Historiography, thought, and intellectual development during the Springs and Autumns Period

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the historiography and political thought of the Springs and Autumns period. It analyzes major historical texts from the period—the *Springs and Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu*) and the *Zuo zhuan*—addressing their nature, audience, and (especially in the case of the *Zuo zhuan*) the nature of their primary sources. The multiplicity of genres in the Springs and Autumns period historiography is contrasted with the proliferation of didactic anecdotes as major building blocks of historical knowledge during the subsequent Warring States period. The second part of the chapter explores major aspects of the Springs and Autumns period's political thought as reflected in the *Zuo zhuan*. The marked aristocratic nature of this thought is contrasted with major trends of the subsequent Warring States period. The discussion focuses on the views of multistate order, concepts of rulership and ruler-minister relations, and views of social hierarchy and the importance of the ritual system.

Keywords: hierarchy, historiography, ministers, multistate order, ritual, ruler, scribes, Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), unity, Zuo zhuan

[1]IN terms of intellectual flowering, the Springs and Autumns period cannot be compared with the subsequent age of the Warring States, frequently dubbed the age of the Hundred Schools of Thought. The only truly towering thinker from the Springs and Autumns period, Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE), should be considered a transitional figure: in terms of his pedigree, his career, and the focus of his intellectual pursuits, Confucius is much closer to the Warring States–period Masters (*zi* 子) than to his aristocratic contemporaries. Yet the Springs and Autumns period occupies the place of pride in the history of Chinese historiography. Suffice it to mention that it is the only age in China's lengthy history that got its name from the title of a book, namely the *Springs and Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋, hereafter the *Annals*) of the state of Lu, which is traditionally, even if inaccurately, considered as the fountainhead of China's immensely rich historiographical tradition. More importantly, one of the commentaries on the *Annals*, namely the *Zuo Tradition* or *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), exercised immense impact on subsequent history writing.

These two texts may be justifiably considered the singularly important legacy of the Springs and Autumns period to posterity.

(p. 513) Formation of the historiographical tradition

The *Springs and Autumns Annals* may well compete for the designation as the most boring and the least inspiring of Chinese classics. A text some 17,000-odd characters in length, it comprises short entries that record major events from the life of the state of Lu and of related polities from 722 to 481 (or 479) BCE. Every year has at least four seasonal records; only exceptionally there are more than 10 records per year. The records are very brief, mostly consisting of one to two short sentences. There is no narrative in the text, no mention of causality or of broad background of the events. Few if any texts in the entire corpus of early Chinese literature can be less engaging for an average reader.

This problematic setting notwithstanding, the *Annals* were eventually elevated to the position of one of the most profound and sophisticated texts in the entire Chinese intellectual tradition, the summa of the wisdom of Confucius, the blueprint for properly running the empire. This interpretation was first put forward by Confucius's famous follower, Mengzi 孟子 (also known as Mencius, ca. 380–304 BCE). In a famous passage, Mengzi narrates the creation of the *Annals*:

> When All-under-Heaven declined and the Way fell into obscurity, deviant doctrines and violence again arose. There were instances of regicides and patricides. Confucius was apprehensive and composed (*zuo* 作) the *Springs and Autumns Annals*. The *Annals* are the matter for the Son of Heaven. Hence Confucius said: "Those who understand me will do so through the *Annals*; those who condemn me will also do so because of the *Annals*." … When Confucius completed the *Annals*, regicidal ministers and patricidal sons were overawed. (*Mengzi* 6.9:155)

This passage defined the dominant view of the *Annals* for millennia to come. The text is explicitly attributed to Confucius; its composition was an almost sacrosanct undertaking, which normally should have been initiated by the Son of Heaven alone; and when composed, the text turned into a potent weapon to overawe the evildoers. The *Annals*, then, have profound meaning and unusual political potency. This view was shared by two of the major commentaries on the *Annals*—the *Gongyang Commentary* 穀梁傳 and *Guliang Commentary* 公羊傳. Both traditions consider the *Annals* as a blueprint for the ideal political order. This blueprint is built on the combination of unshakeable ritual norms, inherited from King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (d. ca. 1047 BCE), coupled with their flexible adaptation to ever-changing political circumstances. The *Annals* not just embed King Wen's norms but also show how these norms should be applied. They are based on strict "rules of recording," any deviation from which, for example by altering personal appellations or by adding or omitting dates or place names, is not incidental but rather is done to present Confucius's praise or blame of historical personalities and of their actions (Gentz 2001,

2015). The “subtle words” (*weiyan* 微言) (p. 514) of the *Annals* epitomize Confucius’s unrivaled political wisdom; understanding them will immensely benefit policy-makers.

The popularity of the *Annals* peaked under Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE), when the *Annals*, in their *Gongyang* interpretation, were briefly elevated to the position of the empire’s foundational text. This adoration of the *Annals* receded later, although their position among the canonical scriptures was never questioned throughout the imperial millennia.[2] Yet in the twentieth century, when the former canonical texts lost their primacy as the quintessence of traditional wisdom, and Confucius himself was dethroned from his position as the ultimate sage and relegated to that of an average thinker, the *Annals* lost their appeal almost entirely. Even in the scholarly community only a very few continue to investigate them, while for the general public they remain almost unknown. Yet once we rid ourselves from attempts to comb the *Annals* for Confucius’s wisdom, we can start analyzing the text for what it is: a product of the Springs and Autumns historiography.

For a contemporary researcher the *Annals* are still a riddle. First, what was the nature of Confucius’s connection—if any—to the *Annals*? Although nobody considers him a composer, as is possibly implied by the verb *zuo* in *Mengzi*, it is unclear whether he edited the *Annals*, just promoted circulation of an extant version, or was simply erroneously identified as their editor by later followers. Second, how should we read the *Annals*? Does their formulaic language convey praise and blame of historical personages, and if yes then how? For instance, it is highly likely that different naming patterns of historical personages may be used to criticize their actions, but should we interpret other irregularities (e.g., in dating or location of the event) in a similar way? Yet before we answer these and related questions, we should address the third and, arguably, the most intriguing question: who was the intended audience of the *Annals*?

The last question may sound odd: intuitively, we tend to identify the *Annals* as a historical text directed at the members of educated elite, much like any other product of China’s immensely rich historiographic tradition. Yet the problem is that even a cursory reading of the *Annals* will identify numerous records that could have no meaningful value for either contemporaries or posterity. For instance, no less than 63 of the *Annals*’ entries record only the season and its first month without any event reported for this period of time (e.g., “Spring, the first month,” or “Autumn, seventh month”). Who was the addressee of these records? How important for a reader would it be to know that in winter 696 BCE the walls were built for the town of Cheng 成, and that in autumn 688 BCE snout moth’s larva (*ming* 螟) was reported? Is there any didactic or entertaining value for these records? Were these events considered exceptionally worthy of commemoration? A modern reader remains perplexed.

Not all of the *Annals*’ records are so boring; but many others are unintelligible to the people lacking proper scribal education. How a lay reader was expected to understand, (p. 515) for example, that the phrase “In the third year, in spring, in the royal first month, Ni met with a Qi army to make an attack on Wei” (Zhuang 3.1) was meant to criticize

Prince Ni 溺 of Lu who supported the Qi 齊 assault on Wei 衛 without receiving the command of the lord of Lu (this criticism is hinted at by omitting the designation of "ducal son" [*gongzi* 嵫子] before Ni's name)? Even more confusing are the cases of concealment in the *Annals*. For instance, whenever a ruler or an heir-apparent in Lu was assassinated, the *Annals* invariably reported them as "passing away" (*hong* 薨; *Zuo zhuan*, Yin 11.8, Huan 18.1, Min 2.3), or "dying" (*cu* 卒) for the heir (*Zuo zhuan*, Zhuang 32.5; and Wen 18.5). Records are modified to avoid unpleasant news when the lord of Lu was detained or otherwise humiliated by foreign powers (*Zuo zhuan*, Xi 17.4; Wen 2.3; Cheng 10.7; Zhao 16.1; see also Van Auken 2016a:59–61). And, when in 517 BCE rebellious ministers expelled Lord Zhao 魯昭嵫 (r. 541–510 BCE), the *Annals* laconically recorded: "Ninth month; on [the day] *jihai*, the lord left for Qi" (*Chunqiu*, Zhao 25.5; when other dignitaries or foreign rulers went into exile, the *Annals* report them as "fleeing" [*ben* 奔]). Needless to say, a reader would not properly understand these entries without an additional explanation.

The peculiar language of the *Annals* makes them into a singularly incomprehensible historical text in China's lengthy tradition of recording the past. A Han-dynasty scholar, Huan Tan 桓譚 (ca. 20 BCE–56 CE) sighed: "Should the [*Annals*] classic lack the [*Zuo*] commentary, the sage would close the door and ponder over it for ten years, and even then he would not understand it!" (*Xin lun* 9:39). It is likely indeed that the text was not originally prepared for broad circulation; according to the *Zuo zhuan* anecdote it was normally stored at the scribe's office of the state of Lu and shown to a visiting dignitary from the state of Jin 晉 only as a sign of an extraordinary favor (*Zuo zhuan*, Zhao 2.1). It is even possible that the readers of the text were not human beings but ancestral spirits of the state of Lu, to whom periodic reports had to be made in the ancestral temple (Pines 2009b:318–323). If so, then omissions of unpleasant news from the *Annals* may reflect the same tendency in the bronze inscriptions, which are also overwhelmingly directed at the donors' ancestors and avoid disturbing news (Falkenhausen 1993:152). Although this supposition of the cultic context of the *Annals* cannot be unequivocally proven or refuted, it is clear that the text was not designed to serve as a plain factual record of events for the use of educated elite members.

Terseness and partial incomprehensibility aside, the *Annals* are also an informative and a highly meaningful political text. Their entries are never whimsical. They invariably derive from the records of the Lu scribes or from reports to Lu from other polities, whose scribes routinely updated the Lu court about major events in the lives of their states, such as wars, covenants, rulers' successions, or cases of internal turmoil (Van Auken 2016a: 43–52). Hence, the *Annals* are rich in details about "who, what, when, and where," leaving only the question of "why" outside their concern. Moreover, the *Annals* provide an invaluable glimpse into the ritual conventions of their age. These ritual norms dictate the *Annals*' terse records. For instance, the image of the superiority of Zhou kings is preserved through careful placing of the kings' representatives ahead of even the most powerful regional lords whenever an inter-state meeting or a covenant are (p. 516) reported. The *Annals* furthermore uniformly refer to foreign dignitaries according to their ranks within the Zhou original hierarchy, stubbornly refusing to recognize the ritual "upgrad-

ing" of powerful rulers of such states as Qin 秦, Chu 楚, Wu 吳, and Yue 越 and from their original *bo* (伯, earl) or *zi* (子, viscount) to the *gong* (㕣, duke) and *wang* (王, king) rank. This ritual precision of the *Annals* explains perhaps their importance in the eyes of Confucius and the members of his circle: if indeed they were responsible for the broader circulation of the *Annals*, this was probably done to disseminate knowledge of the ritually correct language—and mutatis mutandis of ritual in general—among the elite members.

The *Annals* exercised tremendous influence on subsequent Chinese historiography in terms of their language—the precision in the usage of official titles, personal names, and the like became the hallmark of official histories. Yet it was the *Annals*' major commentary, the *Zuo zhuan*, which can be justifiably considered the fountainhead of traditional Chinese historiography. Its style, language, adherence to chronological framework with only minor digressions and, most of all, its combination of being highly informative on the one hand and didactic—both explicitly and implicitly—on the other turned the *Zuo zhuan* into a source of inspiration for the father of Chinese official histories, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BCE) and for his countless successors (Durrant et al. 2016: LXIX–LXXVII).

The *Zuo zhuan* is one of the most contestable texts in the entire pre-imperial lore: countless generations debated its authorship, dating, reliability, and its relation to the *Annals*. Sima Qian identified its author as a "superior man from Lu," Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, who allegedly created his work so as to explicate the message put into the *Annals* by Confucius (*Shiji* 14:509–510). Later scholars added many details regarding the transmission of the *Zuo zhuan* from the times of Zuo Qiuming (supposedly, Confucius's contemporary) into the Han, but their claims, just as Sima Qian's assertion of Zuo Qiuming's authorship, remain unverifiable. What is clear is that during Sima Qian's times the recognition of the *Zuo zhuan* as the *Annals*' commentary remained lackluster: the text was treated as a repository of the knowledge of the past and not as an exegesis on the canonical work. Only by the end of the Former Han 前漢 (206 BCE–9 CE) did the situation change, when the court archivist, Liu Xin 劉歆 (ca. 50 BCE–23 CE), demanded establishing an official position for the *Zuo zhuan* exegetes among the court academicians. It took many years of bitter controversies before the *Zuo zhuan* was approved as an official commentary of the *Annals* by the Han court, but doubts about its relation with the *Annals* were not dispelled. In the late eighth century CE the controversies over the *Zuo zhuan* renewed: first, several scholars argued that it should be treated as a pure historical text and not a commentary on the classic; then, by the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) others began pointing at alleged anachronisms in the *Zuo zhuan*, suggesting that it was produced much later than implied by Sima Qian. This broadened the controversy: not only the text's relations to the *Annals* but its dating and authorship were henceforth questioned.

Debates over the *Zuo zhuan* intensified in the late nineteenth century, when the famous reformist statesman, Kang Youwei 康有爲 (1858–1927), eager to dismiss once and for all the *Zuo zhuan*'s position as a commentary to the *Annals*, argued that the (p. 517) entire text was a forgery by Liu Xin and hence is of no relevance to the Springs and Autumns period whatsoever. Despite the obvious weakness of Kang's argumentation (van Ess 1994), his views were endorsed by the so-called "Doubters of Antiquity" current (*yigu pai* 疑古派),

centered around Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980). The controversy expanded to involve a full range of questions concerning the nature, dating, and historical reliability of the *Zuo zhuan*; it encompassed dozens of scholars in China, Japan, and the West and continued throughout much of the twentieth century. For a sample of different views, see Schaberg 2001; Pines 2002; Li 2007; and Durrant et al. 2016:I-XCV and see there for further references.

Not all of the past debates are relevant nowadays. For instance, the question of the text's authorship lost much of its relevance. The idea of an active author who is engaged in a dialogue with his readers, expresses his personal feelings, and hints at his hidden or overt agendas did start in China only with Sima Qian (Kern 2016), and as such it is irrelevant to the *Zuo zhuan*, whose author(s) hide(s) himself/themselves behind the neutral designation of "a noble man" (*junzi* 君子; Henry 1999; cf. Van Auken 2016b). The question of the *Zuo zhuan*'s relations to the *Annals* also seems to have become less acute. At the very least scholars who deal with the *Annals*' exegesis overwhelmingly accept the *Zuo zhuan* as its earliest commentary (e.g., Zhao Shengqun 2000; Van Auken 2016a; but see also Wang He 2011 for an opposing view). Nor would a serious scholar today dismiss the *Zuo zhuan* as a "historical romance" as was once common (Gu Jiegang 1988:16; Maspero 1927:chapter 7) or as Liu Xin's forgery.

In contrast to the question of the *Zuo zhuan*'s authorship, the question of its dating continues to arouse heated polemic. To demonstrate the difficulty to arrive at a convincing answer, suffice it to consider a single example of an irresolvable contradiction. The *Zuo zhuan* contains no less than five predictions that were based on calculations of Jupiter's position (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 28.1, 30.10, Zhao 8.6, 9.4, 11.2). As paleo-astronomers had demonstrated, these calculations were retroactively produced after 375 or 365 BCE and then incorporated into the text (Hu Nianyi 1987:57–61; for the possibility that these entries were forged by Liu Xin, see Qiao Zhizhong 2016). At the same time, the *Zuo zhuan* contains a famous prediction by the "noble man," according to which "Qin will never again march eastward" (*Zuo zhuan*, Wen 6.3). This prediction could not have been made after the 360s BCE, when Qin renewed its eastward expansion. These examples of mutually contradictory dates can easily be multiplied. How can we understand them?

The riddle of the text's dating will be resolved once we dismiss the erroneous (even if popular) idea according to which a single date can be offered for the *Zuo zhuan*'s composition. Actually, there are at least four or five dates of the materials in *Zuo zhuan*. The earliest is the date of the composition of its component materials, local histories of the Springs and Autumns–period states (see below in this section). Then at a certain point (either in the fifth or fourth century BCE) these histories were put together, arranged chronologically, and probably supplemented with the commentarial layer, providing the earliest version of the *Zuo* commentary on the *Annals*. Then came a lengthy period of transmission, during which unknown redactors of the text may have intervened into (p. 518) its content: this includes an obvious instance of Han-dynasty redaction,[3] with some modifications continuing till the age of Liu Xin (Qiao Zhizhong 2016; Xu Jianwei 2017:181–246) to the text's major exegete, Du Yu 杜預 (222–285) (Durrant et al. 2016:

LVII). However, the fact that the fallacious prediction about Qin was not edited out may suggest that the editorial efforts of the fourth century BCE and later were of limited nature: the transmitters might have added sections or sentences that would serve their ideological needs or would flatter their patrons, but they did not comb the text for editing out earlier content. This scenario may explain, for instance, why the effusive—and probably spurious—panegyrics of, for example, ancestors of the Ji 季 lineage in Lu or the Wei 魏 lineage in Jin (Pines 2002:234–242) coexist with other narratives that are highly critical of the members of these lineages. A reader of the *Zuo zhuan* must be doubly cautious in discerning the dating of many of its segments.

Going from the dating of the *Zuo zhuan* to its nature, we may immediately notice that the text resembles the *Annals* in terms of presenting an abundance of minute details about "who, what, when, and where." Yet the *Zuo zhuan* is much more detailed than the terse *Annals*. Its meticulous records that include a wealth of information about personal and place names, the events' dates, the participants' official titles, and the like were surely not invented but rather introduced from the text's primary sources. The reliability of some of this information can be furthermore independently verified by the newly unearthed paleographic sources, including contemporaneous bronze inscriptions.[4] Yet *Zuo zhuan* is not a dry chronicle. In distinction from the *Annals*, the text is concerned primarily with the question "why." This preoccupation with the event's causality is visible most immediately through the ubiquitous illative expressions *gu* 故 (because of, hence) and *shiyi* 是以 (therefore), which recur in the text well over 800 times. Yet by far more important are speeches of wise statesmen and post-factum observations of the "noble man" and Confucius, which allow the reader to draw proper historical lessons. It is this explicit didacticism that distinguishes the *Zuo zhuan* dramatically from the *Springs and Autumns Annals* (Schaberg 2001; Li Wai-yee 2007; Durrant et al. 2016:LX-LXIX).

One of the crucial questions concerning the reliability of the *Zuo zhuan*—in particular with regard to the intellectual history of the Springs and Autumns period (discussed in the next section)—is whether or not a variety of interpretative devices encountered in the text are the product of its compilers and transmitters (which means that they come from the Warring States period or even from the Han age) or rather were introduced into the text from its original sources (which means that they reflect the intellectual milieu of the Springs and Autumns period). The dominant answer until recently was the former: the *Zuo zhuan* was read as a polemical treatise aimed "to validate Ru teachings … through writing them into a narrative of the past" (Lewis 1999:132). Now, with a (p. 519) wealth of new materials, which allow a better understanding of the *Zuo zhuan*'s sources, this assertion can be disputed. Of particular value is the bamboo manuscript *Xinian* 繫年 (*String of Years or Linked Years*) from the Qinghua/Tsinghua University collection (composed ca. 370 BCE). Since it is evidently based on the same primary sources as the *Zuo zhuan*, the comparison between the texts allow meaningful reconstruction of these sources (Pines 2014, 2020).

From this reconstruction and from renewed scrutiny of the *Zuo zhuan* itself, it may be tentatively averred that the text's primary sources were not short annalistic accounts but rather much longer local histories from several contemporaneous polities. These histories were in all likelihood produced by the same court scribes, who were responsible for the preparation of the *Annals*-like ritualistic chronicles. However, unlike the *Annals*, these lengthy histories were aimed to teach the elite members about the past of their countries and lineages and also edify and entertain the readers (see more in Pines 2020). It is highly likely that many—most?—of the interpretative devices employed in the *Zuo zhuan* derive from the text's primary sources. This may explain the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in the *Zuo zhuan*. Thus, some of the narratives go against the moral messages enunciated in other parts of the text, creating considerable tension over the bottom line of the text's didactic message (Li 2007).

The sophistication of the *Zuo zhuan*'s primary sources reflects the importance of historiographic tradition in the Springs and Autumns–period Zhou world. *Zuo zhuan* itself is self-referential in its insistence on the importance of mastering the past to cope with current challenges. Its protagonists routinely invoke the past in a variety of court or interstate debates, and their superior knowledge of former events becomes a useful polemical weapon. References to successes and failures of previous rulers and ministers, analyses of historical developments in a rival state, or invocations of earlier precedents to justify a policy choice are recurrent rhetorical strategies in the *Zuo zhuan*. The past is a tool in the statesmen's hands, and to make it more accessible the text aims at providing the reader with as much useful information about important events in the life of major states and lineages as possible. This attitude toward the past was in all likelihood not invented by the *Zuo zhuan*'s compiler(s) but reflected common attitudes of the age.

It was the importance of mastering the past that gave rise to the flourishing history-writing during the Springs and Autumns period. The discovery of *Xinian*, another quasi-historical text from the Qinghua University collection, *Chu ju* (楚居, "Chu residences"; see Asano 2012; Cook and Luo 2017; Pines 2020); and the still-unpublished Chu historical manuscripts, one from the Anhui University collection (Huang Dekuan 2017 and another excavated in 2019 from the cemetery at the northern shore of Longhui River 龍會河, Jingzhou [Hubei]; see Li Huibo and Wu Yaxiong 2019) demonstrate the richness and heterogeneity of contemporaneous historiographic tradition. Accounts of the past were prepared to edify and entertain, to teach the statesmen about ritually important sites and to communicate with the ancestors, to provide the policy-makers with the background of contemporaneous inter-state situations, and for many other reasons (Pines 2020). However, it seems that at a certain point between the Springs and Autumns and the Warring States periods a change in usages of the past had occurred. The *Zuo* *(p. 520)* *zhuan* combination of being highly informative and sophisticatedly didactic is not matched in later texts. When the Zhou world entered the age of bitter ideological disputes, the so-called age of the Hundred Schools of Thought, the thinkers' priorities changed. What was prized now was not historical accuracy but a didactic message: through retelling, twisting, or inventing the narratives of the past, thinkers could provide compelling justifications for their policy proposals. Detailed narratives of the past had all but disappeared from the

contemporaneous texts; instead, the overwhelmingly dominant historical genre was henceforth that of didactic anecdotes.

Didactic anecdotes—short vignettes valued for their moralizing messages or amusing features—are ubiquitous in Warring States–period writings. They permeate most texts later classified as either "histories" (like *Guoyu* 國語, Discourses of the States and *Zhanguo ce* [戰國策, Stratagems of the Warring States]) or "philosophies" (e.g., *Han Feizi* 韓非子, or *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋). In an excellent study, David Schaberg (2011) had summarized some of the essentials of the anecdotal genre. Anecdotes are normally short and easily detachable textual units of several hundred characters length. Most anecdotes contain an exchange of speech and either a confirmation of one of the speakers' prescience or judgment by a later commentator. Schaberg concludes: "The early Chinese historical anecdote is a fundamentally didactic form, as valuable for instructing rulers and peers as for training young students" (Schaberg 2011:396; see also Van Els and Queen 2017).

Whether the anecdotes serve as the primary building blocks of historical knowledge in pre-imperial China as asserted by Schaberg (2011), or they are derivative of earlier longer sources as asserted by myself (Pines 2020) remains to be seen. What is clear is that the proliferation of the anecdotes was accompanied by their progressive dissociation from informative aspects of history writing and overwhelming focus on didacticism. In the Warring States–period texts, not only the interest in minute details is lost but even the basic concern with historical accuracy. Many anecdotes, the earliest versions of which appear in the *Zuo zhuan*, were retold repeatedly from the Warring States to the Han periods, with later versions becoming progressively dissociated from the factual background of the anecdote. In these late versions we can encounter such features as the same speech attributed to different personalities from different periods, proliferation of purely fabricated speeches, and abundance of blatant anachronisms (Henry 2003; cf. Van Els 2017).

It should be recalled here that more detailed historical records continued to be produced by scribal offices in each of the competing states, yet their circulation remained limited. Eventually they perished during the infamous Qin biblioclasm of 213 BCE (*Shiji* 15:686). What survived was only segments of the Wei 魏 chronicle, the so-called *Bamboo Annals* discovered in 279 or 280 CE (Shaughnessy 2006), and Qin's own "scribal records," which were later utilized by Sima Qian in sections of his *Shiji*. Judging from the relevant portions of *Shiji*, the Qin records were not anecdotal in their nature but more information-oriented (Yoshimoto 1995; Fujita 1997; Pines 2005–2006). However, we still lack a full understanding of non-anecdotal aspects of historical writing in the Middle to Late Warring States periods. It can be only hoped that new discoveries will bring to light more historical documents from that age.

(p. 521) The world of thought before Confucius

Moving from the realm of historiography to the realm of political and ethical thought of the Springs and Autumns period, we stand on more shaky ground. The major problem of reconstructing the world of thought before Confucius is our overwhelming indebtedness to a single source, namely the *Zuo zhuan*, which records speeches of contemporaneous statesmen. Many of these speeches are highly interesting in terms of the light they shed on the speaker's worldview, but how reliable are they? To recall, not all of the *Zuo zhuan* comes from the Springs and Autumns period; it contains later interpolations and, possibly, embellishments and other redactional efforts by the composer and the transmitters. How can we be sure that ideas pronounced by the *Zuo zhuan* speakers are reflective of the Springs and Autumns period's intellectual milieu and were not put into their mouths later? This question remains highly controversial (cf. Schaberg 2001; Pines 2002).

We cannot ascertain the authenticity and dating of each of the hundreds speeches scattered throughout the *Zuo zhuan* but, when read systematically, these speeches provide us with a highly peculiar ideological picture, which does not have clear parallels in any of the transmitted texts from the Warring States or later periods. Most notably, the speeches in the *Zuo zhuan* reflect a distinctively aristocratic outlook of the vast majority of protagonists. This aristocratic mindset evidently reflects the power and self-confidence of hereditary aristocrats during the heyday of their power (see more in chapter 22), and it is highly unlikely that it would be post-factum invented by a Warring States–period forger and put in the mouths of dozens of the speakers. It is similarly unlikely that other peculiar approaches that permeate the *Zuo zhuan* speeches, such as, for example, approval of the multistate order or treating the ministers rather than the rulers as the true masters of the state, were fabricated by the Warring States–period thinkers, who lived under very different sociopolitical conditions. It is plausible then that the *Zuo zhuan* as a whole reflects the intellectual milieu of the aristocratic Springs and Autumns period, later editions and embellishments notwithstanding.

To introduce the world of thought depicted in the *Zuo zhuan*, we can conveniently contrast it with that of the subsequent Warring States period by focusing on three major topics: the views of the interstate order, the ruler's authority and ruler-minister relations, and the nature of social hierarchy. With regard to the first of these, what distinguishes the *Zuo zhuan* protagonists from the later ideologues is their indifference toward the idea of political unity of the Zhou realm. In the Warring States period and thereafter the quest for unification became the common conviction of competing thinkers (Pines 2000), but judging from the *Zuo zhuan*, it did not exist at all during the Springs and Autumns period. The protagonists discuss at length the means of perpetuating a viable multistate order, address the nature of hegemony and of alliances, and debate advantages of peace and war, but they never propose unification either through restoration of an effective rule of the Zhou Sons of Heaven or through other means. In the late years of the Springs and Autumns period we encounter brief references to the desire of the Chu (p. 522) kings to "attain All-under-Heaven," but this desire is presented as exceptional and unreasonable (e.g., *Zuo zhuan* Zhao 13.2g). The solution to the interstate turmoil, according to the *Zuo*

zhuan, is perfection of the multistate system rather than its dismantling (see also chapter 22).

A reader may discern increased frustration with the ongoing failures in creating a viable multistate order. This frustration is well palpable in the changing attitudes toward the institution of hegemony. Early hegemons, such as Lord Huan of Qi, Lord Wen of Jin, and Lord Wen's descendants, are repeatedly urged to maintain their position through adherence to ritual norms, display of magnanimity and trustworthiness, refraining from annexations, and through displaying "kindness" (*de* 德) along with "awesomeness" (*wei* 威). In the later half of the *Zuo zhuan*, these admonitions fade away. New leaders, including such respectable statesmen as Zichan 子產 (d. 522 BCE) of Zheng 鄭 and Sima Hou 司馬侯 (d. ca. 535 BCE) of Jin, candidly advocate annexations and resort to force as inevitable and legitimate means of maintaining interstate leadership (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 25.5; Xiang 29.11). These voices reflect a sober understanding that the age of trustworthiness and kindness is gone forever. Even more revealing is a Late Springs and Autumns–period speech by Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (d. 484 BCE), one of the most prominent statesmen of his age. Wu Zixu urges his patron, the king of Wu, to eliminate the rival state of Yue, not because of the depravity of the Yue ruler but precisely because the latter is a model sovereign, who is able to attract his subjects: this makes him an even bitterer adversary:

> [Yue] has existed on the same lands as we do, and for generations they have been our enemy. Therefore, to overcome it but not to seize its territory, and moreover to preserve its existence, is to contradict Heaven and prolong [the life of] the adversary. Even if you repent later, you will be unable to reverse the case. (*Zuo zhuan*, Ai 1.2)

This prescient speech (Yue indeed eliminated Wu in 473 BCE) might not have been pronounced by Wu Zixu himself, but those who put it into his mouth wanted to indicate the coming of a new age. It suggests that the multistate order is not sustainable; the rival polities are engaged in a life-and-death struggle with each other, and the only way for maintaining hegemony is to mercilessly smash the enemy. This sober recognition of the impossibility to maintain lasting peace in a fragmented world would serve a precondition for the voices that demanded political unification as the only viable means of stabilizing the sub-celestial realm. Mengzi's dictum "stability is in unity" (*Mengzi* 1.6) is never articulated in the *Zuo zhuan*, but it sounds like a reasonable conclusion from reading its speeches, which convince the reader that the multistate order is doomed.

The *Zuo zhuan* differs from later texts not only in its avoidance of the issue of political unification but also in its views of the monarchic order. As mentioned in chapter 22, the Springs and Autumns period marked the nadir of the ruler's power—both the Zhou Son of Heaven and most of the regional lords were eclipsed by their underlings. From the perspective of later monarchic thought, this situation should be considered a grave aberration (Pines 2009a:25–53), but in the *Zuo zhuan* it is often treated as a fait accompli. (p. 523) Although the text does contain a few sayings that compare the ruler's authority to that of Heaven (*Zuo zhuan*, Xuan 4.3b; Ding 4.3e), these are exceptional. Normally, the

protagonists are eager to provide rationalizations for the decline of the ruler's power. For instance, in one of the most ideologically significant speeches in the entire text, Master Kuang 師曠 of Jin justifies the expulsion of the lord of Wei 衛 in 559 by implicitly blaming the lord himself. Kuang explains that while theoretically the ruler should be revered as Heaven and Earth, this reverence is not unconditional: it depends on the ruler's ability to take care of the people's needs. Otherwise, the ruler loses his legitimacy:

> The ruler is the master of the deities, the hope of the people. But if he fatigues the people's lives, neglects the deities, and ignores the sacrifices, then "the hundred clans" will lose their hope, and the altars of soil and grain will have no master. What use is [such a ruler]? What can one do but expel him? (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 14.6)

The idea that the ruler's right to his position should be subordinated to proper performance of his tasks is not novel: its roots can be found already in the Western Zhou documents that elaborate the idea of Heaven's Mandate (*tian ming* 天命). Yet Master Kuang goes further. Those who should act on Heaven's behalf and supervise the ruler are his high ministers, namely precisely the members of the stratum that repeatedly challenged the lords. In Kuang's eyes, rulers are given "helpers to teach them and protect them and to prevent them from exceeding [proper] measures… . When [the ruler] is good, he is rewarded; when he exceeds, he is corrected; when he is in distress, he is rescued; when he loses [the proper way], he is replaced" (*Zuo zhuan*, Xiang 14.6). This conclusion puts the right to replace the ruler in the hands of his ministers, making them singularly powerful political actors and severely undermining the ruler's authority.

The *Zuo zhuan* speakers' willingness to justify expulsion and replacement of the rulers is matched by their high esteem of the ministers. Those are considered not the ruler's servitors but rather companions, who share with him responsibility for the "altars of soil and grain" (*sheji* 社 稷), namely the collective entity of the state. The leading ministers are proudly designated "masters of the people" (*min zhi zhu* 民之主), a term normally reserved for the rulers alone. They repeatedly argue that they owe allegiance to the altars of soil and grain rather to the ruler personally, and in the name of the altars they have the right to defy the sovereign's orders and even to depose him (Pines 2002:136–163). This haughty ministerial discourse was by itself one of the manifestations of the power of the ministerial stratum and the weakness of the rulers, which plagued the world of the Springs and Autumns period (see chapter 22).

Ministerial self-confidence as depicted in the *Zuo zhuan* is related to the overall self-confidence of hereditary aristocrats, which permeates the book. The nobles were immensely proud of their status, which was defined primarily, if not exclusively, by their pedigree. The term "noble man" (*junzi* 君子), the most respectable designation of the elite members, is applied in the *Zuo zhuan* exclusively to the members of upper (*qing* 卿) and middle-rank (*dafu* 大夫) nobility but never to the members of the *shi* 士 stratum, which will become so prominent in the age of the Warring States (Pines 2017). The term (p. 524) *shi* itself is marginal in the *Zuo zhuan*: it is employed to define the low-rank nobles (or, in other con-

texts, soldiers or males) but is never used either as a generic elite designation or as a referent to a morally and intellectually superior individual, as is common in later texts (Pines 2009a:115–135). It is clear that for the *Zuo zhuan* protagonists the elite is confined to the upper ranks of hereditary aristocracy; *shi* are not its members.

The Springs and Autumns period aristocrats were not prone to open the ruling stratum to newcomers from below. Hence, many common topoi of the Warring States–period discourse are either absent or marginal in the *Zuo zhuan*. For instance, the meritocratic principle of "elevating the worthy" is normally not articulated. If individual's worthiness is mentioned at all in the context of one's appointment, it is invariably done either in the context of choosing a better heir or selecting a more suitable candidate from among highest aristocrats—but never in the context of promoting a *shi* person. This differs dramatically from the Warring States-period discourse (Pines 2013). Similarly, self-cultivation and learning are rarely discussed: after all, the aristocrats owed their position to their pedigree rather than to self-acquired skills. At the same time, the single most important concept that repeatedly resurfaces in dozens of speeches is ritual (*li* 禮)—the best panacea from social ills, a universal stabilizer of hereditary aristocracy. A leading thinker, Yan Ying 晏嬰 (d. ca. 500 BCE), explains:

> According to *li*, the family's favors do not exceed those of the state; the people do not drift; peasants do not move [to new lands], artisans and merchants do not change [their occupation], *shi* do not overflow, officials do not exceed [their responsibilities], and the nobles dare not seize the lord's profits. (*Zuo zhuan*, Zhao 26.11)

Ritual is supposed to stabilize society. Everybody will perform his ancestral tasks; everybody will be satisfied with his hereditary position; then the *shi* will not "overflow" the nobles, while the nobles, in turn, will not endanger their rulers. This conservative vision epitomizes the expectations of the Springs and Autumns–period aristocrats as reflected in the *Zuo zhuan*. Fixing the society once and for all according to rigid hierarchic norms is the only means to save it from ongoing disintegration.

Social values of the Springs and Autumns–period nobles were fundamentally conservative; yet seeds of change were sown already then, as is reflected in a gradual reconceptualization of the nature of the elite status. Rather than justifying their elevated positions in terms of pure pedigree, aristocrats of the Springs and Autumns period increasingly tended to emphasize abilities and morality as the true foundation of their power. This change is visible in the increasing tendency to imbue the term "noble man" (*junzi*) with ethical content. Although the pedigree connotation of the term remained clear (hence, in the *Zuo zhuan* this designation is never applied to a *shi*), *junzi* was gradually reinterpreted as pertaining to one's qualities rather than pure pedigree. Only the noble who was impeccably moral and intelligent deserved his elevated position; otherwise he could be designated "a petty man" (*xiao ren* 小人), indicating thereby his unworthiness of the noble status. In the age of frequent downfall of powerful ministerial lineages, this emphasis on personal inadequacy of those who were supposed to be "superior men" (p. 525) provided contemporary

aristocrats with convenient explanations of the ever-accelerating downward mobility of the members of their stratum (Pines 2002:165–171).

This shift away from one's lineage and one's pedigree to one's individual qualities as a major determinant of one's status is visible in the Late Springs and Autumns period, from both textual and paleographic sources.[5] Yet this "ethicization" of the "superior men's" self-image had unexpected consequences for the nobles. Even if in the short term it was designed to provide further legitimation for the aristocrats' dominant position, in the final account it paved the way for the upward mobility of the *shi* stratum. In due time, the rising *shi* began emulating the behavior of the "noble men," thereby laying claim to their eligibility for the *junzi* status. The aristocrats remained powerless in the face of this challenge. Ironically, those who imbued the term *junzi* with ethical meaning were unable to find ideological justifications to repel the *shi* assault on their hereditary privileges. Thus, by downplaying the importance of the pedigree in obtaining high political status, aristocrats of the Springs and Autumns period contributed to the dismantling of the very social order that had ensured their elevated position. The new age belonged to the new men.

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Zuo zhuan. See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*.

Notes:

([1]) This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 568/19) and by the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies.

([2]) Among a few statesmen who reportedly suggested expurgation of the *Annals* from the list of the classics, one may mention the famous Song reformer, Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), although whether or not he really denigrated this text is debatable. See Zhao Boxiong 2004:460–468.

([3]) The most obvious indication of the Han redaction of the current version of the *Zuo zhuan* is its avoidance of the tabooed bang 邦, the name of the Han dynastic founder, Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195 BCE).

([4]) See for instance the recently discovered Zifan-*bianzhong* 子犯編鐘 inscription, which narrates the Jin victory over Chu and celebrations in the Zhou royal palace. The date of the ceremony of rewarding the Jin commanders, *dingwei* 丁未 (10th day) of the fifth month, is identical to the one recorded in *Zuo zhuan* (Xi 28.3h). See more in Pines 2020: 82–84.

([5]) Thus, as pointed by Gilbert Mattos (1997:86–87), bronze inscriptions of the Springs and Autumns period turn away from the ancestors and focus on the individual attainments of the donor; for similar analysis of the inscriptional evidence, see Pines 2002:171–175.

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