

### Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

Yuri Pines

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the political and social order of the aristocratic Springs and Autumns period. It analyzes the formation of the multistate system in the wake of the weakening of the Zhou dynasty, this system's functioning, and the eventual collapse of the attempts to ensure viable multistate order. The chapter shows that aggravating political fragmentation notwithstanding, the aristocratic elites throughout the Zhou realm maintained considerable cultural unity. Even the elites of alien political entities, such as Wu and Yue, became increasingly absorbed into the broad framework of the Zhou culture, contributing therewith to the expansion of the Zhou realm and the softening of Sino-alien dichotomy. The second part of the chapter focuses on domestic life of the component polities of the Zhou world. Particular attention is given to the power of hereditary aristocrats (specifically, the ministerial lineages) and to political activism of the lower stratum of "capital-dwellers," who emerged as major beneficiaries of the ongoing struggles between the rulers and their chief ministers.

Keywords: aristocracy, barbarians, city-states, commoners, covenants, hegemony, identity, inter-state relations, ministers, rulers

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When the Way prevails under Heaven, rites, music, and punitive expeditions are initiated by the Son of Heaven; when there is no Way under Heaven, rites, music, and punitive expeditions are initiated by regional lords. If they are initiated by regional lords, few [states] will not be lost within ten generations; if they are initiated by nobles, few will not be lost within five generations; when retainers hold the state's [power to issue] commands, few will not be lost within three generations. (*Analects*)

<sup>1</sup>THE Springs and Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) period was the heyday of China's aristocratic age. It was the age when a few noble lineages monopolized social, economic, political, and cultural power in each of the polities that comprised the Zhou 周 world, effectively preventing outsiders from ascending the ladder of power. It was also

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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the age of one of the deepest systemic crises in China's long history. The aggravating weakness of the rulers—both of the Zhou kings and of regional lords—brought about political disintegration, the pace of which accelerated by the sixth to fifth centuries BCE. Confucius's (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) saying cited in the epigraph (*Lunyu* 16.2:174) may serve as a brief summary of the devolution of political power during that age. The inability of policy-makers to curb the powers of disintegration stands at the background of profound reforms that ensued in the subsequent Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE), and which redirected the Zhou world toward the new, imperial era (Chapter 27).

### (p. 496) The rise and fall of multistate order

The Springs and Autumns period was the only age in China's long history during which efforts were made to create a viable multistate system. Back then, in marked distinction from other periods of political fragmentation, coexistence of multiple independent polities was not considered an aberration but rather a *fait accompli*. Statesmen of that age invested considerable efforts in solidifying and perfecting the multistate system. They even tried to create a proxy for an interstate law and developed diplomatic codes. It is only in the aftermath of the fiasco of these efforts that the search for multistate order was discontinued and the quest for political unification of All-under-Heaven (*tianxia* 天下) turned into the central feature of traditional Chinese political culture (Pines 2000).

The formation of the multistate system of the Springs and Autumns period was a by-product of the malfunctioning of the Zhou dynasty. Nominally, throughout this period and much beyond, the Zhou kings, the self-proclaimed "Sons of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子), remained the supreme locus of political legitimacy. The kings inherited the immense prestige of the founders of the Zhou dynasty: they symbolized political order; stood at the apex of the ritual pyramid; and, most importantly, acted as exclusive mediators between the supreme deity, Heaven, and humankind. Practically, however, the Zhou dynasty had never recovered from the disastrous collapse of its western power-base in the Wei River Valley in 771 BCE. Never again could its economic and military prowess match its ritual prestige. Gradually but inevitably, the Sons of Heaven lost the ability to impose their will on regional lords (*zhuhou* 諸侯), who turned into independent political actors. Regional polities waged wars, concluded alliances, and maintained diplomatic relations with each other, while the Zhou kings were mostly hapless spectators of these developments, granting them post-factum approval and being unable to actively influence interstate dynamics. As time passed, the locus of political gravity shifted irreversibly from the Zhou royal court at Chengzhou 成周 (near modern Luoyang) toward the courts of powerful regional leaders.

The decline of the royal power was a complex process with manifold ebbs and flows. The dynasty reached its weakest point shortly after the collapse of its power in 771 BCE. According to the newly available information from the bamboo manuscript *Xinian* 繫年 (*String of Years*) from the Qinghua/Tsinghua University collection, after one of the contenders for the throne was killed in 750 BCE, "for nine years (749–741 BCE) Zhou was

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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without a king, and the rulers of the states and regional lords then for the first time ceased attending the Zhou court" (*Xinian* 2, slip 8). Only in 741 BCE did Marquis Wen of Jin 晉文侯 (r. 780–746 or 770–736 BCE) establish the new incumbent, King Ping 周平王 (r. 770/741–722 BCE) on the throne, and in 738 BCE transferred him to Chengzhou (Chen and Pines 2018). There, under the protection of Jin 晉 and Zheng 鄭, the dynasty started to recover its prestige. According to *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, our major source for Springs and Autumns period history (see this chapter and chapter 23), in the late eighth century BCE the kings could even initiate punitive expeditions against minor polities whose leaders (p. 497) behaved disrespectfully. However, maintaining the semblance of the royal house's authority would not be possible without the ongoing support of powerful regional lords, and this support could not be taken for granted. In 707 BCE, the coalition army, personally led by King Huan of Zhou 周桓王 (r. 719–697 BCE), was defeated by the king's protector-turned-foe, Lord Zhuang of Zheng 鄭莊公 (r. 743–701 BCE). The king was wounded in the battle, and although Lord Zhuang refused to continue his assault on royal forces and even sent an envoy to express his condolences to the king, the renewed blow to the Zhou prestige was harsh. This defeat marked the end of the kings' military activism.

In the early seventh century BCE the first attempt was made to restructure the interstate system so as to reflect a new power balance between the kings and regional lords. This was the establishment of the institution of hegemony (*ba* 霸), under the aegis of Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685–643 BCE). Lord Huan's hegemony was based on a combination of Qi's military superiority together with the lord's ability to position himself as a surrogate and protector of the Zhou kings. Although Lord Huan redirected some of the interstate ceremonies, such as court visits, from the Zhou court to himself, he continued to display reverence to the kings, assisting them in their conflicts with external and internal foes and invoking their name in his incursions against other regional lords, most notably against the rising superpower of Chu 楚 in 656 BCE.

Moreover, Lord Huan acted resolutely against the Rong 戎 and Di 狄 incursions into the Zhou lands and, in a remarkable display of selflessness, restored in 659 BCE the statelets of Xing 邢 and Wei 衛 that were earlier annihilated by the Di invaders. All these actions, in addition to Lord Huan's carefully orchestrated display of adherence to the Zhou ritual norms of interstate intercourse, served as a useful veneer to Lord Huan's blatant military superiority, turning him from a powerful local potentate into a protector of the Zhou-mandated interstate order.

Lord Huan's success notwithstanding, the institution of hegemony, based as it was on the combination of unilateral military superiority of a regional lord and the ritual prestige of the Zhou king, was not sustainable in the long run. By the late seventh century BCE it was replaced by a bi-polar system of two competing alliances, each led by a powerful state (Jin in the north, Chu in the south). The alliance system can be considered the second major device developed by the Springs and Autumns period statesmen as a means of stabilizing the multistate system, at least within each alliance. The alliance leaders tried to maintain order within their coalitions, acting as arbiters in inter- and intra-state conflicts and protecting domestic order within the allied states. They maintained vibrant

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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diplomatic activities, convening the allied lords for periodic meetings and swearing solemn alliance covenants. Jin leaders also tried to emulate Lord Huan's role as protectors of the Zhou house, although in reality their actions often deviated from this role. Thus, the first of the Jin hegemonies, the illustrious Lord Wen 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE), arrogantly demanded of his protégé, King Xiang 周襄王 (r. 651–619 BCE), to grant him royal sumptuary privileges; when refused, Lord Wen retaliated by *summoning* the king to an interstate meeting in 632 BCE. This appalling disregard of ritual norms dealt another blow to royal prestige, foreshadowing further marginalization of the Sons of Heaven during the second half of the Springs and Autumns period.

(p. 498) The system of alliances could temporarily ensure intra-alliance stability, but in the long term it proved woefully ineffective. The alliance leaders were often prone to pursue narrow interests of their polities at the expense of the allies, betraying their solemn oath obligations and sacrificing the trust of their protégés for the sake of immediate gains, particularly territorial expansion. Worse, the century-long struggle between Jin and Chu, which culminated in three major—but indecisive—battles of Chengpu 城濮 (632 BCE), Bi 郟 (597 BCE), and Yanling 鄢陵 (575 BCE), served as the permanent destabilizing factor in interstate relations. The fierce inter-alliance competition amid ongoing military deadlock caused the leaders of both major powers to seek expansion of their alliances by alluring or forcing the enemy's allies to switch sides. This, in turn, generated repeated invasions of intermediate polities, sandwiched between Jin and Chu. The situation of these polities, according to a contemporary testimony, was grave indeed:

With the domain cut to pieces and thrown topsy-turvy, there is no place to turn to for appeal. Those among the people who perished were either fathers and older brothers or sons and younger brothers. Everyone is in sorrow and pain, not knowing where to find protection. (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 8.7b; translation borrowed from Durrant et al. 2016: 947).

This plight of the tiny states generated the final and the most curious attempt to stabilize the multistate system: namely, two “disarmament conferences” in 546 and 541 BCE. The organizers proposed the creation of a mega-alliance, led simultaneously by Jin and Chu, legitimating thereby the bipolar world. This initiative, however, failed miserably owing to the lack of mutual trust between major powers. After a short period of *de facto* hegemony by a ruthless King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 540–529 BCE), the internal crises in both Chu and Jin opened the way to the rise of new major powers. By the late sixth century BCE, the center of political gravity shifted to the peripheral southeastern states of Wu 吳 and Yue 越. Wu, loosely allied with Jin, had inflicted a major blow on Chu, briefly occupying Chu's capital, Ying 郢, in 506 BCE. Later, as Chu recovered its power, Wu shifted its attention northward, expanding robustly into the direction of Shandong. This strategy backfired, though, as Wu's southern rival, the state of Yue, assaulted Wu from the south, eventually eliminating it in 473 BCE. In the aftermath of this illustrious success, King Goujian of Yue 越王句踐 (r. 496–464 BCE) inherited Wu's policy of a loose alliance with Jin and continued northward expansion into Shandong.

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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Their occasional military success notwithstanding, neither Wu, nor Yue, nor the resurrecting powers of Chu and Jin were able to maintain even a semblance of stability that existed under earlier hegemony. By the end of the Springs and Autumns era, erstwhile alliances disintegrated and the war of all against all ensued. The very idea of a sustainable multistate system had eventually lost its appeal. The period following the breakup of the state of Jin in 453 BCE, and prior to the imperial unification of 221 BCE, is ominously known as the age of the Warring States: the age when no rules of interstate intercourse were maintained. It was during that age that the dictum of political unification as the only way toward peace and stability ensued, becoming the cornerstone of Chinese political culture for millennia to come (Pines 2000 and 2012:11–43).

### (p. 499) **Ethnocultural identities in fragmented world**

The Late Warring States-period text, the *Gongyang* 刪羊 commentary on the canonical *Springs and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), famously hails Lord Huan of Qi as the defender of Chinese civilization against the southern state of Chu and against the northern Di and Rong tribesmen:

Chu is the country that is the last to submit when there is a True Monarch, and the first to rebel when there is no True Monarch. It belongs to Yi 夷 and Di 狄 [“barbarians”] and extremely hates the Central States [“China”]. When southern Yi and northern Di communicated, China was on the verge of being cut off like a thread. Lord Huan rescued the Central States and repelled the Yi and the Di, and finally had pacified Jing (Chu): this is considered the undertaking of the True Monarch. (*Gongyang zhuan*, Xi 4:203)

The idea that Lord Huan saved China from mortal peril is echoed in a few other texts from the Warring States and early imperial periods; when read in tandem with harsh pronouncements in contemporaneous texts that emphasize the alleged bestiality of the “barbarians” and their impaired humaneness, it creates an impression of a clearly pronounced “Sino-barbarian” dichotomy. Not a few scholars picked up these citations to argue that already during the Springs and Autumns period seeds of Chinese exclusive nationalism or even of racism were sown (e.g., Dikötter 1992:1–30). These scholars furthermore uncritically accept the picture of a clear-cut spatial and cultural separation between the proud bearers of Chinese civilization (self-named Xia 夏 or Huaxia 華夏) and the culturally backward “barbarians of the four quarters.” This picture is largely false though. Careful reading of early textual sources, such as the *Zuo Tradition* or *Zuo Commentary on the Springs-and-Autumns Annals* (*Zuo zhuan*, see chapter 23), coupled with analysis of material data and of relevant paleographic sources creates a radically different picture. Ethnocultural identities of the pre-imperial age appear much more malleable and flexible than the authors of later systematizing texts and some modern scholars would want us to believe (Di Cosmo 2002; Pines 2005).

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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To begin with, pace the *Gongyang Commentary*, the “Central States” were not surrounded by belligerent “barbarians”; rather, the latter were often settled in between “Chinese” polities, sometimes at the very heartland of the Central Plains. For instance, in 478 BCE the ruler of the centrally located state of Wei 衛 was surprised to discover a Rong settlement at the sight distance from the walls of his capital. Moreover, wars were only one—and arguably not the most significant—aspect of Sino-alien interactions. Although the mid-seventh-century-BCE Rong and Di incursions into the northeastern part of the Zhou world caused serious devastation and clearly increased “anti-barbarian” sentiment, these were exceptions rather than the rule. Non-Sinitic polities were involved in a complex web of relations with their Xia neighbors, which included alliances, inter-marriage, (p. 500) and even forging fictitious kinship ties through adopting the clan names of the Zhou royal house or of other Xia polities. When military conflicts occurred, more often than not the Rong and the Di acted as the allies of one Xia polity against another; alternatively they are often depicted as victims of the Xia expansion rather than insatiable belligerents. Actually, the alarmist tone of the cited *Gongyang* statement is highly exceptional in pre-imperial texts. Ethnicity or kinship could be invoked to justify a war or an alliance, but they were never the major determinant of the polity’s course.

To illustrate the latter point let us briefly focus on the behavior of the leaders of Sui 隨 (or Zeng 曾),<sup>2</sup> once the major stronghold of the Zhou ruling clan in the eastern part of the Han River Valley. Since the late ninth century BCE, most Zhou-related polities in this area were conquered by Chu, and Sui became the Chu satellite. In 506 BCE, following the disastrous defeat by the Wu forces, the beleaguered king of Chu fled to Sui. The Wu commanders requested the Sui leaders to hand the fugitive king over and avenge therewith the fate of their Ji 姬 (Zhou-related) clansmen (recall that the kings of Wu claimed, like many non-Sinitic rulers, to be members of the Zhou royal Ji clan). The Sui leaders refused. Their position is explained in a recently unearthed inscription on the Marquis Yu of Zeng bells 曾侯與編鐘. The marquis of Zeng (Sui) tells that although he is proud of his ancestors’ service of the Zhou dynasty, by now the Zhou house had declined and the Mandate of Heaven had shifted to Chu. The Marquis boastfully proclaims, “The restoration of the King of Chu is thanks to the numinous power of the Marquis of Zeng” (Khayutina 2019; Pines 2020:86). Namely, what matters is the new configuration of power, not the ancestral memories.

An additional reason for the relative marginality of ethnicity as a political factor in the Springs and Autumns period is that cultural belonging back then was remarkably malleable, defying the simplistic “us-versus-them” dichotomy. To illustrate the latter point, suffice it to trace briefly the cultural trajectories of several major polities of that age. For example, states such as Wu and Yue in the lower Yangzi region came into close contact with the states of the Central Plains only in the sixth century BCE. Archeological data and textual evidence alike clearly testify to the cultural otherness of the Wu and Yue elites, and yet this otherness was in the process of being eroded (Falkenhausen 2006:271–284). The rulers of Wu and Yue forged genealogies that made them descendants, respectively, of the Zhou royal progenitors and of the sage Thearch Yu 禹, thereby acquiring a respectable Xia pedigree; their elites were absorbing mortuary practices of their Zhou

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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peers; advisors from other Zhou polities flocked to their states; and their leaders became active participants in interstate assemblies and covenants of the Late Springs and Autumns period. A similar tendency toward cultural integration is observable with regard to a few other polities associated with Rong and Di, although in these cases the dearth of reliable data prevents us from making far-reaching conclusions.

(p. 501) While some of the aliens were in the process of becoming “Chinese,” a few Xia states were moving in the opposite direction. Two major examples of this alienation from the Zhou realm are the states of Qin 秦 in northwest and Chu in the south. Texts of the Warring States period and later often (even if not unanimously) identify both major polities as “barbarian” entities; the cited *Gongyang Commentary* statement is representative of this trend. However, this image of the otherness of Qin and Chu does not fit the realities of the Springs and Autumns period. Elite burials from both Qin and Chu share major characteristics with those of other Zhou states in terms of the shape and furnishing of the tombs, assemblages of sacrificial vessels, inscriptions on some of these vessels, and social hierarchy as reflected in burial practices and the like (Falkehnausen 2006). There are certain local idiosyncrasies to be sure—such as a higher frequency of flexed (as opposed to supine) burial in Qin tombs or the appearance of new shapes of bronze vessels in Chu—but these are indicative, to cite Lothar von Falkenhausen (2014:39) of a “regional phase” of the Zhou culture and not of a separate culture. The material evidence shows then that despite their distinctiveness, both Chu and Qin were full members of the Zhou cultural *oikouménē*. A similar picture comes from *Zuo zhuan*, the major textual source for the history of the Springs and Autumns period. Although the text does refer to Qin’s “remoteness” (from the viewpoint of the eastern state of Lu 魯; *Zuo zhuan*, Wen 12.5) and to Chu’s being “not of our kin” (i.e., not ruled by the same Ji 姬 clan as Lu, Jin, or Zhou; *Zuo zhuan*, Cheng 4.4), it never refers to either Qin or Chu as “barbarians.” Elite members of Qin and Chu appear as equal participants in the common aristocratic ritual culture, which was defined in *Zuo zhuan* and elsewhere as the hallmark of cultural belonging to the Zhou world.

The “barbarian” image of Qin and Chu appears then to be the product of the Warring States cultural milieu: a mark of their estrangement from the states of the Central Plains. This process of estrangement started earlier in the state of Chu, the heads of which claimed the royal title (*wang* 王) already in the Springs and Autumns period, thereby defying the Zhou norms (although they were careful not to claim the title of Son of Heaven, leaving the Zhou kings a semblance of ritual superiority). In the case of Qin, the shaping of a new identity was a later process, which started in the Warring States period and will not be discussed here (Shelach and Pines 2005). Yet differences aside, both cases of Chu and Qin demonstrate that aside from acculturation into the Zhou world, elites in at least some of the Zhou polities were engaged in the opposite process of forging a distinctive cultural identity.

The malleability of cultural identities in the Springs and Autumns period is duly reflected in the multifaceted presentation of the Other in contemporaneous texts. Aside from pejorative remarks about the alleged bestiality of the “barbarians,” we find many other cases

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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in which the aliens are treated neutrally, or even positively, as being culturally and intellectually superior to the dwellers of the Central States (Schaberg 2001:132–133). Yet what is really remarkable—and what critically distinguishes pre-imperial Chinese historical texts from those in, for example, the Greek or Roman world—is the relative marginality of the aliens as a *topos*. More often than not, the cultural otherness of a statesman is not an issue at all, and it is frequently ignored altogether (Pines 2011). (p. 502) For instance, only a few careful readers of *Zuo zhuan* would notice that the leading Jin statesman, and the architect of Lord Wen's hegemony, Zifan 子犯 (also known as Hu Yan 狐偃, fl. 650–630 BCE), was a person of the Rong stock. Nor would many readers pay attention to the fact that Lord Wen himself was born of a Rong mother. This lack of interest in cultural otherness of important political figures is not incidental. It seems that, pace the *Gongyang Commentary*, statesmen of the Springs and Autumns period were much more preoccupied with struggles against their peer polities than in defending the Xia against the “barbarians.”

## The heyday of aristocratic rule

In 522 BCE a conflict erupted between Lord Yuan of Song 宋元蒯 (r. 531–517 BCE) and two leading ministerial lineages in his state, Hua 華 and Xiang 向. The conflict turned into a major domestic war, which started with the massacre of many of Song princes and ended with the partial extermination and partial expulsion of both rebel lineages. It generated manifold dramas, such as that of Grand Marshal Hua Feisui 華費遂, who first assisted Lord Yuan in quelling the rebellion of his kinsmen, driving one of his own sons into exile, but then was forced to join the rebels almost against his will because of a fratricidal struggle between two of his remaining sons. The war lasted for three years and involved military forces from all the major powers of the age, including Jin 晉, Chu 楚, Qi 齊, and Wu 吳, in addition to Song's tiny neighbors, Cao 曹 and Wei 衛.

This dramatic story is just one of dozens of similar events narrated in the latter half of *Zuo zhuan*. Clashes between regional lords and ministerial lineages, coupled with perennial inter- and intra-lineage struggles, plagued most polities of the Springs and Autumns period. They reflected the major distinctive feature of the political structure of that age: the shift of power from the regional lords to their underlings, members of the powerful ministerial stratum. By the end of the Springs and Autumns period, only a few rulers succeeded in preserving the reins of power in their hands.

The power of nobility was embedded in the very foundations of the Zhou system, in which a noble lineage acted as the fundamental socioeconomic, religious, military and, naturally, political unit (Zhu Fenghan 2004), but by the middle of the Springs and Autumns period it reached new dimensions. By then, ministerial (*qing* 卿) lineages formed a new social segment distinguishable from the rest of the nobles (*dafu* 大夫). The emergence of this new stratum derived from two major peculiarities of the political structure of the Springs and Autumns period, namely the systems of hereditary office holding and of hereditary allotments. Both systems are traceable to the Western Zhou period, but it was only by the

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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late seventh century BCE that they outgrew their original scope and turned into the major threat to domestic stability (Qian Zongfan 1989). Of the two, the system of hereditary allotments was the most consequential. Originally it was designed as a means of compensating an official for his services. Upon appointment, a new official was granted an allotment comprising of several settlements (or several (p. 503) dozen settlements for top appointees) and their adjacent fields. The allotment's master commanded all of its economic and human resources; the allotment's inhabitants paid him taxes, served as auxiliaries in his military forces, and owed him their exclusive allegiance. The allotment was ruled by the master's personal appointees, mostly his kin and retainers. In principle, the allotment was alienable: upon cessation of service, the official was supposed to return his territory to the lord, preserving just a few settlements as his hereditary possession.

In the short run the system of hereditary allotments was sustainable, but it was undermined by the system of hereditary ministerial positions. Whereas in the early Springs and Autumns period it was still customary for every new ruler to replace his predecessor's appointees with new ministers, mostly from among his closest kin, gradually this situation changed (Hsu 1965). Should a single minister succeed to preserve his position during the reigns of two or more rulers, he could amass sufficient power to manipulate succession of the office in favor of his son. In that case the office itself and the related allotment would become a hereditary possession of a ministerial lineage, and the ruler could not but acquiesce. Specifics of this process varied in place and time, but the overall direction was clear: slowly but steadily the rulers were losing their administrative power, and with it the ability to command the resources of their state.

Transformation of allotments from ad hoc possessions of individual ministers into hereditary holdings of ministerial lineages had profound implications on the nature of the polities of the Springs and Autumns period. Most fundamentally it meant dispersal of political, economic, and military authority. Having monopolized material and human resources of the allotment, powerful ministers could rival their nominal superiors, the regional lords, in terms of wealth and military prowess; gradually their allotments turned into mini-states in their own right. Allotments were run by the master's courts patterned after the regional lord's court; they had an independent administrative system, their own weights and measures, a cultic center (the ancestral temple of the allotment's master), and their own military forces that were only indirectly subordinate to the regional lord. Some allotments began emulating regional polities seeking territorial expansion, and it was not uncommon for some of the ministers to conduct independent foreign policy in the interest of their allotment, invading minor polities or concluding alliances so as to expand the territory under their direct control. The desire to expand an allotment at the expense of one's neighbors exacerbated tensions among ministerial lineages, aggravating the domestic turmoil that plagued the polities of the Springs and Autumns period.

The empowerment of ministers meant progressive devolution of economic, military and, most notably, political authority. As the rulers were eclipsed by their underlings, the very pattern of centralized rule was profoundly challenged, and most polities were in the process of being transformed from monarchies into de facto aristocratic oligarchies, run

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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by coalitions of powerful ministers. These coalitions rarely could ensure stability, being perpetually undermined by internecine struggle among rival lineages. In the state of Jin, for instance, followers and supporters of Lord Wen formed the core of the new leadership: since the end of the seventh century BCE they rotated among themselves (p. 504) the all-important positions of commanders and vice-commanders of the country's six (later three) armies. Yet as time passed, inter-lineage struggles decimated the number of power-sharers: by the mid-sixth century BCE only six ministerial lineages remained. Two of these were annihilated in 497–490 BCE and another one in 453 BCE; the remaining three (Wei 魏, Han 韓, and Zhao 趙) eventually divided the state of Jin among themselves. Similar decimation of ministerial lineages took place in the state of Qi 齊, in which a single victor emerged: the Chen 陳 (Tian 田) lineage, the members of which had ruled the state since 481 BCE on behalf of puppet lords, until finally usurping the Qi throne in 386 BCE. The Qi example appears exceptional insofar as a single lineage succeeded in consolidating power; elsewhere the collateral branches of the ruling lineage rotated the power among themselves. In the state of Zheng 鄭 these were the seven lineages of descendants of Lord Mu 鄭穆 嗣 (r. 627–606 BCE); in the state of Lu 魯, the triumvirate of descendants of Lord Huan 魯桓 嗣 (r. 711–694 BCE) under the supremacy of the head of the Jisun 季孫 lineage; and similar coalitions emerged in Song 宋, Wei 衛, and elsewhere. The only major exception to this pattern of dispersed authority was the state of Chu, which maintained a higher degree of centralized control and stronger monarchic authority than any other comparable polity (Blakeley 1992). Some scholars suggest that a similar centralized pattern characterized Qin as well, although the precise situation there remains debatable (Thatcher 1985; cf. Yoshimoto 1995).

Not all the rulers accepted their position as figureheads; some tried to fight back and regain political initiative. A few succeeded, most notably King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王 (r. 612–591 BCE), whose smashing of the Ruao 若敖 lineage in 605 BCE ensured the lasting dominance of Chu kings over their ministers. Others failed miserably. Lord Ling of Jin 晉靈 嗣 (r. 620–607 BCE) tried to get rid of his powerful prime minister, Zhao Dun 趙盾, but was killed by Zhao's henchmen. A generation later, Lord Li of Jin 晉厲 嗣 (r. 580–573 BCE) tried to replace chief ministers with his personal favorites and even succeeded to wipe out the powerful Xi 郤 lineage, but other ministers retaliated, and the hapless lord was murdered and posthumously humiliated. His heir, Lord Dao 晉悼 嗣 (r. 572–558 BCE), dared not punish the assassins and retained the reins of power only by carefully maneuvering among his haughty underlings. In the state of Wei 衛, in 559 BCE the coalition of powerful nobles expelled Lord Xian 衛獻 嗣 (r. 576–559 and 546–544 BCE) and ruled through a puppet. In the state of Lu, an attempt by Lord Zhao 魯昭 嗣 (r. 541–510 BCE) to eliminate the overbearing Jisun lineage failed; the lord was expelled in 517 BCE and died in exile. For seven years, the triumvirs of the "Three Huan" lineages ruled their state without even bothering to appoint a new lord, creating thereby an unprecedented situation of direct rule by powerful aristocrats. These examples can be easily multiplied.

To aggravate the ruler's situation, even the ideological realm, as reflected in *Zuo zhuan*, was firmly controlled by the members of the ministerial stratum, who eagerly provided justifications for their elevated position vis-à-vis the regional lords (see more in chapter

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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23). At times it seems that even some of the rulers had internalized the realities of the new balance of power. Nothing exemplifies more the regional lords' humility than an offer made in 547 BCE by the ousted Lord Xian of Wei to Ning Xi 甯喜, the son of his former enemy, Ning Zhi 甯殖: "If you let me return [to Wei], all the administration (p. 505) will be in the hands of the Ning lineage, while I shall [only control the] sacrifices" (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 26.2). De facto, the lord acquiesced to the position of a ritual figurehead. Although this was an exceptional offer, it suffices to indicate that the ruler's authority was approaching its nadir.

The lack of effective rulership both within the Zhou *oikouménē* and within individual polities aggravated political crisis in the Zhou world, leading to a series of odd situations. For instance, in Confucius's home state of Lu, after the expulsion of Lord Zhao by the "Three Huan" lineages in 517 BCE, the scheming steward of the Jisun lineage, Yang Hu 陽虎 (fl. 510–490 BCE), a member of a lowly *shi* 士 (low nobility) stratum, turned for a few years (505–502 BCE) into a de facto dictator of his state, with both the nominal lord and the head of the Jisun lineage being his puppets. Elsewhere, powerful states discovered that the territories recently acquired from the neighbors could immediately after the annexation become a power base of rebellious ministers, thereby annulling the advantages of territorial expansion. States were decimated due to intermittent struggles between the lords and their ministers, among ministerial lineages, and among rival branches of major lineages. Some of the states—like the major superpower, the state of Jin—had completely disintegrated. Alternatively the ruling lineage could be replaced, as happened in the state of Qi after the Chen (Tian) usurpation. The outcomes differed, but malfunctioning of the political system was evident in every case.

Given the obviously negative consequences of the ruler's weakness, it is remarkable that throughout the entire Springs and Autumns period we have no evidence of significant reforms aimed at recreating effective centralized control.<sup>3</sup> It seems that leading ministers, who were in charge of restoring stability, remained torn between their conflicting public commitment to the state's well-being, which required re-empowerment of the ruler, and their private responsibilities toward their lineages, which would have to pay a price in case of renewed centralization. Unwilling either to cede their power to the lords or to institutionalize it, these ministers—and the rulers' courts run by them—remained paralyzed. The odd situation of the de facto ministerial oligarchy had not been legitimated, but no viable alternative to it had been proposed either.

This said, the seeds of recentralization were sown outside the rulers' courts. Some of the ministers began experimenting with a more centralized form of rule within their allotments. They discontinued the system of hereditary office holdings, paid their servants salaries in kind or in precious metals instead of further parceling the allotment, and maintained effective control over the entire territory under their rule. When some of the allotments turned into full-fledged states—such as happened to the successor states of Jin, namely Wei, Han, and Zhao, and to the new state of Qi, reconstituted by the "usurpers" from the Chen/Tian family—the new rulers continued with centralized forms of control. In due time these measures were emulated elsewhere, and a new state was born (Zhao Box-

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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iong 1990; Lewis 1999). By the fourth century BCE (p. 506) newly centralized territorial states under powerful monarchs replaced the loose aristocratic polities of the Springs and Autumns period. China started its drive toward the centralized “universal” empire.

### “Capital-dwellers” and political activism from below

Political instability was the major curse of the Springs and Autumns era, but for some people it might have been a blessing. In particular, it benefitted commoners and minor nobles (*shi* 士), who formed an increasingly vociferous group of capital-dwellers (*guo ren* 國人).

Capital-dwellers were a broad social group that comprised most of the male inhabitants of the capital, including farmers, whose plots were located outside the walls, in addition to petty nobles and their retainers, merchants, and artisans. During the Springs and Autumns period, capital-dwellers emerged as a highly influential political force. Two factors contributed to their high visibility. First, they were a major source of auxiliary manpower for the ruler’s armies. Although infantry soldiers recruited from among the capital-dwellers could not match the chariot-riding professionals of aristocratic descent, they were of huge importance not just as auxiliaries but primarily as the last-ditch (or, more properly, last-wall) defenders of the capital during times of siege. Second, and more importantly, their proximity to their ruler could become a major asset at times of domestic turmoil. When battles were waged on the streets of the capital, aristocrats had no particular advantage, and military intervention by capital-dwellers could become decisive.

Even a brief survey of *Zuo zhuan* shows how significant capital-dwellers were during domestic conflicts. The text identifies no less than 25 cases in which they actively influenced the outcome of internal struggles, such as succession conflicts or inter- and intra-lineage feuds. Their importance was duly recognized; the *Zuo zhuan* cites many speeches in which contemporaneous statesmen reiterate the need to cater to the needs of “the people” (i.e., capital-dwellers), in particular by taking care of their material interests. Without that, the speakers warn, the fighting spirit of the people will be impaired or, worse, they will side with the ruler’s enemies. Whatever the authenticity of these speeches, it seems that they reflect a common political awareness of rulers and ministers alike. The *Zuo zhuan* repeatedly tells how contenders for power adopted a variety of “populist” measures to endear themselves to capital-dwellers: they cut taxes, cancelled old debts, supported the needy, displayed frugality, and the like. Thus, we read of Prince Bao 鮑子鮑 of Song who distributed grain to the starving population during a famine, securing thereby the capital-dwellers’ assistance in a coup against his elder brother, Lord Zhao 宋昭 趙 (r. 620–611 BCE), in 611 BCE. Similar steps ensured the survival of the Han 罕 lineage in the state of Zheng and the Yue 樂 lineage in the state of Song during the (p. 507) tensest period of inter-lineage feuds in those states. Probably the most famous example of a scheming minister employing populist measures was the policy adopted by the Chen (Tian) family in the state of Qi. The Chen leaders used a double system of measures and weights so

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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that they lent the people more grain than the people had to repay. This policy, which reportedly caused the people to “sing and dance” in praise of the Chen (*Zuo zhuan*, Zhao 26.11), allowed them not only to overcome rival lineages but ultimately to usurp the power in their state.

In addition to eliciting economic benefits from the lord or from his rivals, capital-dwellers sometimes intervened directly in policy-making. Their opinion was influential enough to determine the course of interstate policy of their country or to influence certain promotions and demotions. There were even certain arrangements that institutionalized the input of capital-dwellers in policy-making. In cases of exceptional emergency, such as disastrous defeats, domestic turmoil, or just before a fateful decision such as relocation of the capital, rulers assembled capital-dwellers, apologized for “humiliating the altars,” or performed a religiously significant covenant ceremony (*meng* 盟) to reconfirm their ties with the populace. This kind of a “people’s assembly” encouraged certain scholars (e.g., Lewis 2006:136–150) to suggest that capital-dwellers were “citizens” rather than mere “subjects” and even to assert that the Springs and Autumns-period polities bore strong similarities to the ancient Greek city-states. This comparison is somewhat far-fetched though, since in the Chinese case, unlike in the Greek *poleis*, the people’s assemblies were an extraordinary ad hoc measure and not a normal political institution. Nonetheless, their existence, even if marginal, is indicative of much broader popular participation in politics than was the case in any subsequent period in Chinese history. And yet, these practices of popular assemblies and of political participation from below discontinued in subsequent centuries. Why?

To answer this question we should be reminded that political participation of the commoners was a direct by-product of political turmoil that plagued the polities of the Springs and Autumns period. Covenants between the rulers and the population were akin to the covenants occasionally made between the ruler and his rivals from among ministerial lineages: an abnormal solution to the abnormal situation of the ruler’s weakness. As an ad hoc means, such covenants, or assembling the capital-dwellers and soliciting their opinion on matters of vital importance, were tolerable, but they were never considered desirable and no attempt was ever made to institutionalize them. Actually, manifold speakers, cited in the *Zuo zhuan* and elsewhere, repeatedly express concern with the people’s livelihood, but we know of not a single voice that advocated increase in the people’s political participation. If such demands were ever made, they might have been inconsequential enough to disappear from historical accounts and from political rhetoric without leaving any trace. The people’s sentiments had to be taken into account, but it was up to the elites to understand the people’s needs and to respond to them. The commoners’ direct impact on political life, associated as it was with unruly capital-dwellers of the Springs and Autumns period, was a symptom of political malady and not the remedy (Pines 2009:187–214).

### (p. 508) **Summary: Cultural unity at the age of fragmentation**

Politically speaking, the Springs and Autumns period was a disastrous age. Fragmentation of the Zhou realm, the collapse of the multistate order, and perennial turmoil in major polities turned this period into a paradigmatic negative example, the mistakes of which should never be allowed to recur. In particular, the lesson of the unruly ministerial stratum was properly learned: the political system should never again allow a few lineages to monopolize political, economic, and military power. To a significant extent, bureaucratization, centralization, and empowerment of the monarch, which ensued in the subsequent Warring States period (Lewis 1999), and which remained the hallmark of Chinese imperial polity, should be understood as a conscious negation of the turmoil of the Springs and Autumns era.

And yet, the Zhou world did not disintegrate completely in the aftermath of three centuries of aristocratic rule. Its cultural ties appear even stronger by the end of the period under discussion than they were at the beginning, and the elite Zhou culture even expanded further into the lower Yangzi basin and, somewhat superficially, into the Sichuan basin as well (Falkenhausen 2006:244–288). Moreover, as time passed, the idea that the dwellers of the Zhou realm shared a common destiny became ever more pronounced, as can be judged from the increasing usage of the term All-under-Heaven (*tianxia*), the common designation of the Zhou *oikouménē*. This term is marginal in the Western Zhou texts and in the first half of the *Zuo zhuan* narrative, but its usage intensifies in the second half of the *Zuo zhuan*, and it becomes ubiquitous in the texts of the Warring States period (Pines 2002). What are the reasons for this increasing awareness of the commonality of the sub-celestial realm? Why did political fragmentation not affect negatively the sense of common cultural belonging?

To answer this question we should revisit the hereditary aristocracy—the very stratum whose unruliness contributed so much toward the political divisiveness of the Springs and Autumns period. It appears that whereas the nobles were the major factor behind political disintegration, culturally they were the major integrative force. The very mode of their life transcended the parochial limits of their allotment or of their polity. Under the mandatory rules of clan exogamy, the nobles often had to marry daughters of aristocratic clans from neighboring polities, creating thereby a web of cross-Zhou marital ties. More importantly, the nobles routinely had to depart from their country on military or diplomatic missions, during which they interacted with their peers from other states thus, perpetuating common aristocratic identity. Judging from the *Zuo zhuan*, at these meetings they conversed in “eloquent language” (*ya yan* 雅言), the lingua franca of the Zhou world; performed common ceremonies; and were expected to be versatile in the *Canon of Poems* and understand ritual music. Even military encounters were a means of perpetuating common cultural links, as they gave participants a chance to demonstrate adherence to common rules of chivalry. These rules required not just (p. 509) display of martial spirit and personal courage but also courtesy to the rival: hence, one was not expected to at-

## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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tack an unprepared enemy or to benefit from the rival's dire straits; even an exchange of arrows presupposed shooting in turns. The *Zuo zhuan* (and later texts) is often critical of excessive adherence to the rules of chivalry at the expense of pursuing military victory, and it is clear from the text that these rules were not uniformly observed, but there is little doubt that the wars of the Springs and Autumns period were conducted in an incomparably more gentlemanly way than during the subsequent Warring States era.

One may suspect the *Zuo zhuan* of exaggerating the degree of the Zhou elites' cultural cohesiveness, but archaeological evidence supports this picture. Cultural diversity in the Zhou world notwithstanding, in most essential aspects of burial customs we observe uniform rules throughout the entire *oikouménē*. Such status-defining parameters as the size of the tomb, the amount of inner and outer coffins, mortuary assemblages of bronze vessels (or of their ceramic imitations, the *mingqi* 明器), and the like all reflect adherence to common rules (Falkenhausen 2006; Yin Qun 2001). Similar uniformity is observable in the inscriptions on the ritual bronze vessels, the authors of which employ similar formulaic language throughout the Zhou world (Mattos 1997). To be sure, the uniformity was not absolute: one can observe manifold infractions of ritual regulations, local modifications of burial customs, and the appearance of new ritual assemblages. However, these modifications were performed within the commonly accepted parameters. The fundamental idea of the Zhou ritual system, namely strict observance of social hierarchy as reflected in strict sumptuary rules, was maintained unwaveringly in every polity of the Zhou world throughout the entire Springs and Autumns period.

The subsequent Warring States period witnessed the demise of hereditary aristocracy, which was absorbed into a broader meritocratic elite based on the *shi* 士 stratum. And yet the idea of the cultural unity of All-under-Heaven became even stronger. The *shi* inherited not just the political power of the aristocrats and their pride; more consequentially, they inherited and further strengthened the notion of common belonging to All-under-Heaven and of common cultural values that transcend the boundaries of individual states. This was the background for their quest for political unification of the entire sub-celestial realm, the quest that became the perennial feature of Chinese political culture from the Warring States period onward.

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## Historical background during the Springs and Autumns Period

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*Zuo zhuan*. See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*.

### Notes:

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<sup>(2)</sup> The question of identity between Zeng and Sui has aroused numerous controversies since the 1970s, but with the new discoveries it may be considered positively settled. For a cautious summary, see Venture 2017. For an updated analysis that takes into account 2019 discoveries, see Pines 2020: 85–88.

<sup>(3)</sup> It should be noted that the supposed reforms in the state of Qi under the aegis of Guan Zhong 管仲 (d. 645 BCE) are definitely an invention of Warring States-period thinkers and are not related to actual political situation in Qi during the Springs and Autumns period (Rosen 1976).

#### **Yuri Pines**

Yuri Pines, Hebrew University of Jerusalem