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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS about the longest aristocratic age in Chinese history—the Springs-and-Autumns period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE). That age spanned three odd centuries, starting with the collapse of the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty (ca. 1046–771 BCE), and ending with the disintegration of the state of Jin 晉, which marked the onset of a new era, the Warring States period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE). Because the end of the Springs-and-Autumns period coincides with the lifetime of the singularly influential Chinese thinker, Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE), this age is often paired with the Warring States period as the formative age of China’s cultural tradition (both are parts of the so-called Eastern Zhou 東周 era, 770–255 BCE).¹ However, I think this pairing is wrong. From many points of view, the Springs-and-Autumns period marks a dramatic rupture rather than continuity in Chinese history.

It is remarkable how much the Springs-and-Autumns period differed from what is often associated with the normative orientations of Chinese political life. It was an age when political fragmentation was considered a norm and not an aberration, and efforts were made to perfect and stabilize the multistate system. It was an age when many states were moving from monarchical to oligarchic forms of rule, and political participation of the lower strata was acceptable and even partly institutionalized. It was an age when pedigree mattered more than abilities in determining an individual’s career, when the concept of the Mandate of Heaven had little to do with the notion of universal rule, and when lineage cohesiveness was subversive of rather than conducive to the preservation of the sociopolitical order. In many respects, this period

1. The “Eastern Zhou” is called so because of the relocation of the Zhou capital to the eastern part of the royal domain, near Luoyang. Note that the Zhou dynasty was terminated in 255 BCE, while the Warring States period ended in 221 BCE with the unification of the realm under the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BCE).

appears as an inversion of traditional Chinese political values rather than their affirmation. Reevaluating this age and its place in the broader context of China's history is the goal of this book.

My study has three major objectives. The first is to introduce the reader to the basic parameters of this insufficiently understood era. The explosive growth of material and paleographic evidence, parallel to advances in our understanding of relevant textual sources, allows us to engage with Springs-and-Autumns history anew, and to present a more nuanced (and, hopefully, more accurate) picture than was possible a few decades ago. This is done in the first part of this book, which introduces demographic and geographic background, traces differences and similarities in the political trajectories of major states, addresses tensions between political fragmentation on the one hand and ongoing elite cultural unity on the other, and explores the role of the “aliens” in the Zhou world.

The second goal of the book is to go beyond the confines of teleological narratives that view Springs-and-Autumns developments through the prism of how they contributed to the rise of the centralized and bureaucratized Warring State en route to China's eventual imperial unification in 221 BCE. Instead, I want to understand the policies adopted by Springs-and-Autumns statesmen on their own terms and within their contemporaneous social, political, and intellectual contexts. In my view, the Springs-and-Autumns period was China's longest experiment with a polycentric world and polycentric society. In parts 2 and 3 of this book, I shall evaluate the pros and cons of this experience, first at the level of stabilizing the multistate system and second at the level of attaining domestic stability. Although both experiments eventually failed, I want to highlight their logic and their achievements, even if those were ultimately short-lived.²

My third goal, conversely, is to go beyond the confines of the aristocratic era itself and to situate it within the *longue durée* of Chinese history. What were the lessons learned from the Springs-and-Autumns experiences by political thinkers of the Warring States era and by their imperial-era heirs? How is this period related to different paradigms through which China's past is analyzed domestically and by outsiders? These topics will be addressed in the epilogue to this study.

2. When I refer to “experiments” here and throughout this book, I do not mean deliberate tests but rather improvisations, the results of which were analyzed by thinkers and statesmen who then devised new political solutions. It is this postfactum analysis that makes the “experiment” label valid.

Studies of the History of the Springs-and-Autumns Period

The history of the Springs-and-Autumns period was among the best known in traditional China. This is surprising when we consider that the period under discussion neither shared the historical prestige of the preceding Western Zhou, nor witnessed an intellectual flowering on a par with the subsequent Warring States era. The puzzle is resolved once we recall that the very name “Springs-and-Autumns” derives from the title of the Lu 魯 chronicle, the *Springs-and-Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋; hereafter *Chunqiu*). This dry and formulaic text was overwhelmingly viewed by the imperial literati as the embodiment of Confucius’s deepest political wisdom. To grasp fully the “great meaning in subtle words” (*weiyán dàyì* 微言大義), allegedly embedded in *Chunqiu* by Confucius, the reader had to possess basic knowledge of contemporaneous events. This knowledge was provided by the *Chunqiu* commentaries, particularly the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳; hereafter *Zuozhuan*). The canonization of *Chunqiu* and its commentaries made these texts required reading for the imperial literati from the Han 漢 dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE) until the beginning of the twentieth century. The oversized engagement with these texts resulted in hundreds of works, from glosses and subcommentaries, through philosophical analyses, to focused historical studies, exploring topics such as kinship relations among the protagonists or the events’ geographic setting. Without these studies, modern scholarship would remain on an entirely different level.³

In the twentieth century, studies of Springs-and-Autumns history entered a long lull. The loss of *Chunqiu*’s canonical status led to a dramatic shrinkage of scholarly interest in this (frankly, quite tedious) text and its historical setting. Moreover, the Springs-and-Autumns period, associated with lasting turmoil, was deemed uninspiring for most historians, who preferred to focus on more prosperous ages in China’s long history. Yet the major reason for scholars’ reluctance to engage with that age was the outburst of bitter debates about the authenticity and reliability of *Zuozhuan*, the singularly important relevant historical source. When, in the late 1920s, the renowned leader of the “doubters of antiquity” current (*yigupai* 疑古派), Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980), averred that *Zuozhuan*’s historical reliability is akin to that of a literary masterpiece, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義), his opinion had

3. To demonstrate the “oversized” nature of *Chunqiu*-related studies, suffice it to mention that the major imperially approved compilation, *Complete Books in the Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, 1772–1783), comprises well over a hundred titles focused purely on *Chunqiu* and its commentaries.

a huge scholarly impact.⁴ Henceforth, a historian planning to explore Springs-and-Autumns history first had to engage in lengthy and immensely complex debates about the reliability of the text that contained the lion's share of the information about that age. It is no surprise that most scholars preferred to eschew the challenge and focus on other, less contentious topics.⁵

It was only in the last decade or so of the twentieth century, when debates about *Zuozhuan's* historical reliability in China receded, that studies of Springs-and-Autumns history resumed in earnest. Although only a very few monographs focused specifically on that period,⁶ many others discussed it within a broader time span, usually encompassing the entire Zhou era. Scholars in China and Japan produced many excellent studies of the political, social, cultural, and institutional history of the age under discussion; I am particularly indebted to the astute observations of Zhu Fenghan (1990; rev. ed. 2004), Zhao Boxiong (1990), Tian Changwu and Zang Zhifei (1996), Yoshimoto Michimasa (2005), and Watanabe Hideyuki ([2010] 2024), to mention only the most prominent monographs. In addition to these, hundreds of other monographs, dissertations, and scholarly articles explore Springs-and-Autumns diplomacy and warfare, histories of individual polities, and social, cultural, religious and intellectual life. Many of these will be referred to throughout this book.

In Western Sinology, by contrast, interest in Springs-and-Autumns history remains meager. The pioneering research of Hsu Cho-yun (1965) was an impressive scholarly achievement for its time, but it did not yield follow-ups. Only aspects of the military history of that age have been adequately covered

4. See Gu Jiegang 1988b: 16 (this is the summary of Gu's lectures from 1929–1930); compare Qian Xuantong [1931] 1963. For Western parallels, see, for instance, Henri Maspero's views of *Zuozhuan* as a "historical romance" ([1927] 1965, chapter 7), or, later, Jacques Gernet's labeling it "a semi-fictional chronicle" (1982: 86). Gu Jiegang gradually modified his views of *Zuozhuan*, but, judging from the summaries of his lectures in 1940s published by his student, Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞 (1917–2012), he refrained from addressing systematically the question of *Zuozhuan's* historical reliability (Gu Jiegang 1988a). See also the next note.

5. A notable exception to this rule was Gu Jiegang's student, Tong Shuye 童書業 (1908–1968), who finalized in 1941 under Gu's encouragement his *History of Springs-and-Autumns* 春秋史 based on the revisions of Gu's lectures from 1935–1937. The book gained due attention only after its republishing in the 1980s (Tong Shuye 2003).

6. The only major academic publication aimed at comprehensively discussing Springs-and-Autumns history is Gu Derong and Zhu 2001, published as part of the *Series on China's History, Chronologically Divided* 中國斷代史系列. This is, frankly, not among the strongest volumes in the series, particularly due to the uncritical incorporation of the Warring States–period materials as if reflective of Springs-and-Autumns realities.

by Lewis (1990: 15–52; 2021: 17–46) and Kolb (1991: 167–260). In addition, several articles, book chapters, and two monographs have touched upon other aspects of institutional and diplomatic history.⁷ This dearth of historical studies can be contrasted with the in-depth engagement of Western scholars with *Zuozhuan*. From the onset of the twenty-first century, a series of major studies has elevated understanding of this crucial text to a qualitatively new level, highlighting its immense complexity, analyzing its interpretative techniques, and exploring the nature of its sources and the impact of compilers, transmitters, and editors on its content. The cumulative insight of these publications allows incomparably more nuanced utilization of *Zuozhuan* (and mutatis mutandis other relevant transmitted texts) than was possible before.⁸

Aside from a better understanding of transmitted sources, the second major impetus for revisiting Springs-and-Autumns history is the archaeological revolution, which allows us to go beyond textual confines in analyzing the social, economic, cultural, and, infrequently, political history of the age under discussion. Here, for a nonarchaeologist like myself, the most prized works are integrative ones that process a vast amount of excavation reports and analyze spatial and temporal differences in material culture. In particular, the importance of Lothar von Falkenhausen’s publications (primarily 1999, 2006, and forthcoming) cannot be emphasized enough. These meticulously executed and methodologically transparent studies are a must for any historian who aims to engage archaeological materials in earnest. Without them I would not be able to effectively utilize archaeological materials that are crucial especially for part I of this book.

Archaeologists (and, unfortunately, their competitors, the tomb looters) have brought to light numerous paleographic sources—from the inscriptions on bronze vessels to manuscripts written on bamboo and silk. These texts are intensively studied by scholars in China and elsewhere, without whose

7. Aspects of administrative and political history of the Springs-and-Autumns period are covered in Creel (1964), Blakeley (1977–1979 and 1992), and Thatcher (1977–1978, 1985, 2004). Rubin (1960 and 1965) and Lewis (2006: 136–50) explored the relevance of the city-state paradigm to the Springs-and-Autumns world. Walker’s *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (1953), even if much outdated, is the only English-language monograph dedicated to preimperial interstate relations in China. Another relevant study is Stumpfeldt’s (1970) exploration of the formation of the territorial state during the Springs-and-Autumns period (I am grateful to Christian Schwermann for introducing me to this monograph). Additionally, Gassmann’s (2006) study of kinship and social systems of the Zhou era contains many astute observations about Springs-and-Autumns political history.

8. See Schaberg 2001; Pines 2002a; Li Wai-ye 2007; “Introduction” in Durrant, Li, and Schaberg 2016, and the articles collected in Pines, Kern, and Luraghi 2023b.

paleographic expertise I would not be able to utilize them in the first place. My own previous monograph (Pines 2020c) explored the impact of paleographic sources on the reevaluation of Zhou-era historiography. In the current study, I utilize these inscriptions and manuscripts to fine-tune discussions of Springs-and-Autumns political, social, and cultural history.

Sources, Old and New

One of the major impediments to studies of Springs-and-Autumns history is the need to navigate among textual sources, which differ considerably in terms of their nature, authorship, intended audience, agenda, proximity to the depicted events, and, of course, the degree of their reliability. Understanding these complexities is the critical first step toward any meaningful research of that era. Systematically addressing these problems in the framework of the current introduction is impossible; hence, I shall briefly outline my choices, referring the reader to further relevant discussions when possible. (Readers who are less interested in the technicalities of my study can skip this section.)

Transmitted Texts

Let us start with *Chunqiu*, the text that gave its name to the period under discussion. Putting aside for the time being the perplexing question of this text's relation to Confucius, we may conclude, following Yang Bojun (1990: 16–22) and Van Auken (2023), that the text overwhelmingly reflects contemporaneous records by Lu scribes. These records could be at times edited and manipulated, but these manipulations were evidently rare. And, whereas the text's laconic and formulaic entries make it fairly tedious, they also allow for observing long-term changes, which may reflect either alterations in Lu's foreign policies or, more significantly, new social realities. These barely observable changes are precious because we may confidently conclude that they were not the product of a later editor. Therefore, despite its laconicism, concealment of negative domestic news, and selectivity (the events would not be recorded unless properly reported to the state of Lu), *Chunqiu* remains a valuable historical source.⁹

9. For the nature of *Chunqiu*, see Yang Bojun 1990: 16–22; Zhao Shengqun 2000; Pines 2020: 17–23; Van Auken 2023. For barely notable yet highly significant changes in, for example, reporting about the state of Chu, see section 2.4, pp. 81–82; for changes reflecting the rise of the ministerial stratum, see section 7.2, p. 248. For *Chunqiu*'s laconicism as possibly reflecting the

Laconicism and an abundance of formulaic records, often aimed to conceal more than they reveal, have made *Chunqiu* a notoriously difficult text for readers lacking scribal education.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, from the earliest stages of its circulation, the text was accompanied by oral or written commentaries, the most important of which for a historian of the Springs-and-Autumns period is undoubtedly *Zuozhuan*. The compilation of this text likely started in the fifth century BCE, but it contains much later segments, which led many scholars to date it to the fourth century BCE or even later. *Zuozhuan* is among the most controversial texts in the entire corpus of early Chinese writings. Traditional debates have focused on the nature of its relations with *Chunqiu*, its date and authorship, and the accuracy of its exegesis. In the twentieth century, as noted earlier, some scholars questioned the very relevance of *Zuozhuan* as a source for Springs-and-Autumns history. By now, few, if any, scholars deny *Zuozhuan*'s historical reliability altogether, but the degree to which its narratives should be trusted is still an open question. What is clear is that a "one size fits all" approach is inadequate to deal with *Zuozhuan*. The text comprises both highly accurate and independently verifiable stories, as well as fictitious narratives. Reducing it to either "true records" (*shilu* 實錄) or "a historical romance" is untenable.¹¹

The most important new understanding, spurred particularly by the discoveries of paleographic sources such as the bamboo manuscript **Xinian*¹² (see the following), is that the bulk of *Zuozhuan*'s information comes from local histories prepared by court scribes of competing states. These histories comprised both informative segments (focused on "who, what, when, and where") and interpretative ones (focused on "why"). *Zuozhuan* preserves incomparably more informative segments than any other preimperial historical or quasi-historical text. Thanks to this, we are exposed not just to a huge amount of personal and place names, official titles, and the detailed chronology of many events, but also to substantial information such as kinship relations

limitations of its material medium (the text apparently was prepared as a tablet with limited number of bamboo slips per a year's season), see Chen Minzhen 2023.

10. For instance, the Han man of letters, Huan Tan 桓譚 (ca. 20 BCE–56 CE), exclaimed: "Should the [*Chunqiu*] classic lack the [*Zuozhuan*] commentary, the sage would close the door, ponder over it for ten years, and even then he would not understand it" 經而無傳，使聖人閉門思之十年，不能知也 (*Xin lun* 9: 39).

11. For controversies about *Zuozhuan* and for new trends in studying this text, see notes 4 and 8 earlier.

12. I have marked with an asterisk the titles of unearthed manuscripts if they were assigned by contemporary editors. To avoid alienating the reader with too many asterisks, I do this only once, at the first appearance of the manuscript's name.

among political leaders, local administration in major states, the scope of military campaigns, and even intralineage management. This information is the core of what will be used in this book.¹³

That said, we should beware of overtrusting *Zuozhuan*. The authors of its original sources (local historians of Springs-and-Autumns polities) had their agendas, and so did the text's compilers, transmitters, and editors, who could redact existing records or add outright fictitious information. Without equally rich alternative sources of information, our perceptions of Springs-and-Autumns political life are significantly influenced by these agendas, which determined the selection of materials to be narrated as well as their interpretation. Additionally, we should pay attention to differences in the coverage of major states in *Zuozhuan*. Unequal density of this coverage and the different preferences of local historians result in considerable gaps in our knowledge of the individual polities' foreign and domestic affairs. When, in the absence of alternative sources, my discussion has to rely almost exclusively on *Zuozhuan* (particularly chapters 4 and 9), the analysis remains inevitably tentative.

The single most controversial segment of *Zuozhuan* are speeches attributed to major Springs-and-Autumns statesmen. Although it may be surmised that most of the speeches were incorporated into the text from its primary sources—and in that case, even if they are outright fictitious, they should reflect the Springs-and-Autumns intellectual milieu¹⁴—this does not necessarily mean that the speeches we read today are identical to the early versions. As these speeches often encapsulate the lessons to be gleaned from particular events (Schaberg 2001), they were susceptible to ideological manipulations by the text's compiler(s), transmitters and editors. It would be much easier to alter the content of the speech, or to invent one outright, than to modify a detailed narrative account.

That said, I believe that with due care *Zuozhuan*'s speeches can serve as a reliable source for Springs-and-Autumns political history. First, as I have argued elsewhere (Pines 2002a), the content of *Zuozhuan*'s speeches differs so much from the ideas exposed in later texts that it is unlikely that they were

13. For an analysis of “informative” versus “interpretative” strands of early Chinese historiography and their applicability to *Zuozhuan*, as well as for the nature of the “local histories” that its compilers utilized, see Pines 2023c. For detailed chronology of many events in *Zuozhuan*, see Durrant 2023. For later interpolations in *Zuozhuan*, see Pines 2002a: 221–26 and 233–46; see there for further references.

14. This can be inferred from the proximity (and sometimes identity) of many speeches cited in *Zuozhuan* and *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語). As explained later in the text, it is likely that *Zuozhuan* and several sections of *Discourses* shared common primary sources, from which the speeches may have originated.

heavily edited by the Warring States or later redactors. Topics common in the Warring States discourse—such as support for political meritocracy (“elevating the worthy” [*shang xian* 尚賢]), the importance of personal self-cultivation, the normativity of politically unified realm, and so forth—are notably absent from *Zuozhuan* speeches. Additionally, these speeches differ from later texts in their lexicon (Pines 2002c). In light of this, I believe that the *Zuozhuan* speeches underwent less ideological redaction than, for instance, those compiled in *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu* 國語) discussed later. Nevertheless, given widespread doubts about their reliability, I will use them sparingly in this book—except for section 7.5, where they play a central role.

Two other *Chunqiu* commentaries, **Gongyang zhuan** 公羊傳 and **Guliang zhuan** 穀梁傳, were composed in the latter half of the Warring States period. Both differ from *Zuozhuan* in their exegetical approach. They are predicated on explaining the “great meaning” of *Chunqiu*, which they do through the meticulous analysis of the text itself, its formulae, and the patterns of deviations from the normative records. The background historical information is of less importance to the *Gongyang* and *Guliang* exegetes than to their *Zuozhuan* counterparts; when it is provided, it sometimes echoes *Zuozhuan*, but at times differs considerably. How to treat these discrepancies is not just an exegetical but also a historical question. Many scholars, myself included, tend to trust *Zuozhuan* a priori, but this may be premature, as argued by the foremost specialist on the *Gongyang* tradition, Joachim Gentz (2023a). At the very least, one must acknowledge that *Gongyang* and *Guliang*’s understanding of the *Chunqiu* formulae is at times superior to *Zuozhuan*. More importantly for the current study, both commentaries provide an interesting example of the Warring States–period interpretation of Springs-and-Autumns history, and it is through this prism that they will be primarily utilized in this book, particularly in the epilogue.¹⁵

Judging from both transmitted and newly discovered texts, the bulk of historical information in the Warring States period circulated through didactic **anecdotes**—vignettes valued for their moralizing messages or amusing features. The nature of these anecdotes was conveniently summarized by David Schaberg (2011). Most of them are short and easily detachable textual units of several hundred characters’ length, which normally contain an exchange of speech and either a confirmation of one of the speakers’ prescience or judgment by a later commentator. As such, they unequivocally belong to the

15. *Gongyang zhuan* was analyzed in several studies by Joachim Gentz (2001, 2015, 2023a). For a comprehensive discussion cum translation of both *Gongyang* and *Guliang zhuan*, see Queen and Gentz, forthcoming.

interpretative or didactic strand of early Chinese historiography. Schaberg (2011: 394–95) concludes, “The early Chinese historical anecdote is a fundamentally didactic form, as valuable for instructing rulers and peers as for training young students.”

Putting aside for the time being my single disagreement with Schaberg (he considers the anecdotes as the primary building blocks of early Chinese historiography, whereas I think that they were extracted from larger local histories produced by the Springs-and-Autumns scribes [Pines 2020c: 73–80]), the point to be addressed is the anecdotes’ value for the current study, which focuses on political rather than intellectual history. This question is particularly important with regard to two collections of anecdotes that purportedly deal with the Springs-and-Autumns events, namely, *Discourses of the States* and *Springs-and-Autumns of Master Yan* (*Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋). Both collections, especially the former, contain many overlapping anecdotes with *Zuozhuan*, but also entirely different vignettes. Of the two, the latter poses less of a problem for me: it is so lacking historical details as to be of little use for a historian in the first place.¹⁶ This cannot be said about *Discourses of the States*, though. Parts of the text resemble *Zuozhuan* so much that a few scholars even considered the latter as being produced out of the former or vice versa. By now, these speculations can be dismissed; instead, the most plausible explanation of the similarities (and differences) between the two texts is their resort to common primary sources, probably the same local histories that served as *Zuozhuan*’s building blocks.¹⁷ The question is how to assess the *Discourses*’ value as an independent source for Springs-and-Autumns history.

Before answering this question, we should repeat the warning against a “one size fits all” approach. If it applies to *Zuozhuan* (which was meticulously edited and can be read to a certain extent as a coherent compilation),¹⁸ it is doubly valid with regard to a heterogeneous compilation such as *Discourses of the States*. *Discourses* can be tentatively divided into three parts. One, which comprises the Zhou, Lu, Jin, and Chu 楚 sections, shares many similarities with *Zuozhuan*; many anecdotes in these sections clearly derive from the same

16. For translations cum studies of *Yanzi chunqiu*, see Milburn 2016 and Ariel 2018; see more in Cook 2015 and Liu Jiao 2018. Some—but not all—of Yan Ying’s 晏嬰 (that is, Yanzi, d. ca. 500 BCE) speeches assembled in *Zuozhuan* may derive from independently circulating Yan Ying-related anecdotes that were later assembled into *Yanzi chunqiu*.

17. The most famous claim that *Zuozhuan* was forged on the basis of *Discourses of the States* was made by Kang Youwei 康有為 (1859–1927), which spurred lasting controversies (Kang Youwei 1955). Zhang Yiren (1962 and 1963) had convincingly shown that both texts are independent and were not produced one from another.

18. For meticulous editing of *Zuozhuan*, see Schaberg 2023.

sources that served *Zuozhuan*'s compilers. However, the *Discourses*' compilers were primarily interested in the didactic message of the protagonists' speeches; they were less bothered with "who, when, where, and what." Moreover, the cited speeches underwent by far more substantial literary or ideological embellishments than in *Zuozhuan*'s case, resulting in recurrent instances of Warring States-period ideas and lexicon in *Discourses*, in contrast to *Zuozhuan*.¹⁹ These observations reduce the relevance of *Discourses* to the current study; only infrequently can it augment *Zuozhuan*'s information.

The second segment of *Discourses* comprises a single section, that of Zheng 鄭. This section is centered around a long speech allegedly pronounced by a prescient Zhou scribe to the Zheng ruler on the eve of the Western Zhou downfall. It has long been demonstrated that the speech reflects realities of the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, and as such is unrelated to the anecdotes' interlocutors. However, the section is full of historical details that may derive from the currently lost early text(s), and as such merits attention.²⁰

Four other sections of *Discourses*—those of Qi 齊, Wu 吳, and two sections of Yue 越—belong to what I have dubbed recently "**didactic narratives**" (Pines 2022a). Much like the anecdotes, didactic narratives served the ideological needs of the Warring States thinkers, but they did this not through edifying speeches but rather through tendentious narrative aimed to lead the reader to desirable conclusions (for instance, the importance of profound political reforms for the state's prosperity). Whereas less common than short anecdotes, didactic narratives proliferated widely in the Warring States world, as can be confirmed by the discovery of at least four of them among the recently unearthed bamboo manuscripts. Two of these manuscripts share much in common with the Qi and Wu sections of *Discourses of the States*, while two others present an alternative narrative of the Wu-Yue conflict, different from the Wu and Yue sections of *Discourses*.²¹ The Qi story (which focuses on Qi's most eminent ruler, Lord Huan 齊桓公 [r. 685–643 BCE] and the reforms

19. A systematic comparison of historical reliability of *Discourses* and *Zuozhuan* is still very much lacking. For some of my preliminary observations, see Pines 2002: 39–45 and 2005d: 207–13; Luo and Pines 2023: 18–19.

20. For a detailed analysis of this section, see Qiu Feng 2007.

21. Tomb 36, at Shibancun 石板村, Cili 慈利 county (Hunan), dated to the early Warring States period (Hunan sheng and Cili xian 1995), yielded badly damaged slips with parallels to the Wu section of *Discourses* (Zhang Chunlong 2004). A manuscript preliminary named **Qi Huan gong zi Ju fan yu Qi* 齊桓公自莒返于齊, unearthed in 2020 from the Warring States-period Tomb 46 at Zaolinpu Paper Mill 棗林鋪造紙廠, Jingzhou (Hubei) parallels, at times quite closely, the Qi section of *Discourses* (Zhao Xiaobin 2023). The Wu-Yue struggle is discussed in two closely related manuscripts, the **Yuegong qishi* 越公其事 from the Tsinghua collection, and

allegedly launched by his famous aide, Guan Zhong 管仲) is paralleled also in the “Xiao kuang” 小匡 chapter of the fourth–second century BCE compilation, *Guanzi* 管子.²²

Not a few colleagues, especially in China, tend to treat the preceding didactic narratives as reliable versions of Qi, Wu, and Yue history. I beg to disagree. My reasons for dismissing the bulk of the Wu–Yue narratives in both *Discourses of the States* and in the newly discovered manuscripts have been explained elsewhere (Pines 2022a). Here, I want to briefly explain why I dismiss all three stories about the so-called Guan Zhong reforms. The problem is not just with blatant anachronisms and geographic inaccuracies in these narratives but, more substantially, the improbability of the reforms in the first place. The idea that Guan Zhong created a highly centralized bureaucratic state in Qi in the seventh century BCE is contradicted both by *Zuozhuan*’s depiction of Qi’s domestic life after Guan Zhong and by some of Qi’s bronze inscriptions.²³ Therefore, I fully concur with Stanley Rosen’s (1976: 437) summary that it is “much more probable that the author of the *Kuo Yü* [*Discourses of the States*, YP] was presenting a blueprint of the government that, in his opinion, ought to exist, rather than a history of one that did exist.” Consequently, none of the didactic narratives mentioned earlier will be utilized in my study.

Ideological biases—the desire to present a narrative about what “ought to have happened” rather than focusing on “who, when, where, and what”—is characteristic also of the recurrent references to the Springs-and-Autumns events in the anecdotes scattered throughout the texts associated with the **Warring States and Han-era thinkers**. For the current study, the major problem of these anecdotes—which abound in particular in late Warring States–period texts, such as *Han Feizi* 韓非子 and *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋—are not biases themselves (which are, after all, inevitable in any historical text) but rather the persistent negligence of historical details. As centuries passed after the depicted events, few if any thinkers paid attention to such issues as the event’s location, its chronological ramifications, the participants’ official titles, and so forth. This information is essential in *Zuozhuan*, and appears in many of the *Discourses of the States*’ stories, but is either dismissed or skewed in most

**Wu wang Fuchai qishi fa Yue* 吳王夫差起師伐越 from Tomb 46 at Zaolinpu Paper Mill (Pines 2022a).

22. For *Guanzi* in general, and for the dating of its component chapters, see Rickett 1985 and 1998.

23. For the latter: All the narratives of Guan Zhong’s reform allege that *xian* 縣 (county) was a sizable territorial unit in the state of Qi. Yet the Shuyi-*zhong* inscription (chapter 2, note 64) mentions a land grant of 300 *xian*, from which it is clear that the size of a *xian* in Qi a century after the alleged reforms was akin to a single settlement.

late Warring States–period and Han versions of earlier anecdotes.²⁴ Therefore, utilizing these anecdotes as sources for Springs-and-Autumns history is untenable.

Another, potentially important but very controversial source of information is **ritual texts**. These were normally designed as prescriptive rather than descriptive, but this is not necessarily an obstacle to their utilization. After all, in a society that was permeated by ritual norms (chapter 3), even prescriptive texts could have some descriptive value. The problem is the immense difficulty of dating ritual texts and ascertaining whether they depict the Springs-and-Autumns rituals, modify these to fit the realities of the Warring States society, or simply invent ancient rituals to serve as a blueprint for the future unified empire. The latter is probably the case of *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rituals of Zhou), the “constitutional” text (Schaberg 2010), composed between the late Warring States and the early Han dynasty. Whereas it is likely that the text’s composers incorporated astute observations about earlier Zhou realities into their blueprint for an ideal society, it would be imprudent to rely on this text in discussing the administrative, military, social, or ritual practices of the Springs-and-Autumns period.²⁵

On the opposite side of the relevance spectrum stands *Yili* 儀禮 (Ceremonial rituals), a text that was probably composed earlier than other ritual compendia and may have incorporated genuine ritual texts from the Springs-and-Autumns period (Xu Zibin 2010). It is particularly relevant for the current research because a few of its chapters, most notably the “Pinli” 聘禮 (Rituals of friendly visits), depict the same normative situation of a multistate world that dominates *Chunqiu* and *Zuozhuan*. Less clear is the degree of relevance of the third ritual compendium, *Records of the Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). While some of its chapters may reflect genuine ritual norms of the Springs-and-Autumns period, overall the probability is high that they are reflective of the Warring States–period ritualists’ adaptation of early rituals to their current needs; hence, I use them very sparingly.²⁶

The final text that should be addressed in this brief survey is Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). Being the fountainhead of China’s imperial historiography, this text’s impact on studies and

24. For examples, see van Els 2017; Li Wai-yee 2023: 136–41; for the habitual neglect of historical accuracy in the Warring States texts, see also Pines 2020c: 88–91.

25. For discussions about *Zhouli*, see Peng Lin 2009 and Elman and Kern 2010.

26. The relevant chapters are “Qu li” 曲禮 (Minute rites) and “Tangong” 禮弓. For their dating, and the analysis of their relation to *Zuozhuan*, see Yoshimoto 1992 and 1995a. (I do not necessarily concur with all of Yoshimoto’s analysis, but I think his arguments about the chapters’ dating to the second half of the fourth century BCE are valid).

perceptions of China's past is enormous. The crucial question to the current study is that of Sima Qian's sources. It is broadly accepted that Sima Qian utilized *Zuozhuan* (more precisely the earlier version of *Zuozhuan*, which differed slightly from the current one),²⁷ *Discourses of the States*, and many Warring States-period anecdotes in composing his opus magnum; but did he possess additional sources for Springs-and-Autumns history? Did any of the local histories utilized by *Zuozhuan* compilers survive by Sima Qian's time? Here, Sima's own answer is negative: he famously lamented Qin's destruction of the "historical records of regional lords" 諸侯史記 (*Shiji* 15: 686), which left the historian only with Qin's own, inadequate records (see section 2.1, p. 36). Once we acknowledge that the accounts of Springs-and-Autumns history in *Records of the Historian* are overwhelmingly derivative of *Zuozhuan* (and sometimes of less reliable anecdotal sources), we cannot treat Sima Qian's opus magnum as a primary source for the history under discussion.²⁸

This being said, one should be reminded of an important source that was utilized by Sima Qian (and many commentators of transmitted texts) until it was lost between the Tang 唐 (618–907) and Song 宋 (960–1279) dynasties, namely, *Shiben* 世本 (Roots of generations). This text, composed in the late Warring States period, preserved genealogical data about ruling lineages and major aristocratic houses of the Zhou era. It was probably *Shiben* that allowed Sima Qian to reconstruct with relative accuracy the chronology of early rulers. Glosses based on *Shiben* are an important additional source of information about Springs-and-Autumns aristocratic society.²⁹

Material Data

As noted earlier, archaeology revolutionized the studies of the Springs-and-Autumns period. Thousands of tombs of rulers, aristocrats, lower-elite members, and commoners have been excavated in recent decades. The analysis of mortuary customs, especially the assemblages of mortuary goods, allows us to reconstruct aspects of social and gender stratification, the nature of the

27. For perceptive analysis of the differences between the earlier *Zuozhuan* version, utilized by Sima Qian, and the current one, edited by the Han librarian Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 BCE–23 CE), see Xu Jianwei 2017: 181–246.

28. For minor inaccuracies resulting from Sima Qian's utilization of *Zuozhuan*, see Nienhauser 2003 and 2007. For more substantial ideological alterations, see Rubin 1966. For Sima Qian's demonstrable lack of reliable sources for pre-fourth-century BCE history, see Pines 2020c: 95–121.

29. For *Shiben*, see Cang Xiuliang 2006, 1: 78–90. For attempts to reconstruct *Shiben* from different quotations in transmitted texts, see *Shiben bazhong*.

ritual-based hierarchy, and even long-term changes in the elite composition. It further allows us to redraw the contours of the Zhou cultural realm, its interaction with neighboring ethnocultural groups, and regional variations within this realm (see chapter 3). Mortuary data can also contribute more directly to the questions asked in this study—for example, by providing clues to the spatial dimension of a polity (see, for example, section 1.2). Sometimes, these data also allow for rethinking textual evidence and recharting new historical trajectories of Zhou polities (see, for example, Shelach and Pines 2006).

Burials aside, archaeology offers many clues about socioeconomic life (Falkenhausen forthcoming), demographic trends, population density, and settlement hierarchy in specific localities. Regional surveys provide us with information that cannot be traced through textual sources. Of particular value for this study is the rapid expansion of excavated (or at least archaeologically surveyed) city sites throughout the Zhou world. The analysis of these sites allows us to rethink the relative significance of a given polity, the density of its population, and even the balance of power among neighboring polities (chapter 2). My study has benefited enormously from the comprehensive survey of China's preimperial cities by Xu Hong (2017), whose tabulation of these cities into four tiers according to their relative size is utilized in my work.³⁰

Paleographic Sources

Paleographic sources constitute the third pillar of the current study. The most notable of these are **bronze inscriptions**. These inscriptions—short texts inscribed primarily on sacrificial vessels that were placed in tombs and ancestral temples of high-ranking nobles—have been identified long ago as one of the primary sources for Zhou history.³¹ However, until recently, historians of Springs-and-Autumns were less attracted to this medium than scholars of Western Zhou. The major reason was the relative brevity of most Springs-and-Autumns inscriptions in comparison to the Western Zhou ones, which gave rise to the habitual view of these inscriptions as secondary to the information in received texts, merely footnotes to *Zuo zhuan* (for example, Wang Zewen 2002). This situation is rapidly changing now, both due to the expansion in newly discovered lengthy inscriptions and due to the fact that even

30. Xu Hong's work provides also an excellent clue about the rapid expansion in the number of surveyed city sites. In the earlier version of his study (2000), Xu tabulated 428 Eastern Zhou (that is, both Springs-and-Autumns and Warring States period) sites, whereas in 2017 their number increased to 585.

31. For bronze inscriptions, see, for example, Falkenhausen 1993a; Kern 2009; Shaughnessy 2011: 379–90.

shorter ones can yield useful historical information about topics not adequately covered in the received texts, such as the fate of polities conquered by their peers (Xuan Liu 2022).

The most significant contribution of bronze inscriptions to the current study is the light they shed on the polities that are inadequately covered in textual sources. One notable example is the state of Qin. A series of inscriptions on bronze vessels and chime-stones, cast by the orders of its rulers between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, present a radically new picture of this state, its rulers' ambitions, and its cultural orientations (Kern 2000: 59–105 and section 2.1). Even more fascinating are the recently discovered inscriptions cast by the rulers and elite members of the state of Zeng 曾 (or Sui 隨), which shed a new light on its barely known history (see section 8.1, pp. 283–96). These and other examples (section 5.2) show the increasing importance of bronze inscriptions to studies of Springs-and-Autumns history.

Whereas the number of Springs-and-Autumns bronze inscriptions increases annually, not a single bamboo or silk manuscript from that age has been discovered thus far, in stark contrast to the subsequent Warring States period.³² Luckily, some of the Warring States manuscripts contain precious information about the Springs-and-Autumns and even earlier periods.

The first major discovery of Warring States–period historical and quasi-historical texts occurred in 279 or 280 CE, under the Western Jin 西晉 dynasty (266–316). The plundering of the tomb of King Xiang of Wei 魏襄王 (r. 318–296 BCE), at Ji 汲 commandery (Henan), brought to light numerous bamboo manuscripts, the most prominent of which was a chronicle named by its editors the **Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年). Two separate editions of the chronicle were prepared by the Jin editors, and while the original slips were soon lost, the edited versions survived for centuries, being cited in numerous texts, most notably the glosses to *Records of the Historian* and Li Daoyuan's 酈道元 (d. 527) *Annotated Canon of Waterways* (*Shuijing zhu* 水經注) (these scattered citations are referred to as the *Old* 古本 version of the *Bamboo Annals*). Long after the *Bamboo Annals* ceased to circulate, the text resurfaced in the late sixteenth century in what is called the *Current* 今本 version. The dominant scholarly opinion dismisses the *Current* version as a forgery (for the recent comprehensive discussion, see Cheng Pingshan 2013), although Edward L. Shaughnessy (2006: 131–256) has demonstrated that this may be a premature

32. The earliest example of inscribed bamboo slips come from one of the best-studied burials, the tomb of Marquis of Zeng named Yi 曾侯乙 (d. 433 BCE). Not coincidentally, perhaps, this tomb is reflective of changing views of death in the Zhou world (Falkenhausen 2006: 306–8).

conclusion. Controversy aside, what matters for the current discussion is another Shaughnessy insight, to wit, that any version of the *Bamboo Annals* is the product of the third-century CE editors, who tried to make sense of the disparate bamboo slips on the basis of their knowledge of early history. Possibly because of this editing, it is only exceptionally that the *Bamboo Annals* (overwhelmingly, its *Old* version) present information that differs significantly from *Zuo zhuan*. As such, the text's value for the current study remains, regrettably, minuscule.

After the *Bamboo Annals*, there was a long lull in discoveries of other historical or quasi-historical manuscripts relevant to the period under discussion, the only (inconsequential) exception being the silk manuscript **Chunqiu shiyu* 春秋事語 (Affairs and discourses from the Springs-and-Autumns period), unearthed in 1973 from Tomb 3, Mawangdui 馬王堆, Changsha 長沙 (Hunan).³³ This changed dramatically in the twenty-first century, when several relevant manuscripts were discovered in a row. The most important of those that have been published by now is **Xinian* 繫年 (Linked years) from the collection of looted Warring States-period manuscripts acquired by the Tsinghua (Qinghua 清華) University at the Hong Kong antiquity market in 2008. Its publication in 2011 became a true milestone in studies of Zhou history. Despite its brevity (ca. 5,000 characters, which is just 3 percent of *Zuo zhuan*'s length), *Xinian* (which covers the period between ca. 1046 to 395 BCE) is highly informative, especially regarding the events that precede or postdate the *Zuo zhuan* narrative (see, for example, section 5.1). Moreover, parallels between the Springs-and-Autumns sections of *Xinian* and *Zuo zhuan* allow meaningful reconstruction of the nature of primary sources used by the compilers of both texts and considerably advance our understanding of early Chinese historiography in general (Pines 2020c).³⁴

In 2017 and 2019, scholars announced the discovery of two additional historical manuscripts from the state of Chu: one from the bunch of looted manuscripts acquired by Anhui University (Huang Dekuan 2017), and another, scientifically excavated from Tomb 324, the Longhui River 龍會河 cemetery, Jingzhou (Hubei) (Li Huiibo and Wu Yaxiong 2019; Ke Yaqin 2019; the nature of the latter manuscript is still not clear). Both of these still await publication (as of mid-2025). Other manuscripts that are tangentially relevant to the current study include historical anecdotes, didactic narratives, and lists of

33. For the (limited) historical value of this text, see Yoshimoto 1990a; Pines 2003.

34. Following the publication of my monograph, Hans van Ess (2023) argued that *Xinian* may be a forged manuscript, but this is not the case. See my arguments in Pines 2020c: 45–48, and more in Shaughnessy 2024.

meritorious rulers and ministers; although these are not reliable historical sources, they are important evidence for the Warring States views of the Springs-and-Autumns events and personalities. Of greater value is another Tsinghua University manuscript, **Chu ju* 楚居 (Chu residences), which provides brief information about early Chu history and location of Chu's royal residencies. The importance of this text for understanding Chu's historical geography is discussed in section 2.4.

The combination of textual, material, and paleographic sources raises our understanding of Springs-and-Autumns history to a qualitatively new level. However, it also poses new challenges, especially when transmitted and newly available sources contradict each other. This issue is particularly pertinent with regard to the identification of ancient place names, a *sine qua non* requirement for historical geographers, and a highly relevant issue for my study. The vast majority of place names in the transmitted sources have been identified centuries ago by traditional commentators or by ancient geographers, such as Li Daoyuan. In many cases, the identification is undoubtedly correct: for instance, the site of the ancient state of Huang 黃 has been recently discovered precisely at the place of its traditional identification (near the modern Huangchuan 潢川 county). The identification was confirmed by the discovery in the nearby burials of bronze vessels with inscriptions made by the rulers of Huang and their kin.³⁵ Sometimes, however, textual, archaeological, and inscriptional evidence contradict each other, for instance regarding the location of the Chu capitals (section 2.4). This reminds us of the limitations of our knowledge and cautions against presenting definitive answers to many enigmas of Springs-and-Autumns history.

Structure of the Book

This book's focus is decidedly political: social, economic, technological, or cultural aspects are discussed only insofar as they influenced contemporaneous power structures and political struggles.³⁶ The book is divided into three parts. The first provides a detailed introduction to the Springs-and-Autumns

35. The most significant of these discoveries are the tombs of Ruler Meng of Huang 黃君孟 and his spouse discovered in the nearby Guangshan 光山 county (see Henan Xinyang and Guangshan 1984, where other inscribed Huang-related vessels are also discussed). For the remnants of Huang's capital site, see Yang Lǔxuan 1986.

36. Readers interested in detailed introductions to the preceding topics should consult Falkenhausen (2006 and forthcoming); Gassmann 2006; Rawson 2023; and Chinese and Japanese monographs cited throughout this study.

world, while the second and third parts focus, respectively, on interstate dynamics and power relations within major polities. Parts II and III form the core of this study; it is there that I analyze the peculiarities of China's aristocratic age—such as war and diplomacy, ruler–minister relations and the formation of ministerial oligarchies, experiments in territorial control, and the impact of lower strata on contemporary politics. It is also in these parts that I evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of contemporary polycentric arrangements.

The attempt to generalize the political dynamics of the Springs-and-Autumns period faces two pitfalls. One, noted earlier (p. 2), is a common tendency to consider these centuries merely as a prelude to the robust reforms of the Warring States period. Avoiding this pitfall is relatively easy: discarding the teleological narrative allows us to analyze the Springs-and-Autumns political choices on their own terms and within their own contexts. It is my conviction that the Springs-and-Autumns search for stability was less an attempt to attain preconceived political goals and more a series of improvisations that primarily responded to contingencies rather than being derived from a master design. In many respects, the Springs-and-Autumns represented an open-ended situation, which makes its political dynamics all the more interesting.

The second pitfall is more challenging. Facing a bewildering number of political entities, many scholars tend to analyze Springs-and-Autumns history through a few well-known events and phenomena, treating contemporary polities as if they evolved along similar lines. This results in simplifications, such as reducing the interstate dynamics to the struggle for hegemony (chapter 6, p. 203), or singling out a territorial unit *xian* 縣 (“county”) as the only noteworthy attempt to ensure territorial control (chapter 8, p. 279). My avowed goal in this study is to avoid this monochromatic discussion.

To achieve this goal, I opted for a “thick description” of Springs-and-Autumns history.³⁷ This means not only acknowledging the heterogeneity of political trajectories during that era but also addressing rarely noted factors that influenced contemporary interstate and intrastate dynamics, from population density and terrain to the age of individual rulers at the time of their enthronement. However, this focus on minute details poses another challenge to this study. Few readers would be attracted by minutiae about bygone polities, noble houses, and individuals, most of whom are barely known even

37. The term “thick description” was coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) and popularized by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973: 9). In Sinology, it was popularized by Goldin (2005: 2), from whom I borrow this term.

to professional historians. How can one preserve the thick description without becoming tedious?

My solution was to concentrate minute details in one lengthy chapter (chapter 2), which introduces individual trajectories of major polities and analyzes the specifics of their geographic settings, differences in their coverage in historical sources, peculiarities of their cultural backgrounds, and the like. That chapter targets primarily historians of early China. Readers with less interest in minutiae can skip it or turn to its specific sections that are cross-referenced throughout. In other chapters, I tried to maintain a digestible amount of detail, much of which is relegated to lengthy footnotes to smooth reading.

My focus on the heterogeneity of political patterns during the Springs-and-Autumns period does not mean, for sure, that I am avoiding generalizations whatsoever. To the contrary, my second avowed goal is to highlight common patterns behind divergent political trajectories. These broad patterns are interesting not only from a modern historian's perspective but also because they were analyzed by political thinkers beginning with the Warring States period. The lessons gleaned by these thinkers from the history of the aristocratic age were of lasting importance for China's subsequent political developments.

This latter topic is the focus of the epilogue of this study. How was the Springs-and-Autumns era perceived in its immediate aftermath and later, throughout the imperial millennia? What was the role of the (largely negative) view of this age in shaping traditional Chinese political culture? And how does the story about China's major experiment with polycentrism fit (or not) into the monocentric paradigm through which China's history is habitually analyzed? I hope that engaging with this *longue durée* perspective will be of interest not just to students of early China but also to all those eager to understand China's perennial preoccupation with its past as a mirror to its present.

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