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Fable and Fact in Spring and Autumn
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I. FABLE

It is widely believed that in the Spring and Autumn period, during the 7th century BC, the state of Chí, under its ruler Hwán-gung and his minister Gwán Júng, made itself the leader of the other states. This idea is based on several Warring States sources. First comes the Dzwó Jwán, which was written in the 4th century BC. In Handout #1 are all the Dzwó Jwán entries concerning Gwán Júng. They represent him as a wise advisor, urging that needy states be assisted, and that all be treated kindly.

The process of strengthening Chí is described in another 4th century Warring States source, the Chí statecraft text called the Gwándž. Chapters 18-20 of that work give much detail about Gwán Júng’s economic and military reforms. It tells how, after years of preparation, Chí set out from a position of strength to dominate the other states. This is what I call the Fable.

I will now proceed to refute the Fable.

Let us look at the actual record of the time, as preserved in the Chuñ/Chyo, the chronicle of Chí’s neighbor Lu, which covers the period from 722 to 481. There we find that both during and after the reign of Hwán-gung, Chí shows no sign of military improvement or relative superiority. During the reign of Hwán-gung, Chí took part in 27 military actions. In 18 of them, or 67%, it used allies. It acted by itself in only 9 of them, or 33% of the time.

When it did act by itself, the results were trifling. This is what they achieved:

- 4 statelets were extinguished
- 2 attacks were made on the Rúng barbarians
- Relief of Sying when attacked by Dí barbarians
- 1 incident where Chí officers occupying Swéi are killed by the people
- 1 victory in a battle on Chí territory with the medium-sized state of Wèi

I would comment: If Gwán Júng had done what the Gwándž says he did, Chí would have had a military edge over her neighbors. Obviously, it had no such edge. Nor did that edge appear after Hwán-gung’s reign. In that period, Chí 6 times attacked the small state of Jyw, but without success. It 18 times attacked the medium state of Lú, but without result. Chí did take a Lú border town as a residence for the exiled Lú ruler Jáu-gung, but returned it after Jáu-gung had died. Later, Chí took two towns from Lú, but soon returned them. This is not the record of a great military power.

So, the Gwándž story proves to be a myth. Why was it invented?

For one thing, it is a self-serving myth. The early 4th century Dzwó Jwán writers, who portray Gwán Júng as a kindly advisor, themselves recommended kindly policy toward other states. The later 4th century Gwándž experts were advising the current ruler of Chí precisely on ways to organize his state to use human and natural resources more efficiently. To show that these things had been done earlier tended to give force to their recommendations.

As for the new mass army, its real birth was also in the 4th century, and also in Chí. The art of leading that kind of army is found in the 4th century Sündž, a text associated with Sün Bin. It was Sün Bin who had been chief of staff at the Battle of Mâ-líng in 0343. In that battle, the Chí army defeated the Ngwèi army, in the enemy’s territory. This achievement so encouraged the Chí ruler that in the next year he took for himself the Jóu title King.

If the logistics, the bureaucratic support, and the field tactics, of the mass army had been worked out 300 years earlier, and in Chí, there would have been no need to do it all over again, in the same state, in the 4th century. The claim that it WAS done earlier is a backward projection of the 4th century reality.

The claim that new ideas had precedents in the past was a common rhetorical strategy in the Warring States period. The Myth of Chí strengthening in the 7th century turns out to be merely one more example of that strategy.
II. FACT

Looking at the Chūn/Chıyōu has been useful to dispel the myth of 7th century state strengthening. We might then read it to see what WAS going on in Spring and Autumn. For an overview of military potential in the period, I refer to my article, Military Capacity in Spring and Autumn, which is listed at the end of the handout. It shows what the old elite chariot force could and could not do. That force was weaker, but also more mobile, than the heavy infantry army of the later Warring States period. That difference affected the conduct of all Spring and Autumn battles. By following the Chūn/Chıyōu, we can to a considerable extent appreciate the tactics of those armies, and the strategies of their rulers. They were different in many ways from what we read in such 4th century texts as the Dzwō Jwān or the Sündž.

Beside these general points, there is a matter of special interest which is my subject for the rest of this paper. This is not the domination of the Bā or Hegemon. As I have shown in another article, this too is a myth of the Dzwō Jwān, or more exactly, three successive myths of the Dzwō Jwàn. I will focus instead on a series of 16 covenants or mvng, which are distinguished in the Chūn/Chıyōu by the special name tung-mvng. What is a tung-mvng?

The commentators have little to say. The Dzwō Jwān explains it as “those with whom a ruler had made a covenant” (1/1:5). The later Gungyang says that those making the covenant “had a common desire” (3:16:4), but that could be said of any covenant. The still later Gulyang says that they “had a common purpose to honor Jōu.” The real purpose of the tung-mvng covenants is clear from the military history of the period: it was to join in resisting the southern state of Chū. From early in Spring and Autumn, Chū had sought to drive a wedge between the states in the Yellow River Valley, and to reach the River itself, by taking Jvng, which lay between the eastern and western states. No one northern state was strong enough to resist Chū. Their only hope was to combine forces.

It was by combining forces against a Chū invasion of the north in 0632, that Jīn, Chūn, and Chí were together able to inflict a major defeat on Chū at the famous Battle of Ch’ungpu. The defeat was so severe that the Chū leader was executed on his return home, and for 8 years thereafter, Chū attempted no military enterprise outside its own borders. But Chū was only stopped for a time. It later returned to the attack, and the problem which Chū posed for the north thus continued. The tùng-mvng were one way that this ongoing problem was dealt with.

For some details of the 16 tùng-mvng, see the summary in Handout #2; a full account is available in my article, The League of the North. It is notable that the tùng-mvng were not used for the greatest successes of the northern states: the invasion of Chū under Chí Hwān-gŭng in 0656, or the defeat of Chū in the north under Jīn W’ren-gṳng in 0632. The tùng-mvng became effective later on, when they were revived under Jīn leadership, after those two leaders were dead. They were a sort of substitute for the charismatic leadership of able figures. Finally, in 0546, a peace agreement was made with Chū. To be sure, Chí did once return to the attack, but restored up the two border states it had conquered when forced to do so by the last of the tùng-mvng, in 0529. With that last tùng-mvng, what had begun as a military agreement achieved a certain diplomatic power.

III. CONCLUSION

First, I should emphasize that the tùng-mvng are unusual. The typical Spring and Autumn covenant was an agreement to join in attacking another state, but once that was done, the covenant had achieved its purpose. Nothing remained. No permanent alliances were made between states during the entire Spring and Autumn period. Only in the tùng-mvng was there a sense of an ongoing need, a collective security interest which could at least briefly override the desire of each state to conquer its neighbor.

Is there a moral to this tale? As for the implication of the Spring and Autumn diplomatic facts with which I have tried to acquaint you, the political scientists are in the best position to say, and I will leave that task to them.

In terms of historical method, I think it is obvious that contemporary sources are better than later histories, as evidence for past realities. But though it may be obvious, it may need to be repeated from time to time. That point is my final conclusion. The Dzwō Jwān has long been the preferred source for Spring and Autumn. It is easily shown to be fallible in that role, however enjoyable the stories in it may be as fiction.

The real history of the Spring and Autumn period is available to us through the contemporary Chūn/Chıyōu, along with inscriptions and archaeological evidence. That history is available to anyone who cares to approach it from those sources. The field at present is not crowded, and I would like to point out that it offers many exciting opportunities for new investigation.