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The Three Dimensions of *Shi* 時 in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳

— Nature, Governance, and Morality

摘要

先秦時代「時」的思想，普遍流行，從農耕時代衍生的自然尊崇與信仰，漸漸轉變成為具有多面向性的哲學思想。近代研究，多從先秦時代整體看待「時」的哲學，而從《左傳》視角做專門研究者，仍在少數。本文在前賢基礎上，冀更加注意於《左傳》透露的細節，彌補前人未注意到的部分，從人與自然、政府與人民、功利與道德三個維度入手，探索「時」的意涵及時代特色。從而發現，在政府與人民的層面上，除了往往被人們所留意的「使民以時」的思想，《左傳》同樣推崇「順時養民」的邏輯，而後者更體現了民主思想的雛形。在功利與道德層面，我們發現「時」被用於追求事功，同時亦發現它作用於人內在德性的理想與追求。這些面向，或可對於吾人了解先秦之「時」有所裨益。

Forewords

Shi 時 was a frequent concept in the pre-Qin 先秦 period. The origin of this character could be dated back to the Eastern Zhou dynasty 東周 (770-256 BCE) when it was written as 𠂔, and the form of 時 originated from it.¹ It originally meant 'the four seasons' (*sishi* 四時), which was closely related to the agricultural background of ancient China when people's harvest was greatly dependent upon climate change.² Afterwards, its meaning was expanded to 'situation' (*shishi* 時勢) and 'the right moment' (*shiji* 時機).³ Later, Confucius and Mencius integrated *shi* into the idea of *yi* 義 (righteousness), *zhong* 中 ('the middle way'),⁴ becoming a central term in pre-Qin philosophies.

In *Zuozhuan* 左傳, one of the Confucian Thirteen Classics 十三經, *shi* appears about a

¹ Chen Jian 陳劍, 'Shuo shi' 說時, *Rao Zongyi guoxueyuan yuankan* 饒宗頤國學院院刊, 4 (2017), p. 2.

² Zhang Ting 章婷 says, '中國古代社會是農業社會，由於農業生產同一年四季的氣候等自然條件密切相關，先民就在農業生產的實踐中漸漸形成了「時」的概念。' Zhang Ting 章婷, 'Zhongguo shi guannian de yuyan waixian yu zhexue zhi si' 中國「時」觀念的語言外顯與哲學之思, *Jiangsu shehui kexue* 江蘇社會科學, 1 (2007), p. 218.

³ See Zhang Ting, 'Zhongguo shi guannian de yuyan waixian yu zhexue zhi si', p. 219.

⁴ See Tan Degui 譚德貴 and Xin Yamin 辛亞民, 'Xianqin rujia shi sixiang tanxi' 先秦儒家「時」思想探析, *Dongyue luncong* 東嶽論叢, 42.10 (2021), pp. 131-136.

hundred times.⁵ Among these, there are daily uses or names of places, which does not have philosophical implications, such as *gua shi er wang* 瓜時而往 (departing at the time when melons were ripe) and *gong hui zhengbo yu shilai* 公會鄭伯于時來 (The King met the King of the Zheng at Shilai). Apart from uses as the above, *shi* mostly reflects the ideology and philosophy of *Zuozhuan* and people at that time. Previous scholars have paid much attention to the idea of *shi* in the pre-Qin time as a whole, but analysis of it within the particular range of *Zuozhuan* is much less. Wu Boqun 吳博群 and Chen Yonghong 陳永宏 gave special attention to this topic and carried out an insightful review of the different aspects of *shi*: people's obedience to climate change, the act of 'using the people according to the seasons' (*shi min yi shi* 使民以時) of the government, and the combination of *shi* with morality and propriety.⁶ However, there are still some aspects that can be further recognized. For example, apart from 'using the people according to the seasons', *Zuozhuan* also shows the idea of 'following the seasons to nurture the people' (*shun shi yang min* 順時養民), reflecting the ideal relationship between the leaders and their people. Furthermore, *Zuozhuan* shows that the ancients gave great importance to 'acting on the right moment' in political affairs, which mainly is a matter of *shiji* 時機. However, it also stresses the 'timeliness' of one's emotions and acts from the angle of ethics and morality, the relation of which is worthy of further exploration. Therefore, this essay will cover the above matters and analyse the idea of *shi* from three relationships: human beings and nature, the government and the people, and interests and morality.

Between human beings and nature

Records of unusual climates and natural phenomena constitute a special part of *Chunqiu* 春秋. For example, in the fifth year of King Yin 隱公, there is a one-character record of *ming* 螟 (snout moth's larvae).⁷ This is not a description of a kind of insects, but a record of a plague, just as Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 says, 'The larvae became a plague, and thus it is recorded.'⁸ In the ninth year of the King Yin, another record goes:

⁵ The edition relied on is: Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, 4th edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016).

⁶ Wu Boqun 吳博群 and Chen Yonghong 陳永宏, 'Zuozhuan zhong shi de sixiang neihan' 左傳中「時」的思想內涵, *Baicheng shifan xueyuan xuebao* 白城師範學院學報, 33.9 (2019), pp. 62-65.

⁷ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 44.

⁸ Yang says, '螟害成災，故書。' Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 44.

In the third month, on the day of *guiyou*, there was heavy rain, with thunder and lightning. On the day of *gengchen*, snow heavily falls.

三月，癸酉，大雨，震電。庚辰，大雨雪。⁹

This is not a record of the usual climate. According to *Zuozhuan*, the rain, thunder and lightning, and snow lasted not only within one day but for many days. And the date recorded is just the start date of them (*shu shi ye* 書始也).¹⁰ These are two examples of the records of unusual natural phenomena in *Chunqiu* and *Zuozhuan*, but the question would be: why it keeps records for these non-political things? There are mainly two reasons. The first one is ancient China as an agricultural society. People's food relied on climate and seasons too much to influence the power of the states. The other reason is that during the Zhou dynasty, people had a belief that natural phenomena had some relation to or inspiration for the human world including political things.

'Following the seasons' is highly emphasized by people as recorded in *Zuozhuan*. In the seventh year of the King Zhao 昭公, Shi Wenbo 士文伯 says,

Thus, governance allows no carelessness. It is nothing more than three things. One is promoting the right person. The second is following the will of the people. The third is obeying the four seasons.

故政不可不慎也。務三而已：一曰擇人，二曰因民，三曰從時。¹¹

Du Yu 杜預 explains 'obeying the four seasons' as 'following what should be done according to the four seasons' (*shun sishi zhi suo wu* 順四時之所務).¹² In the sixth year of King Huan 桓公, Ji Liang 季梁 said to the King Wu of the Chu 楚武王,

Ensure farming during the three seasons, construct the five educations, and get along with the nine generations, to offer sacrifices to gods or ancestors.

務其三時，脩其五教，親其九族，以致其禋祀。¹³

From these two dialogues, we see the importance of 'following the seasons' at that time. People had an ideal to do things according to nature so that they could get good results.

⁹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 68.

¹⁰ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 68.

¹¹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1427.

¹² Du Yu 杜預, Kong Yingda 孔穎達 and others, *Zuozhuan zhengyi* 左傳正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), p. 1242.

¹³ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 121.

They also wished that everything in nature could work in its usual way. Otherwise, an unusual climate could cause severe problems with food, just as Bozong 伯宗 says in the fifteenth year of the King Xuan 宣公, 'If the *tian* goes against the seasons, there will be a disaster (*tian fan shi wei zai* 天反時爲災).'¹⁴

Another thing worthy of notice is that there was a wide belief in the time of Chunqiu that natural phenomena were not something random, but has some relationship with human affairs. For example, in the seventh year of King Zhao, there was an eclipse of the sun. *Zuozhuan* records:

The King of the Jin asked Shi Wenbo, 'Who is going to bear the punishment (of the eclipse)?' Wenbo answered, 'The Lu and the Wei will bear it. Wei will bear more, and Lu will bear less.' The King asked for the reason. Wenbo said, 'It left the region of Wei and entered the region of Lu. From then it brought disaster, and Lu indeed will bear it. The most severe punishment will be on the king of Wei, and Lu will lose its highest minister... If a country has poor governance and does not appoint good people, it will bring about the punishment of the sun and the moon. Thus, governance allows no carelessness.

晉侯問於士文伯曰：「誰將當日食？」對曰：「魯、衛惡之。衛大，魯小。」公曰：「何故？」對曰：「去衛地如魯地，於是有災，魯實受之。其大咎其衛君乎？魯將上卿。……國無政，不用善，則自取譴于日月之災，故政不可不慎也。」¹⁵

From this, we see that in pre-Qin belief, the move of nature was closely linked to human affairs. Unusual climate or natural phenomena meant punishment for them, and on the other side, people could get rid of these disasters by doing good. In other words, people not only should follow *shi*, the seasons but also should carry out good and moral governance, so that a nation could bring peace and keep nature running in its regular way.

Between government and the people

Confucius says in *The Analects* 'to employ the people in the proper season' (*shi min yi shi* 使民以時).¹⁶ The *shi* here also refers to 'the right season'. This is to maintain the regular farming and harvest of the people and protect them from being exhausted by frequent taxes and labour ordered by the government. In *Zuozhuan*, many texts reflect this idea. Firstly, *Chunqiu* keeps records of labour carried out in improper times and seasons. For example, in

¹⁴ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 833.

¹⁵ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, pp. 1426-1427.

¹⁶ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 49.

the seventh year of the King Yin 隱公, there is a record:

In the summer, Zhongqiu was fortified. It is recorded because it was not a proper season.

夏，城中丘。書，不時也。¹⁷

Yang Bojun's explanation for *bushi* 不時 is short yet clear:

What it means by *bushi* is that it was not urgent for national defence, but disturbed farming.

不時者，謂非既國防之所急，而又妨害農功。¹⁸

We can find many records of improper labour like the above in *Chunqiu*. In the ninth year of the King Yin, the fortification of Lang 郎 was recorded for an improper season¹⁹, the building of the Yan Stable 延廡 in the twenty-ninth of the King Zhuang 莊公²⁰, the construction of the South Gate 南門 in the twentieth of the King Xi 僖公²¹, the making of the Deer Farm 鹿囿 in the eighteenth of the King Cheng 成公²², and the fortification of Qi 漆 in the fifteenth of the King Ding 定公²³. On the other hand, *Chunqiu* also makes records for those labour carried out in proper seasons which were especially worthy of praise. For example, the fortification of Xiang 向 in the sixteenth of King Huan is recorded in *Chunqiu*, and *Zuozhuan* says that it is because it was carried out in the proper season.²⁴ The idea of 'employing the people in proper season' not only exists in the above records but is also directly expressed by some kings and ministers. When the King Dao of the Jin 晉悼公 got to the throne, he made an order for his ministers and officials, in which he told them to 'employ the people according to proper seasons' (*shi yong min* 時用民) and 'wish not to offence farming seasons' (*yu wu fan shi* 欲無犯時).²⁵ In another case, Shi Kuang 師曠 said to the King of Jin,

Raising labour in improper time has led to grudges and complaints among people.

¹⁷ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 58.

¹⁹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 70.

²⁰ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 265.

²¹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 422.

²² Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1000.

²³ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1787.

²⁴ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 157.

²⁵ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 995.

作事不時，怨讟動于民。²⁶

From these above, we can see that the idea of ‘employing the people according to proper seasons’ had been common knowledge among the leaders in the Eastern Zhou dynasty, although some leaders did not completely follow it in knowing it.

The practice of ‘employing the people in the proper season’, from one angle, is to preserve the labour and will of the people, so that they could better contribute to the nation. This, in other words, is to some extent government-centred. But in *Zuozhuan*, it also shows a people-centred idea between government and the people about the idea of *shi*. That is, in one phrase, ‘act according to proper seasons to nurture the people’ (*shun shi yi yang min* 順時以養民). *Zuozhuan* says,

Intercalary is used to correct the time. Time is the basis of working. Working is the way to nurture people’s life. The principle of nurturing the people lies here. Not announcing the first day (of the lunar month) to the gods means the abandonment of policies related to the seasons. How could a nation then better serve its people?

閏以正時，時以作事，事以厚生，生民之道，於是乎在矣。不告閏朔，棄時政也，何以爲民？²⁷

This shows the ideal of the writer of *Zuozhuan*, which is that a government follows the seasons to nurture the people. In this context, the relationship between the government and its people is not only ‘employing’, but ‘taking care of’ them. This also to some extent reflects the idea of *minben* 民本 (people-oriented thought). We can also find this in Shenshu Shi’s 申叔時 words to Zifan 子反:

Kindness helps charity, laws help to rectify the wicked, sincerity helps to serve the spirits, righteousness helps to generate benefits, propriety helps to follow the flow of seasons, and faithfulness helps to maintain things. When people’s living is ample, they will have integrity. When benefits are generated, things will be run in the proper route. When the proper season is obeyed, things will be well produced.

德以施惠，刑以正邪，詳以事神，義以建利，禮以順時，信以守物。民生厚而德正，用利而事節，時順而物成。²⁸

From this, we can also see the ideal of ‘nurturing the people’ by following the proper

²⁶ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1441.

²⁷ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1441.

²⁸ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 963.

seasons.

Between interests and morality

Shi also means ‘the right moment’, which refers to the best time to act to gain the result. In the history of *Zuozhuan*, we can find ancient Chinese people’s emphasis on ‘the right moment’, especially in wars and diplomatic actions. *Zuozhuan* praises the King Zhuang of the Zheng 鄭莊公:

He estimated his moral strength in his decision and judged his material strength in his actions. He acted according to the right moment, not leaving trouble for his later generation.

度德而處之，量力而行之，相時而動，無累後人。²⁹

In other records, Guan Zhong 管仲 says,

Not offending the father of oneself is propriety. Following orders and being careful about the right time to act is trustworthiness. No sin would be greater than disobeying these two principles,

子父不奸之謂禮，守命共時之謂信。違此二者，姦莫大焉。³⁰

From these, we can find that ‘acting at the right moment’ was seen with great importance. Not acting at the right moment or disobeying the right moment might lead to great mistakes. Shenshu Shi once blamed the King of the Chu, saying,

He disobeyed what he said, act against what is the right time, and exhausts his people in fulfilling his desire.

食話言，奸時以動，而疲民以逞。³¹

Therefore, to achieve success, a leader must be able to wait for and act at the right moment. Han Xianzi 韓獻子 says,

Emperor Wen led the rebels of the Yin dynasty to serve Emperor Zhou, this is because he knew what was the right time.

²⁹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 82.

³⁰ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 347.

³¹ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 964.

文王帥殷之叛國，以事紂，唯知時也。³²

When the King of Jin asked Zhongxing Xianzi 中行獻子 about whether he could launch a war on the Wei State, Xianzi says,

Not as good as following the situation and helping to settle it in peace. The Wei has already had its king. We might not gain what we want by fighting it... You, my King, should settle it down and wait for the right time!

不如因而定之。衛有君矣，伐之，未可以得志，……君其定衛以待時乎！³³

The intention of Jin is to gain benefit by fighting the Wei, but Xianzi found it was not the right time, and told the king to wait, and help the Wei to settle down at that moment. This shows the strategy used between national diplomacy and the use of the idea of 'time'. Only at the right time, could a nation get its ideal results.

On the other hand, in the opposite to the above manoeuvre used in gaining profits, we can also find the link between *shi* and morality in *Zuozhuan*. In the twentieth of the King Zhuang of the Lu 魯莊公, the King of the Zheng 鄭伯 had a war with the Imperial Zhou. However, the son of the Emperor still played music happily. The King of the Zheng says, 'If one feels sorrow or happy at the wrong time, calamity will come (*ai le shi shi zai jiu bi zhi* 哀樂失時，殃咎必至).'³⁴ In this context, the *shi* is closely linked with propriety (*li* 禮). Human beings have a natural affection for parents. When a person does not feel sad, but still indulges in entertainment, this is against the nature of humans, and thus is not moral. Therefore, in this context, *Zuozhuan* not only tells people to do according to the right time but to constrain one's emotions according to different situations. In another record, Jin heard that the troop of Chu was coming:

Dong Shu said, 'The route of Jupiter is at the north-west. The south troop (the Chu) is not acting at the right time. They could not get what they want.' Shu Xiang said, 'It depends on their king's virtue.'

董叔曰：「天道多在西北，南師不時，必無功。」叔向曰：「在其君之德也。」³⁵

Dong Shu's words are from the angle of astrology, asserting that it was the wrong time for the Chu, but what Shu Xiang says is from the angle of morality. It is as Wu Boqun 吳博群

³² Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 1022.

³³ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, pp. 1120-1121.

³⁴ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, p. 234.

³⁵ Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu*, pp. 1147-1148.

and Chen Yonghong 陳永宏 say,

In terms of the thought of *shiji* 時機 (the right moment of action), people in the Spring and Autumn Period turns from the simple belief and obedience of *shi* to the attention to morality.³⁶

This shows the turning of pre-Qin thought about *shi*, from mystery to morality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by exploring the thought of *shi* in *Zuozhuan*, we have found these below:

Firstly, the thought of *shi* comes from the agricultural background of ancient China, where people relied much on the regular running of nature and the four seasons. People not only thought to follow the running of the seasons but also believe in the link between people's actions and the running of nature.

Secondly, in terms of the relationship between government and people, the thought of *shi* existed in two layers. One is 'employing the people in proper season', which is more of a government-centred thought. The other is 'following the season to nurture the people'. This was the embryo of people-centred thought.

Thirdly, ancient people in the time of the Spring and Autumn Period noticed the importance of catching the right moment to act to maximize what they wanted. However, at the same time, there was an inward logic behind it, that is morality. In the value system of *Zuozhuan*, people were supposed to control their emotions and actions according to what should be done at that moment, so that they could be following propriety and morality.

³⁶ Wu and Chen's original text: '在時機意識層面，春秋時期由對「時」簡單樸素的崇拜與遵循，轉為對「德」的高度關注，此前合時順時的單一思維方式至此已經開始向立體邏輯的趨勢發展。' Wu Boqun and Chen Yonghong, 'Zuozhuan zhong shi de sixiang neihan', p. 65.

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