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De 德 in the *Zuozhuan* 《左傳》

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Abstract

This article surveys the usages of the term *de* 德 in the *Zuozhuan*《左傳》. It demonstrates the term's hermeneutical richness: *de* could refer to charismatic power, to political potency, to proper decorum, to mildness and kindness in domestic or interstate affairs, to individual morality, and so forth. Behind this richness, though, we may discern a clear predominance of political usages of *de* and paucity of references to *de* as personal moral virtue. Notably, *Zuozhuan* never refers to *de* in the context of moral self-cultivation. The article discusses the reasons for this peculiarity.

Keywords

charisma – *de* – morality – political thought – virtue – *Zuozhuan*

At first glance, the *Zuo Tradition* or *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*《左傳》) appears as a most appropriate choice for discussion on "De and Virtue in Confucian Texts." Suffice it to mention that the term *de* 德 appears in the text no less than 330 times, that is by far more than in any other text concerned in the current volume. And yet those who expect *Zuozhuan* to be an extraordinary rich depository of discussions about individual virtue would be somewhat disappointed. As I shall try to demonstrate, this meaning is secondary and fairly marginal to the overall usage of *de* in the text. However, possible disappointment aside, study of the usages of *de* in *Zuozhuan* may be useful for the overall contextualization of this multi-faceted term in the broader corpus of China's pre-imperial texts.

In what follows, I shall start with exposing the complexity of *Zuozhuan* as a source for China's intellectual history inasmuch as it can be considered both as "Confucian" and also markedly pre-Confucian text. Then I shall survey major usages of *de* in *Zuozhuan* starting with its meaning as the ruler's charismatic power through its usages as proper political conduct domestically and on the interstate scene, and ending with its meaning as moral virtue. I shall demonstrate that *de* was primarily a term of political rather than moral discourse, which distinguishes *Zuozhuan* from the majority of texts of the Confucian lore. The reasons for this difference will be surveyed at the end of this essay.

1 *Zuozhuan* as Source for Intellectual History

Zuozhuan is often squarely identified as a "Confucian" text. Mark E. Lewis, for instance, opined in an influential study that the goal of its composition was "to validate *Ru* ["Confucian"] teachings … through writing them into a narrative of the past."[1] This view is echoed in many

1 Mark E. Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 132. Note that in his earlier study (*Sanctioned Violence in Early*

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more studies.[2] The logic behind it is clear. First, the didactic nature of many of *Zuozhuan*'s narratives is undeniable. Second, the text clearly adores Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE) as the source of political wisdom; his manifold comments scattered mostly in the latter half of *Zuozhuan* serve as an important means of gleaning proper historical lessons from the narrative.[3] Third, the very fact that *Zuozhuan* was recognized from the Latter Han dynasty (25–220 CE) as a canonical commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) – the putative *locus classicus* of Confucius's political message – further lends credentials to *Zuozhuan*'s Confucian affiliation. Add to this a widespread conviction that *Zuozhuan* was composed in the fourth century BCE (or even later) – i.e., at the time when Confucian discourse became increasingly popular among segments of educated elite – and you have all the reasons to read *Zuozhuan* through a Confucian lens.[4]

And yet things are not so simple. Recall that its didacticism notwithstanding, *Zuozhuan* is not a polemical text akin to those of the Warring States-period Masters (*zi* 子). Rather, it is a historical composition the aim of which is to provide broad historical context for the enigmatic entries of the *Annals*. The text was not composed singlehandedly but is overwhelmingly based on earlier sources, which I have identified elsewhere as local histories prepared by court scribes of major Springs-and-Autumns period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) polities. From the tentative reconstruction of these local histories we may surmise that they were both informative and interpretative. Namely, aside from dry accounts of the events that may have been prepared by the scribes simultaneously with the events' unfolding or shortly thereafter, local histories contained other segments, some of which evidently come from the oral lore or from scribes' imagination. Some of these segments – such as the statesmen's speeches, predictions of the future events, and post-factum analyses by wise observers – were essential means of conveying the histories' didactic message. These didactic devices were duly incorporated into *Zuozhuan* becoming the earliest, and arguably the largest layer of its ideological content.[5]

We do not know to which extent did the complier(s) of *Zuozhuan* intervene in the content of its speeches, but we do know that he (they) added another interpretative layer, namely comments by the "noble man," some of the exegetical explanations to the *Annals*, and possibly statements attributed to Confucius as well.[6] Later transmitters and editors, starting with the Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE) and

China [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990], 16), Lewis commented that *Zuozhuan* narratives "depict a world alien or hostile to Zhanguo Confucianism." For a much more nuanced discussion of *Zuozhuan*, see Lewis's most recent *Honor and Shame in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17–18.

2 For a sample, see Yuri Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period, 722–453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 260n82.

3 For Confucius's comments, see Eric Henry, "'Junzi yue' and 'Zhongni yue' in *Zuozhuan*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59.1 (1999): 125–161.

4 The nature, dating, and ideological contents of *Zuozhuan* had been discussed extensively in the recent years. For the authoritative summary, see the "Introduction" to Stephen W. Durrant, Li Wai-yee, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016). For some of the earlier studies, see David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001); Pines, *Foundations*; Li Wai-yee, *The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007); q.v. for further references.

5 I discuss the *Zuozhuan* sources in light of the newly available paleographic evidence in Pines, *Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript* Xinian *and Early Chinese Historiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

6 For the commentarial layers of *Zuozhuan* and their possible origin, see Newell Ann Van Auken, *The Commentarial Transformation of the Spring and Autumn* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016). For the "noble man's" comments, see Eric Henry, "'Junzi yue' and 'Zhongni yue.'" Compare to Van Auken, "Judgments of the Gentleman: A New Analysis of the Place of *junzi* Comments in *Zuozhuan* Composition History," *Monumenta Serica* 64.2 (2016): 277–302.

ending with the Han librarian, Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE) and even later redactors, had further intervened in *Zuozhuan*'s content, e.g., by inserting favorable accounts about their patrons' ancestors or by modifying some of the ideologically or exegetically important information. To complicate things further, *Zuozhuan* comprises a small amount of inadvertent interpolations, such as earlier glosses that had been incorporated into the original text. The overall impact of these later additions on *Zuozhuan*'s content is very much debatable, but that the text itself is multi-layered and that many centuries separate its earliest and latest segments is undeniable.[7]

In the context of the current discussion, it is important to notice that the term *de* appears in each of the above layers of *Zuozhuan*, to which we may add an earlier layer, namely references to *de* in citations from the canonical odes and documents supposedly coming from the Western Zhou 西周 (ca. 1046–771 BCE) period. Predictably, the meanings of *de* in different temporal layers of *Zuozhuan* differ. Yet whereas identifying these differences may be an interesting intellectual exercise, my goal in what follows is more modest. I shall focus on the earlier layers of *Zuozhuan*, namely the overwhelming majority of its speeches and utterances, which were in all likelihood incorporated into the text from its primary sources and which can be expected to reflect the world of thought of the aristocratic age, prior to the proliferation of Confucius's ideas. By highlighting the decisively political nature of the term *de* in *Zuozhuan* and the relative unimportance of its meaning as individual morality, I hope to shed additional light on Confucius's intellectual revolution.

2 *De* as Charismatic Power

Let us start with the earliest semantic layer of *de*, namely that of charismatic power. As is well known, the appearance of the term *de* in early Zhou texts and bronze inscriptions is intrinsically linked to the concept of Heaven's Mandate (*tian ming* 天命). The founders of the Zhou dynasty, Kings Wen and Wu, possessed the sacred substance of *de* which was essential for ensuring divine support for their endeavor. Without entering debates of whether or not the concept of *de* can be compared to the Polynesian concept of *mana*, and to which extent it was intrinsic to an individual or conferred on him by Heaven, the Lord-on-High (Shangdi 上帝), or the meritorious ancestors, what is uncontroversial is that *de* as charismatic power was an essential attribute of Zhou kings. Preservation and maintenance of this royal charisma – which the kings could confer on their descendants and meritorious ministers – was the precondition for preserving Zhou's mandate.[8]

The charismatic aspect of *de* is duly present in *Zuozhuan*, even though it is by no means the dominant use of the term *de* there. The decline of the Zhou dynastic power made references to the dynastic founders' charisma a rarity. Nonetheless, on certain occasions, the concept of *de* as the dynasty's hereditary possession and the ongoing justification for its rule could be invoked. For instance, in 635 BCE, when the powerful

7 For the question of interpolations in *Zuozhuan*, see Pines, *Foundations*, 221–226 and 233–246, q.v. for further references. For Liu Xin's intervention in *Zuozhuan*'s content, see most recent studies by Qiao Zhizhong 喬治忠, "*Zuozhuan*, *Guoyu* bei Liu Xin cuanluan de yixiang tiezheng: lishi niandaixue Liu Tan zhi shuo shenlun" 《左傳》《國語》被劉歆竄亂的一項鐵證—歷史年代學劉坦之說申論, *Beijing shifan daxue xuebao* (shehuikexue ban) 北京師範大學學報（社會科學版）3 (2016): 68–78 and Xu Jianwei 徐建委, *Wenben geming: Liu Xiang, "Hanshu yiwenzhi" yu zaoqi wenben yanjiu* 文本革命：劉向、《漢書・藝文志》與早期文本研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017), 181–246.

8 See discussions in Kominami Ichirō 小南一郎, "Tenmei to toku" 天命と德, *Tōhō gakuhō* 東方學報 64 (1992): 1–59; Vassili Kryukov, "Symbols of Power and Communication in Pre-Confucian China (On the Anthropology of *De*)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 58 (1995): 314–333; Wang Huaiyu, "A Genealogical Study of *De*: Poetical Correspondence of Sky, Earth, and Humankind in the Early Chinese Virtuous Rule of Benefaction," *Philosophy East and West* 65.1 (2015): 81–124.

leader, Lord Wen of Jin 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE) demanded of his protégé, King Xiang of Zhou 周襄王 (r. 651–619 BCE) to grant him royal sumptuary privileges, the king refused: "This is the distinctive mark of a king. To have two kings when there is as yet no virtue that takes Zhou's place – that is something that you, my uncle, would detest!"[9] Notwithstanding how much the dynasty was battered, the idea that Zhou is a singular possessor of the supreme virtue remained alive.

The appeal to the royal virtue is most notable in the speech allegedly pronounced by Royal Grandson Man 王孫滿 of Zhou in 606 BCE. That year witnessed the peak of northward expansion of the state of Chu 楚 under the robust leadership of its most successful monarch, King Zhuang 楚莊王 (r. 613–591 BCE). Having reached the vicinity of the Eastern Zhou capital, near modern Luoyang, the king of Chu had inquired about the size and weight of the "nine cauldrons," the sacred symbol of the Zhou royal power. The implication of the inquiry was clear: the king of Chu contemplated whether or not the time had come to challenge Zhou's mandate, which would imply moving the cauldrons to Chu's capital. Royal Grandson Man rebuffed him:

> Size and weight depend on virtue (*de*), not on the cauldrons. In the past, just when Xia possessed virtue, men from afar depicted various creatures, and the nine superintendents submitted metal, so that cauldrons were cast with images of various creatures.... The last Xia king, Jie, possessed dimmed virtue, and the cauldrons were moved to the house of Shang, there to remain for six hundred years. The last Shang king, Zhòu, was violent and tyrannical, and the cauldrons were moved to the house of Zhou. When virtue is bright and resplendent, the cauldrons, though small, are heavy. When virtue is distorted, dimmed, and confused, the cauldrons, though large, are light. Heaven blesses those of bright virtue, giving them the place for realizing and maintaining it. When King Cheng put the cauldrons in place at Jiaru (i.e., Luoyang), he divined about the number of generations and got thirty; he divined about the number of years and got seven hundred. This is what Heaven has decreed. Although Zhou virtue is in decline, Heaven's decree has not yet changed. The question of whether the cauldrons are light or heavy may not be asked yet.[10]

The dating of this speech is bitterly contested because of the odd prediction of "thirty generations" and "seven hundred years" of Zhou's prosperity, as these numbers do not fit the Zhou royal chronology. Controversies aside, I think it is reasonable to consider the speech as coming from the earlier rather than later layer of *Zuozhuan*.[11] The speech clearly shows the intrinsic linkage between *de* and the preservation of Heaven's decree or mandate. The phrase "Heaven blesses those of bright

9 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 25.1. "Uncle" (more precisely, "paternal uncle") is the polite designation employed by the king when addressing the regional lords who belonged to the Zhou royal clan. All my translations from *Zuozhuan* are based (with minor modifications) on Durrant, Li, and Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition*.

10 *Zuozhuan*, Xuan 3.3.

11 Neither the count of generations nor the time span of the dynasty fits Zhou history (the dynasty lasted 791 years and 36 generations of kings). It was opined that the prediction refers to a story (invented during the Han dynasty), according to which the cauldrons sank in the Si River 泗水 in 327 BCE, in which case the speech must be a Han dynasty fabrication (Hong Ye 洪業, "*Chunqiu jing zhuan yinde* xu" 春秋經傳引得序, in: Hong Ye, ed., *Chunqiu jing zhuan yinde* 春秋經傳引得 [1937, reprinted Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1983], xc–xcii). This opinion is not convincing, though, because even in the case of the putative sinking the cauldrons in the Si River, the count of generations and years will not be correct, and in any case Man clearly speaks of the dynasty's life span rather than of the cauldrons' fate. It is more likely that the prediction reflects some genuine early Zhou tradition (in which the dynasty was supposed to last a century longer than its predecessor, the Shang), which will put this speech among a very small number of wrong predictions in *Zuozhuan*.

virtue, giving them the place for realizing and maintaining it" can be used as a perfect summary of the Zhou mandate's theory in general. *De* is not an individual attribute but is a hereditary dynastic possession. It can be preserved even when the dynasty lacks visible achievements. Insofar as the rulers maintain reasonable conduct and prevent *de* from becoming "distorted, dimmed, and confused," the mandate (and the cauldrons) will remain the dynasty's possession.

The idea of charismatic *de* as essential for preserving the polity's survival was not limited to the Zhou dynasty but applicable mutatis mutandis to regional polities as well.[12] In several speeches scattered throughout *Zuozhuan* prescient advisors warn their rulers that spirits and deities would support the ruler and the state only in the case the latter maintain their "bright virtue" (*ming de* 明德). For instance, in 655 BCE, when the ruler of a statelet of Yu 虞 opted to assist Jin in its attack on the neighboring state of Guo 虢, his advisor, Gong Zhiqi 宮之奇 warned him of Jin's plans to extinguish Yu as well. The ruler argued that since "my offerings and sacrifices are abundant and pure, the deities are certain to sustain me." To this, Gong Zhiqi replied with the following argument:

> I have heard that the spirits and deities do not show favoritism toward men, but it is the virtuous alone to whom they turn. Therefore, as it says in the *Zhou Documents*, "August Heaven has no favorites; only the virtuous does it assist." It also says, "The millet is not fragrant; bright virtue alone is fragrant." And it also says, "People do not change the offerings; virtue alone is the offering." So it is that in the absence of virtue, the people will not be in harmony and the deities will not be pleased. What the deities turn to will be found in virtue. If Jin seizes Yu and makes bright its virtue as it offers sacrifices, will the deities spit them out?[13]

De (virtue) is the only true foundation of the polity, the only factor in ensuring the ongoing divine support. This point is made in several other speeches in *Zuozhuan* and it may be plausibly assumed that it reflects a widespread conviction of contemporaneous statesmen.[14] Yet what does exactly *de* mean in this context? Gong Zhiqi does not clarify the point, but what is clear is that the term does not refer to political morality. After all, Jin was behaving deplorably: its assault on the fraternal polity of Guo was bad enough, but its expected betrayal of another fraternal polity and an ally, Yu, was even worse. This immoral behavior did not mean, however, that Jin was somehow deficient in virtue. It can be surmised that *de* here refers to power rather than morality leaving us with an unpleasant feeling that Gong Zhiqi's bottom line means: "might is right."

3 Political Virtue: Domestic Manifestation

The invocations of charismatic virtue discussed in the previous section were all devoid of clear moral context; nor did *de* there appear to be related to any concrete political action. Other speakers, in contrast, emphasized the connection among different semantic layers of *de*. The most notable of these speakers was Yan Ying 晏嬰 (aka Master Yan, Yanzi 晏子, d. ca. 500 BCE).[15] One of the most famous anecdotes about him tells of Yan Ying's master, Lord Jing of Qi 齊景公 (r. 547–490 BCE) suffering from a prolonged illness.

12 Note that the concept of Heaven's Mandate was modified in the Springs and Autumns period to refer to the ruler's or the dynasty's right to possess an individual regional state rather than All-under-Heaven. See Luo Xinhui 羅新慧, "Chunqiu shiqi tianming guannian de yanbian" 春秋時期天命觀念的演變, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中國社會科學 12 (2020): 99–118.

13 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 5.8.

14 Ibid, Huan 6.2, Zhuang 32.3; Zhao 26.10.

15 Yan Ying is the most frequently cited speaker in *Zuozhuan*, and arguably the most sophisticated philosophically. See Yuri Pines, "The Search for Stability: Late Ch'un-ch'iu Thinkers," *Asia Major* (3rd Series) 10 (1997): 18–31.

Two sycophantic courtiers proposed to execute a scribe and an invocator who failed to solicit the deities' positive reply to Lord Jing's illness-averting prayers. Yan Ying dismissed this idea. He reminded the ruler of a late Jin statesman, Shi Hui 士會 (d. after 590 BCE), whose superior *de* allowed his scribes and invocators to make truthful reports to the deities and solicit their blessings (see more below, section 5). If the ruler wants his scribes' and invocators' prayers to be effective, he must cultivate his virtue first.[16]

The idea that *de* is essential for ensuring divine support is intrinsically linked to the notion of charismatic virtue discussed in the previous section. But what does it mean to cultivate one's virtue? Yan Ying discussed this in great detail. He enumerated major maladies of Lord Jing's administration, especially abuse of taxes and levies and exorbitant exploitation of the people. The results were gloomy: "The common people and the leaders suffer and fret, and man and woman alike curse you." Having heard this the lord mended his way and the illness was duly cured. What is remarkable though that a lengthy speech – one of the longest in the entire *Zuozhuan* – has no reference at all to the ruler's individual morality. The latter topic does not seem to matter to Yan Ying. Cultivating one's virtue for the ruler is not a matter of improving personal conduct but rather of improving political behavior.[17]

Yan Ying emphasized the connection between *de* as charismatic power and *de* as proper political behavior in the last of his recorded speeches in *Zuozhuan*. Lord Jing, who was destined to be the last ruler of the Jiang 姜 clan in Qi to preserve a semblance of effective power in his hands, sighed about the future of his palaces, "who will own them?" In reply to Yan Ying's query, Lord Jing explained that he spoke of virtue, here unmistakably referring to the sacred substance that allows a dynasty to survive. Yan Ying immediately realized what the lord speaks about:

> As you have put the matter, it will be the Chen lineage.[18] Although the Chens lack any great virtue, they are generous to the people. They use their grain measures to tax their public holdings sparingly and give to the people generously. Because you tax generously and the Chens give generously, the people have gone over to them. As it says in the *Poems*, "Although I have no virtue to share with you,//Let us sing and dance." The people sing and dance in response to the gifts of the Chen lineage. If future generations are even slightly remiss in their conduct, and the Chen lineage has not perished, then the domain will be theirs.[19]

Yan Ying skillfully plays among different dimensions of the term *de.* He starts with *de* as charismatic power and reminds that the power of the Chen lineage is not great. However, they are generous, and generosity or gift-giving was yet another dimension of the term *de*.[20] The nature of this generosity – using two different sets of measures so that the Chen were lavish in lending grain and sparing in collecting taxes – was explained by Yan Ying elsewhere.[21] Generous giving is not coequal to charismatic virtue, but, just as in the cited ode, it suffices to make the recipient happy, and, by inference, allows the benefactor to acquire

16 *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 20.6.

17 See more in Yuri Pines, "From Teachers to Subjects: Ministers Speaking to the Rulers from Yan Ying 晏嬰 to Li Si 李斯." In: *Facing the Monarch: Modes of Advice in the Early Chinese Court*, ed. Garret Olberding (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center 2013), 72–76.

18 The Chen 陳 (Tian 田) lineage emerged as victorious after a series of internecine conflicts among powerful ministerial lineages in Qi in the second half of the sixth century BCE. It consolidated power following Lord Jing's death and by 481 BCE it became the single locus of gravity in Qi politics. For a century the Chen leaders ruled through the puppet rulers of Qi from the Jiang clan, until finally replacing the last of these rulers in 386 BCE.

19 *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 26.11.

20 Wang Huaiyu, "A Genealogical Study of *De*."

21 *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 3.3b.

popular support in the stead of the ailing ducal house. It is worth noting again that morality as such is not the topic of this virtue-related discussion. Whereas generosity is surely associated with moral behavior, in *Zuozhuan* discussions of *de* it recurs exclusively in political contexts – such as grace toward one's underlings, or, as discussed in the next section, toward weaker states. Giving and being generous in *Zuozhuan* is primarily a political virtue.[22]

Yan Ying's speeches epitomize what was one of the major usages of *de* in *Zuozhuan* – a terminus technicus for politically proper behavior. There was no specific set of policies associated with *de*, although normally it referred to a variety of mild and non-coercive conduct.[23] Often, *de* appears as a complementary means to "punishments" (*xing* 刑; see more in the next section).[24] Yet there were many other cases in which *de* stands simply for good government, be it properly meting out rewards or displaying military acumen.[25] And sometimes the political dimensions of *de* could be reduced just to proper maintenance of ritual decorum. This is most vivid in one of the earliest ideologically significant speeches in *Zuozhuan*. In 710 BCE, a Lu 魯 minister Zang Aibo 臧哀伯 reprimanded his ruler for a ritually improper act. Zang started with the statement "The ruler of men should manifest virtue and block transgressions, therewith overseeing and shining a light upon his officials. Still, he fears that he might sometimes fail at this, and therefore he manifests exemplary virtue and displays it for his sons and grandsons." Then came a lengthy clarification of how virtue should be manifested. This manifestation remained squarely within preserving ceremonial decorum, as is exemplified in the ruler's sacrificial offering and utensils, his garments, his ornaments, the decorations on the vessels he uses, and so forth. The speech – which solicited a praise from *Zuozhuan*'s narrator ("the noble man") who lauded Zang Aibo's appeal to *de* to correct the ruler's transgressions – does not refer at all either to the ruler's morality or to his maintenance of political affairs. In this case, virtue does not seem to refer to anything outside the realm of proper decorum and of ritual norms.[26]

Ubiquitous as they are, references to *de* as political virtue do not provide a clear picture of what does it refer to exactly. My feeling is that *de* was simply a highly positive term, one with a strong "emotive meaning" the invocation of which bolstered the speaker's argumentation without the need to elaborate what does it refer to exactly.[27] As in the above examples, discussions of *de* as a political virtue are overwhelmingly unrelated to its moral content and do not contain any reference to a ruler or a minister's individual morality. Only exceptionally do we find some connections between the two, as in the deathbed instructions of the famous Zheng 鄭 prime minister, Zichan 子產, to his successor: "Only one who has virtue is capable of controlling the people by means of leniency. Failing that, nothing is better than harshness."[28] Does virtue here refer to a leader's morality that allows him to apply leniency? Or does it refer to his charismatic power that engenders compliance even without resort to punitive means? And what does it mean for the leader "to have virtue"? These questions remain unanswered either in Zichan's speech or in most other occurrences of the term *de* in *Zuozhuan*.

22 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 15.8, Xi 19.3, Cheng 3.4; Xiang 27.6; Xiang 29.7.

23 See, e.g., Ibid, Wen 7.3; Xiang 7.6.

24 Ibid, Huan 13.1; Xuan 12.2; Cheng 16.5.

25 Ibid, Xuan 15.6; Xiang 13.4.

26 Ibid, Huan 2.2; for a similar attitude, see Xiang 31.13. Interestingly, the term *li* 禮 (ritual), which is ubiquitous in *Zuozhuan*, is absent from Zang Aibo's speech on ritual norms, possibly suggesting the speech's earliness – before the term *li* became fully prominent. See Pines, *Foundations*, 93–94.

27 For the notion of "emotive meaning" (borrowed from C. L. Stevenson [1908–1979]), see Carine Defoort, "How to Name or Not to Name: That Is the Question in Early Chinese Philosophy," in *Keywords in Chinese Culture*, ed. Li Wai-yee and Yuri Pines (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2020), 22–30.

28 *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 20.9.

4 Political Virtue: Interstate Manifestation

The term *de* was significant in discussions of domestic policies but it was doubly so in discussions of interstate relations. The term recurs with particularly high frequency in debates about the nature of hegemony. Recall that during the Springs-and-Autumns period repeated efforts were made to solidify the newly emerging multistate system. One of the major attempts to stabilize interstate relations was through the institution of hegemony which allowed a powerful leader acting under the nominal auspices of the Zhou king to impose a semblance of order on smaller states. It was expected that despite his power, the hegemon would refrain from bullying smaller neighbors, not to say annex their territories, and that he would treat weaker states in accordance with the Zhou ritual system. In short, he was expected to manifest his *de*.[29]

In the context of discussions about hegemony and interstate relations, *de* had two major meanings. One, related to the charismatic power, was the understanding that a leader with strong *de* is irresistible – either everybody would submit to him, or at least his rivals should avoid confrontation with him. For instance, when, on the eve of the fateful Chengpu 城濮 battle of 632 BCE, King Cheng of Chu 楚成王 (r. 672–626 BCE) tried to dissuade his prime minister from engaging the army of Lord Wen of Jin (the second famous hegemon of that age), he said:

> Heaven has granted him (the lord of Jin) a long life and has removed those who would harm him. How can those whom Heaven has set up be cast aside? The *Military Maxims* say, "When you reach the appropriate point, stop." And again they say, "When you know that the difficulties are insurmountable, withdraw." And still again they say, "Those of virtue cannot be rivaled."[30]

The *Military Maxims* cited by King Cheng reflected what appears to be a common conviction of the Springs-and-Autumns period statesmen: "Those of virtue cannot be rivaled." But what does Lord Wen's virtue refer to? In the context of King Cheng's speech, the referent is neither Lord Wen's morality nor proper political conduct, but merely Heaven's support. This support – a recurrent topic in discussions about Lord Wen – did not derive from observable moral considerations; it was just a given, and it was demonstrated in Lord Wen's extraordinary luck.[31] Heaven bestowed its favors upon Lord Wen, which meant that Heaven bestowed virtue upon him. This virtue was a Heaven's gift which made it imprudent to challenge Lord Wen on the battlefield.

The concept of irresistibility of possessors of *de* recurs elsewhere in *Zuozhuan*, although in other contexts the rival's *de* is said to be manifested in prudent political conduct above all.[32] Yet insofar as interstate ties are concerned this usage of *de* remains secondary. Overall, overwhelming majority of debates focus on hegemon's *de* as referring primarily to mild and non-coercive means of dealing with smaller polities. This usage is observable already in the earliest discussions of interstate leadership related to the first of the illustrious hegemons, Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685–643 BCE) and his famous aide, Guan Zhong 管仲. When Qi invaded the state of Chu in the first ever military encounter between the two, Lord Huan boasted of the multitudes of his armies. The Chu commander was not impressed:

> If you pacify the regional lords with virtue, who would dare not submit? But if you

29 See more in Pines, *Foundations*, 105–135.

30 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 28.3c.

31 For the figure of Lord Wen of Jin in *Zuozhuan*, see discussions in Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*, *passim*; Li Wai-yee, *The Readability of the Past*, 254–276; Marián Gálik, "King David (ca. 1037–ca. 967 B.C.) and Duke Wen of Jin (ca. 697–628 B.C.): Two Paradigmatic Rulers from the Hebrew Deuteronomistic and Early Chinese Confucian Historiography," *Asian and African Studies* 19.1 (2010): 1–25.

32 *Zuozhuan*, Wen 2.1; Ai 1.2.

> use force, then the state of Chu will take Fangcheng as its wall and the Han River as its moat. Even with multitudes, you will have no means to make use of them.[33]

The idea that the regional lords would invariably submit to virtue invokes the notion of irresistible charismatic power, but the Chu leader's focus lies elsewhere. *De* here is juxtaposed with force (*li* 力), the usage of which would not yield any positive result to Lord Huan. Many other speeches about hegemony tend to juxtapose *de* with its complementary opposites such as "force" (*li*), "punishments" (*xing* 刑 or *fa* 罰) and "awe-inspiring majesty" (*wei* 威).[34] It is worth reminding in this context Kominami Ichirō's assertion that originally force and punishments were inseparable aspects of *de* along with grace and kindness, but towards the mid-Western Zhou period the non-coercive aspects of *de* became prevalent.[35] Insofar as we can judge from *Zuozhuan* speeches, Kominami is right. At least in the context of hegemony discussions, non-coercive *de* was overwhelmingly considered the major characteristic of the good interstate leader. In particular, representatives of weak states were repeatedly invoking *de* to cause the leaders of major powers to mend their ways. In 589 BCE, following a disastrous defeat at An 鞌, the Qi envoy appealed to the importance of *de* to cause the Jin victors moderate their demands.[36] In 549 BCE, Zichan of Zheng made a skillful appeal to *de* to cause the Jin leader reduce tribute demands of Zheng.[37] Such examples can easily be multiplied.

Many of *Zuozhuan* stories suggest that the appeal to *de* was an effective weapon of the weak, but this was not invariably so. In 589 BCE, having defeated the state of Qi, Jin granted part of Qi fields to Jin's ally, Lu. Six years later, having improved the relations with Qi, Jin demanded Lu to return the disputed fields to Qi. The head of Lu's government, Ji Wenzi 季文子, protested vehemently against this breach of trust and appealed to the hegemon's virtue but to no avail.[38] In 582 BCE, during a covenant arranged to seal Jin's order, Ji Wenzi had the following exchange with the Jin leader, Fan Wenzi 范文子:

> Ji Wenzi said to Fan Wenzi, "What use is it to renew the covenant if one's virtue is insufficient?" Fan Wenzi said, "To care for other states assiduously, to treat them leniently, to control them firmly, to invoke bright spirits to deter them, to deal gently with the submissive, and to attack the duplicitous – these are the next best things after virtue."[39]

Eloquent as it was, Fan Wenzi's answer contained a barely concealed threat to "attack the duplicitous." This argument was sufficiently compelling. *Zuozhuan* leaves no doubt that despite the niceties of the virtue-related discourse, the bottom line of "attacking the duplicitous" or "manifesting awe"[40] was an increasingly common means of ensuring one's international leadership. Gradually but irreversibly the notion of virtue as the moderator of the hegemons' behavior faded away and with it the expectations that a virtuous hegemon would secure the interstate order.[41]

33 Ibid, Xi 4.1. Fangcheng refers to a series of Chu fortifications that protected the northern approaches to its heartland – the Nanyang basin. A protective wall there was erected much later, in the fifth century BCE.

34 Ibid, Yin 11.6, Xi 15.8, Xi 25.2, Wen 7.8, Cheng 16.7 *et saepe*.

35 Kominami, "Tenmei to toku": 50–55.

36 *Zuozhuan*, Cheng 2.3.

37 Ibid, Xiang 24.2.

38 Ibid, Cheng 8.2.

39 Ibid, Cheng 9.1.

40 Ibid, Zhao 13.3a.

41 The failure to ensure interstate leadership through non-coercive means contributed in the long term to the deterioration of the interstate order and abandonment of efforts to consolidate the multistate system. In due time, thinkers and statesmen came to realization that only political unification of All-under-Heaven will ensure peace and stability. See more in Yuri Pines, "'The One that Pervades All' in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: Origins of 'The Great Unity' Paradigm," *T'oung Pao* 86.4–5 (2000): 280–324.

5 *De* as Moral Virtue

The discussion heretofore emphasized the relatively minor role of individual morality insofar as *de* as charismatic power or as political virtue was concerned. This does not mean, though that discussions of *de* do not contain references to moral virtues. Actually, in not a few speeches the term *de* itself stands as a generalized reference to moral qualities. One speech enumerates "being close to one's kin" (*qin* 親), "benevolence" (*ren* 仁), "auspiciousness" (*xiang* 祥) and "righteousness" or "dutifulness" (*yi* 義) as "four virtues" (*si de* 四德).[42] The catalog of virtues depicted here is a little bit odd (auspiciousness is normally not associated with moral behavior). Elsewhere the same term "four virtues" refers to something even vaguer, such as blood proximity and historic ties between the state of Zheng and the Zhou royal domain,[43] or to a combination of moral and political reasons for preferring one heir over another.[44] However more commonly when the virtues are itemized they refer to moral qualities, such as benevolence, trustworthiness (*xin* 信), and loyalty (*zhong* 忠).[45] These usages suffice to indicate that morality was included within the semantic field of the term *de*.

Moral aspects of *de* are most commonly seen in discussions of ministerial qualities. For instance, in 633 BCE, when a Jin leader proposed to appoint Xi Hu 郤穀 to command Jin's central army he argued:

> Xi Hu is the right person. I have often heard his words. He takes pleasure in ritual propriety and music and is well versed in the *Odes* and the *Documents*. The *Odes* and the *Documents* are repositories of righteousness (or dutifulness, *yi* 義); ritual and music provide the norms of virtue; and virtue and righteousness are the foundations of benefit.... You, my lord, should test him.[46]

Xi Hu's virtue seems to have little relation to political attainments; actually, his only merit was being versatile in canonical texts, as well as in rites and music. In *Zuozhuan*, this reasoning for one's promotion – which sounds suspiciously reminiscent of the Warring States-period Confucian meritocratic discourse[47] – is highly exceptional. Not only one's learning never recurs in *Zuozhuan* as the primary reason for one's appointment, but more generally discussions of appointing a person to a high position just because of his morality are few and far between. This is not surprising of course. In the aristocratic society of the Springs-and-Autumns period, top positions in the government apparatus were normally occupied on the hereditary basis by members of major ministerial lineages. Only exceptionally, e.g., in the state of Jin in the aftermath of Lord Wen's enthronement (during which period Xi Hu's appointment was made), could domestic turmoil eliminate earlier power holders and open the route of upward mobility for outsiders. In these rare cases the appointee's virtue mattered. Xi Hu himself died almost immediately after the appointment and never manifested his virtue and righteousness, but we are told that the next round of reshuffle in Jin's top brass was also conducted so as to "elevate virtue."[48]

Actually, even in a pedigree-based society individual virtue could matter. We are told that a candidate's virtue may be a factor behind selecting a proper heir when normal succession rules (which prioritized the firstborn son of a primary

42 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 14.4.

43 Ibid, Xi 24.2.

44 Ibid, Wen 6.5.

45 Ibid, Zhao 12.10; Ai 7.4; see also Xiang 9.3, where the four virtues are associated with "prime," "offerings," "benefit" and "constancy," that is the statement for hexagram "Sui" 隨 ("Following") from the *Zhou Changes* 周易. This latter speech, though, is itself a much latter interpolation in *Zuozhuan*. See Kidder Smith, "*Zhouyi* Interpretations from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49.2 (1989): 435–438.

46 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 27.4.

47 For this discourse as emphasizing one's morality rather than skills as the major reason for one's elevation, see Yuri Pines, "Pitfalls of Meritocracy: 'Elevating the Worthy' in Early Chinese Thought" (forthcoming).

48 *Zuozhuan*, Xi 28.1.

wife) were not applicable.[49] A Chu king is praised for not neglecting one's virtue in making promotions, although in the same phrase he is praised for prioritizing his kin and members of hereditary ministerial families in staffing his government.[50] So does "not neglecting virtue" refers to the incumbents' morality? Alas, there is no clear answer. A minister's virtue may be associated with the ruler-like charismatic power, which allows the minister to attain popular support;[51] it can refer to a minister's general political acumen;[52] but it can also be associated with more clearly defined ministerial moral qualities, such as displaying respectfulness (*jing* 敬), ability to yield (*rang* 讓), or loyalty.[53] In not a few cases it is not clear at all what is the referent of ministerial virtue aside from a clear feeling that *de* is a highly desirable attribute of any political leader, a general term for one's positive qualities.[54]

Only exceptionally do we have a chance to read in *Zuozhuan* something that approximates a concrete discussion of *de*. The most notable case is the posthumous assessment of Shi Hui 士會 (aka Fan Wuzi 范武子) in the year 546 BCE:

> Zimu (Chu prime minister, Qu Jian) asked Zhao Meng (Jin prime minister, Zhao Wu), "What was Fan Wuzi's virtue like?" He replied, "That fine man's domestic affairs were well governed, and when he spoke in Jin capital, he had nothing to hide. His invocators and scribes presented the truth to spirits and deities with no need for apologies." Zimu, upon his return, told the Chu king. The king said, "Lofty indeed! He could delight deities and men. It was fitting that he gloriously assisted five rulers who became masters of covenants."[55]

Shi Hui's *de* is represented on three levels. First, he acts as a good ruler of his patrimony (which, recall, was of a similar size as a small polity of that age).[56] Second, he speaks straightforwardly in Jin's capital, which refers to his readiness to remonstrate with the rulers and argue, when needed, with fellow ministers, the features that made him a model minister.[57] Third, the fact that Shi Hui's scribes and invocators could "present the truth to spirits and deities with no need for apologies" indicates his impeccable morality. These three features which allowed Shi Hui "to delight deities and men" – nicely integrating the "religious" and "secular" aspects of *de* – epitomize his virtue.

Zhao Wu's summary of Shi Hui's virtue is one of the most detailed analysis of the term *de* in the entire *Zuozhuan*. It does show that the term encompassed one's interactions with deities above and men below; that it had charismatic, political, and moral dimensions. And it also suggests that the latter were tertiary at best. The discourse of *de* could refer to morality among other aspects but the focus of this discourse was elsewhere. *De* was primarily a political term with strong religious dimensions and clearly pronounced yet less central moral aspects. With this understanding in mind we can address now the point that was raised at the beginning of this essay: how much does *Zuozhuan* usage of *de* correlate with what would be expected of a "Confucian" text?

49 Ibid, Zhao 26.9.
50 Ibid, Xuan 12.2b.
51 Ibid, Xiang 14.3.
52 Ibid, Xi 33.3.
53 Ibid, Xi 33.6, Zhao 2.3, Zhao 10.4.
54 Ibid, Xuan 6.6, Xiang 26.1.
55 Ibid, Xiang 27.4e. Shi Hui served five rulers of Jin between ca. 630–590 BCE, during which period Jin leaders acted as hegemons, meaning that they presided over the allies' covenants.
56 For the nature of ministerial patrimonies as mini-states in their own right, see Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚, *Shang Zhou jiazu xingtai yanjiu* 商周家族形態研究 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1990), 525–566.
57 For the importance of remonstrance in *Zuozhuan*, see David Schaberg, "Remonstrance in Eastern Zhou Historiography," *Early China* 22 (1997): 133–179.

6 Afterword: Pre-Confucian Usage?

Scholars who studied the semantic field of *de* commonly notice its hermeneutical richness.[58] The above study of the usages of *de* in *Zuozhuan* fully supports this observation. *De* could refer to charismatic power; it could refer to a Heaven's gift or to a sacred substance that facilitated communication with spirits and deities; it could refer to political potency, to proper decorum, to mildness and kindness in domestic or interstate affairs, to individual morality, and so forth. Rarely, it could appear even in a neutral meaning of "quality," in which case the term was losing its normal positive connotations and could be applied in neutral and even negative contexts, such as referring to the characteristics of despised aliens.[59] Few if any keywords in *Zuozhuan* can match this semantic breadth. With this observation in mind, how can we correlate the usage of *de* in *Zuozhuan* with that in other Confucian texts, most notably the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), which arguably reflect the world of thought from the period closest in time to that depicted in *Zuozhuan*?[60]

Without entering into detailed comparison, suffice it to accept Yao Xingzhong's view that *de* in the *Analects* "is more than a customary 'good habit or disposition.' It is the moral power that must be cultivated, and cultivation of moral excellence is both the prerequisite for, and the necessary consequence of, acquiring an understanding of the Way."[61] This observation encapsulates the profound difference between the *Analects* (and later texts of the Confucian lore in which cultivation of virtue or, more precisely, moral self-cultivation, is one of the most essential topoi)[62] and the world of thought of *Zuozhuan*. In the latter, there are no less than ten instances in which the speakers insist on the need to "cultivate *de*" (*xiu de* 修德), but not a single one refers to moral self-cultivation. Invariably – as we have seen from Yan Ying's speech cited in section 3 – speakers refer to improving one's political conduct either domestically or in the interstate context. The addressees of the discussions about "cultivating virtue" are rulers or other top leaders, and the context is purely political. Personal morality does not figure at all in speeches that mention cultivation of *de*.[63]

The absence of interest in cultivating individual virtue in *Zuozhuan* is not incidental. Overall, the

58 See, e.g., Alan K. L. Chan, "Interpretations of Virtue (*de*) in Early China," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38.1 (2011): 134–50; Wang, "A Genealogical Study," 81, q.v. for further references.

59 See *Zuozhuan*, Ding 4.3f, where *de* refers to rapacious disposition of the "barbarian" state of Wu 吳; Ai 13.4a, when it refers to Wu's "unstable temperament"; Xi 24.2c where it refers derisively to an insatiable queen of Di 狄 origin; see also *de* referring to neutral innate qualities of humans and beasts in Xiang 4.7.

60 The *Analects*, like most other preimperial texts, is a composite text, meaning that its formation spanned generations if not centuries. However, insofar as the text reflects ideas of Confucius and the first two generations of his disciples, it can be considered as reflective primarily of the intellectual atmosphere of the late Springs-and-Autumns rather than the Warring States period. Note also that its vocabulary is much closer to that of *Zuozhuan* than to that of the middle to late Warring States-period writings. See Yuri Pines, "Lexical Changes in Zhanguo Texts," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.4 (2002): 691–705. For philosophical observations that support this dating, see Paul R. Goldin, "Confucius and His Disciples in the *Lunyu*: The Basis for the Traditional View," in *Confucius and the Analects Revisited: New Perspectives on Composition, Dating, and Authorship*, ed. Michael Hunter, and Martin Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 92–115. For different views, see other articles in *Confucius and the Analects*.

61 Yao Xinzhong, "The Way, Virtue, and Practical Skills in the *Analects*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39.1 (2012): 30–31.

62 Paul R. Goldin identifies the emphasis on moral self-cultivation as one of the fundamental features of Confucian texts (see his *Confucianism* [Durham: Acumen, 2011], 5). For more on the importance of self-cultivation in the Warring States-period texts, see Olivier Weingarten, "'Self-Cultivation' (*xiu shen* 修身) in the Early Edited Literature: Uses and Contexts," *Oriens Extremus* 54 (2015): 163–208.

63 The instances in which "cultivation of virtue" is mentioned are: *Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 8.2, Xi 5.2, Wen 2.1, Cheng 13.3, Xiang 9.5, Xiang 13.7, Xiang 28.8, Zhao 4.1, and Zhao 20.6.

topics of self-cultivation, learning, and so forth, are marginal in the text. In the pedigree-based social order, individual qualities mattered less than one's birthright in determining one's social position. For those from outside the ranks of nobility, self-cultivation could never pave the way for upward mobility. There was for sure downward mobility: hence, nobles who lacked morality or were unlearned (for instance lacking knowledge of rituals or of canonical *Poems*) were castigated; misbehavior could be seen as losing one's "noble men" (*junzi* 君子) status and descending to the despicable position of "petty men" (*xiao ren* 小人).[64] Yet downward mobility was not matched by upward mobility of the members of the low nobility, i.e., the *shi* 士 stratum. *Shi* are never called "noble men" (*junzi* 君子) in *Zuozhuan*, nor do they appear in discussions of virtue. At least insofar as aristocratic speakers whose voices overwhelmingly dominate *Zuozhuan* are concerned, *shi* were not relevant politically, socially, or intellectually.[65]

It is on this background that we can note another dimension of Confucius's intellectual revolution. That Confucius was a *shi* who wrote for fellow *shi* and that he was the first to use the term *shi* as coterminous with the "noble man" is well known.[66] The comparison of the *Analects* with *Zuozhuan* shows that Confucius was arguably the first to apply the discussion of *de* as moral virtue to the members of his stratum. By doing so he may have contributed decisively to the shift of the semantical focus of *de* from the realm of politics and charisma to that of morality. Moreover, he contributed to the empowerment of *shi* vis-à-vis the nobles. Successful cultivation of virtue was opening to a *shi* way upward to the rank of "noble men," i.e. society's leaders. The age of hereditary aristocracy was approaching its end.

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64 See, e.g., *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 27.2; Xiang 28.9e; Xiang 31.12; Zhao 16.3b; Zhao 10.4c; *et saepe*.

65 See more in Yuri Pines, *Foundations*, 164–204. For the position of *shi* during the aristocratic Springs-and-Autumns period, see Hsu Cho-yun, *Ancient China in Transition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965); cf. Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 116–119.

66 See, e.g., Yuri Pines, "Confucius's Elitism: The Concepts of *junzi* and *xiaoren* Revisited." In: *A Concise Companion to Confucius*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 164–184.