2020, 246) noted, *rang* can refer to “broad practices in making decisions, initiating activity, or recognition of rank,” and thus has various English translations, such as “yielding” or “deference.”

In Confucian political thought, one way to practice the idea of *rang* is the voluntary relinquishment of political power by a high-rank claimant (usually a monarch or a prince). In the *Analects* 8.1, Confucius praised such a noble decision as a way towards the supreme form of virtue (*zhide* 至德).⁷ Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559) summarized and interpreted such complimentary commentaries in Early Confucianism and Han Scholarship as reflecting a widely shared sense that *rang* as “renunciation of power” was to be valued or held in high esteem—*guirang* 貴讓 (see *Shiji Pinglin* 史記評林, bk. 31).⁸

The historical roots of viewing voluntary renunciation of power as virtuous remain mysterious—Early Confucians often praised the ancient legends of Yao and Shun’s abdications (*Yao Shun shanrang* 堯舜禪讓) and the abandonment of the throne by Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊 in the state of Guzhu 孤竹國 (ca. 1600–660 BCE) as the sources. Nevertheless, the details and interconnections of these legends in historical sequence are difficult to trace (see *Shiji*, bks. 1, 61). One traceable source in history, which this article focuses on, is that, at least during the Zhou dynasty, voluntarily giving up power became a long-lasting political convention shared by various branches of Zhou’s royal house in their ancestral legends and narratives.

Zhou’s two legendary ancestors—Taibo 泰伯 and the Duke of Zhou 周公—were representative models of *rang* as “renunciation” in Zhou’s

⁶ I particularly thank Daniel A. Bell, John Keane, Wang Pei, and anonymous reviewers’ critical concerns on the complexity of “Confucian humility” and the English translation of *rang*.

⁷ Similar comments can be found in *Book of Rites* 禮記 (8.12), *Shiji* 史記 (bks. 31, 61), and *Xinxu* 新序 (ch. 7).

⁸ Thomas Lee (2008) challenges the existence of the idea of *guirang*, but he does not mention nor discuss the corpus of Yang Shen’s commentaries on *rang* and *guirang* in *Shiji Pinglin*.

ancestral worship (*zuxian chongbai* 祖先崇拜). Taibo was the eldest prince of Zhou's grand ancestor King Tai 周太王, who was believed to have transferred his inheritance right (along with another elder prince, *Zhongyong* 仲雍) to his youngest brother Jili 季歷 (in ca. 1150 BCE) to fulfill his father's will.⁹ The Duke of Zhou was the regent supervising and serving his underage nephew King Cheng 周成王 to overcome a difficult transitional period from the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1040 BCE) to the Zhou dynasty after the death of King Wu 周武王 (in ca. 1043 BCE); he then returned the throne upon King Cheng's coming of age (Roberts 2020, 70–71).

These legends profoundly influenced the descendants of Taibo and the Duke of Zhou. Taibo and Zhongyong's branch was Jizha's family—the house of Wu. The Duke of Zhou's branch was the house of the state of Lu 魯國 (ca. 1042–249 BCE), which later had another case of abandoning the throne by Duke Yin 魯隱公 (in ca. 712 BCE) (*Shiji*, bk. 33; *Zuo zhuan*, bk. 1). Other branches also practiced this convention: for instance, Prince Xinshi 公子欣時 (?–?) was endorsed by Cao's people to replace his brother, who had murdered the former monarch's crown prince, but he gave up the throne in the name of abiding by his principles (in ca. 578 BCE) (*Zuo zhuan*, bk. 8).¹⁰

This political convention has some “institutionalized” structural features. A usual element is agnatic seniority (*xiongzhongdiji* 兄終弟及): this alternative inheritance order has an even longer history than the Zhou dynasty (see *Shiji*, bk. 38). The application of agnatic seniority not only launches an optional mechanism of succession beyond primogeniture but also endorses an exceptional case challenging the family ethics of hierarchical brotherhood. Two other features are the customary agendas of “renunciating thrice” (*sanrang* 三讓) and “mutual renunciation” (*hu rang* 互讓). Both procedures are “institutionalized” as relatively fixed steps in line with the ancestral legends—if this were not an illusion caused by the narratives' glorification. “Renunciating thrice”

⁹ Taibo's legend was first recorded by “Huang Yi” 皇矣, in *Book of Odes* 詩經 (see *Han Shi Waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, bk. 10). See also *Shiji* (bk. 31), *Wuyue Chunqiu* 吳越春秋 (bk. 1), and *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (bks. 5, 12).

¹⁰ The house of the state of Cao 曹國 (ca. 1050–487 BCE) was the branch of the Duke of Zhou's younger brother Zhenduo 曹叔振鐸.

and “mutual renunciation” can be seen as two stages of negotiation and legitimization where both sides of the power transfer need to avoid showing arrogance.

It can be found that Zhou's political convention of “renunciation” was rooted in a system of moral values and norms shaping and regulating political actors' behaviors. However, for Early Confucians and Han scholars, evaluating such cases of Zhou's political convention as aligned with the Confucian moral values of *rang* was a very complex and controversial process. One major issue was the lack of clear, uniform standards. For example, *Gongyangzhuan* 公羊傳 claimed a large number of stories as practicing the Confucian virtue of *rang*, such as the tragedy of Shuwu 叔武 in 632 BCE and the legend of Shushu 叔術 in approximately 782 BCE, but other works like *Zuozhuan* and *Shiji* provided ambiguous or even opposite opinions on these cases (see *Gongyangzhuan*, bks. 5, 10; *Shiji*, bk. 37; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 5).

The unclear criteria led to a variety of moral reasoning and judgment in later interpretations, and even one scholar could have multiple different evaluations of different cases. For instance, Cheng Yi emphasized more on the necessity of finding a worthier candidate to benefit the state in assessing Jizha's case; nevertheless, he evaluated the story of Boyi and Shuqi from a perspective that was more centered on the pursuit of morality or virtue—*qiuren* 求仁 (“pursuit of humaneness”) (see *Ercheng Yishu* 二程遺書, bk. 22A; *Ercheng Yulu* 二程語錄, bk. 14).¹¹ Other ideas for identifying a historical case as the practice of *rang* include: (1) *huanzheng* 還政 (“returning authority to the appointed or legitimate adult heir,” or *shouzheng* 授政 or *zhifan* 治反) in *Shiji* and *Gongyangzhuan*; (2) *shoujie* 守節 (“adhering to one's moral strictures”) in *Xinxu*, which later was employed by Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138) in his judgment on Jizha's case; (3) *shoujing* 守經 (“adhering

¹¹ Notably, the Chinese term *lixian* 立賢 particularly means suspending the normal process of succession in order to install the worthiest candidate. This term somewhat shares the idea of “elevating the worthy” (*xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治 or *shangxian* 尚賢), while the latter term can refer to broader practices in government and society (like selecting and commending outstanding officials). Another Chinese term, *rangxian* 讓賢, is also applicable. According to Fech (2023, 100), the original term used in the Zhou dynasty was *zhixian* 置賢.

to normal rules or standards”) proposed by Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159–1223); and (4) *quan* 權 (“weighing”) used by many of Jizha’s critics and defenders.¹²

Here, the evaluation of renunciation of power as a form of *quan* especially reflects Confucian moral particularism and a critical appeal to political realism. On the one hand, *quan* in the Confucian tradition as a position of moral particularism suggests that one with good moral judgment can have flexibility or discretion in applying the normal rules when there is a conflict of moral values in a specific context (e.g., *Mengzi* 4A.17, 7A.26; see also Goldin 2005; Van Norden 2008, xxxvi). In *Analects* 9.30, Confucius suggested that someone having the capability of applying *quan* should have a deep understanding of the moral Way (*dao* 道). On the other hand, *quan* in some comments on Jizha’s case can also be interpreted as a form of political expediency (*quanyi* 權宜) for negotiation or self-preservation in rational decision-making. This means that political actors may flexibly employ or utilize Zhou’s political convention of abandoning power for both moral concerns and political concerns.

Both Jizha’s critics and defenders noticed the complexity of moral values and political reasoning behind one’s decision-making of *rang*. These commentators did not deploy a solely outcome-based or intention-based assessment framework; instead, most of them considered a *range* of personal motives and environmental factors in Jizha’s story. All in all, the sophistication of evaluating Zhou’s political convention as the practice of the Confucian virtue of *rang* sowed the seed of the long controversy over Jizha’s case—this will be further discussed in Sections IV and V. In the next section, I will translate the entire detailed narrative of Jizha’s story from multiple sources to trace the historical sequence.

¹² See *Beixi Ziyi* 北溪字義, bk. 2, ch. 9; *Gongyangzhuan*, bk. 5; *Hushi Chunqiu zhuan* 胡氏春秋傳, bk. 23; *Shiji*, bk. 33; *Xinxu*, ch. 7. I particularly thank anonymous reviewers’ feedback on the complicated notions and frameworks for assessing *rang* in these texts.

III. Jizha's Story

The first part of Jizha's story is about a political testament by Jizha's father (see *Gongyangzhuàn*, bk. 9; *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 2):

Jizha was the youngest son of King Shoumeng 吳王壽夢. He was wise, benevolent, and loved by all his three elder brothers. Shoumeng suggested establishing Jizha as his heir, but Jizha disagreed and supported his oldest brother Zhufan 諸樊 to ascend to the throne. Jizha said, "[Our] rituals had a tradition [of primogeniture]. Why should we abandon the former kings' rituals to fulfill our personal interests?"

Shoumeng then proposed a plan of agnatic seniority in a private discussion with Zhufan to offer Jizha an inheritance right in the future.¹³ Shoumeng said to Zhufan, "I wish to give Jizha the state, and you should not forget what I have said." Zhufan replied, "[In the past,] King Tai knew the sagacity of [Jili's son] King Wen 周文王. He [thus] abolished the inheritance rights of his elder sons [Taibo and Zhongyong] and established his youngest son [Jili] as the crown prince; his decision helped the Way of the True King (*wang zhi dao* 王之道) to flourish.¹⁴ Now, if you [my father] want to pass the state to Jizha, I sincerely propose to take to farming outside of the capital."

Shoumeng said, "The virtue of Zhou in the past had been extended to the four seas (*sihai* 四海).¹⁵ Now, you are merely in a small state in the south of the Jing barbarians 荊蠻. How can you realize [Zhou's] accomplishments? As you do not forget the ancestors' words, you must follow [my plan of] agnatic seniority to pass the state to Jizha in the end." Zhufan then answered, "How dare I disobey the order?" Hence, Shoumeng decided on Zhufan as the state's heir (or temporary regent).

¹³ In *Gongyangzhuàn* (bk. 9), Zhufan proposed the plan of agnatic seniority as he expected that Jizha would not accept the throne. *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (ch. 14) and *Xinxu* (ch. 7) also support this version of the story.

¹⁴ It means that the better successor realizes the harmony and prosperity of Zhou's state and family.

¹⁵ This is a metaphorical expression of Zhou's reign over the Chinese world.

Here, Zhufan employed Taibo's legend to legitimize Jizha's inheritance right based on the idea of *lixian*. Below, I translate Taibo's legend for comparison (see *Han Shi Waizhuan*, bk. 10; *Lunheng* 論衡, chs. 12, 42, 58, 66, 68; *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 1; *Zuozhuan*, bks. 5, 12):

Taibo and Zhongyong were Zhou's two elder princes. Their father, King Tai, wanted the youngest prince, Jili, to ascend to the throne because he predicted that Jili's son, King Wen, would become a sage king in the future. King Tai said, "Chang 昌 (King Wen) will be the generation prospering [our state and family], won't he?" When Taibo and Zhongyong knew their father's will, they chose to decline the throne to meet their father's wish.¹⁶ As King Tai was ill, the brothers left Zhou on the pretext of collecting herbs and then arrived in the south of the Jing barbarians. Then, they cut their hair and tattooed their bodies as signs of abandoning their inheritance rights.¹⁷

It can be seen that Zhufan's plan is in line with Taibo's legend. However, Shoumeng's reasons for opposing Zhufan's initial proposal are not entirely clear. A possible motive behind Shoumeng's response was to test and warn Zhufan about his political ambition (see *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 1; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 9B).

The second part of Jizha's story is about the "mutual renunciation" between Jizha and Zhufan after the death of King Shoumeng (see *Gongyangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 2; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 9A):

In around 561 BCE, King Shoumeng died, and Zhufan temporarily supervised the state. After the funeral, Zhufan intended to establish Jizha as the new king (in ca. 559 BCE). Zhufan said, "When the [old] king was about to die, he felt uneasy throughout the whole day. I

¹⁶ In *Zuozhuan* (bk. 5), Gong Zhiqi 宮之奇 said: "Taibo and Zhongyong declined the throne against their father's wish." Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 clarified that "against their father's wish" meant Taibo and Zhongyong were not with their father on his deathbed instead of disobeying his father's testament (see *Rizhi Lu* 日知錄, bk. 27).

¹⁷ In *Zuozhuan* (bk. 12), Zigong 子貢 said that only Zhongyong cut his hair and tattooed his body when he ascended to the throne after Taibo's death (Taibo was childless). *Qianfulun* 潛夫論 (ch. 35) also supported this version.

looked at his appearance, and [I knew that] his intention was [to establish] Jizha. He mourned for three mornings and then ordered me: 'I know that Jizha is the virtuous one, and I wish to abolish all my elder sons' inheritance rights and enact Jizha [as my crown prince].' He said this twice. I had already accepted his plan within my heart, but he could not bear to carry out his will; thus, he gave me the state. How dare I disobey this order? Now, the state should be [Jizha] yours. I hope to realize the old king's last wish."

But Jizha declined, saying, "The tradition of primogeniture is not about the former kings' personal wills but about the ancestors' political legacy for the state.¹⁸ How can it be changed?" Zhufan replied, "If there were any other way I could give you the state, why would the former king's order be here?! King Tai changed the tradition and established Jili, so that Jili's elder brothers [Taibo and Zhongyong] came to the south of the Jing barbarians and founded our state. Zhou's way is complete, and our predecessors always praise it. What you are practicing now is learned from our ancestor Taibo's legend."

But Jizha refused again, saying, "Prince Xinshi also gave up the throne and left the state when people attempted to invite him to be the new monarch of Cao; in this way, he secured his brother Prince Fuchu's rule. The nobleman said of him that he 'was able to keep his moral principles.' You, my king, are the rightful heir. Who would dare to oppose you? To possess the state is not my principle. I wish to follow Xinshi's paradigm so as not to lose my principles, though I lack talent." Zhufan and Wu's people persisted in establishing Jizha as the new king. Jizha thus abandoned his property and took to farming. Finally, Zhufan ascended to the throne, but he told Jizha's other two elder brothers and Wu's people that after his death, they should follow agnatic seniority to pass the state to Jizha in the future.

Here, the political agenda of "mutual renunciation" between Jizha and Zhufan was somewhat similar to the dialogue between Jili and Taibo, as compared below (see *Han Shi Waizhuan*, bk. 10; *Lunheng*, ch. 68; *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 1):

¹⁸ It means that primogeniture is a constant mechanism of succession for the state's stability.

When King Tai was about to die, he told Jili, “After my death, you should renounce power to your elder brothers [Taibo and Zhongyong]; if they do not return [to power], it will be legitimate for you to ascend to the throne and consolidate your position.” After King Tai’s death, Jili went to the south to inform his elder brothers; they followed him to attend the funeral in Zhou. [At the funeral or in Zhou’s court,] ministers wanted Taibo to establish Jili as the new king. Taibo thus invited Jili to ascend to the throne twice, yet Jili also renounced twice in reverse. Taibo asked Zhongyong, “How should I handle this?” Zhongyong answered, “In our general principles, one key teaching is ‘to support the measly’ (*fuwei* 扶微). Jili [as the youngest prince] can be established.”

Hence, Taibo invited Jili again, saying, “I went to the south, cut my hair, and tattooed my body according to the Jing barbarians’ custom; as a man with a tattoo [similar to a convict] (*xingyu zhiren* 刑餘之人), I cannot be the patriarch of our family and the monarch of our state.” As Taibo had renounced three times, Jili knew that Taibo would no longer desire the throne. Jili consented to Taibo’s decision and then took power. Taibo and Zhongyong returned to the south and established a small state named “Gouwu” 句吳. Thousands of barbarian households recognized Taibo’s righteousness (*yi* 義) and followed him; Taibo later became the first king of the state of Wu.¹⁹

A few key differences can be detected in the comparison between the two procedures. Obviously, Zhufan did not perform some actions as a decisive sign of abandoning his inheritance right, and he also did not complete another agenda of “renunciating thrice” to show his firm determination. Most importantly, as Jizha employed Pricne Xinshi’s case to support his moral pursuit, the two sides took contradictory intentions (“establishing the worthy” versus “adhering to Jizha’s moral strictures”), which resulted in a complex deadlock in the negotiation.²⁰

The third part of Jizha’s story shows the fact that Jizha’s *rang* was against implementing the plan of *lixian* for the excellence of leadership

¹⁹ In *Shiji* (bk. 31) and *Yuejueshu* 越絕書 (bk. 3), the first king of Wu was Zhongyong’s descendant.

²⁰ Xinshi’s detailed story can be seen in Durrant et al. (2016, 810–11, 818–19, 848–49). See also *Gongyangzhuan* (bk. 8), *Guliangzhuan* 穀梁傳 (bk. 8), and *Xinxu* (ch. 7).

(see *Gongyangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Guliangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 2; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 9B):

Zhufan became arrogant after he came to power: he launched but lost two wars against the state of Chu 楚國, and he died in the second war; Jizha's second elder brother Yuzhai 餘祭 then ascended the throne (in ca. 548 BCE). Yuzhai appointed Jizha as a small lord of Yanling 延陵 and a diplomat.²¹ In approximately 544 BCE, Yuzhai was assassinated by a gatekeeper for mysterious reasons.²² Jizha's third elder brother Yumo 餘昧 then ascended the throne and decided to establish Jizha as the new king after his death.

However, Jizha withdrew from the throne inheritance again, saying, "I have clearly claimed that I will not ascend to the throne. In the past, I introduced Prince Xinshi's moral principles to respond to the former king's order. [I wish to] keep my purity and conduct myself cleanly, admiring the virtuous and practicing the noble. I will only be with humaneness (*ren* 仁); wealth and rank are to me just like the passing through of the autumn wind."²³ Jizha then went back to Yanling.

Here, a dialogue between Qu Huyong 屈狐庸 (?-?) and Zhao Wu 趙武 (ca. 598–541 BCE) in around 542 BCE contradicted Yumo's claim to Jizha's inheritance right. Zhao asked Qu about Jizha's inheritance right, but Qu denied it and supported Yumo's descendants as legitimate heirs (Durrant et al. 2016, 1282–83). This dialogue is very intriguing. It can be understood as merely diplomatic rhetoric to glorify the current monarch; or, Yumo might have changed his mind after Jizha's renunciation, and he thus allowed Qu to present his new political testament during the meeting. Otherwise, Qu's statement may be a

²¹ In *Qianfulun* (ch. 35), Jizha was appointed as a small lord of the city of Zhoulai 州來 in Yanling. Hu Sanxing 胡三省 reorganized the timeline so that Jizha was first appointed as the lord of Yanling and then as the lord of Zhoulai (see *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, bk. 148).

²² In *Guliangzhuan* (bk. 9), Yuzhai was murdered due to hatred since he had too close a personal relationship with the gatekeeper. In *Zuozhuan* (bk. 9B), the gatekeeper's identity was a captive from the state of Yue 越國, and he thus took the opportunity to assassinate Yuzhai when Yuzhai was visiting a boat. *Shiji* did not record Yuzhai's unnatural death; instead, it mentioned that Yuzhai had a long reign of 17 years.

²³ This is a metaphorical expression of his lack of desire for wealth and power.

subtle (and spine-chilling) warning to Jizha, particularly as both Qu and Jizha were Wu's diplomats. Linking with the unnatural deaths of Jizha's two elder brothers, the dialogue seems to imply that Yumo, from the very beginning, was not willing to hand over the throne to Jizha in the future; Jizha's renunciation of power allowed him to survive under Yumo's watchful eyes.

The final part of Jizha's story shows King Liao's legitimacy crisis and King Helü's bloody usurpation after Jizha's multiple renunciations of his inheritance right (Durrant et al. 2016, 1674–75; see also *Shiji*, bk. 31; *Wuyue Chunqiu*, bk. 2; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 10B):

After Yumo's death (in ca. 527 BCE), Jizha returned to the capital of Wu and supported his half-brother Liao to be the new king.²⁴ But Yumo's son Helü refused to obey Liao.²⁵ Helü said, "The former kings made agnatic seniority instead of primogeniture just because of Jizha. If we follow the former kings' order, we should establish Jizha as the new king. If not, why not establish me as a proper new monarch of the state but Liao?!" Hence, Helü conspired to murder Liao with his counselor Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (ca. 559–484 BCE), and he hired an assassin, Zhuan Zhu 專諸 (ca. ?–515 BCE). Simultaneously, Liao also felt his legitimacy crisis and thus deployed a large number of bodyguards for self-protection.²⁶

In approximately 515 BCE,²⁷ King Liao planned to attack the state of Chu; he thus sent Jizha to the state of Jin to observe other monarchs' reactions to his aggression against Chu. Helü took this opportunity, invited Liao to taste a fish dish, and commanded Zhuan Zhu to

²⁴ In *Shiji* (bk. 31), Liao was the eldest son of Yumo and a concubine. When Yumo died, Wu's people said, "Our former kings had agnatic seniority since [they wanted] Jizha to be eventually established. Now, as Jizha gives up the throne, we should establish Yumo's son [Liao] as the new king. Yumo is dead, and [Liao] should be established."

²⁵ *Shiben* 世本 (bk. 1, ch. 6) supported this version. In *Shiji* (bk. 31), Helü was Zhufan's son instead of Yumo's son.

²⁶ Du Yu 杜預 noted that King Liao had established his son with Zhufan's name as the crown prince (see *Chunqiu Shili* 春秋釋例, bk. 9). However, Kong Yingda 孔穎達 and Gu Yanwu all disagreed with it (see *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, bk. 50; *Zuozhuan Dujie Buzheng* 左傳杜解補正, bk. 2).

²⁷ *Shiji* gave two dates in different books: 519 BCE (see bk. 86) or 515 BCE (see bk. 31). The assassination happened in approximately 515 BCE for sure.

assassinate Liao with a dagger hidden in the fish. After Liao's death, as Jizha returned to the state, Helü invited Jizha to ascend to the throne for unknown reasons.²⁸ Jizha rejected it, saying, "So long as the former kings do not cast aside our sacrifices, the people and the ministers do not cast aside their monarch, the altars of the state maintain their ceremonies, and the state and patrimony are not overturned, then he [indeed] is our king. Against whom should I presume to bear a grudge? I will mourn for the dead [Liao] and serve the living [Helü], awaiting Heaven's commands. As I have not started the chaos myself, I follow the established new king. That is in line with the way of our ancestors." Therefore, King Helü came to power. Jizha went to Liao's grave and mourned; and then, he returned to the court.²⁹

The above Jizha's story was commonly recognized as aligned with both the Confucian moral values and Zhou's political convention of *rang* by Early Confucians and Han scholars, but a group of commentators later turned to criticize Jizha's case. In the next section, I will gather and categorize more than forty scholars' comments on Jizha's story to show the core divergent viewpoints between Jizha's critics and defenders.

IV. Commentaries and the Neo-Confucian Debate on Jizha's Case

In the mainstream view of Early Confucianism and Han Scholarship, Jizha was idealized as a "model" prince practicing the virtue of *rang* (see Durrant et al. 2016, 1011). Confucius named Jizha as a "Heaven's Subject" (*tianmin* 天民) who "eschewed [the inheritance right] by leaving [the state]" (*qiaoyer fushou* 橋而弗受) (*Shangbo Jian* 上博簡, bk. 5, ch. 6; see

²⁸ In *Gongyangzhuan* (bk. 9, *Shuoyuan* (ch. 14), *Wuyue Chunqiu* (bk. 2), and *Xinxu* (ch. 7), Helü wished Jizha to ascend to the throne. However, *Shiji* and *Zuozhuan* did not support this record.

²⁹ According to *Zuozhuan* (bk. 12), Jizha was very longevous and acted as a diplomat until at least around 485 BCE. In another version of the story, Jizha rejected Helü's legitimacy to rule and escaped to Yanling; he never came back to serve in Wu's court again (see *Gongyangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Shuoyuan*, ch. 14; *Xinxu*, ch. 7). I translate this part largely based on the existing translation by Durrant et al. (2016, 1674–75) with some minor modifications.

Ma 2005, 268). In many other works, Jizha was commonly labeled as outstandingly virtuous (*xianren* 賢人) or an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子).⁵⁰ Jizha's story was usually considered to be comparable to Taibo's legend.⁵¹

The earliest known reflection of the contrast between Jizha's idealized image and Wu's political crisis was in *Liezi* 列子 6.1: in a metaphorical dialogue between "Capability" (*li* 力) and "Fate" (*ming* 命), Jizha's story was seen as a case of one's incapability of avoiding the conditions imposed on the existence of one's present being. Later, two Han scholars—Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 BCE) and Huan Tan 桓譚 (36 BCE–35 CE)—noticed the potential causality between Jizha's renunciation of power and King Helü's usurpation.⁵² Dong interpreted Jizha's relinquishment of power and tolerance of Helü's offense as a situational consideration; Huan claimed that the state's plan of *lixian* should take precedence over Jizha's moral pursuit for political stability (see *Chunqiu Fanlu*, ch. 5; *Huantan Xinlun* 桓譚新論, ch. 9). Another Han scholar, He Xiu 何休 (129–182), started to question Confucius' praise of Jizha and assumed that Confucius downplayed Helü's usurpation to glorify Jizha's image (*Chunqiu Gongyang Jingzhuan Jiegu* 春秋公羊經傳解詁, bk. 9).⁵³ Then, a Tang scholar, Dugu Ji 獨孤及 (726–777), judged Jizha as the culprit of King Liao's death and made a harsh criticism of Jizha's "selfish" personality (see *Piling Ji* 毘陵集, bk. 7).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See *Caizhonglang Ji* 蔡中郎集, bk. 4; *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露, ch. 6; *Gongyangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Guliangzhuan*, bk. 9; *Kongzi Jiayu* 孔子家語, chs. 41–42; *Shuoyuan*, ch. 14; *Xinxu*, ch. 7; *Zuozhuan*, bk. 9A.

⁵¹ See *Hanshu* 漢書, bk. 28B; *Lunheng*, ch. 16; *Shiji*, bk. 31.

⁵² At least nominally, the comments were attributed to Dong Zhongshu.

⁵³ Ye Mengde 葉夢得 later proposed a similar hypothesis in *Yeshi Chunqiu Zhuan* 葉氏春秋傳 (bk. 17).

⁵⁴ Here, Dugu listed Jizha's four offenses—abolishing the former king's order as "against filial piety" (*feixiao* 非孝); far-fetched imitating Prince Xinshi's case as "against the public interest" (*feigong* 非公); triggering usurpation and murder due to abiding by rituals and principles as "against humaneness" (*feiren* 非仁); and showing insights into diplomatic affairs but refusing to launch a punitive expedition on the usurper as "against wisdom" (*feizhi* 非智). In conclusion, Dugu stridently criticized Jizha as a man of vanity and selfishness who ignored his compulsory responsibilities to the state and family and only cared about personal fame.

The massive debate on Jizha's case sparked in the Song dynasty (960–1279). One critical factor in the historical background that might relate to the increasing focus on Jizha was a series of heated debates on *gong* 公 versus *si* 私 among Neo-Confucian scholars (*gongsizhi bian* 公私之辯).³⁵ Jizha's image became confusing when later scholars rethought the problematic end of his story—should Jizha be seen as a humble prince aligned with the virtue of *rang* or a self-interested, vain person? Since the Song dynasty, commentators have proposed various perspectives to review and evaluate Jizha's case, such as seeing Jizha's intention as defending the convention of primogeniture or linking Jizha's decision-making with the reasoning and acting framework in line with ancient rituals.³⁶

The most influential perspective that later ignited a six-century-long debate was the reassessment of Jizha's case led by Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, and their students and followers. Cheng Yi criticized Jizha's renunciation of power, arguing that it violated the plan of agnatic seniority for *lixian* designed by his father and brothers, which left a power vacuum and decisively triggered the political crisis (See *Ercheng Yishu*, bk. 22A; *Ercheng Yulu*, bk. 14):

Jizha made a renunciation to refuse enthronement, and he did not establish [another] worthy successor before he left. Hence, there was chaos in King Liao's death.³⁷

This view was later promoted by his student Liu Xuan 劉絢 (ca. 1045–1087).³⁸ Cheng Yi's judgment seems to criticize the outcome of political instability after Jizha's renunciation of power, while the principles behind Cheng Yi's comments cannot be simply labeled as

³⁵ The debates covered a broad range of topics, such as public interest versus private interest, impartiality versus partiality, public life versus private life, state versus family, etc. See more details in, e.g., Cui (2007), Fang (2012), Ivanhoe (2013, 88–98), Tillman (1982), and Tiwald (2011).

³⁶ See Jia Xuanweng 家鉉翁 in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Xiangshuo* 春秋集傳詳說 (bk. 22), Wang Qiao 王樵 in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* 春秋輯傳 (bk. 9), and Sima Guang 司馬光 in *Zizhi Tongjian* (bk. 1).

³⁷ 札讓不立，又不為立賢而去，卒有殺儼之亂。

³⁸ Liu Xuan's original work is lost, but his comment is very influential and can be found in other commentators' citations (see Huang 2008; Li 2016, 117).

“consequentialist” or purely result-based. A key point in Cheng Yi’s criticism is Jizha’s failure to select or recommend another worthy candidate before his abnegation of the throne, which reflects the excellence of leadership for political order and stability emphasized by generations of Confucian scholars (see Chan and Chan 2014).

Cheng Yi’s follower, Hu Anguo, proposed a more detailed and systematic criticism of Jizha’s case, as shown below (*Hushi Chunqiu*zhuān, bk. 23):

Jizha should have ascended to the throne at least after Yumo’s death, following the political testament of *lixian* by his father and elder brothers. The main reason was that Jizha’s father and elder brothers shared a heart of public-mindedness (*gongxin* 公心), while Prince Xinshi’s case, employed by Jizha, was merely a low-ranking man’s personal concerns and principles (*pifu zhi jiejie* 匹夫之介節). Jizha’s story could be seen as a representative case of adhering to one’s moral strictures, establishing one’s reputation, self-protection, and self-cultivation; however, his virtue was far lower than Taibo and other sage kings—as he gave up his compulsory obligations as a capable prince to his state and family. Jizha might have wanted to apply the doctrine of *zhongyong* 中庸, yet he did not fully understand this wisdom.

It can be seen that Hu Anguo recognized Jizha’s moral purity in ritual observance on the one hand; on the other hand, he underlined Jizha’s failed concerns about the priority of the public interest (the excellence of rulership, as Cheng Yi emphasized). Hu further established a clear framework to rethink Jizha’s case: by assuming Jizha’s father and elder brothers’ motivation of *lixian* as public-mindedness, Jizha was not in the position of voluntarily conceding power; rather, Jizha was rejecting the offer from his father and elder brothers. Hu developed his thesis that Jizha’s “rejection” as *rang* did not have a greater moral value than the voluntary proposal of power transfer based on public-mindedness, and we thus should not praise his story as a representative case of practicing the virtue of *rang*.

Here, a questionable point is Hu Anguo’s employment of the Neo-Confucian understanding of *zhongyong*. The meaning of *zhongyong* in

Hu's context was most likely derived from Cheng Yi's interpretation, as translated by Chunqing Li (2020, 41):

Zhong means no bias or no deviation from the middle course, and *yong* means no change. *Zhong* is the most correct principle and *yong* the most stable principle.³⁹

If Hu Anguo understood Jizha's ritual observance as a failed imitation of the doctrine of *zhongyong* (Cheng Yi's interpretation), it would mean that Hu employed the "recent" idea to speculate on an ancient prince's intentions (*yijinduogu* 以今度古)—during Jizha's lifetime, such Neo-Confucian understanding of *zhongyong* did not exist. Despite this, Hu Anguo's indication of Jizha's insufficient understanding of *zhongyong* reflects his concerns about moral discretion by the approach of *quan* ("weighing"). This idea was later enhanced by Zhu Xi's student, Chen Chun; this article will discuss Chen Chun's commentaries in the following paragraphs.

For Zhu Xi himself, on the one hand, he agreed with Hu's thesis and showed his critical attitude towards Jizha in sporadic texts (see *Zhuzi Yulei*, bk. 34, ch. 13; bk. 83, ch. 2):

(1) The interpretation of Hu Wending (Hu Anguo) in this section of *Chunqiu* is also good. He said, "The sages will not agree with the story of Jizha's renunciation of the throne in the state of Wu," and then he quoted several cases as proof.⁴⁰

(2) Jizha's renunciation of the throne was not completely right.⁴¹

On the other hand, Zhu Xi remained in an ambiguous position between Jizha's critics and defenders, and he did not clarify his understanding and evaluation of Jizha's case (see *Zhuzi Yulei*, bk. 83, ch. 2):

[Someone] asked: "For Jizha, Hu Wendingong (Hu Anguo) said that his renunciation of the throne caused chaos, while Wengong (Sima

³⁹ 不偏之謂中，不易之謂庸。中者，天下之正道，庸者，天下之定理。

⁴⁰ 胡文定「春秋」解這一段也好，說：吳季札讓國事，聖人不取之，牽引四五事為證。

⁴¹ 季札辭國，不為盡是。

Guang 司馬光, 1019–1086) said that he had a deep understanding of the distinction between ruler and minister. [Who was right?]

[Zhu Xi] answered: “[Jizha] can accept [the throne], but he also can refuse to accept [the throne].”⁴²

At the very least, Zhu Xi seems to adopt Hu Anguo’s framework: Jizha’s *rang* is about rejecting the offer instead of a typical practice of *rang* as a voluntary relinquishment of power.

Zhu Xi’s student, Chen Chun, proposed a clearer evaluation of Jizha’s case. Chen Chun further developed Hu’s indication of an in-depth understanding of moral discretion in real-world political practice. Here, Chen Chun linked Jizha’s *rang* with *shoujing* (“adhering to normal rules or standards”) and *quan* (“weighing”). As I mentioned in Section II, *quan* reflects Confucian moral particularism suggesting that one with good moral judgment can have situational flexibility in applying the normal rules when there is a conflict of moral values in a specific context (e.g., *Mengzi* 4A.17, 7A.26; see also Goldin 2005; Van Norden 2008, xxxvi). Chen Chun stated that at the level of *shoujing*, Jizha’s case had its moral values, but at the higher level of *quan*, Jizha’s decisions were too rigid, ignoring the paramount importance of *lixian* for the harmony and prosperity of his state and family (*Beixi Ziyi*, bk. 2, ch. 9). It can be found that Chen’s assessment, from another perspective, supported Hu’s judgment that Jizha had no greater moral values than public-mindedness when he rejected the power transfer.

In summary, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, and their students and followers noticed the adverse outcomes of Jizha’s *rang* and its causality of King Liao’s legitimacy crisis. Nonetheless, they developed more sophisticated principles than simply result-based criteria to reassess and criticize Jizha’s case, including the “public-mindedness” moral ground of *lixian* for excellence of leadership, the peculiar moral evaluation of Jizha’s situational rejection as *rang*, and the idea of *quan* as a higher level of understanding morality and wisdom in real-world politics. They shared a fundamental Confucian value that establishing a worthy candidate is highly esteemed, even if it requires sacrificing

⁴² 問：季札，胡文定公言其辭國以生亂，溫公又言其明君臣之大分。曰：可以受，可以無受。

one's personal desires and needs, and this was why so many scholars followed their reassessments of Jizha's case. These followers' criticisms can be classified into two categories. First, several critics pointed out that Jizha's *rang* directly triggered the next generation's legitimacy crisis, and he did not find an alternative worthy candidate to transfer the authority and stabilize the state, as mentioned by Cheng Yi.⁴³ Second, many critics agreed with Jizha's insufficient understanding of the public interest's priority and the flexibility of moral practice, as indicated by Hu Anguo and enhanced by Chen Chun.⁴⁴

However, in Jizha's defenders' view, Jizha's critics still did not fully understand the complexity of the interrelationship, differentiation, and rank-ordering of the public interest of *lixian*, ritual observance, and moral purity behind Jizha's decision-making. Furthermore, they underlined that the pursuit of excellent leadership with Jizha's self-sacrifice would cause a dilemma in Jizha's decision-making. If Jizha ascended to the throne by following the critics' advice, he would face a range of dangerous issues, including the destruction of the ethical orders of brotherhood and primogeniture, the risks to his safety, and the potential legitimacy crisis as a monarch established by the plan of *lixian*.

Therefore, Jizha's defenders have developed three main theses to support Jizha's decision to give up the throne. The first two theses are pragmatic and based on an appeal to political realism. The first thesis focuses on the necessity of self-protection in the political arena, especially given Wu's dangerous political environment of unnaturally dead monarchs and endless wars.⁴⁵ In this view, Jizha

⁴³ See Li Mingfu 李明復 in *Chunqiu Jiyi* 春秋集義 (bk. 42), Wang Yuanjie 王元傑 in *Chunqiu Yanyi* 春秋讞義 (bk. 9), Xue Yingqi 薛應旂 and Dong Fen 董份 in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31), Yu Yunwen 余允文 in *Zunmengbian* 尊孟辨 (bk. 1), and Zheng Yu 鄭玉 in *Chunqiu Queyi* 春秋闕疑 (bk. 38).

⁴⁴ See Chen Shen 陳深 in *Du Chunqiu Bian* 讀春秋編 (bk. 9), Xiao Ding 蕭定 and Jin Lüxiang 金履祥 in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31), and Zhang Shi 張栻 in *Guisi Mengzi Shuo* 癸巳孟子說 (bk. 7). Apart from this, some other of Jizha's critics like Hong Zikui 洪咨夔 in *Hongshi Chunqiu Shuo* 洪氏春秋說 (bk. 26) concentrated more on interstate relations.

⁴⁵ See Chen Quanzhi 陳全之 in *Pengchuang Rilu* 蓬窗日錄 (bk. 4), Gao Kang 高閔 in *Gaoshi Chunqiu Jizhu* 高氏春秋集註 (bk. 35), Hu Sanxing in his annotations of *Zizhi Tongjian* (bk. 45), Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* 春秋家說 (bk. 3A), Wang Qiao in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* (bk. 9), Wang Shizhen 王世貞 and Su Shi 蘇軾 in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31), and Zhao Pengfei

chose primogeniture just for self-preservation. The second thesis concentrates on the plan of *lixian* and agnatic seniority as the source of intensified power struggles. It was commonly mentioned that King Shoumeng's inheritance plan complicated the mechanisms of succession and thus caused instability, and Jizha was unable to solve the sophisticated conflicts of interest by himself.⁴⁶ Some scholars even blamed Wu's ministers as negligent in assisting King Liao's legitimization or suggested appointing a powerful minister as a supervisor to regulate the inheritance order.⁴⁷

The third thesis is grounded in the vision of Jizha's acting framework of Confucian rituals, values, and ethical orders. Some defenders tried to reinterpret Jizha's adherence to moral strictures as having blameless, pure intentions with a deep concern for maintaining order and stability in Wu's house and court (as another essential public interest). Beyond moral pursuit, Jizha's *rang* aimed to stop the endless hatred, betrayal, and murder in Wu's family, to preserve the tradition of primogeniture, and to abide by the absolute principles of rituals (*li zhi dajie* 禮之大節)—the fixed ruler-minister hierarchy—during the chaotic period.⁴⁸ Here, Jizha's defenders framed comprehensive considerations

趙鵬飛 in *Chunqiu Jingquan* 春秋經筵 (bks. 12, 14–15). Interestingly, a few scholars like Chen Quanzhi, Wang Qiao, and Wang Shizhen defended Jizha under the pretext of Daoism—they seemed to notice a moral dilemma of self-preservation and self-sacrifice.

⁴⁶ See Chen Fuliang 陳傅良 in *Chenshi Chunqiu Houzhuan* 陳氏春秋後傳 (bk. 10), Chen Quanzhi in *Pengchuang Rilü* (bk. 4), Lu Can 陸燾 in *Chunqiu Hushizhuan Bianyi* 春秋胡氏傳辨疑 (bk. 2), Shen Fei 沈斐 in *Chunqiu Bishi* 春秋比事 (bk. 8), Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 3A), Wang Qiao in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* (bk. 9), Ye Shi 葉適 in *Xixue Jiyan* 習學記言 (bks. 20, 33), and Zhu Heling 朱鶴齡 and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 in *Du Zuo Richao* 讀左日鈔 (bk. 10). This opinion was also agreed by Jizha's critic Yu Yunwen in *Zummengbian* (bk. 2).

⁴⁷ See Liu Chang 劉敞 in *Liushi Chunqiu Zhuan* 劉氏春秋傳 (bks. 11, 13), Lü Benzong 呂本中 in *Chunqiu Jijie* 春秋集解 (bk. 26), Zhan Ruoshui 湛若水 in *Chunqiu Zhengzhuan* 春秋正傳 (bk. 33), and Zhang Qia 張洽 in *Zhangshi Chunqiu Jizhu* 張氏春秋集注 (bk. 9). This opinion was also agreed by Jizha's critic Chen Shen in *Du Chunqiu Bian* (bk. 10).

⁴⁸ See Jia Xuanweng in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Xiangshuo* (bks. 20, 22, 27), Liu Chang in *Chunqiu Yilin* 春秋意林 (bk. 2), Lü Benzong in *Chunqiu Jijie* (bk. 5), Sima Guang in *Zizhi Tongjian* (bk. 1), Su Zhe 蘇轍 in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31) and *Sushi Chunqiu Jijie* 蘇氏春秋集解 (bk. 3), Wang Dang 王當 in *Chunqiu Chenzhuan* 春秋臣傳 (bk. 18), Wei Liaoweng 魏了翁 in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Yaoyi* 春秋左傳要義 (bk. 28), Zhan Ruoshui in *Chunqiu Zhengzhuan* (bk. 33), Zhang Daheng 張大亨 in *Chunqiu Tongxun* 春秋通訓 (bk. 3), and Zhao Pengfei in *Chunqiu Jingquan* (bk. 6).

behind Jizha's decision-making: they constructed a solid ground combining moral pursuit and outcome-based reasoning to defend and value the Confucian rituals and ethics implicit in the traditional mechanism of succession.

After a six-century-long debate, neither Jizha's critics nor his defenders had much success in finding a consensus or persuading the opposing side. Although the debate over Jizha's case has cooled down following the formation of Qing scholars' dogmatic judgment, some in-depth problematic ideas in Confucian moral and political philosophy behind the controversy remain unresolved (see Li 2016). In the next section, I will continue to explore both the complexity of Confucian judgments on moral pursuit and outcome-based reasoning and the deep tension between excellence of leadership versus precise and uncontentious mechanism of succession. I will argue that the commentaries from Jizha's critics reflect more sophisticated moral principles for critically evaluating *rang* in real-world political practices, but their inheritance plan of *lixian* is proven to have significant feasibility issues. Finally, I will list some other viewpoints with unsolved questions to rethink Jizha's case and the idea of *rang* in Confucian moral and political philosophy, which could guide future research.

V. Discussion

As shown above, from a perspective of moral philosophy, the judgments on Jizha's case from both the critics and defenders relied on very sophisticated Confucian ethical and reasoning frameworks without a significant distinction between "purely moral valuing" versus "purely outcome-based assessing." The various commentaries on Jizha's *rang* and the moral complexity behind them provided a new perspective to more deeply and comprehensively review the different branches and individual scholars of Neo-Confucianism in moral philosophy. The most representative one is the Cheng-Zhu school's role in the debate. They adjusted ritual systems and ethical frameworks in pursuit of better leadership as a shared fundamental value, and they also

reconstructed the moral principles and evaluation framework (as a form of moral particularism) to revisit the case of real-world political practice.⁴⁹

Here, I particularly highlight these scholars' thoughtful and prudent adoptions of result-based reasoning and *quan*. In the historical context of *gong si zhi bian*, there was a contention between Zhu Xi and Chen Liang 陳亮 (ca. 1143–1194), as Tillman (2020, 180–81) summarized:

Although Zhu was of course also interested in practical results, he claimed that enduring accomplishment arose only from integrity; therefore, he gave high priority to what he judged to be right and so regarded ethical standards to be absolute and unchanging. However, Chen perceived *quan* to be compatible with integrity and inherent in what is right.

In the debate with Chen Liang and the Shigong school 事功學派, Zhu Xi showed a very critical attitude towards the result-based reasoning and the application of *quan*: he negatively characterized Chen's position as *gongli* 功利 ("utilitarian") (see Tillman 2020, 182). But for the reassessment of Jizha's case, Zhu Xi himself agreed with both Hu Anguo's indication of moral discretion and Sima Guang's preservation of traditional rituals and principles. His student Chen Chun even installed *quan* as the core interpretation and solution of Jizha's case.

However, this does not mean that Zhu and Chen completely changed their fundamental values to a "consequentialist" position; instead, they combined outcome-based reasoning and *quan* with the pursuit of the public interest (the excellence of leadership) and the greater moral values of public-mindedness in a very critical way. In Chen Chun's chapter of *Jing Quan* 經權, he strictly limited the situational and personal conditions for applying the idea of *quan* to avoid the abuse of moral flexibility (see *Beixi Ziyi*, bk. 2, ch. 9). Similar to most accounts of morality, part of what it means to be moral is to be reasonably conscientious about consequences or to have some

⁴⁹ I particularly thank an anonymous reviewer's comments on the sophistication of Neo-Confucian moral philosophy implicit in the criticisms of Jizha's case.

forethought about likely outcomes in Jizha's critics' comments.⁵⁰ Even for Kantians and virtue ethicists, there are some places in morality for thinking about outcomes: consider that it would be debatable to support one's actions as in line with the virtue of benevolence if one gives recklessly or makes all kinds of self-centered assumptions about what other people need; the virtue of prudence is usually taken to be constituted largely of conscientious forethought about likely outcomes.⁵¹ It can be argued that these critics ultimately aimed to pursue and enhance the shared fundamental values (excellence of leadership and public-mindedness), and they thus designed very sophisticated moral principles to critically evaluate *rang* in real-world political practices and to avoid a purely result-based reasoning framework. The commentaries on Jizha's case reveal such critical concerns on a political agent's practice of Confucian virtues in the unique context, which helps us to explore the complexity of Confucian political ethics behind such judgments.

Nevertheless, from another perspective of political philosophy (especially political realism), Jizha's critics offered a highly problematic plan of inheritance and power transfer. The debate over Jizha's case revealed the deep tension between excellence of leadership versus precise and uncontentious mechanism of succession, and Jizha's critics supposed an idealistic scenario that if Jizha ascended to the throne following the plan of *lixian*, the state of Wu and its ruling house would inherently achieve great harmony and prosperity—no legitimacy crisis and bloody conflicts—based on the excellence of rulership. However, I argue against the feasibility of this plan of *lixian* because it designs very problematic mechanisms for the real-world political practice of succession and power transfer.

⁵⁰ The representative example will be utilitarianism, see Mill (2009).

⁵¹ Kant has certain "imperfect duties" that require a minimally responsible moral agent to devote time and effort to thinking about outcomes: consider, even some strict moralists will say that culpable negligence is a moral failure (see Hope 2023; Timmons 2021, 183–205). Here, "culpable negligence" is defined as being insufficiently motivated or concerned to figure out the likely good or bad effects of one's behavior. I particularly thank Justin Tiwald's comments on the sophistication of the Cheng-Zhu school's judgments on Jizha's case.

The accounts of the stories of Jizha and Taibo suggest that at least two steps were taken in the interest of *lixian*—the former king’s political testament and the voluntary, candid negotiation of both sides in power transfer. The first step usually establishes agnatic seniority to replace primogeniture, and the second step is somewhat “institutionalized” into the customary agendas of “renunciating thrice” and “mutual renunciations.” However, neither of the steps has a clear, constant mechanism that minimizes conflicts of interest and avoids damaging or imperiling the successor’s legitimacy.

The former king’s political testament is based in part on his supreme authority of fatherhood in Confucian family ethics; however, this supreme authority is temporary due to the mechanism of “intergenerational transmission” (*daiji chuandi* 代際傳遞, see Ames and Rosemont 2016, 73–96). When the father dies, the oldest son will inherently succeed in this kind of supreme authority as patriarch over his younger brothers. In both cases of Jizha and Taibo, it can be observed that Zhufan and Taibo, as the oldest princes, all have the prior right to speak in the decision-making of succession after the old king’s death. That is why the oldest prince’s voluntary compliance with the political testament is a necessary condition to realize the plan of *lixian*—except the oldest prince dies in advance to the father, like in the case of King Wen’s enacting King Wu instead of the oldest prince Bo Yikao 伯邑考 as his crown prince (see Feich 2023, 99–104). Nevertheless, even if the oldest prince transfers the power and authority to the worthy one, there will be numerous potential conflicts between the oldest prince’s descendants and the worthy one’s successor. That was why both Taibo and Zhufan claimed that they would give up all positions and leave the political center.

The political struggle between King Liao and King Helü shows how complex the legitimacy crisis is if the inheritance order of agnatic seniority lasts for more than two generations. Helü took it for granted that he had the potential inheritance right because his father Yumo—as the reigning king with supreme authority—could authorize him as the crown prince (returning to primogeniture) anytime; indeed, the dead former kings could not block this decision. This means that the prior inheritance right of either Jizha or Liao is objectively based on Yumo’s

non-exercise of his capability to enact Helü as the heir. Therefore, Helü could confidently challenge Liao's legitimacy to rule, even though Liao was Helü's uncle and supported by Jizha and Wu's people. Both Jizha's critics and defenders highlighted that Helü might find another opportunity to overthrow or assassinate Jizha—just like the murder of Liao—if Jizha came to power; the disputed and manipulatable inheritance order had already fuelled Helü's political ambition.⁵² Such a mechanism of succession based on agnatic seniority has been proven to be unsustainable and unreliable by historical practices around the world (Kokkonen et al. 2022, 190–203).

The second step of a frank negotiation between both sides in power transfer requires very stringent conditions to be achieved. Some of Jizha's defenders noted that a successful negotiation for *lixian* needed both sides to be outstandingly virtuous and selfless, and Jizha's elder brothers obviously did not have the same high level of political virtue and awareness as Taibo to completely give up their political power and position by “renunciating thrice” and other decisive actions (like disfiguring appearance).⁵³ The dialogue between Qu Huyong and Zhao Wu even implied that Yumo's willingness to pass the throne to Jizha might be deceitful (Durrant et al. 2016, 1282–83).

Moreover, there are ways in which even fully consensual transfers of power can cast doubt on the legitimacy of the next ruler. Consider, if Zhufan had passed the throne to Jizha as selflessly as Taibo, Jizha would still have been suspected of being an ambitious, selfish, and power-hungry man with a lower moral level than Zhufan. Even if such suspicions were baseless, doubts about Jizha's sincerity could have been enough for Zhufan or Zhufan's descendants to come back to claim the crown and overthrow Jizha or Jizha's successor in the future.⁵⁴ In such a case, Jizha would be in a very precarious situation after enthronement because his legitimacy to rule would come from his highly virtuous

⁵² For instance, see Jia Xuanweng in *Chunqiu Jizhuan Xiangshuo* (bk. 22), Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 3A), Wang Qiao in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* (bk. 9), and Xue Yingqi in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31).

⁵³ See Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 3A) and Wang Qiao in *Chunqiu Jizhuan* (bk. 9).

⁵⁴ See the case of Ziyu 子魚 in *Zuozhuan* (bk. 5) and comments from Lu Can in *Chunqiu Hushizhuan Bianyi* (bk. 2).

elder brother. Being in so precarious a position, he might have had to resort to conquering the state of Chu and even reunifying China—like King Wen and King Wu—to reinforce his fragile authority.

In summary, a vulnerability of legitimacy is almost inevitable in such a plan of *lixian* and agnatic seniority without a precise mechanism of succession, which leads to Jizha's dilemma in decision-making. Hence, the thesis by some of Jizha's critics on Jizha's renunciation of power as the primary source of the legitimacy crisis is not valid. I argue that the critics' plan for Jizha's enthronement is almost impossible to realize due to the high risks of instability and chaos. Only the idealistic scenario of Taibo's legend may achieve the pursuit of excellence in leadership through *lixian*.

In the end, I will list some alternative perspectives to further review the complex Jizha's case and its Neo-Confucian debate. For instance, from the view of political rationality, could we compare the plan of *lixian* by Jizha's critics with other cases of "political self-sacrifice"—benefiting the whole political community by abolishing the existing ethical orders and ignoring the natural autonomy of self-protection?⁵⁵ On the other side, some Jizha's defenders stressed the "self-interested" nature of a political actor (especially in the political arena with a lower level of morality), and they imagined and stimulated how Jizha could survive in Wu's dangerous political environment under "the law of the jungle," where Jizha's potential competitors could use any unethical, brutal means to seize the throne.⁵⁶ Could we see these ideas as comparable to Thomas Hobbes's interpretation of the violent external environment as the source of "prudence" in human nature and rationality (Hobbes 2018, 41)?

Besides, I detect a very interesting Confucian vision of an ideal political actor. These Jizha's defenders remark on a unique precondition of one's selfless devotion to the public interest. The majority of political actors in the arena must share a high-level understanding of their fundamental moral principles and compulsory obligations for

⁵⁵ For such a behavioral model of political self-sacrifice, see Fierke (2012, 55–77).

⁵⁶ For instance, Wang Fuzhi in *Chunqiu Jiashuo* (bk. 3A) and Wang Shizhen in *Shiji Pinglin* (bk. 31).

their role-playing political identities. Otherwise, acting with rigid moral obligations and principles in an amoral and anarchic environment is seen as unwise and lacking vigilance. Could we review these Neo-Confucian comments on Jizha's case as a Confucian reflection on the theory of rational decision-making? In my opinion, at the very least, they support that Confucian moral politics is not the opposition to political rationality and realism.

From another perspective of “co-governance” (*gongzhi* 共治) and “power-sharing” (*quanli fenxiang* 權力分享), could we suppose that, according to the Confucian virtue of *rang*, Confucianism does not reject the power-sharing of several worthy candidates? It seems that Jizha's defenders only reject the dangerous game among “self-interested” political actors with a low level of morality—where capable candidates find it hard to safely make contributions and selflessly benefit the public. If the scenario is as idealistic as Taibo's legend, will Confucianism lead to a progressive form of government beyond absolute monarchy?

Here, I find at least two weaknesses that should be explained further: how to ensure the reliability and sustainability of such a power-sharing system; and how to find effective ways of regulating competitors' behaviors (especially the violation of rules and violent coups). In traditional Confucian political thought, the major hope is placed on the moral education and self-cultivation of political leadership to become self-disciplined and “selfless” (e.g., see Ames 1998, 23–8; Tiwald 2019; Wang 2016, 565). Based on the debate on Jizha's case, should we pay more attention to the development of institutional settings (see Bell 2016; Kim 2018a)? Any virtue-based approach faces the challenge of *who decides who is most virtuous*. Moreover, the most virtuous, by nature or in line with *qian xun*, are not inclined to assert their moral superiority, as Doil Kim (2023) indicated; if they do so, it can seem “self-interested.” Similarly, we need to explore a more effective way of selecting virtuous ministers to staff the government—the current civil service exam was one attempt to institutionalize such a process, but the results were, at best, mixed. Developing more complete institutions or processes for selection has the advantage of shared acceptance and avoiding personalizing such decisions. Even

when they function badly, if people support the institutions and they are preserved, the state will remain stable.⁵⁷

There are even more research angles to rethink Jizha's case. Scholars can see it as merely about preserving primogeniture or Jizha's self-protection, without complex concerns imagined in later commentaries. Or they can further explore the roots of Jizha's reasoning and acting framework from ancient Chinese rituals and cultures. More in-depth research on the Neo-Confucian moral philosophy behind Jizha's case also holds high potential. Can we demonstrate the sophisticated interrelationship and differentiation of *lixian*, ritual observance, and personal moral purity from the corpus of Jizha's critics? Can we employ Jizha's case to manifest Loubna El Amine (2015) and Sungmoon Kim's (2018b) different opinions on ruler's virtue of "being responsible"? I sincerely expect more extensive and detailed analyses of Jizha's case and the idea of *rang*, and I believe the various research angles will contribute to a more comprehensive vision of "Confucian humility" and Confucian moral and political philosophy.

⁵⁷ I particularly thank Philip J. Ivanhoe for the sparkling ideas on the potential problems behind Jizha's story.

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