

State Transformation in Early China

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The classical age in China runs from the fall of Jōu in 0770 to the unification by Chín in 0221, a span of five and a half centuries. It is usually divided into Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Both are characterized by constant warfare among the major states, but in Spring and Autumn, the warfare was less destructive. Many small states vanished, but all the major and many medium states survived. At some point, the states reached the limit of expansion on the old model, a chariot force consisting of hereditary chariot warriors, each supported by a landholding. They then created a new-style army, with chariot warriors as officers, but made up of infantry drawn from the common people. These had simple weapons, and were led in a different manner. They could cross terrain which was inaccessible to chariots. They could not only conquer an enemy, but occupy its territory. To support this army, the state was transformed into a resource bureaucracy. This could extract more from the land, and use it in support of the new army. This is the revolution, at once military and organizational, that defines the classical period.

The question is, when did all this happen? To that question, there are two answers. Both focus on the state of Chí. One view holds that the restructuring of the state happened in the 07th century, and gave Chí instant military superiority, making it the leader of the other states. The transformation was the work of Gwǎn Jùng, the minister of Chí Hwán-gūng, who reigned from 0684 to 0643.

The other answer is that the change took place gradually over the 05th and 04th centuries, with early signs in the 05th century and a first major success in the year 0343. How shall we choose between these options?

The 07th Century Option

This is embodied only in late texts. The Dzwǒ Jwàn (04th century) first mentions Gwǎn Jùng as minister of Chí. In a different set of entries, it tells how Chí Hwán-gūng became the bà or hegemon; the leader of the other states. In a late 04th century passage in the Analects, we see that a combination of these stories has been accepted as true. “Confucius” comments on the achievement of Gwǎn Jùng in saving the north from the threat of southern and non-Sinitic Chǔ, while deploring certain aspects of his character. In three late chapters (18, 19, and 20) of the Chí statecraft text Gwǎndž, Gwǎn Jùng’s work is described in detail: Hwán-gūng should build up the power of Chí by stages. He should settle the 4 classes (gentry, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants) in different places for social stability. He should make military and civil administration coincide, to conceal the military buildup. He should store up weapons, conciliate neighbors, and recruit able officers, so as to emerge later as most powerful.

The early 03rd century Gwó Yǔ, successor to the Dzwǒ Jwàn, adopts the latest of these Gwǎndž chapters as the whole of its Chí section. Thus did the Gwǎn Jùng state-strengthening story become embedded in the literature. Millions of people now accept it.

To check it, we take up the Chūn/Chyōu, the chronicle of Lǔ which gives its name to the Spring and Autumn period. It was begun in the year 0722, and kept up at least until 0464. It is this work to which the Dzwǒ Jwàn is ostensibly a commentary. Does it confirm the story? It does not. The Chūn/Chyōu knows nothing of Gwǎn Jùng. It knows nothing of any of the three terms which the Dzwǒ Jwàn uses for “hegemon.” Following standard historical procedure, we will thus prefer the earlier source, and reject the story of Gwǎn Jùng.

But silence in a text can always be argued with. Perhaps Lǚ did not know the internal affairs of Chí. Perhaps Chí *did* become the hegemon, but the Lǚ scribe refused to acknowledge it.

We then turn to the military records which the Chūn/Chyōu provides in great abundance, and ask the military question. If Chí was militarily superior to the other states, it would show up in the record: Chí could conquer its lesser neighbors, and would not need to act with other states, but could win by itself. This is our test case.

The record shows the opposite. Chí in Hwán-gūng's reign behaved like any other large state. Its military, like that of the others, was a chariot host. Of 29 Chí military activities in Hwán-gūng's reign, 14 were by Chí alone. Alone, Chí extinguished and absorbed small nearby statelets, and wiped out the native Rúng population, but nothing more glorious than that.

15 Chí military activities were with allies. This is already a problem: the chariot force and the infantry army operate at different speeds and on different terrain; in the nature of things, there cannot be a mixed force of the two. In any case, the fact that Chí operates mostly with allies refutes the idea that it was strong enough to act on its own in any major matter.

Nor was Chí any stronger after the death of Hwán-gūng. During the succession dispute which followed Hwán-gūng's death, the Chí host was defeated by Sùng. Lǚ and the Dí people, at different times, relieved Chí from attack by others. The only conquest of Chí in this period was Lá, a small non-Sinitic state to its east, and that only on the third try. Chí attacked the small state of Jyǔ 6 times, and medium-sized Lǚ 15 times, but without conquering either, or seizing significant territory. In reprisal for one attack, Lǚ with aid from Chǔ attacked Chí and took the city of Gù. In another reprisal for a Chí attack on Lǚ, a coalition of four states "disgracefully defeated" Chí. Against an attack from the sea by Wú, allied with Lǚ, the resisting Chí force was again "disgracefully" defeated, and its leader captured. We thus have the same situation as before, with Chí unable to conquer other major states, or to repel an attack by them. The 07th century option thus fails twice, and I regard the second failure as decisive. There was no Gwǎn Jùng.

The 05th Century Option

This rests on the Chūn/Chyōu and on other texts, both from Chí and its smaller neighbor Lǚ.

In a Chūn/Chyōu entry for 0483, Lǚ Aī-gūng institutes a land tax. The land thus was no longer portioned out among the hereditary warriors; it began to come under the control of the state. Grain came to the center, and was redistributed as salary to the formerly independent elite. The Analects of Confucius is a record of genuine and invented sayings of Confucius, compiled between 0479 and 0249. A passage of c0460, a generation after the institution of the land tax, records a travel allowance made for an envoy's expenses during his absence on a mission to Chí. Here is the new salaried civil official. Later, in a passage of c0360, the question of rebuilding the Lǚ treasury comes up. A disciple is praised for disapproving of its enlargement. That enlargement was essential to provide storage for the larger amounts of grain which the state was holding, for official salaries and army rations. This was in Lǚ, a second-rate power. It shows Lǚ in the 05th and 04th centuries taking steps to support the new army. In Chí, the Tyén usurpation of 0375 put new energy into the process. The earliest part of what was later called the Gwǎndǔ gives details: taxes, land surveys, trade regulation, and many civil magistrates as enforcers.

The art of leading the infantry army was first described in the mid and late 04th century military text Sūndǔ, supposedly containing the teachings of the Chí general Sūn Bìn. It was followed in the 03rd century by the Wúdǔ, which tells the conquering army not to destroy the infrastructure of a conquered state, but to preserve it for use by the conqueror. By the mid 03rd century, but not before, these texts were regarded as standard military doctrine.

In other words, the record for Chí and Lǚ in the 05th and 04th centuries is exactly what we expect, but do not have, for Chí in the 07th century.

The first victory of the new system was the battle of Mǎ-líng in 0343, when Chí defeated a Ngwèi army **in Ngwèi territory**. So important was this thought to be that the Chí ruler dropped his title gūng (“Prince”) and called himself King, a title previously reserved for the Jōu ruler. He began to number the years of his reign from 1, to show that a new era had begun. As indeed it had. But in the 04th century, not 300 years earlier. If Chí had had such an army for centuries, why all this fuss in the year 0342?

The probable reason is that the new army was then indeed new, and the first victory with the new army was indeed decisive. In addition, the late 04th century was the time when stories of wise ministers advising rulers on how to conquer the world became popular: not only was the state looking for ancient precedent: so were those who served the state below the ruler level. Having a precedent for what the statecraft experts of Chí were then doing fits this situation perfectly.

The Real Hwán-gūng

So there was no Gwǎn Jùng, and no new-style army in the 07th century. But there was something else. Hwán-gūng, by diplomacy, and not by military supremacy, did strengthen the north against Chǔ. He gathered and led a joint incursion into Chǔ, and forced Chǔ to make a covenant. He introduced the túng-mǐng, a solidarity covenant, among the northern states. This was not, like other covenants, a pledge to join in a campaign. but a commitment to combine in resisting Chǔ, and to punish any northern state which joined with Chǔ. The idea was taken over by Jīn, and continued to be effective until Chǔ itself, being distracted by the coastal power Wú, signed a peace treaty with the north. The survival of the north, as such, owed much to this device of mutual security. This was the real achievement of Hwán-gūng.

Why Does This Matter?

It matters because the point of historical research is to get the history right, to see the actual process of development over time. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, this means correctly describing the growth and transformation of the state and its army. But beyond this, there is another issue: the use of history.

The use of false historical examples can lead to unfortunate results. Since the Enlightenment Europe had regarded China as a model state, more rational than Europe itself. Accounts of it, including a picture of a system of collaborative states in Spring and Autumn, became part of the common lore. Based in part on that ideal, the League of Nations was created in 1920, as a forum for the peaceful resolution of international disputes. It failed within two years. What the Chinese record really shows is that state relationships in Spring and Autumn were based on power, not debate or due process. The only guarantee between states was the covenant oath. When that failed to bind, there was no recourse save the use of force, which they did use.

It may thus be said, of this fictive Gwǎn Jùng interlude in Chinese history, that the difference in when an event takes place and when it does not, is vitally important for our understanding of history itself, and for any uses we may make of that history in our own times.

This is the kind of difference that time makes.