# Too Big to Succeed? Costs of Expansionism during the Springs-and-Autumns Period

Yuri Pines

This article explores the patterns of territorial control adopted by Jin and Chu, two major expansionist powers of the Springs-and-Autumns (Chunqiu) period (770–453 B.C.E.). I demonstrate that despite experimentation with both direct and indirect control over localities in Chu, overall, neither Chu, nor Jin, nor their peers developed efficient methods of incorporating outlying territories. Worse, in many cases the newly acquired territories could become a springboard for domestic rebellion. This explains deceleration of Chu and Jin's expansion between the middle seventh and late sixth century B.C.E.

## Introduction: Trajectories of Jin and Chu's territorial expansion

*Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo tradition)—our major source for the history of the Springs-and-Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋) period (770–453 B.C.E.)—contains two closely related speeches that justify territorial expansion. In the first, a young Zheng 鄭 leader, Zichan 子產 (who was not yet at the helm of the Zheng government), rebuffed, in 548 B.C.E., the Jin 晉 leaders' accusation that Zheng had unjustifiably assaulted its weaker neighbor, the state of Chen 陳. In particular, Zichan reminded his interlocutors that annexations of neighbors' territories were the political norm rather than an aberration:

> 昔天子之地一圻，列國一同，自是以衰。今大國多數圻矣，若無侵小，何以至焉？
>
> In the past, the territories of the Son of Heaven amounted to one *qi* (1,000 *li* squared); that of the regional states—one *tong* (100 *li* squared); and with the lower ranks, the territories were smaller still. Now the great states (or: your great state) span several thousand *li* squared. If they had not invaded small [polities], how could they have reached that (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 襄 25.10)?[1]

Just a few years later, it was the turn of a Jin leader to blatantly defend expansionism. In a court debate, Sima Hou 司馬侯 (also known as Ru Qi 女齊) justified why he accepted the expansion of Jin's ally, Lu 魯, at the expense of the natal polity of the Jin lord's mother:

> 虞、虢、焦、滑、霍、楊、韓、魏，皆姬姓也，晉是以大。若非侵小，將何

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[1] All references to the *Chunqiu Annals* and *Zuozhuan* are to the lord year and section, as applied in Durrant/Li/Schaberg (2016), who borrow their identifiers from Yang Bojun (1990). I borrow, with slight modification, their translations.

所取？武、獻以下，兼國多矣，誰得治之？

Yu, Guo, Jiao, Hua, Huo, Yang, Han, and Wei were all ruled by Ji (royal Zhou 周) clansmen. Jin became great by [annexing them]. How else can lands be taken, if not by invading small [polities]? From the time of lords Wu and Xian, Jin annexed many states: who can regulate this? (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 29.11)

These statements made by respected statesmen are echoed elsewhere in *Zuozhuan*.[2] They give the text an aura of preferring Realpolitik to morality, which ignited the ire of Confucian purists throughout ages,[3] but also made *Zuozhuan* a more attractive read than other edifying histories. The text clearly shows that conquests and annexations were not just common in the Springs-and-Autumns world but were accepted as inevitable, notwithstanding lofty pronouncements in favor of "preserving ruined [states] and continuing cut-off [sacrifices]" (存亡繼絕).[4] However, upon closer examination, a strange phenomenon emerges: the robust expansion of major powers peaked in the middle of the seventh century B.C.E. and then decelerated. For instance, six of the eight polities mentioned in the above speech by Sima Hou were annexed during the reign of Lord Xian of Jin (Jin Xian gong 晉獻公, r. 676–651 B.C.E.). Another was annexed much earlier, and only a single one (Hua 滑) was briefly acquired by Jin after it had been extinguished by Qin 秦 in 627 B.C.E.; eventually, Jin gifted Hua to the Zhou 周 royal domain. Since the reign of Jin's most illustrious leader, Lord Wen (Jin Wen gong 晉文公, r. 636–628 B.C.E.), annexations were by and large discontinued. Jin continued expanding primarily into the sparsely populated territories inhabited by the Rong 戎 and Di 狄 ethnicities to the north and east but refrained from seizing the lands of the Huaxia 華夏 ("Chinese") polities beyond the Yellow River. There, the Jin leaders preferred to maintain buffer zones occupied by allied polities and—well until the end of the sixth century B.C.E.—refrained from permanent occupation.[5]

A similar pattern is observable in the state of Chu 楚. Chu began expanding robustly under King Wu (Chu Wu wang 楚武王, r. 740–690 B.C.E.), whose reign is identified by Taniguchi Mitsuru 谷口満 (2011: 29–30) as Chu's "second birth." King Wu consolidated Chu's control over the fertile flatlands to the west of the Han 漢 River, which became Chu's core territory. His son, King Wen (Chu Wen wang

[2] E.g., *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 昭 1.2b.

[3] See, for instance, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200): "The malady of Mr. Zuo is that he discusses what is right and what is wrong through success or failure and does not base himself on the correctness of propriety and the principle" (左氏之病，是以成敗論是非，而不本於義理之正; *Zhuzi yulei* 93: 2149–50).

[4] This statement (with slightly different wording) appears both in the *Gongyang* (公羊傳) and *Guliang* (穀梁傳) commentaries on *Chunqiu* (Xi 僖 17.2) in the context of hailing the achievements of the first Springs-and-Autumns hegemon, Lord Huan of Qi (Qi Huan gong 齊桓公; Liu Shangci 2011: 233; Zhong 1996: 305).

[5] For details, see Ma Baochun (2007) and Pines (2026, ch. 2.2).

楚文王, r. 689–675 B.C.E.) further accelerated expansion, occupying the Nanyang 南陽 Basin, which became Chu's protective shield from the north, and advancing into the middle reaches of the Huai 淮 River. Expansion into the Huai Basin continued under King Cheng (Chu Cheng wang 楚成王, r. 671–626 B.C.E.) and his successors, who had also effectively stabilized Chu's boundary along the Huai's northern tributary, the Ru 汝 River (Map 2, p. 90). After King Cheng, the pace of annexations decreased markedly, so that even King Zhuang of Chu (Chu Zhuang wang 楚莊王, r. 613–591 B.C.E.), renowned for military successes, did not significantly expand Chu's territory. It was only under King Ling (Chu Ling wang 楚靈王, r. 540–529 B.C.E.), and more aggressively in the fifth century B.C.E. that Chu renewed its territorial expansion (see section 2.3 below).[6]

How should we understand this pattern? Why do two major powers of the Springs-and-Autumns era seem to have largely stopped annexing weaker neighbors and slowed down their territorial expansion through the late seventh and most of the sixth century B.C.E.? An immediate explanation would be the political one. As is well known, between 632 and 541 B.C.E. (and to a lesser extent thereafter), both states led two competing alliances. Acting as "master of the covenants" (*mengzhu* 盟主) was a prestigious position, but it came at a price: the leaders had to observe, even if half-heartedly, the rules of the game which precluded forcible acquisition of their allies' lands, not to mention the outright extermination of allied polities.[7] Expansion under these circumstances was permissible only into the non-Huaxia periphery, which was indeed done by both Jin and Chu. This explains why expansion decelerated after the two alliances had been stabilized.

In this article, however, I want to offer an additional explanation, based on the domestic rather than interstate considerations of the Jin and Chu leaders. I argue that vigorous expansion in the seventh century B.C.E. taught the leaders of both polities that swift territorial growth was a double-edged sword, as it generated domestic challenges. How could the newly acquired territories be fully integrated? How could future rebellions in these territories be prevented? Tackling these problems required reconsideration of the nature of territorial control. However, as I will demonstrate, despite some successful experiments, especially in Chu, overall, this control remained weak throughout most of the Springs-and-Autumns period, hindering the territorial expansion of even the most powerful polities.

In the first two sections of this article, I will explore the interrelation between domestic consolidation and territorial expansion primarily on the basis of Jin and Chu examples. In the third section, I shall augment these examples with references to other contemporaneous polities, such as Zheng and Qi 齊. I will demonstrate how the persistent fear of powerful localities as potential challengers of the political center led many statesmen to view territorial expansion as a threat to domestic stability.

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[6] For a brief discussion of Chu's annexation of its neighbors, see Zhao Bingqing (2021); for a more detailed discussion, see Pines (2026, ch. 2.4).

[7] For views on interstate leadership in the Springs-and-Autumns period, see Pines (2002: 105–35).

I will conclude by briefly outlining new approaches to enhancing the effectiveness of territorial control by the end of the Springs-and-Autumns period.

## 1 The Jin pattern

We shall start with one of the less noted *Zuozhuan* episodes from 547 to 546 B.C.E.:

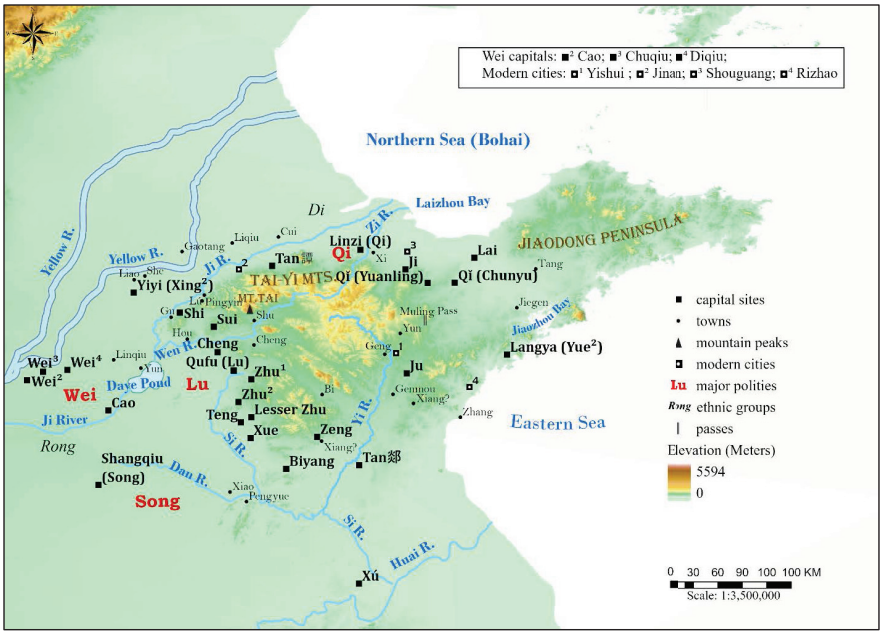
> 齊人城郚之歲，其夏，齊烏餘以廩丘奔晉。襲衛羊角，取之；遂襲我高魚。有大雨，自其竇入，介于其庫，以登其城，克而取之。又取邑于宋。於是范宣子卒，諸侯弗能治也。及趙文子為政，乃卒治之。文子言於晉侯曰：「晉為盟主，諸侯或相侵也，則討而使歸其地。今烏餘之邑，皆討類也，而貪之，是無以為盟主也。請歸之。」公曰：「諾。孰可使也？」對曰：「胥梁帶能無用師。」晉侯使往。
>
> In the summer of the year that the leaders of Qi fortified Jia (549 B.C.E.), Wu Yu of Qi, taking the settlement of Linqiu with him, fled to Jin. He made a surprise attack on Yangjiao in Wei and took it, and then he made a surprise attack on our (Lu's) Gaoyu. There was then heavy rain, and he entered the city from the opened drains, armed his men with weapons from the arsenal of Gaoyu, climbed up its city walls, overcame the city, and took control of it. He also took settlements from Song. It was at that time that (the head of Jin's government) Fan Wenzi (also known as Fan Gai 范丐) died (548 B.C.E.), and the regional lords could not deal with the situation. When Zhao Wenzi (also known as Zhao Wu 趙武) came to be in charge of [Jin's] government (547 B.C.E.), he finally dealt with it.
>
> Wenzi (Zhao Wu) said to the Marquis of Jin (i.e., Lord Ping, Jin Ping gong 晉平公, r. 557–532 B.C.E.), "Jin is the master of covenants. When the regional lords invade each other's territories, Jin should chastise the invaders and make them return the lands they have taken. Now Wu Yu's settlements are all in the category that deserves chastisement. If we covet them, then we will not have the wherewithal to be the master of the covenants. I request to have the land returned." The lord said, "I agree. Whom can we send for this mission?" He replied, "Xu Liangdai will be able to accomplish this without using force." The Marquis of Jin sent him on the mission (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 26.14).

The story requires some background. Linqiu 廩丘 was located in the sparsely populated territory between the course of the Ji 濟 River to the east and south and the two parallel streams of the Yellow River to the west. Most of this territory served as a buffer zone between Jin's possessions to the west of the Yellow River and Qi's territory to the east of the Ji River. The northern part of the buffer zone was generally under the loose control of Qi;[8] the southwestern section belonged to Jin's ally, Wei 衛; and the southeast, where Linqiu was located, bordered the settlements of Lu 魯, Song 宋, and Cao 曹 (Map 1). This convenient location allowed the turncoat Qi official, Wu Yu, to establish Linqiu as a personal power base and begin expanding

[8] Should we trust Guan Zhong's 管仲 statement cited in *Zuozhuan* (Xi 僖 4.1), upon the establishment of Qi in the eleventh century B.C.E., its western boundaries were fixed on the Yellow River line.

at the expense of neighboring polities. Wu Yu's nominal masters at the distant court of Jin were uncertain how to handle their unruly subject who attacked Jin's allies. Fortunately for them, Xu Liangdai 胥梁帶 proved to be smarter than Wu Yu:

> 二十七年，春，胥梁帶使諸喪邑者具車徒以受地，必周。使烏餘具車徒以受封。烏餘以其眾出，使諸侯偽效烏餘之封者，而遂執之，盡獲之。皆取其邑，而歸諸侯。諸侯是以睦於晉。
>
> In the twenty-seventh year, in spring (546 B.C.E.), Xu Liangdai made the various parties that had lost settlements to Wu Yu come equipped with chariots and soldiers, so that they might get back their lands, and they were to maintain the utmost secrecy. He made Wu Yu come equipped with chariots and soldiers to receive entitlement to the lands he had taken. Wu Yu came with the throng of his followers. Xu Liangdai made the regional lords pretend to be the ones conferring entitlement on Wu Yu. They then arrested him, seized all his followers, retrieved all the settlements he had taken, and returned them to the regional lords. That was why the regional lords had harmonious relations with Jin (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 27.1).




*Map 1*. Qi and its neighbors, ca. 600–400 B.C.E. (after Pines 2026).

What can we learn from this story? First, it appears that the Linqiu military forces (and, possibly, the population at large) were under Wu Yu's full control. Following his defection to Jin, there were no known attempts to restore Qi's control over the city, and the Linqiu forces seem committed to act as Wu Yu's private army. Second,

Linqiu acted as a satellite rather than an integral part of Jin. Wu Yu engaged in military activities that the Jin leaders could approve or disapprove of but which apparently did not require prior authorization. Third, Jin was in no position to actively compel Wu Yu into compliance. It was only through the successful ploy of an otherwise unknown Xu Liangdai that Wu Yu's private state-building abruptly ended. Throughout this short episode Wu Yu's and Linqiu's subordination to Jin remained nominal at best.

Wu Yu's story appears in *Zuozhuan* primarily in the context of praising the new Jin chief minister, Zhao Wu 趙武, as a pliable man whose concern for Jin's allies made him a champion of peace (soon after the depicted events he led Jin to two peace conferences in 546 and in 541 B.C.E.; see section 2.3). In Wu Yu's story, Zhao Wu demonstrated his fairness by refusing to expand Jin's territories at the allies' expense. But the story also allows a different interpretation: Jin's leaders became averse to reckless expansion because they began to realize its costs. Expansions benefitted not the state of Jin but rather specific lineages or nobles who gained more territory for their personal allotment. In what follows I will demonstrate that Jin's predominant mode of territorial control—the system of ministerial allotments (*caiyi* 采邑)—precluded territorial integration.

The system of remunerating office holders by granting them allotments comprising from one to several dozen settlements and their adjacent fields began in the Western Zhou (Xi Zhou 西周, ca. 1046–771 B.C.E.), but it was only in the Springs-and-Autumns period, with the proliferation of hereditary officeholding and the formation of powerful ministerial houses, that it became the major factor in the domestic politics of most northern states (Qian 1989). Allotments were, in principle, recallable at the end of one's service term; but once service became lifelong and hereditary, the allotments effectively coalesced into a political entity in their own right. The master controlled the allotment's material and human resources, and mobilized some of the subordinate population into his military forces. As illustrated by Wu Yu's example above, he could also expect the loyalty of his subjects. Many allotments hosted their master's ancestral temples and—most notably in Jin—cemeteries of the ruling family. They maintained mini-courts staffed by military and civilian officials, and sometimes operated a separate system of weights and measures. Much like Linqiu under Wu Yu, they engaged in autonomous military and diplomatic activities. In short, many of the allotments effectively became mini-states.[9] In a few notable cases, the allotments evolved into fully independent polities, such as Wei 魏, Han 韓, and Zhao 趙, which after 453 B.C.E divided the state of Jin among themselves.

Personal allotments were not the only way of territorial control in Jin. Certain territories and settlements supposedly remained under the direct control of the ruler.

[9] Lü (2006) is the most systematic study of the allotment system; see especially pp. 147–73. For a brief survey of cemeteries of Jin's ministerial lineages, spread throughout their allotments, see Pines (2026, ch. 2.2).

Some of these were organized as "counties" (*xian* 縣). The term *xian* immediately recalls the system of centralized control epitomized by the commanderies-cum-counties (*junxian* 郡縣) system that proliferated in the state and the empire of Qin. As several scholars have shown, however, this is a misleading resemblance. Although in some cases, most notably in the state of Chu (see below), *xian* indeed referred to a centrally administered unit that could be appropriately named "county," this was not the case elsewhere.[10] Jin's *xian*, for instance, were predominantly ruled on a hereditary basis, with ownership shifting from one lineage to another only due to domestic power struggles (Tsuchiguchi 2007: 618–21). Several narratives in *Zuozhuan* clearly equate Jin's *xian* with ministerial allotments. See the following for example:

> 初，州縣，欒豹之邑也。及欒氏亡，范宣子、趙文子、韓宣子皆欲之。文子曰：「溫，吾縣也。」二宣子曰：「自郤稱以別，三傳矣。晉之別縣不唯州，誰獲治之？」文子病之，乃舍之。
>
> Earlier, Zhou 州 county had been Luan Bao's settlement. After the fall of the Luan lineage, Fan Xuanzi (Fan Gai), Zhao Wenzi (Zhao Wu), and Han Xuanzi (Han Qi 韓起) all wanted it. [Zhao] Wenzi said, "Wen (out of which Zhou was carved) is our county." Both Xuanzis said, "Since Xi Cheng split [Zhou] off, it has changed hands three times. Zhou is not the only county in Jin to have been split off from another. Who could return all of them to their original order?" [Zhao] Wenzi was chagrined by this and therefore renounced his claim [to Zhou] (*Zuozhuan*, Zhao 昭 3.4b).

Zhou was a small county that split off from a larger one, Wen 溫, which was originally assigned to Hu Zhen 狐溱, then transferred to the Zhao lineage, and later to the Xi 郤 lineage, amidst the power struggles in Jin. While the details of these transitions are of little importance here, what matters is that neither the *Zuozhuan* narrator, nor the cited statesmen distinguished between a county and a personal allotment. This was the norm in Jin. The primary difference was in size: in a speech by a Chu statesman who demonstrated superb knowledge of Jin's domestic structure, it was claimed that the Han lineage "extracts levies from seven settlements, each of which is a full-scale county" (韓賦七邑，皆成縣也), which implied that they could levy a hundred war chariots from each (*Zuozhuan*, Zhao 5.4c). Apart from size, personal allotments and "counties" were indistinguishable. Note that this was the case in Jin but not elsewhere. In Qi, for instance, *xian* was coterminous with a single settlement (*yi* 邑).[11]

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[10] Literature about *xian* abounds. See Masubuchi (2017: 287–366) (which excels in analyzing the Jin *xian*); Creel (1964) and Yang Kuan (1981) (for Chu); Zhao Boxiong (1990: 259–75); Matsui (2002: 256–76); Tsuchiguchi (2007: 617–21). Translating *xian* as "counties" is appropriate for Chu, where a *xian* was governed by a duke (*gong* 公), much like a county in France (*comté*) was originally governed by a count.

[11] The *Shu Yi zhong* 叔夷鐘 inscription (*Jicheng*, 275) records a grant of 300 *xian* to the bell's donor. Clearly, these *xian* could not be larger than a single settlement. As correctly noted by Zhao Boxiong (1990: 260), this inscription suffices to invalidate the imagined neat system of territorial control allegedly instituted in Qi under Guan Zhong, in which *xian* was a sizeable territorial unit.

Another of Jin's administrative patterns, which was supposed to ensure effective centralized control, is known as the "lord's settlements" (*gong yi* 公邑). The term itself is rarely used in early texts (it never appears in *Zuozhuan*, for instance),[12] but it is widely adopted by current scholars to distinguish between the settlements under the direct control of the ruler and those allotted to ministers.[13] The problem is that even in the "lord's settlements" the central government had very limited involvement beyond appointing the settlement's chief. Two stories in *Zuozhuan* exemplify this. The first concerns an early stage in the career of Ducal Son Chong'er (公子重耳), the future Lord Wen of Jin. In 666 B.C.E., Chong'er was appointed governor of the frontier fortress of Pu 浦. Ten years later, Chong'er's stepmother, Li Ji 驪姬, accused him (and his half-brother Yiwu 夷吾) of participating in an alleged plot by crown prince Shensheng 申生 to assassinate their father, Lord Xian. Subsequently, the Jin troops assaulted the Pu fortress. *Zuozhuan* says, "The men of the Pu fortress wanted to fight, but Chong'er refused" (蒲城人欲戰，重耳不可); he claimed that it would be immoral to use the followers who had been granted to him by his father to resist his father (Xi 23.6a). The story may well be spurious, but its inventors—in all likelihood the Jin scribes[14]—would have tried to make it plausible for their audience. It was evidently to be expected that after ten years at the head of a settlement, its leader would have firmly secured control over the settlement's population, whose allegiance would no longer be to the ruler of the state but rather to their immediate master.

This observation is further supported by a story from a century later. Luan Ying 欒盈 (d. 550 B.C.E.), who headed one of Jin's most powerful ministerial lineages, was overpowered by his foes from the Fan 范 lineage and fled Jin in 552 B.C.E. Two years later, with the covert support of Qi, Luan Ying reentered Jin. He arrived at Jin's secondary capital, Quwo 曲沃, a city which he had governed prior to his exile and which still hosted many of his supporters and associates. His followers joined him and assaulted Jin's primary capital, Xintian 新田 (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 23.3 and 23.6). The rebellion was ultimately quelled, but what matters for us is the ease with which Quwo's troops joined the rebellion. As a secondary capital, Quwo could not have been Luan Ying's private allotment; in all likelihood it was a "lord's settlement" governed by Luan Ying (and, presumably, his ancestors) on behalf of Jin's ruler.[15] Nonetheless at the moment of truth Quwo military and civilian leaders chose to support the rebellious master against the legitimate ruler. This indicates that even in such an important city, the ruler's authority was ephemeral. The immediate master mattered more than the nominal sovereign.

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[12] Its locus classicus is *Gongyang zhuan* (Zhao 5.4; Liu Shangci 2011: 516), which distinguishes between "private settlements" (*si yi* 私邑) and the "lord's settlements" (*gong yi*).

[13] See, for instance, Tsuchiguchi (2007: 624).

[14] For the origin of *Zuozhuan* stories about Chong'er, see Pines (2023: 32–38).

[15] During Luan Ying's rebellion, the head of the Jin government, Fan Gai, offered Quwo to Luan's supporter, Wei Shu 魏舒, in exchange for abandoning Luan Ying (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 襄 23.3c).

These examples illustrate the limits of Jin's control over its localities—not only in outlying areas like Linqiu but also in closer locations, such as the Pu fortress and even the secondary capital Quwo. The center's role likely extended only to appointing a person in charge of a locality. Appointments were expected to become lifelong and eventually hereditary; at the very least, the appointees were not routinely rotated. Furthermore, the central authorities seem to lack the means for monitoring appointees' conduct. Local administrative staff and the population were expected to be loyal to their immediate master rather than to the ruler. Ultimately, there was little difference between centrally governed settlements and the private allotments of ministerial lineages. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that dealing with an unruly Wu Yu in Linqiu required considerable acumen (or trickery).

## 2 The Chu pattern

Many scholars have noted that the state of Chu was more centralized than its Central Plain counterparts, that its kings were more powerful vis-à-vis ministerial lineages, and that it was remarkably effective in incorporating annexed polities.[16] These observations are accurate; however, as I shall demonstrate below, one should not exaggerate the degree of Chu's centralization and administrative efficiency. One of Chu's indisputable advantages over Jin and other northern states was the kings' ability to limit the power of hereditary ministerial lineages. In particular, ministerial allotments in Chu were much smaller than those common in the north (Li Shijia 2021: 109–31). Another notable feature of Chu's sophistication was the successful combination of direct and indirect control over localities. All of these factors facilitated Chu's territorial expansion, which dwarfed even that of Jin. However, as we shall see, Chu's experiments in territorial control were only partly successful.

### 2.1 Direct control: Shen and other counties

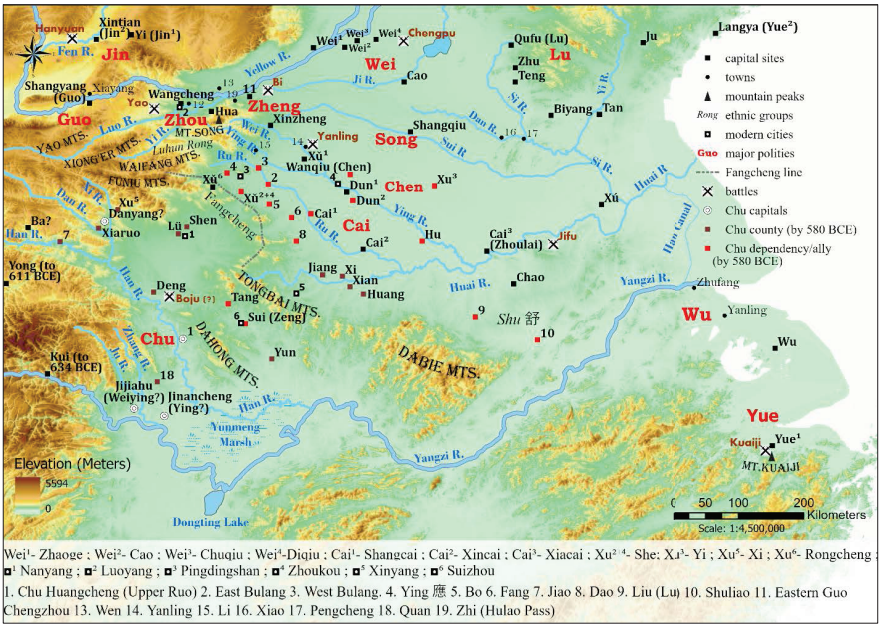
The singularly notable success of Chu's territorial administration was the institution of counties as units under effective centralized control.[17] Chu's experimentation with counties as basic administrative units started at an early stage of its expansion, already under King Wu. This experimentation did not always proceed smoothly, as *Zuozhuan* relates under the year 676 B.C.E.:

> 初，楚武王克權，使鬬緡尹之，以叛，圍而殺之。遷權於那處，使鬬敖尹之。
>
> Earlier, when King Wu of Chu conquered Quan, he sent Dou Min to govern it. Dou Min used it as a base for rebellion. Chu laid siege [to Quan] and killed him (Dou Min). They relocated Quan to Nachu and sent Yan'ao to govern it (*Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 莊 18.5).

[16] See, for instance, Creel (1964), Blakeley (1992), and Thatcher (2004).

[17] See discussions in Creel (1964) and Yang Kuan (1981).

This brief entry leaves many details unclear, but Yang Bojun's inferences are reasonable and can be adopted (Yang Bojun 1990: 208–9). Quan (see Map 2) may have been turned into a county soon after its annexation by King Wu. Then, however, the Chu governor rebelled, likely with local support. Having quelled the rebellion, Chu leaders "relocated" Quan eastward. This relocation, as Yang Bojun suggests, was probably akin to the relocation of the Shang 商 population following their failed anti-Zhou rebellion in 1042 B.C.E., involving the transfer of the elite lineages to another location(s), to facilitate smooth incorporation of the remaining subjugated population.




*Map 2.* Chu's sphere of influence (after Pines 2026).

Whether the experience of Quan provided a lesson to Chu leaders on the proper incorporation of conquered territories cannot be verified, but some indirect evidence suggests that a new pattern soon emerged regarding Chu's annexation of smaller polities. Namely, the ruling lineages of the subjugated entities were relocated to the territory under Chu's control, where they acted as semi-autonomous dependencies, while the original polity was turned into a county governed by a Chu noble. This pattern can be exemplified with particular clarity in the history of Chu's most important and best-documented county, Shen 申. Shen, located near the current city of Nanyang 南陽, along with the neighboring (and less understood) Lü 呂, as well as Xi 息 in the middle reaches of the Huai River, exemplify what can be dubbed Chu's

military counties. Because we have more information about Shen than its counterparts, I shall focus on it in the following.

Shen was originally a polity of the Jiang 姜 clan located in Shaanxi 陕西; it was relocated to the Nanyang Basin, apparently during the reign of King Xuan of Zhou (Zhou Xuan wang 周宣王, r. 827–781 B.C.E.).[18] Its strategic importance in the heartland of the Nanyang Basin made it an early object of Chu expansion; after several campaigns, Shen was conquered between 687 and 684 B.C.E. After the conquest, the Chu rulers allowed the ruling lineage of Shen to maintain a shadowy polity elsewhere, as will be discussed in the next sub-section. Here I want to focus on the county of Shen and its governance.

Three points are pertinent to understanding the nature of Shen county. First, it was not ruled on a hereditary basis. We can identify ten to eleven governors ("dukes," *gong* 公)[19] of Shen, and only one was the son of his predecessor. Among the governors we find members of major collateral lineages of the ruling house (Dou 鬬, Qu 屈), an external lineage (Peng 彭, which may have played a special role in Shen's conquest by Chu), two sons of Chu kings, and several other individuals whose lineage is obscure.[20] Some may have died in office, but others were removed, allowed to retire, or promoted to higher positions in the Chu hierarchy. As such, Shen was clearly not ruled as the possession of a single lineage/individual.

Nor did the resources of Shen belong to its governor. In 594 B.C.E., following Chu's prolonged campaign against Song, the chief minister Zichong 子重 appealed to King Zhuang to use the fields of Shen and Lü to award meritorious soldiers. The governor of Shen, Qu Wuchen 屈巫臣, rejected this request:

> 不可。此申、呂所以邑也，是以為賦，以御北方。若取之，是無申、呂也，晉、鄭必至于漢。
>
> This will not do. It is with these lands that Shen and Lü could become full-fledged settlements. From thence have come the levies [and soldiers] with which we defend ourselves against the north. If he takes those lands, there will be no more Shen and Lü. Jin and Zheng will certainly reach the Han River (*Zuozhuan*, Cheng 成 7.5a).

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[18] The dominant scholarly view, influenced by the "Grand and Lofty" (*Songgao* 崧高) ode of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Mao 毛 259), assumes that Shen's relocation southward from its Shaanxi location occurred under King Xuan of Zhou (e.g., Xu 2021: 34–39). This assertion does not fit well, however, with the role of the state of Shen in the Zhou dynastic crisis of 771 B.C.E. For attempts to reconstruct Shen's history, see Li Feng (2006: 221–28), Shim (2017), Hu/Jing (2021).

[19] The Chu governors were normally assigned the position of duke in the Chu-led hierarchy, but sometimes they are identified as just "governors" (*yin* 尹), a term associated with a great variety of administrative tasks in Chu. For debates about the usage of both terms, see Zheng Yifan (2021: 36–37).

[20] For two attempts to reconstruct the list of Shen governors, see Xu (2011) and Li Shijia (2021: 166–69). The only Shen governor who may have inherited his father's position was Dou Ke 鬬克 (appellative Ziyi 子儀), who was captured by the Qin army in 635 B.C.E. For the Peng lineage's possible role in facilitating Chu's conquest of Shen, see Xuan (2024: 9–13).

Shen, Lü, Xi (and possibly other Chu counties) were not designed to enrich their governors, or even the state of Chu. Rather, their resources were used by standing armies, which served as the first line of defense along Chu's northern frontiers. From *Zuozhuan* we learn that during the first century of Shen and Xi's existence, these armies, financed through local levies, played a major role in defending Chu and allowing rapid responses to Jin assaults.[21]

The third notable feature of Shen is the activism of its governors beyond the county level. Shen governors often led military expeditions and diplomatic missions, requiring absence from Shen for months or even over a year.[22] They were also engaged in power struggles in the capital: one governor eliminated the chief minister, suspecting him of planning to usurp the throne (*Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 30.2). This implies a role not of mere regional administrators but of major political heavyweights. It would be interesting to know who managed the administration of the county during the governor's absence, but, unfortunately, we do not have adequate information about this.

That Shen was not a private satrapy but part of Chu's centralized administration is undeniable, but does this observation apply to other counties as well? Here we stand on shakier ground. It is tempting to assume, as Yang Kuan 楊寬 suggested, that since most known Chu counties were established in the borderland areas (see also Map 2), they were all intended to serve as military bases (Yang Kuan 1981). The problem is that the evidence is insufficient to validate this assumption. Nor could other county governors (until late in Chu history; see note 37 below) match the importance of their Shen peers. It is possible, then, that the impressively effective control over Shen was an exception rather than the rule. For instance, it is plausible that the Chu kings would pay utmost attention to the appointment of Shen's governor, while allowing other, less critical counties to be ruled on a hereditary basis.[23] Without adequate information about the trajectories of the dozen or so other Chu counties, we should be cautious about drawing far-reaching conclusions. Shen clearly provided a blueprint for efficient centralized control over localities, but how much this blueprint influenced Chu's overall administrative practices remains an open question.

## 2.2 Indirect control: The case of Zeng/Sui

Whereas Chu's institution of *xian* has repeatedly attracted scholarly interest, Chu's other method of incorporating new territories, namely, through indirect control, has

[21] See Pines (2026, ch. 2.4).

[22] For instance, the Duke of Shen, named Shuhou (Shen gong Shuhou 申公叔侯), spent more than a year between 634 and 632 B.C.E. on garrisoning the city of Gu 穀, acquired from Qi. Another Duke of Shen, Qu Wuchen, was dispatched in 589 on a mission to Qi (from which he did not return to his home country); the mission would require months to accomplish (*Zuozhuan*, Xi 26.5, 28.3 for the former, Cheng 2.6b for the latter).

[23] For instance, in the case of Xi there are reasons to believe that its governorship was monopolized by the Qu lineage (Tian/Chen 2019).

remained less understood until recently. Take, for instance, the creation of dependencies in Chu's interior, to which the ruling lineages of the subjugated polities were relocated. This practice was inferred from a brief entry in *Zuozhuan* concerning the abortive relocation of several extinguished polities, including Shen and Lü, to the core Chu territory of Jing 荊 during King Ling's reign, ca. 531 B.C.E. It was opined that these entities were dependencies established for the nobles of the extinguished polities to maintain ancestral sacrifices.[24] Recent discoveries support this inference but also complicate it.

For instance, regarding Shen, it is clear that one segment of the Shen ruling lineage continued to reside near the original state, experiencing marked downward mobility (Xuan 2024: 7–9), while another was allowed to maintain its polity near current Xinyang Municipality (Xinyang Shi 信陽市, Henan 河南). Some findings, such as the *Shu Jiang fu* 叔姜簠 bronze inscription (discovered in 1990), show that the Shen ruling lineage remained active throughout the Springs-and-Autumns period and even intermarried with other noble clans.[25] Shen's situation was perhaps more intricate than others but not exceptional. Inscriptional evidence shows the ongoing existence of noble lineages from other polities extinguished by Chu (Xuan 2022). It is reasonable to assume that these nobles were granted a "compensation statelet," probably to soften their resistance to Chu. Actually, a similar policy of maintaining shadowy entities for ruling lineages of the vanquished polities was adopted in Jin as well.[26] Its roots may be traced to the Zhou founders' decision to allow the descendants of the Shang kings to maintain ancestral sacrifices in the state of Song. The "compensation statelets" remained within Chu's territory but maintained a certain degree of autonomy.

For the current discussion what matters, though, are not the aforementioned tiny dependencies but another type of subjugated polities which were not fully conquered but instead became Chu's satellites. These polities should be distinguished from Chu's major allies, such as Chen, Cai 蔡, and intermittently even Zheng and Song, which remained nominally independent and routinely participated in interstate covenants (*meng* 盟).[27] Satellites, by contrast, were not regarded as independent political actors

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[24] See *Zuozhuan* (Zhao 13.5) and the analysis by Xu (2021: 43–48, 58–61).

[25] Xu (2005). The difficulty to come to terms with the nature of Shen's afterlife under Chu's control is aggravated by the possibility that the Shen lineage in Chu could be either descendants of the Shen rulers or a new lineage, established, for instance, by one of Shen's governors (quite possibly two lineages coexisted). A puzzling self-identification of the Shu Jiang *fu* vessel donor as the descendent of the "king of Shen" (*Shen wang zhi sun* 申王之孫) further complicates the matter because received texts are silent about the ruler of Shen declaring himself a "king." See more in Tian (2016).

[26] For instance, having extinguished the tiny polity of Biyang 偪陽, the Jin leaders allocated its ruler a territory deep in Jin's hinterland (and far away from the home state) to allow ancestral sacrifices to be maintained (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 10.2c).

[27] As is clarified in *Zuozhuan* (most clearly in Cheng 成 2.8b), a dependency was not allowed to

on the interstate scene; however, they maintained full domestic autonomy.[28] While some of these satellite polities are mentioned in *Zuozhuan*, the scarcity of information there has prevented scholars from systematically addressing Chu's patterns of control over them. The situation has changed dramatically now, thanks to a series of remarkable discoveries from one of Chu's major protectorates (satellites), the state of Zeng 曾 (Sui 隨), located near the current city of Suizhou 隨州 (Map 2).

The state of Sui is mentioned several times in *Zuozhuan*—initially as the target of Chu's aggression and later as its recalcitrant ally. However, it attracted scholarly attention not because of these scattered references but primarily due to archeological discoveries, the most spectacular being the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zeng hou Yi 曾侯乙, d. 433 B.C.E.), excavated in 1978 and renowned particularly for its magnificent chime-bells (Rawson 2023: 233–68). Initially, it was not entirely clear whether Zeng and Sui were the same entity, but more recent discoveries have allowed us to resolve this decades-long controversy.[29] More importantly, excavations of several Zeng/Sui cemeteries have uncovered an unusually high number of elite tombs, spanning the period from the state's establishment early in the Western Zhou until its final decades in the mid-Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國) period (453–221 B.C.E.). Of even greater significance is a series of lengthy inscriptions on bronze vessels, cast by order of Zeng's leaders, which allow us to trace changes in the state's political and even cultural outlook over the centuries. The scope of these discoveries is enormous, making it impossible to address them systematically here.[30] Instead, I will briefly outline the state's trajectory and focus on a single inscription that illustrates Chu's remarkable success in ensuring Zeng's loyalty.

Zeng/Sui was established early in the Western Zhou as the major stronghold of the Ji 姬 clan at an important transportation hub located at the confluence of the Han, Huai, and Yangzi Basins. Early in the Springs-and-Autumns, it emerged as the major regional power and the primary opponent of Chu's eastward expansion.[31] Having been repeatedly defeated by Chu, Zeng had to acquiesce to Chu's dominance, while still remaining defiant. Its duke, named Qiu (Zeng gong Qiu 曾公𣪘), had proudly proclaimed his goal "to recover our lands and borders" (復我土疆) and led an abor-

be ranked among the regional lords and could not take part in the covenants. For records of covenants in the *Chunqiu* as reflective of the interstate hierarchy, see also Van Auken (2023: 101–41).

[28] I borrow this distinction from Zhao Bingqing (2021: 84, n. 2). The accuracy of this distinction can be disputed, but its heuristic convenience is undeniable.

[29] For this evidence, see Huang Jinqian (2024: 231–34) and Hubei Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al. (2020: 84, 89). For previous discussions, see Venture (2017).

[30] For major studies of Zeng history, see Chen Beichen (2019) and Fang (2019) (both focus primarily on the material data; both monographs became partly outdated in view of the 2018–2019 discoveries); Huang Jinqian (2024) (which is primarily a republication of his earlier articles) and Huang Tingqi (2024). For more about the ebbs and flows in Chu–Zeng relations, see Pines (2025).

[31] Actually, Chu's first appearance in *Zuozhuan* is related to its campaign against Sui in 706 B.C.E. (*Zuozhuan*, Huan 桓 6.2).

tive uprising against Chu in 640 B.C.E.[32] Having quelled the uprising, Chu treated Zeng/Sui leniently, and continued marital alliance with this recalcitrant ally, a decision that proved to be prudent. Duke Qiu's daughter-in-law, the Chu princess Mi Jia 嬭加 (or Jia Mi 加嬭), who ruled Zeng after the death of her husband, Marquis Bao (Zeng hou Bao 曾侯寶, d. ca. 613 B.C.E.), positioned herself as a proud Zeng patriot who promised to "boost our state and patrimony" (作辟邦家), and also as a staunch Chu supporter proclaiming, "Chu has become the model, I shall match it" (楚既為忒，吾仇匹之).[33] Mi Jia's reign became a milestone in Zeng/Sui's political and even cultural reorientation toward Chu, evidenced by the proliferation of Chu-style bronze vessels in Zeng burials since the early sixth century B.C.E. (Fang 2019). This reorientation is encapsulated in an inscription by a mid-sixth century B.C.E. Zeng ruler, who proudly proclaims, "I serve the king of Chu from the left and the right" (左右楚王; Hubei Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo and Suizhou Shi Bowuguan 2015: 5–7).

In 506 B.C.E., Zeng/Sui's allegiance to Chu was tested at a critical point in Chu's history, when Chu was on the verge of extinction at the hands of the rising southeastern power of Wu 吳. Having defeated the Chu armies, Wu invaders occupied Chu's capital, Ying 郢. King Zhao of Chu (Chu Zhao wang 楚昭王, r. 516–489 B.C.E.) with his entourage fled and found refuge in Zeng/Sui. According to *Zuozhuan*, Wu demanded the king's handover, appealing to the Ji clan's solidarity (Wu claimed to belong to the Ji clan as well) and promising to reward Sui lavishly for its cooperation. The Sui leaders refused, which proved a prudent choice: soon enough the Wu armies withdrew and Chu's fortunes were restored (see more in the next subsection) (*Zuozhuan*, Ding 定 4.3e). Proud of his service to Chu, Marquis Yu of Zeng (Zeng hou Yu 曾侯隅) made the following inscription on his bells:[34]

> 惟王正月，吉日甲午，曾侯隅曰：「伯括上庸，左右文武，達殷之命，撫定天下。王遣命南公，營宅汭土，君庇淮夷，臨有江夏。周室之既卑，吾用燮戚楚。吳恃有眾庶行亂，西征南伐，乃加於楚，荊邦既削，而天命將誤。有嚴曾侯，業業厥聖，親敷武功，楚命是靖。復定楚王，曾侯之靈。」
>
> It was in the first month of the [Zhou] king's calendar, on the auspicious day *jiawu*, Yu, the Marquis of Zeng said, "The Elder Kuo (Nangong Kuo) was enrolled to support from the left and the right kings Wen and Wu. [He helped them to] attain the Mandate of Yin (= Shang) and console and pacify All-under-Heaven. The king (King Wu?) then ordered Patriarch Nan (Nangong Kuo) to establish his residence at the confluence of

[32] See the inscription on the *Zeng gong Qiu bianzhong* 曾公𠭯編鐘, discussed by Guo Changjiang et al. (2020), Chen Minzhen (2020), Huang Yifei (2023), and Huang Tingqi (2024: 134–48). See more in Yang Lisheng (2021) and Pines (2025: 565–69).

[33] For the inscription on the *Mi Jia bianzhong*, see Guo et al. (2019), Chen Minzhen (2022), and Huang Tingqi (2024: 209–17); see more in Chen Zhaorong (2022) and Pines (2025: 569–73).

[34] These bells, *Zeng hou Yu bianzhong* 曾侯隅編鐘, were unearthed in 2009 from Tomb No. 1, Wenfengta 文峰塔 cemetery, Suizhou. See Hubei Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo / Suizhou Shi Bowuguan (2014).

> the rivers, to rule and govern the Yi of the Huai River and to overlook the Yangzi and Xia (= Han 漢) Rivers.
>
> The Zhou house has already declined. I am harmonious and amicable with Chu. Wu relied on its multitudes to behave calamitously. They invaded westward, attacked southward, and thereupon added [turmoil] to Chu. The Jing (= Chu) country had been decimated already and Heaven's Mandate was on the verge of being worried about.[35] Stern is the Marquis of Zeng, magnificent in his sagacity, he personally spread military achievements. Thus, Chu's Mandate has been secured. The restoration of the King of Chu is thanks to the numinous power of the Marquis of Zeng."[36]

Since I have discussed this extraordinary inscription elsewhere (Pines 2020: 85–88), I shall not go into details but focus only on the points relevant to the current discussion. The inscription can be read as a sophisticated justification of Sui's loyalty to Chu during the 506 B.C.E. debacle. While proud of their Zhou ancestry, the Sui leaders are unequivocal: Heaven's Mandate had been transferred to Chu, and it is to Chu only that they owe allegiance. This inscription testifies to the success of Chu's policy of indirect control in ensuring a lasting alliance with a subjugated polity. Marital ties with Zeng, lavish patronage of Zeng's leaders, as reflected in gifts of Chu bronze vessels, and, more broadly, the appeal of Chu's "soft power," which turned Chu into a political and cultural alternative to the moribund Zhou house—all these determined Zeng's choice. Zeng's prudent support of Chu was duly rewarded. Whereas those dependencies that sided with Wu were eliminated (see below), Zeng continued to benefit from Chu's exceptional patronage, as is exemplified, for instance, by Chu's investment in the mortuary ceremonies of Marquis Yi of Zeng in 433 B.C.E. (Habberstad 2014).

The story of Zeng/Sui's transformation from Chu's major foe into its staunch supporter demonstrates the success of Chu's indirect control methods. However, these methods had obvious limitations. Chu's debacle of 506 B.C.E. was precisely the result of widespread dissatisfaction among its allies, who turned to Jin and later to Wu in the hope of liberating themselves from Chu's suffocating embrace (see below). Even earlier, we can observe the dissatisfaction of Chu leaders with the inadequacy of indirect control. We shall now turn to the changes in Chu's patterns of expansion during the last third of the Springs-and-Autumns period.

## 2.3 Chu's expansion under King Ling and thereafter

In 598 B.C.E., King Zhuang of Chu quelled a turmoil in the state of Chen, after which he decided to turn it into a county. He was dissuaded, however, by the wise minister, Shen Shushi 申叔時, who noted,

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[35] Reading 誤 as 虞 (here: to be concerned, worried) (Pines 2020: 262, n. 67). An alternative reading would be that the Mandate was about to be mistakenly transmitted to Wu.

[36] My translation follows Pines (2020: 85–86); q.v. for further references.

> 諸侯之從也，曰討有罪也。今縣陳，貪其富也。以討召諸侯，而以貪歸之，無乃不可乎？」
>
> That the regional lords followed you was because you said you were chastising the guilty. Now to turn Chen into a county is to covet its riches. To summon the regional lords in the name of chastisement and then to let it end in covetousness—is this not unacceptable? (*Zuozhuan*, Xuan 宣 11.5)

The difference between a dependency (or an ally), which maintains domestic autonomy, and a county, the resources of which benefit the king of Chu, is obvious here. The king realized that the regional lords' opinion may indeed turn against him and so abrogated his plans: Chen was restored. However, this abortive attempt at annexation demonstrates that in the eyes of at least some of Chu's leaders, direct control was preferable to indirect control. With the enthronement of King Ling in 540 B.C.E., Chu tried to reenact the policy of full incorporation of outlying territories—with disastrous consequences.

King Ling came to power at an exceptionally opportune moment. The state of Jin, enmeshed in bitter competition among powerful ministerial lineages, yielded many of its positions on the interstate scene. The policy of détente with Chu initiated by Jin's pliant leader, Zhao Wu, resulted in two "disarmament conferences" in 546 and 541 B.C.E. (Kōno 1978). Those officially terminated the Jin–Chu conflict, replacing rival alliances with a new mega-alliance, headed simultaneously by Jin and Chu; practically, however, Jin was no longer in a position to rival Chu's influence. Nor was Wu back then able to threaten Chu without Jin's support. For an assertive Chu leader this was an opportunity not to be wasted.

*Zuozhuan* depicts King Ling as an intemperate, ruthless, and weirdly ambitious ruler, the only one in *Zuozhuan* who openly proclaimed his desire "to attain All-under-Heaven" (得天下; *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 13.2g). Barry Blakeley considers him "the most autocratic ruler in Chu's history" (Blakeley 1992: 19). Putting his complex psychological portrait aside, there is no doubt that King Ling was determined to consolidate his power at home and abroad. Fearing no reprisals for his actions, he dispelled with the caution of his predecessors and adopted an aggressive foreign course. King Ling eliminated several weaker polities, relocated several dependencies closer to the Chu core area, established new military counties along Chu's frontiers,[37] and also tried to curtail the power of some of the Chu aristocrats.

King Ling's most daring step was the annexation of two of Chu's allies, Chen and Cai, in 533 and 531 B.C.E., respectively. Both were turned into new counties, each of which was required to provide a thousand war chariots, which should have expanded Chu's armies dramatically. King Ling personally appointed the county governors, one of whom was his former rival,[38] and another his younger brother, Prince Qiji 棄疾.

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[37] One of these counties, She 葉, thenceforth assumed an active role in Chu's domestic and military policies, similar to that previously played by Shen.

[38] The appointment of King Ling's rival, Chuanfeng Xu 穿封戌, to the position of Duke of Chen

The annexation backfired, though. The revolt that toppled King Ling in 529 B.C.E. was led by his brothers, including the governor of Cai, Qiji (the future King Ping, Chu Ping wang 楚平王, r. 528–516 B.C.E.); reportedly, it was instigated by the nobles of Chen and Cai eager to regain their independence. Notably, the revolt was joined by the military forces of all the newly established counties (*Zuozhuan*, Zhao 13.2).

King Ling's disaster prompts us to reconsider the ostensible efficiency of Chu's county system discussed above. The newly established counties were allowed to retain their population, including elite lineages, as well as military forces and administrative infrastructure. Aside from appointing a governor for the new county, King Ling did not take further steps to strengthen his control. Was it due to excessive self-confidence, or were more decisive measures not in Chu's playbook? We cannot provide a definitive answer. What is clear, though, is that King Ling's experiment ended disastrously.

King Ling's brother and dethroner, King Ping, reversed most of King Ling's policies. Chen and Cai were restored; relocated dependencies were allowed back to their original localities; Chu's pressure on neighboring polities had greatly receded. This lenience, however, was as counterproductive as King Ling's ruthlessness. Chu's satellites, pressured by the steadily expanding state of Wu, started to reconsider an alliance with Chu. Above, I mentioned Sui's exceptional loyalty to Chu. By contrast, many other dependencies and satellites opted to side with Wu. The resultant dynamic is succinctly summarized in the *Xinian* 繫年 bamboo manuscript from the Tsinghua University collection of looted bamboo manuscripts. As Section 19 of *Xinian* recounts,

> 楚靈王立，既縣陳、蔡。景平王即位，改封陳、蔡之君，使各復其邦。景平王即世，昭〔104〕［王］即位，陳、蔡、胡反楚，與吳人伐楚。秦異公命子蒲、子虎率師救楚，與楚師會伐唐，縣之。〔105〕昭王既復邦，焉克胡、圍蔡。昭王即世，獻惠王立十又一年，蔡昭侯申懼，自歸於吳，吳縵（洩）庸〔106〕以師逆蔡昭侯，居于州來，是下蔡。楚人焉縣蔡。〔107〕
>
> When King Ling ascended the throne (540 B.C.E.), he turned Chen and Cai into counties. After King Jingping (King Ping) ascended the throne (528 B.C.E.), he enfeoffed anew the rulers of Chen and Cai, allowing each to return to his country. When King Jingping passed away, King Zhao ascended the throne, and Chen, Cai, and Hu[39] rebelled against Chu, and allied with the Wu leaders to invade Chu. Lord Yi of Qin ordered Zipu and Zihu to lead troops to rescue Chu.[40] Together with the Chu troops, they invaded Tang and turned it into a county.[41] After King Zhao recovered his state,

attracted considerable attention among subsequent anecdote-tellers; see Pines (2020: 76–80).

[39] Hu was a minor polity near present-day Fuyang 阜陽, Anhui 安徽 Province (Map 2); it was a Chu satellite and bore the brunt of Chu's wars with Wu. *Chunqiu* reports on Hu's taking part in the 506 B.C.E. Shaoling 少陵 assembly organized by Jin to oppose Chu (*Chunqiu*, Ding 4.2).

[40] This vital assistance of Qin to Chu was due to the heroic pledge of a Chu minister, Shen Baoxu 申包胥 (*Zuozhuan*, Ding 定 4.3, 5.5). Lord Yi is known as Lord Ai (Qin Ai gong 秦哀公, r. 536–500 B.C.E.).

[41] Tang was one of Chu's satellites that, unlike Zeng, tried to liberate itself from Chu's dominance

> they thereupon overpowered Hu, and besieged Cai.[42] After King Zhao passed away, in the eleventh year of King Xianhui (King Hui) (478 B.C.E.), Marquis Zhao of Cai, named Shen, became fearful and on his own initiative submitted to Wu. Xieyong of Wu used the troops to welcome Marquis Zhao of Cai, and let him reside at Zhoulai, which became the Lower Cai.[43] Thereupon, the Chu leaders turned Cai into a county.[44]

The final lines here are surprisingly confused as I explain in the footnotes, but I shall forgo a detailed discussion of the reasons for this inaccuracy. What matters is that the debacle of 506 B.C.E. and the mass betrayal of Chu by its dependencies and satellites demonstrated the insufficiency of indirect control in the long term. In the aftermath of Chu's restoration of its power, its rulers started readjusting their policy: whenever possible, dependencies and satellites were to be fully incorporated into Chu. Chu started moving in the direction of a territorial state.

## 3 Fear of powerful localities

In 531 B.C.E., King Ling of Chu decided to fortify the recently annexed capitals of Chen and Cai, along with two additional newly formed counties, Western and Eastern Bulang 不羹. This was a reasonable step aimed at strengthening Chu's northern borderlands (see Map 2). However, it prompted the king's most forthright and prescient advisor, Shen Wuyu 申無宇, to remonstrate. When the king argued that establishing great walled cities benefits the state, Shen replied,

> 鄭京、櫟實殺曼伯，宋蕭、亳實殺子游，齊渠丘實殺無知，衛蒲、戚實出獻公。若由是觀之，則害於國。末大必折，尾大不掉，君所知也。」

> In Zheng it was Jing and Li that actually killed Manbo.[45] In Song it was Xiao and

by turning to Wu and actively participating in Wu's invasion of 506 B.C.E. The annihilation of Tang by the Chu-Qin coalition forces is narrated in *Zuozhuan* (Ding 5.5).

[42] Both events are reported in *Zuozhuan* (Ding 15.2, Ai 哀 1.1). Hu was annihilated in 495 B.C.E., and the next year Cai was besieged and then relocated closer to Chu's borders.

[43] There is obvious chronological inconsistency in the *Xinian* story. According to *Zuozhuan*, the relocation of Cai from its erstwhile capital, present-day Xincai 新蔡, to the new one, located 160 km to the east on the Huai River, near present-day Fengtai 鳳台, Anhui (Map 2), took place in 493 B.C.E., still during the reign of King Zhao of Chu. Marquis Zhao of Cai was actually murdered in 491 B.C.E. by disgruntled officials who disliked the close alliance with Chu (*Zuozhuan*, Ai 2.4, 4.1). The final extermination of Cai in its new location was carried out, according to *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), by King Hui of Chu in 447 B.C.E., the 42nd year of his reign (*Shiji* 15: 699). In the 11th year of King Hui (i.e., 478 B.C.E.), Chu exterminated Chen. In *Xinian* the two events are conflated.

[44] Translation follows Pines (2020: 220–22); numbers in brackets in the Chinese texts are the numbers of the slips.

[45] There is some confusion in this sentence. Jing 京 was the power base of rebellious Gongshu Duan 共叔段 of Zheng, who failed to oust his brother, Lord Zuang in 722 B.C.E. Li 櫟 was the power base of Lord Li of Zheng (Zheng Li gong 鄭厲公), who was ousted from his state in 697

> Bo that actually killed Ziyou.[46] In Qi it was Quqiu that actually killed [Gongsun] Wuzhi.[47] And in Wei it was Pu and Qī that actually brought about the expulsion of Lord Xian.[48] Viewing the matter from this perspective, then [large walled cities] are harmful to the state. When the tip of a branch is large, it is certain to break. When a tail is large, it will not wag. This is something that you, my ruler, already know (*Zuozhuan*, Zhao 11.10).

Shen Wuyu's speech was probably fabricated after King Ling's downfall, but this is a minor point. The warning against "a branch" or "a tail" being too large is a recurrent topic in *Zuozhuan*.[49] Shen Wuyu's historical examples, the details of which are clarified in the footnotes above, serve to make the speech all the more convincing. Yet even if we accept his argument, what are its practical implications? Should King Ling have refrained from fortifying his newly acquired towns along Chu's northeastern borders? Would it have been better to leave these territories undefended in the face of a possible external intruder (Jin or Wu)? Although the speaker does not address this point directly, one may conclude that domestic stability should be prioritized over external expansion. Possessing a powerful stronghold on the borders may be more dangerous than yielding this territory to an enemy. Rather than fostering a potential domestic threat, it is better not to possess an overly powerful locality. This logic probably prompted King Ling's successor, King Ping, to relinquish control over Chen and Cai.

The counterintuitive assertion that a smaller and more easily manageable state is preferable to an expansive polity dotted with power bases for potential usurpers and insurgents underlies much of the territorial policies of the Springs-and-Autumns rulers. While this logic was not allowed to dominate local politics in Chu, it was the prevailing rule elsewhere. Take, for instance, the state of Zheng. The first long narrative in *Zuozhuan* recounts the rebellion of Ducal Son Duan (better known as Gongshu Duan 共叔段) against his brother, Lord Zhuang of Zheng, in 722 B.C.E. The story includes an important remonstrance by the prudent minister, Zhai Zhong 祭仲, against granting Duan an excessively large fief:

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B.C.E.; in 679 B.C.E. he reentered Zheng and assassinated his brother Ziyi 子儀, here identified as Manbo. It is likely that Shen Wuyu is confused here; Manbo was probably an appellative of another brother, Lord Zhao of Zheng (Zheng Zhao gong 鄭昭公), assassinated in 696 B.C.E. (*Zuozhuan*, Yin 隱 5.4).

[46] Ziyou 子游 was enthroned in Song in 682 B.C.E., following the assassination of his predecessor, but the rebellion based in the towns of Xiao and Bo resulted in his elimination (*Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 莊 12.1).

[47] Gongsun Wuzhi assassinated Lord Xiang of Qi (Qi Xiang gong 齊襄公) in 686 B.C.E. but failed to consolidate power and was killed by a Qi noble, Yong Lin 雍廩 (*Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 8.4 and 9.1). It is assumed that Quqiu was Yong Lin's power base.

[48] Lord Xian of Wei (Wei Xian gong 衛獻公) was expelled in 559 B.C.E. by the heads of the Ning 甯 and Sun 孫 lineages, whose power base was in the settlements of Pu and Qī respectively.

[49] See, for instance, *Zuozhuan* (Yin 1.4a, Huan 18.3, Zhuang 28.2).

> 都，城過百雉，國之害也。先王之制：大都，不過參國之一；中，五之一；小，九之一。今京不度，非制也，君將不堪。
>
> For the wall of an outlying city to exceed one hundred *zhi* is a danger for the capital.[50] In the system of the former kings, large cities did not exceed one-third of the capital, middle-sized cities did not exceed one-fifth, and small cities, one-ninth. Now Jing, failing to conform to this standard, is not in accordance with the rules. You, my lord, will not be able to bear it (*Zuozhuan*, Yin 隐 1.4a).

Lord Zhuang, pressured by his mother (who supported Duan), did not heed his advisor's warning. Earlier, however, Lord Zhuang rejected his mother's plea to grant Duan an even more significant allotment—the city of Zhi 制—stating, "Zhi is a strategic place. Guo Shu died there. For any other place, you need only issue a command!" (制，巖邑也，虢叔死焉。佗邑唯命; *Zuozhuan*, Yin 1.4a). This statement is mentioned en passant and does not attract much scholarly interest. However, upon closer examination, it becomes highly significant.

Zhi, a former stronghold of the Eastern Guo (Dong Guo 東虢) polity, extinguished by Zheng half a century before the depicted events, was located near the strategic Hulao Pass (Hulao Guan 虎牢關), south of the Yellow River (Map 2). In 722 B.C.E. it was under Zheng's control; a reader of *Zuozhuan* may infer that Lord Zhuang intended to maintain centralized control over it. This inference is wrong, though. Actually, Lord Zhuang preferred to leave Zhi unwalled and undefended rather than incorporate it and turn it into a major Zheng stronghold. Thus, despite—or, probably *because* of —its strategic importance, the city of Zhi (or, more precisely the Hulao Pass) was abandoned by Zheng. In 673 B.C.E., half a century after the depicted events, the king of Zhou granted Hulao anew to Zheng, indicating that by then the location was not under Zheng's effective control. In 656 B.C.E., under pressure from Lord Huan of Qi (Qi Huan gong 齊桓公), Hulao was granted to a Zheng minister, Shen Hou 申侯, who then planned to fortify the city of Zhi. This was crossing the red line: the Zheng ruler had Shen Hou executed because fortifying an outlying fortress was considered a suspicious action (*Zuozhuan*, Xi 僖 4.2, 5.4, 7.2). Later, Hulao was abandoned once again, eventually falling under Jin's loose control. This pattern reveals that for Zheng leaders it was easier to give up Hulao than to fortify it and face the possibility that the city becomes the hotbed of domestic rebellion.

The same pattern is observable with regard to Linqiu, with whose story I started section 1 of this essay. With the elimination of unruly Wu Yu, Jin apparently yielded this strategically located city back to Qi. Linqiu is named later in *Zuozhuan* as a Qi location (*Zuozhuan*, Ding 8.4; 502 B.C.E.), and it remained in Qi's possession thereafter. In 405 B.C.E. it served once again a rebellious Qi noble—this time Ducal Grandson Hui (Gongsun Hui 公孫會), who sought support from the Jin component state of Zhao. This time Zhao was ready to absorb Linqiu; hence, having defeated the Qi armies in the following year, the Jin leaders made a covenant in which Qi

[50] For *zhi* 雉 as a measure used for the height and length of a city wall, see Durrant/Li/Schaberg (2016: 9, n. 17).

promised not to invade Linqiu again (*Xinian* 22; Pines 2020: 233–34; Ma Weidong 2014). Yet that was a new era in which territorial consolidation—not of moribund Jin but of the ascending state of Zhao—started in earnest.

Going back to Shen Wuyu's remonstrance, we may observe that aside from his examples, there are many more that show how a powerful locality—often based on territory acquired from an annexed polity—could become the source of major domestic challenge. Several examples are added to the alternative version of Shen's remonstrance cited in *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語 17.6 "Chu 1"). To these I shall add a single rarely noted example—the state of Song. In 487 B.C.E., Song extinguished its sizeable neighbor, the state of Cao. It took only six years for the Cao territory to become the springboard for a rebellion by a disgruntled Song nobleman (*Zuozhuan*, Ai 哀 14.4). Although the rebellion was quelled, one cannot ignore the constant pattern of an occupied territory becoming a major threat to domestic stability. Without dealing with this challenge, radical territorial expansion could become a suicidal decision, as the fate of the state of Jin demonstrates.

## Epilogue: A long way to territorial control

Establishing effective control over remote localities has remained a challenging task for most expansive polities throughout human history. China— whether during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties or in the Springs-and-Autumns period—was no exception. The above discussion indicates that, despite interesting experimentation in Chu, the Springs-and-Autumns polities overall failed to overcome the challenge of properly balancing external expansion with internal stability. It is time to conclude with a few methodological observations before addressing the seeds of change in the late Springs-and-Autumns period.

First, in discussing Springs-and-Autumns practices we should move away from the habitual teleological approach that views this era merely as a prelude to the emergence of a bureaucratized and centralized "Warring State." This skewed perspective obscures the immediate goals of the contemporaneous political actors. For instance, it is clear that Jin ministers were not focused on establishing a centralized state; rather their goal was to preserve the influence of their lineages. It is not surprising, then, that they did not attempt to replicate the Chu experiment with centrally controlled military counties but rather happily maintained a system in which ministerial lineages controlled most localities. The same logic can be observed in most other polities.

Second, the discussion above makes abundantly clear that one cannot speak of a uniform "Springs-and-Autumns" political pattern. The trajectories of Jin and Chu were very different. The same term (*xian*) could refer to entirely different territorial units in Chu, Jin, and Qi. Moreover, there were more temporal and spatial differences, which could not be addressed in the above article due to space limitations. For instance, in the states of Qi and Zheng, we can observe by the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. a clear tendency toward limiting the size of ministerial allotments,

which was not the case, for example, in Jin, Wei, or Lu.[51] Each political entity should be studied as a separate case, avoiding a "one size fits all" approach.

Third, we must acknowledge the inadequacy of our sources, which leaves many questions unanswered. Take *Zuozhuan*, for instance. Its coverage of the Springs-and-Autumns history is remarkably extensive; however, aside from debates about its reliability, attention should also be given to the significant differences in its coverage of individual states. For example, in the case of Chu (particularly during its early period) we have much better coverage of its military campaigns than in the case of Jin, whereas the Jin sections of *Zuozhuan* are incomparably more systematic in their coverage of domestic affairs, particularly the inter-lineage struggles. These different foci of coverage, which probably reflect the distinct practices of Jin and Chu scribes, may inadvertently skew our analysis. Insufficient data prevents us from adequately analyzing patterns of local control in Qi, Qin, and Wu, among others.[52] Furthermore, unlike for the Warring States and early imperial history, we do not possess administrative documents from the Springs-and-Autumns polities, further complicating our analyses.

The inadequacy of our sources is particularly notable for the history of the fifth century B.C.E., which was probably a significant watershed in China's administrative history.[53] It may be inferred that experiments in tighter centralized control over localities started in the allotments of the three Jin ministerial lineages: Han, Wei, and Zhao. Eager to prevent the disintegration of their ever-increasing allotments, the leaders of the three lineages introduced new principles of employment and renumeration, effectively discontinuing hereditary control over localities. Although details are scarce, it is clear that the three states that emerged on the ruins of Jin were far more centralized than their mother country.[54]

New developments in the state of Chu are somewhat better understood. The major innovation during the last decades of the Spring-and-Autumns period was the emergence of territorial lords (*fengjun* 封君), who, according to Zheng Wei's insightful analysis, were established to counterbalance the excessive power of county governors, whose loyalty had become less certain since the overthrow of King Ling (Zheng Wei 2012). The sophisticated combination of enfeoffed leaders and county governors (dukes) who counterbalanced each other facilitated the gradual consolidation of Chu's territories by the early fourth century B.C.E. By the late fourth century B.C.E., we know of much more sophisticated county-level administration, with multiple offices dealing with separate aspects of economic and military affairs, ena-

[51] These differences are summarized in Pines (2026, ch. 2).

[52] In the case of Qi, it should be reiterated that the so-called "Guan Zhong reforms" which presumably brought about a well-centralized political entity, are clearly an invention of the Warring States period. See Rosen (1976) and note 11 above.

[53] For the inadequacy of our sources for the fifth century B.C.E., see Pines (2020: 112–21).

[54] See details in Zhao Boxiong (1990: 245–51) and Zhu (1990: 531–40).

bling better control and preventing a county from becoming the stronghold of an individual (You 2022: 98–134). It is currently impossible to verify, though, how much this new system—if at all—is indebted to the experimentation of the fifth century B.C.E.

Consolidation of territorial control was one of the major developments of the Warring States era. This topic has been discussed extensively, and whereas many details still require clarification, the basic outline of the emergence of a "ruler-centered state" (Lewis 1999: 597) is relatively clear. I believe that only the emergence of this centralized territorial state allowed wars of intimidation to turn into wars of extermination and annexation. The techniques of effective territorial rule formed between the fifth and the fourth century B.C.E. were crucial in finally ending centuries of debilitating internecine warfare and transforming the fragmented Zhou world into a unified empire.

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