Review Article

Rethinking the Origins of Chinese Historiography: The *Zuo Zhuan* Revisited*

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The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography. By Wai-yee Li. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007. Pp. xxii + 449. $49.50/£36.95.

The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography is a most welcome addition to the growing number of Western-language studies on the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳. Wai-yee Li's eloquent book is the fruit of impeccable scholarship. It puts forward an abundance of insightful and highly original analyses and fully demonstrates the advantages of the skilful application of literary techniques to early Chinese historiography. This work is sure to become an indispensable tool for any scholar interested in the *Zuo zhuan* or early Chinese historiography in general. Furthermore, many of Li's observations are likely to encourage further in-depth research on this foundational text.

To illustrate the importance of *The Readability of the Past,* it is worth highlighting its position *vis-à-vis* prior Western-language studies on the *Zuo zhuan*. Oddly enough, despite its standing as the largest pre-imperial text, despite its canonical status, and despite its position as a fountainhead of Chinese historiography—the *Zuo zhuan* was virtually neglected by mainstream Occidental Sinology throughout the twentieth century. Notwithstanding the pioneering (and highly controversial) study of Bernhard Karlgren, "On the Authenticity and Nature of the *Tso Chuan,*" which was published back in 1928, the *Zuo zhuan* rarely stood at the focus of scholarly endeavour.[1] The only Western-language publication dedicated entirely to

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[1] See Karlgren, "On the Authenticity and Nature of the *Tso Chuan,*" *Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift* 32 (1926), pp. 1–65. Many scholars, beginning with Alfred Forke (in *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 6 [1928], pp. 514–15) and Henri Maspero (in *Journal Asiatique* 212 [1928],

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the *Zuo zhuan* was Burton Watson's selective translation of some of its narratives; in addition, a handful of articles were published dealing directly with the *Zuo zhuan*.[2] In retrospect, the wide gap between the *Zuo zhuan*'s monumental importance in the history of Chinese classical studies, historiography, and literature, on the one hand, and the meager interest in this work among earlier generations of Western scholars, on the other, is astonishing, to put it mildly.

There are several reasons for Occidental Sinologists' relative indifference toward the *Zuo zhuan*. An assault on the text's authenticity—beginning with Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) and echoed by several eminent Chinese and Japanese scholars during the early twentieth century—dictated utmost caution in tending to the text, as many researchers considered it a forgery from the Han dynasty era.[3] Other scholars might have been discouraged by the *Zuo zhuan*'s lack of an identifiable author, which

(Note 1—*Continued*)

pp. 159–65) criticized numerous deficiencies of Karlgren's approach (for more recent criticisms, see, e.g., Sin Chou-yiu [Shan Zhouyao 單周堯], "Gao Benhan *Zuo zhuan* zuozhe fei Luguo ren shuo zhiyi" 高本漢《左傳》作者非魯國人説質疑, *Journal of Oriental Studies* 29, no. 2 [1991], pp. 207–36; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Distribution of '於' and '于' in *Zuozhuan* 左傳: A Stylistic Approach" [unpublished manuscript]). Karlgren's study prompted Maspero to engage in his own extensive research of the *Zuo zhuan,* published as "La composition et la date du Tso tchouan," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 1 (1931–32), pp. 137–215. Justifiable criticisms of Karlgren's study notwithstanding, its pioneering effort to use grammatical approach toward analysing the text's authenticity deserves utmost respect.

2 For Watson's translation see his *Tso Chuan: Selections from China's Oldest Narrative History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). For other major articles dedicated to the *Zuo zhuan* see (in sequence of their appearance): Vitalij A. Rubin, "O Datirovkie i Autentichnosti *Tszo Chjuan,*" *Problemy Vostokovedeniia* 1 (1959), pp. 78–85; Roland Felber, "Neue Möglichkeiten und Kriterien für die Bestimmung der Authentizität des *Zuo-Zhuan,*" *Archiv Orientální* 34 (1966), pp. 80–91; Ronald C. Egan, "Narratives in *Tso Chuan,*" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 37, no. 2 (1977), pp. 323–52; John C. Y. Wang (Wang Jingyu 王靖宇), "Early Chinese Narrative: The *Tso-chuan* as Example," in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays,* ed. Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 3–20; David Johnson, "Epic and History in Early China: The Matter of Wu Tzu-hsü," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (1981), pp. 255–71; Kidder Smith, Jr., "*Zhouyi* Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan,*" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49, no. 2 (1989), pp. 421–63.

3 For Kang Youwei's views, see his "*Han shu* yiwenzhi bianwei" 漢書藝文志辨偽, rpt. in *Guji kaobian congkan* 古籍考辨叢刊, ed. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1955), pp. 605–17; for a criticism of Kang's views, see, e.g., Hans van Ess, "The Old Text/New Text Controversy: Has the 20th Century Got It Wrong?" *T'oung Pao* 80 (1994), pp. 146–70. For other attempts to attribute the composition of the *Zuo zhuan* to various Han personalities, see,

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contrasts it sharply with another masterpiece of early Chinese historiography, the *Shiji* 史記, that indeed attracted much more attention from Western researchers.[4] Lastly, the absence of a handy and up-to-date English translation of the *Zuo zhuan*[5] and the difficulty to follow its interwoven narratives submerged within a rigid chronological structure may have deterred undergraduate and graduate students from approaching the text. These factors were apparently responsible for the paucity of *Zuo zhuan*-related studies until the end of the twentieth century.

The dearth of systematic research on the *Zuo zhuan* resulted in inevitable flattening of this extraordinarily sophisticated work. Thus, many scholars were predisposed toward underestimating the breadth of the text's sources, linking it to but a few literary genres, such as "didactic anecdotes," "heroic narratives," or "historical romances."[6] Others simplified the text's intellectual scope to an unadulterated manifestation of the putative Confucian outlook of its author(s). For instance, Burton Watson, who is an exemplar of this approach, averred that "the aim of the *Zuo zhuan* . . . [is] to edify, and its lessons are overwhelmingly political and moral in nature. . . . [Its speeches] are generally uniform in style and express the same philosophical outlook. . . . [Its narratives and speeches] are marked by an attitude of

(Note 3—*Continued*)

e.g., Hong Ye 洪業 (William Hung), "*Chunqiu* jing zhuan yinde xu" 春秋經傳引得序, in idem, ed., *Chunqiu jing zhuan yinde* 春秋經傳引得 (1937; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1983), pp. i–cvi; Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉, *Saden no shisōshiteki kenkyū* 左傳の思想史的研究 (1935; reprint, Tokyo: Iwanami shoten 岩波書店, 1955). Tsuda's views had been refuted in a detailed study by Kamata Tadashi 鎌田正, *Saden no seiritsu to sono tenkai* 左傳の成立と其の展開 (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten 大修館書店, 1963).

4 A similar bias in favour of the texts that are attributable to individual authors is discernible in studies of early Chinese ideological lore, as innumerably more studies deal with such works as the *Lunyu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子 or the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 than with multi-authored compilations such as the *Guanzi* 管子, *Liji* 禮記 or the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋. It may be not a coincidence that a recent upsurge of interest in the latter texts (and, *mutatis mutandis,* in the *Zuo zhuan*) coincides with the growing awareness that even the so-called "authored" texts were usually multi-authored compilations (see e.g. Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999]).

5 The *Zuo zhuan* had been translated (with certain omissions) into English by James Legge, *The Ch'un Ts'ew, with the Tso Chuen,* vol. 5 of *The Chinese Classics* (1872; reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960) and into French by Séraphin Couvreur, *Tch'ouen ts'iou et Tso tchouan* (Ho Kien Fu: Mission Catholique, 1914). A new, excellent translation of the *Zuo zhuan,* co-authored by Wai-yee Li, Stephen Durrant and David C. Schaberg is due soon from the University of Washington Press, and it will surely bolster significantly *Zuo zhuan*-related research.

6 See, respectively, Egan, "Narratives," Johnson, "Epic," and Henri Maspero, *China in Antiquity,* trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978).

underlying rationalism and humanism."[7] Watson's views were shared by mainstream Western scholarship. While the occasional dissenting voices pointed to the complexity of the *Zuo zhuan*—Mark Lewis, for example, noted that a significant number of its speeches "have no moral message" and "depict a world alien or hostile to Zhanguo [戰國, Warring States, 453–221 BCE] Confucianism"—these scholars remained but a small minority.[8]

Over the past decade, the field of *Zuo zhuan* studies has undergone dramatic change. More English-language studies have been published within the span of a few years than in the entire preceding century. David Schaberg fired the opening salvo with *A Patterned Past,* which was followed by the present reviewer's *Foundations of Confucian Thought* and now Wai-yee Li's *Readability of the Past;* and these books have been accompanied by several lengthy articles.[9] While the authors' perspectives markedly differ, they all believe that the work is much more profound and sophisticated than was previously thought and are attuned to the diversity of its sources. Moreover, all these studies incorporate a fair share of the recent insights of Chinese and Japanese scholars. *The Readability of the Past* marks a new height attained by the *Zuo zhuan*-related studies in the West. What is more, its publication may open new avenues for exploring this text in the future.

The primary objective of Wai-yee Li's study is to trace the earliest stages in the formation of Chinese historical consciousness. From the book's very outset, she explains that the *Zuo zhuan* does not present the past in a straightforward and "univocal" manner, but through an assortment of conflicting interpretations that allow

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7 Watson, *The Tso Chuan,* pp. xx, xxi, xxiv, modifying Watson's transliteration to Pinyin.

8 For these statements, see Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 16. Later, however, Lewis modified his view, claiming that the aim of the *Zuo zhuan* was "to validate *Ru* teachings . . . through writing them into a narrative of the past" (*Writing and Authority,* p. 132). In a personal conversation in 2006, Lewis told me that the latter statement does not adequately present his view of the *Zuo zhuan,* and he did not aim at reducing the text to a Confucian polemical tool.

9 See David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001); Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); both Schaberg and myself published our preliminary results in two articles in *Early China* 22 (1997) ("Remonstrance in Eastern Zhou Historiography" and "Intellectual Change in the Chunqiu Period: The Reliability of the Speeches in the *Zuo Zhuan* as Sources of Chunqiu Intellectual History," pp. 133–79 and 77–132 respectively). See also Eric Henry, " 'Junzi Yue' Versus 'Zhongni Yue' in *Zuozhuan,*" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59, no. 1 (1999), pp. 125–61; A. Taeko Brooks, "Heaven, *Li,* and the Formation of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳," *Oriens Extremus* 44 (2003–04), pp. 51–100.

for disparate and at times contradictory readings, which run the gamut from the naïve and moralizing to the overtly cynical. Li brilliantly unveils the power considerations behind the text's moralizing rhetoric; demonstrates how signs of human or divine intent could be misread, manipulated, or otherwise contested; and juxtaposes the quest of the *Zuo zhuan*'s protagonists and compilers for a moral and ritually appropriate political order with the disintegration of the Zhou 周 world's sociopolitical fabric during the Chunqiu 春秋 (Springs and Autumns, 771–453 BCE) period. In what may be an indirect response to Watson, Li shows how the "edifying perspective is followed by a demystifying one" (p. 357). Moreover, she demonstrates how the text repeatedly generates, rather than resolves, tension in all that concerns making sense of the past:

> If one can speak of an emergent sense of history embodied by the text, it would lie precisely at the intersection of varying conceptions of interpretation and rhetoric brought to bear on the past within a larger context of competing solutions to the crisis of instability and disintegration represented through the events of the 255 years covered by *Zuozhuan*. (p. 27)

This citation succinctly encapsulates what, in my estimation, are the major achievements of Wai-yee Li's approach. The "sense of history" in the *Zuo zhuan* is not a static given, but "emergent." Instead of pursuing a single mode of interpretation for a particular event, there are "varying conceptions." In addition, the protagonists and compilers' attempts at comprehending the past are not merely an intellectual exercise, according to Li, for they arise as part of the need to address the actual "crisis of instability and disintegration." Rather than reading the *Zuo zhuan* as a simplistic confirmation of Confucian/Traditionalist ideology, Li reveals some of the immense complexity of this text and proposes innovative methods for navigating through it. Her historical sensitivity, cognizance of minute details, and mastery of secondary studies (including those by numerous traditional commentators) have rendered *The Readability of the Past* a true masterpiece, which will henceforth constitute a prerequisite for any scholar wishing to delve into the *Zuo zhuan* or, for that matter, early Chinese historiography.

Wai-yee Li's work demonstrates the advantages of a literary approach to the early Chinese historiographic tradition. In many respects, her study is reminiscent of *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel,*[10] the magnum opus of Andrew Plaks, her mentor at Princeton: like Plaks, Li occasionally interjects highly provocative interpretations of what is purported to be an edifying text, discloses the narrative's hidden irony, exposes the links between independent narrative units and creatively utilizes the insights of later interpreters. Her masterful ability to extract multiple meanings from a seemingly straightforward story already comes to expression in the

[10] Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

first chapter. In a section devoted to the first major narrative of the *Zuo zhuan*—the struggle between Lord Zhuang of Zheng 鄭莊公 (r. 743–701 BCE) and his brother Duan 段 (pp. 59–70)—Li offers four possible interpretations: "naïve, suspicious, ambivalent and cynical." Every alternative provides a radically different assessment of Lord Zhuang's morality and motives; each is supported by either passages from the *Zuo zhuan* narrative, or the narrator's comments, or interpretation of the relevant *Chunqiu* 春秋 passage, or later commentaries. Li appears to be inclined towards the cynical reading, which is "never openly endorsed" (p. 68), but which is apparently more appealing to a contemporary analyst unbound by Confucian moral norms. While every individual reader's preference is naturally a matter of personal taste, at the very least Li manages to effectively destroy the reductionist view according to which the *Zuo zhuan* served as pure propaganda for "Confucian" values. Henceforth, any student of the *Zuo zhuan* will have to take into account the possibility of multiple hidden meanings within the narrative, rather than opting for a single, even if conventional, perspective.

The Readability of the Past is by no means an easy text. The book presupposes a thorough understanding of the Chunqiu and Zhanguo political and intellectual history, so that it might well be beyond the grasp of many undergraduate students. However, the work is bound to captivate a more sophisticated audience, both due to its novel perception of formation of Chinese historical thought and for its in-depth analysis of the *Zuo zhuan,* which is as rewarding as the best of traditional commentaries. These, in addition to excellent translations make the reading truly rewarding.[11] Had Wai-yee Li's perceptive study been available when I was conducting my own research on the *Zuo zhuan,* I would certainly have benefited greatly from it and would probably have had to modify some of my interpretations.

[11] Inevitably for such a lengthy manuscript there are a few inaccuracies and improper translations. Thus, Li misleadingly translates the term *ren* 仁 in the same passage once as "benevolence" and once as "nobility" (p. 288); inaccurately refers to the term *zhu Xia* 諸夏 (all the Xia, an ethnic self-identification of the pre-imperial "Chinese") as the "Central States" (p. 306); translates the term *bawang* 霸王 (monarch and hegemon) as purely "hegemon" (p. 286); mistranslates Mengzi's 孟子 dictum "*Spring and Autumn [Annals]* have no [records of] just war" (春秋無義戰) as referring to the eponymous period rather than to the text (p. 346); misspells You Ruo 有若 as You Rou (p. 343); and occasionally refers to a single personage Ru Shuqi 女叔齊 or Sima Hou 司馬侯 as two different persons (pp. 8, 309, 348). These are truly minor points; in my eyes the only real deficiency of the book is its very short index, which should have been significantly expanded given the book's length and complexity. Also, a list of translated passages, such as the one appended to Schaberg's *Patterned Past,* could have greatly benefitted the reader.

Li excels at analysing the subtleties of the *Zuo zhuan*'s narrative. Rare are the occasions in which I felt that her analysis requires substantial reservations. Perhaps the most significant qualification that I have concerns the famous correspondence between Shuxiang 叔向, a conservative Jin 晉 minister, and Zichan 子產, the distinguished Zheng 鄭 leader, in 536 BCE. In a lengthy letter, Shuxiang criticizes Zichan's reforms, especially the promulgation of a penal code, which was cast in bronze and thus presumably became accessible to the entire population. The missive concludes with a prediction of Zheng's imminent downfall:

> Would Zheng perhaps be destroyed at the end of your [Zichan's] generation? I have heard, when a state is about to fall, there are bound to be numerous regulations. Does it not refer to this![12]

Zichan responds to Zheng's gloomy prediction with a terse reply:

> If it is as you said, sir—I [Qiao] lack talent and cannot reach as far as the sons and grandsons. I am using these codes to save this generation. Although I cannot obey your command, how dare I forget the great kindness [of your admonition]![13]

This rare instance of friction between two of the most respected personages in the *Zuo zhuan* is commonly interpreted as a manifestation of the author's support for Shuxiang's conservative position.[14] This supposition is predicated on three observations: Shuxiang's letter is considerably longer and much more assertive than Zichan's reply; immediately following this exchange of letters, the *Zuo zhuan* cites a Jin minister, Shi Wenbo 士文伯, who accurately predicts that Zheng will suffer Heavenly punishment (fires) for casting the penal codes; and Confucius is cited elsewhere as strongly critical of a similar publication of the legal code in the state of Jin in 510 BCE. The reference to Confucius is particularly meaningful in bolstering the impression that the *Zuo zhuan*'s author advocated a pro-Shuxiang stance. Namely, to the extent that the author's "Confucian affinities" may be taken for granted, he is assumed to adhere to Confucius's, and *mutatis mutandis* to Shuxiang's position.

12 「終子之世，鄭其敗乎？肸聞之，『國將亡，必多制』，其此之謂乎！」See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 , annot., *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981; hereafter *Zuo*), Zhao 6, p. 1276. I follow Li's translation (p. 364).

13 「若吾子之言——僑不才，不能及子孫，吾以救世也。既不承命，敢忘大惠！」(ibid., p. 1277)

14 For a detailed analysis of the figures of Shuxiang and Zichan in the *Zuo zhuan,* including of their exchange re the legal code, see Yuri Pines, "The Search for Stability: Late Ch'un-ch'iu Thinkers," *Asia Major,* 3d ser., 10, no. 1–2 (1997), pp. 1–47.

Wai-yee Li heeds to this conventional wisdom, although she also perceptively notices that the narration of the story about the Zheng code differs from that of the Jin: in the former, the narrator cites, if only briefly, Zichan's affirmation of the casting, while the latter lacks this sort of backing. However, upon a closer examination of the final lines of Shuxiang's letter and Zichan's response, it is evident that the differences run even deeper and are indeed quite crucial. Notwithstanding Shuxiang's prediction, the state of Zheng survived for another century and a half, until its annexation by the state of Han 韓 in 375 BCE. Yet the same cannot be said for Shuxiang's progeny, who were eliminated shortly after his death (in 514 BCE, a mere twenty-two years after the correspondence). In light of the above, Zichan's reply—"I cannot reach as far as the sons and grandsons"—is rather ironical because it was ultimately Shuxiang, not Zichan, who failed to preserve his family line. This irony regrettably escapes Li's attention, for despite the *Zuo zhuan*'s ostensible support for Shuxiang's position, the narrative might indeed suggest that the author sympathized with Zichan's reformist stance. If this analysis is correct, then this passage appears to harbor a rare instance of veiled disagreement between the author and Confucius on an issue of ideological import.[15]

The Readability of the Past focuses on perceptions of history rather than history itself. More specifically, the historical record serves as but a backdrop for competing interpretations and manipulations of the meanings that were put forth by the protagonists and anonymous scribes who contributed to the formation of the *Zuo zhuan,* as well as by later compilers, transmitters, and commentators. Although Li does not set out to discover what actually happened during the two and a half centuries that comprise the Chunqiu period, she frequently displays remarkably detailed knowledge of the subtleties of the era's historical processes that are presented in the *Zuo zhuan*—from the disintegration of the multi-state Zhou order, to the demise of the powerful ruling houses, and on through the inter- and intra-lineage struggles in major states. Her mastery of the Chunqiu period's immensely complex history is most laudable. That said, I am compelled to take issue with several of her assertions.

In my estimation, a significant flaw in her otherwise excellent narration is the supposition that hegemony in the Chunqiu world was based on "honoring the Zhou house and keeping the barbarians at bay" (p. 257). While the first part of this sentence is undoubtedly correct, the second inadvertently imposes a Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) perspective onto the *Zuo zhuan*. Although this attribution is common, it is entirely false.

A few years ago, both Nicola Di Cosmo and I elaborated on the evolution of the notion of "Sino-barbarian" dichotomy (Di Cosmo concentrated on the "Sino-nomadic" sub-category). Each of us independently arrived at the conclusion that this notion apparently matured only at a relatively late stage in the development of

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15 For an interesting attempt to trace other differences between the two, see Henry, " 'Junzi Yue'."

Chinese civilization, namely the early Han dynasty, when, for the first time in its history, "China" faced the unprecedented challenge of pure nomads, who proved to be both inconquerable and unassimilable.[16] Prior to that only a single pre-imperial text—*The Gongyang Commentary of the Spring and Autumn Annals* 公羊傳—explicitly promotes the idea that the "barbarians" were a major threat to the "Chinese"; and even there this idea merits only a few passages, which may well be a later addition from the Han dynasty.[17] Other early texts, foremost among them the *Zuo zhuan,* regularly evince pejorative attitudes toward aliens and include frequent comparisons of the Other to "beasts and birds"; yet aliens are only rarely portrayed as a major threat to the Zhou world.

The single most prominent case in the *Zuo zhuan* that can justifiably be construed as an expression of "Chinese" solidarity against the "barbarians" is the pronouncement of Guan Zhong 管仲 (d. 645)—the architect of Qi 齊 hegemony—in the wake of the massive attacks that the Rong 戎 and Di 狄 tribesmen unleashed against the core Zhou states in the second quarter of the sixth century BCE: "Rong and Di are jackals and wolves who cannot be satiated. The Xia [Chinese] are kin who cannot be abandoned."[18] This passage, along with a handful of similar statements that are scattered throughout the *Zuo zhuan* and other pre-imperial texts, ostensibly lends credence to the idea that the notion of hegemony was directed primarily at solidifying the "Chinese" states and repelling alien intruders and this is perhaps the reason that Li cites this passage twice (p. 257 n. 13 and p. 276). That said, students of this era would best be advised to avoid overemphasizing these pronouncements, for they do not necessarily express ideological enmity toward the Other. Instead, these statements should be treated contextually

16 See detailed discussions in Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Yuri Pines, "Beasts or Humans: Pre-Imperial Origins of the Sino-Barbarian Dichotomy," in *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World,* ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 59–102.

17 The *Gongyang zhuan* was composed in the second half of the Warring States period (see details in Joachim Gentz, *Das Gongyang zhuan: Auslegung und Kanonisierung der Frühlings und Herbstannalen (Chunqiu)* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001], pp. 345–403); but certain additions to it might have been made in the early Han period, before it was briefly elevated to the position of the most important of the canonical texts. The *Gongyang zhuan* contains a few strongly pronounced statements about the perennial nature of "Sino-barbarian" conflict (see e.g. *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan zhushu* 春秋公羊傳注疏 , annot. He Xiu 何休 and Xu Yan 徐彥 , rpt. *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 , ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991], *juan* 卷 10, p. 2249 [Xi 4]), but these may belong to the latest stratum of this text. Significantly, Gentz does not identify this notion as essential to the *Gongyang* tradition.

18 「戎狄豺狼，不可厭也。諸夏親暱，不可棄也。」(*Zuo,* Min 1, p. 256).

within the framework of the given conflict, for insatiability is often attributed (in the *Zuo zhuan* and other texts) to different "Chinese" polities, and "bestiality" is routinely associated with anybody lacking proper ritual norms, most notably uneducated "Chinese" commoners.[19] Neither the *Zuo zhuan* nor any other datable pre-imperial text singles out the "barbarians" as the principal menace to "Chinese" civilization.

Li attempts to identify an "anti-barbarian" stance in the policies of Lord Wen of Jin 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE)—the second Chunqiu hegemon—and his descendants, but her conclusions are unconvincing. Thus, the connection between Lord Wen's intervention on behalf of the ousted King Xiang of Zhou 周襄王 (r. 651–619 BCE) and the fact that the king's challenger, Prince Dai 王子帶, was supported by the Di tribesmen, is flimsy, as it was none other than King Xiang who allied with the Di in the first place. In later periods, the "anti-barbarian" motif in Jin policy erodes even further and is primarily associated with the Jin struggle against the state of Chu 楚, which is commonly confused with "barbarians" (as discussed below). At times, Wai-yee Li perceptively notices the problematic of deeming "anti-barbarianism" to be a cornerstone of the hegemons' political platform. Thus, she is puzzled by the Jin rulers' intermittent "pro-barbarian" actions and statements, which she considers to be "paradoxical" (pp. 297–98). However, this attitude was not paradoxical at all, as the repulsion of alien incursions was only rarely (most notably at around 660 BCE) a chief concern of the Zhou states. During the period covered by the *Zuo zhuan,* ethnic and cultural identity played a minor role in the complex framework of inter-state relations. Otherwise, how can we explain the fact that the Zhou king himself formed an alliance with the Di tribesmen, or that by the end of the Chunqiu period the unmistakably "barbarian" southeastern powers of Wu 吳 and Yue 越 had become important and legitimate, even if at times unwelcome, players on the Zhou inter-state scene?

To demonstrate the weakness of "ethnic" interpretations of the Chunqiu political dynamics, suffice it to go back to the example of Lord Wen of Jin—the second and arguably most famous hegemon—whose exploits are discussed by Li in great detail. It is worth reminding here that Lord Wen (Chong'er 重耳) was born of a Rong mother and spent most of his protracted exile among Di tribesmen. Furthermore, Hu Yan 狐偃 (Zifan 子犯)—one of Wen's closest followers and arguably the architect of his hegemony—was of "pure" Rong stock. Yet these "barbarian" connections play no role whatsoever in the appraisals of Lord Wen throughout the pages of the *Zuo zhuan,* and the topic of ethnicity appears so marginal that Hu Yan's alien origins are almost never noticed by the commentators (Wai-yee Li included). It appears as if ethnicity mattered little to Chunqiu statesmen. At the very least, these examples debunk the prevalent assumption that there is a connection between hegemony and ethnicity during the Chunqiu era.

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[19] See details in Pines, "Beasts or Humans."

This topic leads us to another, closely-related misconception: the putative "non-Chineseness" of the state of Chu. Like the issue of the "barbarians," this view is a projection of later outlooks on the *Zuo zhuan* narrative. The current archeological record clearly indicates that, despite being located on the periphery of the Zhou world, the state of Chu (like the state of Qin 秦) was an integral part of the core Zhou civilization, at least with respect to its ruling élites. Only during the late Chunqiu-early Zhanguo period did both states begin to nurture their distinct cultural identity, which gave rise to their "barbarian" image in assorted Zhanguo texts, most notably the aforementioned *Gongyang zhuan* and (in the case of Chu) such an influential text as *Mengzi* 孟子.[20] The idea of the Chu's strangeness was subsequently so firmly entrenched in the Zhanguo and early imperial texts that most traditional and modern scholars consider it a given and thus read the *Zuo zhuan* from this vantage point. However, a close reading of the text exposes the inaccuracy of this view.

Wai-yee Li, like David Schaberg before her, is aware of the fact that the *Zuo zhuan* does not contain so much as a single allusion to the Chu's cultural otherness ("Chu is . . . never designated as the barbarian . . . not even by its opponents in rhetorical and military confrontations." [p. 298]). Nonetheless, the image of the "barbarian" Chu is so deeply rooted that both scholars are inclined to refer to this state as an anomaly—"never quite Chinese and never quite barbarian" (p. 299).[21] This perception is wrong, however. While Chu did not belong to the royal Ji 姬 clan, and was considered by members of Ji polities, such as Jin or Lu 魯 as "not our kin,"[22] and while its leaders' adoption of the royal title was threatening the Zhou-centred political

[20] For the systematic analysis of archeological data concerning Chu (and Qin) see Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006); for the case of Qin see also Gideon Shelach and Yuri Pines, "Secondary State Formation and the Development of Local Identity: Change and Continuity in the State of Qin (770–221 BC)," in *An Archaeology of Asia,* ed. Miriam T. Stark (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 202–30. For fluctuations of Chu identity see many insights in the articles collected by Constance A. Cook and John S. Major, eds., *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). For pejorative attitudes toward Chu, see, e.g., the *Gongyang zhuan, juan* 12, p. 2264 (Xi 33); *juan* 22, p. 2319 (Zhao 5). For Mengzi's pejorative remark about Chu dwellers speaking in a "bird tongue," see Yang Bojun, annot., *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), "Teng Wen Gong shang" 滕文公上 5.4, p. 126.

[21] Li cites Schaberg, *A Patterned Past,* p. 134. Schaberg's misperception of Chu derives, in my eyes, from his indiscriminate incorporation of the *Guoyu* 國語 materials as belonging to the same intellectual lore and temporal layer as the *Zuo zhuan*. In my eyes this equation is wrong, and the *Guoyu* represents much later image of Chu than the *Zuo zhuan*.

[22] 「非吾族也。」(*Zuo,* Cheng 4, p. 818)

order, the friction between this state and its northern neighbours remained primarily political rather than cultural. Chu is never designated a "barbarian" entity in the *Zuo zhuan* simply because it was a normative Zhou state. In this regard, Chu markedly differs from the states of Wu and Yue, which were considered cultural strangers, despite the efforts on the part of their élite to adapt to Zhou cultural and ritual norms.[23]

Were Li to jettison the centuries-old misperception of the Chu's cultural affinity, her account of its depiction in the *Zuo zhuan* narrative would be all the more cogent. As it currently stands, Li is surprised to find that the text's narrator often exhibits great sympathy towards Chu kings and describes them in much the same terms as those attached to quintessential northern hegemons, such as Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685–643 BCE) and Lord Wen of Jin. When a Chu king, such as King Zhuang 楚莊王 (r. 613–591 BCE), appears to be well-versed in the culture of the Central States, Li is similarly puzzled and assumes that he might have been cast in the role of the "wise barbarian" (pp. 305–6), which Schaberg identified as a significant *topos* in the *Zuo zhuan* (*A Patterned Past,* pp. 133–35). Yet the reason behind Li's view is extra-textual, namely the presumption that King Zhuang must have been "a barbarian" leads her to identify him as such. However, familiarity with Zhou culture was the norm for a Chu leader. For instance, the bronze inscriptions of Chu nobles from the Xiasi 下寺 tombs at Xichuan 淅川, Henan, are enough to attest to the fact that the Chu élite were as proficient in the "refined language" of the Zhou as their northern peers.[24] In this particular case, adopting a more rigorous historical approach, which incorporates independent evidence, might have significantly enhanced Li's perspective.

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23 For pejorative treatment of the states of Wu and Yue as cultural stragers in the *Zuo zhuan,* see, e.g., *Zuo,* Cheng 7, pp. 832–33; Xiang 14, p. 1005; Ai 1, pp. 1605–6; Ai 7, p. 1641; for the archeological analysis of their cultures (which likewise suggests their initial strangeness and subsequent partial adaptation to the Zhou ritual culture), see Lothar von Falkenhausen, "The Waning of the Bronze Age: Material Culture and Social Developments, 770–481 B.C.," in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.,* ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 525–39. Li does not discuss the Wu-Yue hegemony in detail in her Chapter 4, which focuses on hegemony-related debates.

24 For these inscriptions, see Henan sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 河南省文物研究所 , ed., *Xichuan Xiasi Chunqiu Chu mu* 淅川下寺春秋楚墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社 , 1991); many of them had been translated by Lothar von Falkenhausen in his Ph.D. dissertation "Ritual Music in Bronze Age China: An Archaeological Perspective" (Harvard University, 1988); see also Gilbert L. Mattos, "Eastern Zhou Bronze Inscriptions," in *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts,* ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy (Berkeley, CA: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1997), pp. 85–124.

This point brings us to the last topic that I would like to touch upon in this review—the potential contribution of *The Readability of the Past* to the ongoing re-evaluation of the nature of the *Zuo zhuan* and its sources. While Li addresses some of the views that have been raised by other scholars, she generally avoids entering the polemical fray on this matter. Thus, she tentatively accepts the "current scholarly consensus" according to which the *Zuo zhuan* was compiled "in the fourth century BCE" (p. 33), yet repeatedly mentions different temporal layers of the text. She presumes a preponderance of "malleable oral traditions" as the text's primary sources (p. 83), but also contends that the *Zuo zhuan* somehow incorporated the divergent views of much earlier "scribes, teachers, or counselors of different persuasions" (pp. 32–33). Li disagrees with my assertion (in *Foundations of Confucian Thought*) that the *Zuo zhuan* reflects ideological developments that transpired over the course of the Chunqiu period; but she also states that "all the same, there seem to be changing concerns that evolve over those 255 years [a period covered by the text]" (pp. 82–83; also see pp. 233, 321, 371). Li summarizes the reason for her caution:

> Obviously there is no simple either-or position. The challenge in interpreting *Zuozhuan* lies precisely in showing how certain sections of the text apparently reflect the activities and concerns of Chunqiu ruling classes and how other layers point to later ideological and rhetorical fashioning. Decisions and choices here may seem arbitrary and merely conjectural. Yet to understand *Zuozhuan,* it is necessary to unravel its different strands and show how they are connected. (p. 83)

This passage deftly summarizes the complexity of the *Zuo zhuan* and points to the necessity of engaging this text on the basis of an analysis of its multiple sources and composite parts. In light of this powerful statement, I find it somewhat disappointing that Wai-yee Li preferred the most cautious route possible. While repeatedly noting that the different outlooks presented in the *Zuo zhuan* are indicative of either disparate sources or temporal layers, she never undertakes to systematize these observations. Even in the aesthetically and intellectually engaging epilogue (wherein the *Zuo zhuan* is compared to the *Shiji*), no attempt is made to summarize her findings. *The Readability of the Past* turns thus the past into more readable than heretofore—but still, insufficiently readable.

A common malady among reviewers is to criticize the author for not doing what they themselves envision if they were to formulate a similar book. It may be unfair, then, to fault Li for not offering a systematic account of her vision of the *Zuo zhuan*'s composition and for incessantly qualifying her penetrating assertions with "probably," "perhaps," "alternatively" and the like. As it now stands, scholars are indeed unable to provide definitive answers concerning the provenance of multiple layers in the *Zuo zhuan*. Even its dating, which Li places in the fourth century BCE, remains the object of a heated dispute; and to be precise we should make note of several "datings" from the fifth century BCE to the first century CE: the initial effort to compile narratives from assorted Chunqiu states; the date the text was molded into its current chronological format; the

date upon which commentaries by the author ("a superior man") and "Confucius" were added; the deadline for major modifications; and the canonization date, after which even minor interpolations might have ceased. In addition, there are the pre-*Zuo zhuan* dates, when the work's primary sources (written, oral, or both) were composed. Unearthing these distinct temporal strata (and dividing the text into different geographical units, since its compiler or compilers obviously utilized sources from different Chunqiu states) constitutes no less than a gargantuan task, which is probably beyond the capabilities of any single scholar, even one as brilliant as Wai-yee Li. And yet, until these questions have been answered, the research community will not be able to fully utilize the *Zuo zhuan*'s cornucopia of data on pre-imperial history, or even accurately situate it in the context of the evolution of Chinese historiography and historical thought.

The imperative to reassess the nature of the *Zuo zhuan* becomes all the more evident upon the completion of *The Readability of the Past*. Li's book excels in decisively undermining the once fashionable, uniformly "Confucian" interpretation of this ancient text. She repeatedly shows that the *Zuo zhuan*'s multifarious sections reflect different, and at times diametrically opposed, perspectives on a wide array of issues (see pp. 247, 294–95, 321 *et saepe*). What is more, the author excels at highlighting the substantial differences between the ideas presented in the *Zuo zhuan* and those that prevail in Warring States texts, particularly the so-called "Confucian" lore. For instance, Li notices that the *Zuo zhuan* lacks psychological dimensions and discussions on "inwardness" (p. 110); that none of its myriad references to music appear within the framework of moral self-cultivation (p. 147); that it lacks positive attitude towards individual spontaneity (p. 184); that it lacks discussions on heart/mind (*xin* 心), moral nature (*xing* 性), self (*wo* 我), and the like (pp. 188–89).

These and the rest of Li's wide-ranging observations, which constitute but a partial list of all peculiarities of the *Zuo zhuan,*[25] underscore both the *Zuo zhuan*'s exceptional standing in the lore of the pre-imperial texts and the need for an in-depth study of the text's component parts and the relations between them. Perhaps the time is ripe for a broad Western-East Asian collaboration of historians, archeologists, linguists, and literature specialists, *inter alia,* that will endeavour to attain an appreciably more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the *Zuo zhuan* than has hitherto been possible. The brilliance of *The Readability of the Past,* as well as the magnitude of the questions it leaves unresolved, accentuates the need for an enterprise of this sort.

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25 This list of discrepancies between the *Zuo zhuan* and later "Confucian" texts can easily be expanded. Thus, among multiple applications of ritual (*li* 禮) in the *Zuo zhuan,* we almost never see it discussed in terms of individual's self-cultivation, a topic which became ubiquitous in writings of the *Ru* 儒 of the Warring States. For details see Yuri Pines, "Disputers of the *Li:* Breakthroughs in the Concept of Ritual in Preimperial China," *Asia Major,* 3d ser., 13, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1–41.