

4.12 THE SPRING AND AUTUMN ANNALS

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is, basically, the court chronicle of the Zhou Dynasty state of Lu, from 722 B.C. to 481 B.C. It is brief, not very informative, and inconsistent in its choice of events to note. A typical entry might read, “Autumn; eighth month; locusts.” The chronicles recount happenings in the state of Lu, and in other states as reported to Lu. Years are arranged according to the reigns of the various dukes of Lu. The chronicle begins in the first year of the reign of Duke Yin, and ends abruptly in the fourteenth year of the reign of Duke Ai.

The *Annals* is one of the foremost classics of the Confucian tradition, and the most fundamental split in Confucian ideology, occurring during the second century A.D., focused on differing interpretations of the *Annals*.

Why?

At a very early date, prior to the composition of the *Mencius*, c. 300 B.C., the tradition arose that the *Annals* had at some time fallen into the hands of Confucius who modestly edited them to bring out their “meaning.” An understanding of the editorial process, it was claimed, could reveal to readers the most profound wisdom pertaining to government and history. Mencius said that when Confucius edited the *Annals*, “corrupt ministers and lawless sons were in terror”: their iniquity had been revealed.

The likelihood of this being true is infinitesimally small. But an oral commentary tradition arose which made every effort to reveal the subtle editorial process which Confucius had used and extract from the chronicles the Sage’s message. Two major branches of the tradition had developed by the early Han: the commentary tradition of “Mr. Guliang” and that of “Mr. Gongyang.” The two are very much alike.

A third commentary, the commentary of Mr. Zuo, did not try to tease ethical meanings out of the text of the chronicle, but simply expanded, at great length, upon the history behind the *Annals*. This is the *Zuo zhuan*, a text we frequently encountered during our survey of Spring and Autumn China. Because the Zuo commentary did not become important as a classical tradition until the mid-Han, we will not discuss it here. The Guliang, while already a significant tradition in the early Han, did not receive state sponsorship until much later, and we know much less about it. In our discussion of Han Dynasty *Annals* classicism, we will consider only the Gongyang tradition. Dong Zhongshu was one of the principal masters of the Gongyang school.

The *Annals* is an “empty text”; there are not subtle meanings in the chronicle. But in the conviction that meaning did exist, Gongyang commentators during the Han developed arcane interpretive techniques which allowed them to read into the text a revolutionary doctrine. The essence of that doctrine was that kings and emperors ruled by no divine right of inheritance, but solely on the basis of their virtue. If their virtue were insufficient, they had no right of rule, regardless of whether or not they managed to hold onto power. This message is in sharp contrast

to the notion that Han Confucians all celebrated unqualifiedly the rule of the Han kings. The New Text tradition was, in fact, anti-Imperial, endorsing *only* Sage Kings: it is no wonder it went underground.

The Gongyang commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* has come down to us in an edition dating from the mid-second century A.D. It includes three levels of text: the annals, the commentary of Mr. Gongyang (supposedly dating from the third century B.C. and certainly not later than the early second century B.C.), and the sub-commentary of one He Xiu, a disciple of the Gongyang tradition who died c. A.D. 175.

He Xiu wrote his subcommentary, or notes, at a time when the Gongyang tradition was still alive in its original form, and his notes pass on the lessons taught him by his teachers--the Gongyang was still an oral tradition. Thus all three levels tell us about the doctrine read into this “empty text” in its heyday. Although He Xiu includes a number of passages praising the wisdom of the Han kings in the highest terms – and even says that Confucius edited the text expressly for their use, foreknowing, as Sages do, precisely what was going to happen for centuries after his death – the imperial message of the text comes through quite clearly.

In order to align the vacuity of the text with their belief that coded within it there lay the greatest wisdom, Han scholars developed hermeneutic strategies for interpreting this text that are more fascinating in their bizarre features than is the case with any other textual tradition. Because of their complexity, however, we cannot delve into them here. Instead, we will focus solely on the issue of the anti-imperial nature of the text, and the passages selected below reflect this single focus (although some of the flavor of this esoteric tradition should come through). What we see here serves to reinforce the Sui Meng story that we discussed earlier, and is another reflection of the tension that existed between Han Confucianism and the hereditary autocracy that it served.

In the following pages, a number of passages are translated. The original text of the *Annals* appears in **BOLD CAPITALS**, Mr. Gongyang’s remarks are in a **less oracular bold script**. He Xiu’s subcommentary is *lightly printed*.

For the record, the translations given do not indicate omitted phrases and passages, and are somewhat free in order to minimize confusions caused by the commentary’s highly technical exegetical (interpretive) methods. They represent about one percent of the total text.

Selections from the Gongyang Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals

[From Duke Yin, First Year (722)]

PRIMAL YEAR. SPRING. KING’S RECTIFIED MONTH.

- What does “primal year” mean?
- It means the beginning year of a ruler’s reign.

The Annals changes “first” to “original.” The “origin” is material force (qi): arising without form, taking shape in division, creating heaven and earth: it is the beginning of heaven and earth. The commentary speaks of the “ruler” and not of the “duke.” The rightful king, as well as the various feudal lords, were all called “rulers,” thus the meaning is extended to the king. Only the rightful king may declare a new “original year.” The Annals as an editorial principle, treats the rulers of Lu as though they were the New King receiving the Mandate of Heaven. Thus, here it makes clear that they nurture and bring to completion the world of things.

- **What does “spring” signify?**
- **The beginning of the year.**
- **To whom does “king” refer?**
- **To King Wen.**
- **Why does it first say “king” and then say “rectified month?”**
- **The king rectifies the calendar.**
- **What is meant by saying “king’s rectified month?”**
- **The great unification.**

“Unification” means “beginning.” When the King first receives the Mandate, he revises the policies of government and spreads his teaching throughout the world. From the feudal rulers to the common people, from the mountains and rivers to the grasses, trees, and insects, none are not one by one threaded to the rectified year.

- **Why is there no mention of the Duke’s acceding to the throne?**
- **This completes the idea of the Duke when he took the throne.**
- **How does it do so?**
- **Duke Yin intended to bring peace to the state and then turn the throne over to his brother, the future Duke Huan.**
- **Why turn it over to Duke Huan?**
- **Huan was younger, but his status in the line for succession was higher; Yin was older but had lower status [and so no legitimate claim to the throne]. Their relative status had not been made clear, and none among the people of Lu [outside the inner circle of the court] knew it. Yin was both older and wiser, and the great families of the state induced him to accept the throne.**

The heir apparent to the Son of Heaven is like a common knight. “There are in the world none who are born to high rank.”

NOTE: This passage illustrates the tortured interpretive logic of the commentary and sub-commentary. There is not the least evidence that Duke Yin of Lu ever intended to act as the commentary indicates. The key lies in the phrase: “The *Annals* treats the rulers of Lu as though they were the New King receiving the Mandate of Heaven.” Confucius’ editing is supposed to reveal in descriptions of the Lu ruling house the key elements of the ethical ideal of the Sage King. Yin is supposed to have the intention of ceding the throne because Sage

Kings, such as Yao and Shun, take cession of the throne as a principle of ethical action. Note especially He Xiu's final remark above, which significantly modifies the original commentary (he cites a line from the *Records of Ritual*, a different Confucian classic.) According to it, *no* son of the preceding Duke had any prior claim on the throne of the Lu state, as a matter of principle. Yin presumably had a claim because he was "wise," and the selection of the great families of the state.

The next passage is also selected from the first year of Duke Yin's reign (722).

AUTUMN, SEVENTH MONTH. THE KING UNDER HEAVEN DISPATCHED HIS MINISTER XUAN TO COME RETURN TO THE LATE DUKE HUI AND HIS DUCHESS ZHONGZI GRAVE GIFTS.

The use of the word "return" indicates approval that it should be so. That which heaven and earth give birth to cannot be the property of a single family: those who have and who have not should be interchangeable.

NOTE: Kings rule the Empire, but they and their families do not own the Empire.

[From Duke Yin, Third Year (720)]

SUMMER, FOURTH MONTH. ON THE DAY XIN-MAO MR. YIN DIED.

- Who is meant by "Mr. Yin?"
- A grandee under the direct command of the Son of Heaven.
- Why is he called "Mr." Yin?
- To disparage him.
- Why disparage him?
- To deprecate his passing of the office of High Minister to his son. Hereditary accession to the office of High Minister is a violation of ritual *li*.

[From Duke Wen, Eighteenth Year (609)]

WINTER. TENTH MONTH. THE STATE OF LU ASSASSINATED ITS RULER SHUQI.

- What is meant by "the state of Lu assassinated?"
- By saying "the state" killed him, it indicates that the people killed him.

One person killed the ruler, but all in the state were happy. Thus the Annals speaks of the state as the assassin to reveal that the ruler had lost his people and should properly have been cut off...

[From Duke Xuan, Fifteenth Year (594)]

WINTER. LOCUSTS AROSE.

- The text has never before noted the advent of locusts, why does it do so here?
- The advent of locusts is not a thing recorded in the *Annals*.
- Then why does it record it here?
- To indicate it was a lucky thing.
- Wherein was it lucky?
- The ruler altered what was old and changed what was constant; in response to this there was a disaster of nature.

The ruler refers to Duke Xuan, who altered the ancient and established system of the public field, and assessed taxes on the basis of acreage. This means that after the famine brought on by this disaster, Xuan awoke to his error and realized that he should return to the old system in time for the next year's harvest. In that winter there was a great harvest.

NOTE: The tax reform of 594 in Lu is discussed in the reading "The Economy of Early China."

-- Passages concerning the royal succession dispute of 520 B.C.

NOTE: The *Annals* recorded a progression of facts concerning a messy struggle for the figurehead Zhou throne. They are included here because the commentary treatment of the records reinforces the anti-hereditary message of the text.

[From Duke Zhao, Twenty-second Year (520)]

SUMMER. FOURTH MONTH. ON THE DAY *YI-CHOU* THE KING UNDER HEAVEN DIED. SIXTH MONTH. SHU-YANG WENT TO THE CAPITAL. KING JING WAS INTERRED. THE ROYAL HOUSE WAS IN CHAOS.

This refers to the affair of the king Meng.

NOTE: Meng was the heir apparent to the late King Jing. Before his death, the king had hoped to designate another son, Chao, as heir, but this had not been accomplished. As a result, upon King Jing's death fighting broke out between factions supporting Meng and Chao. Both were young, and pawns of their supporters. Meng was supported by the Viscounts of Liu and Shan, Chao by the house of Yin, successors to the "Mr. Yin" encountered earlier.

THE VISCOUNT OF LIU AND THE VISCOUNT OF SHAN ENCAMPED AT HUANG WITH THE KING MENG.

- Why is he called, “the king Meng?”
- He was in fact ruling the state.

AUTUMN. THE VISCOUNTS OF LIU AND CHAN INVADED THE ROYAL CITY, LEADING WITH THEM THE KING MENG.

- What is meant by “the royal city?”
- The western capital of the Zhou.
- Why is the word “invaded” used?
- It is a word denoting usurpation.

WINTER, TENTH MONTH. THE KING’S SON MENG DIED.

- **He was a ruler who had not yet begun a new year** (i.e. been properly installed in office and decreed a calendar--becoming, thus, worthy of having his death recorded in the chronicles). **Why does the text record his death?**
- **It does not approve of his having ruled. Its disapproval is a disapproval of sons succeeding to the offices of their fathers, and younger brothers succeeding to the offices of their elder brothers.**

[From Duke Zhao, Twenty-third Year (519)]

AUTUMN. THE KING UNDER HEAVEN (i.e. Chao) WAS ENCAMPED AT DICHUAN.

- **The required three year period for accession to the throne had not passed; why is he called “King under Heaven?”**
- **To show there was a Son of Heaven.**

At the time, the various sons were all competing to usurp the throne. The King under Heaven had lost his position and been forced to encamp elsewhere. How weak he was! Thus the Annals is anxious to clarify his proper title and make evident the fact that the lords of the empire should have come to his aid.

MR. YIN SET THE KING’S SON CHAO ON THE THRONE.

The term “Mr. Yin” is used to disparage him, showing that his power derived from treating the office of High Minister as hereditary. Mr. Yin is disparaged, but not the king’s son Chao (the new King). The latter was not yet ten years old, and did not know that one should not assume a position on the basis of desire for wealth and high rank. The Annals shows that the crime lay with Mr. Yin.