

Assignment one

G S Dite

Assessment Component 1 – 30%

2500 word critical analysis of a text or artifact related to the period of study.

"Does the Zuozhuan support the thesis of the ritual origins of the Warring States?"

This analysis will focus on the Zuozhuan text as primarily read from the translation and commentary by Durrant et. al. (2016). I will use the spelling used by Durrant et. al., that is the compound noun Zuozhuan, rather than other commonly used variations such as Zuo Zhuan. For ease and consistency, any references made to the Zuozhuan will be taken from their place within Durrant et. al. (2016).

Initial introductions of both texts will be followed by an analysis of how they relate to the essay title question, that is whether it supports Lewis' thesis of the ritual origins of the Warring States (1997)., concluding with the author's thoughts.

Zuozhuan

The Zuozhuan (Commentary of Zuo) is traditionally attributed to Zuo Qiuming, however it is commonly understood to be a complex blend from multiple contributors. At its core however it has come together in the form of a detailed commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu), the historical chronicle of the state of Lu, attributed to Confucius. One of the five Confucian classics used for official imperial education, it is one of the earliest and most significant works of Chinese historiography and literature (Durrant et al., 2016, pp. XVII–XXI). It is derived around a core of official court records which record the season as well as the year and month, hence the "spring and autumn" (Chunqiu) name (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XXI). At least one event, with few exceptions, is registered for each season for 242 years that were included, thus providing a chronologically comprehensive historical text from the period.

The importance of the text can be illustrated from the Mencius, a text written two hundred years after Confucius death, claiming Confucius said, "Those who understand me will do so only through the Annals." (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XXIZZ). This provides no testament to the reliability of the text however illustrates the importance of the text to Chinese history, being partly produced and associated with Confucius and the ideals surrounding him, all biases included.

It is also interesting to note that the character of Confucius that has been built on by the various schools of Confucian thought and have strengthened the image as an all-knowing Omniscient Sage. Rather than, perhaps more realistically, an astute literate sage and someone exhibiting professional attitudes of his time and demonstrating fallible judgement or no judgement at other times. This is in fact how he is portrayed by Gentz in later texts such as the Lunyu and Gongyang Zhuan, dated 150-140 BCE (Gentz, 2012, pp. 60–62, 68–69).

The Zuozhuan provides a chronological account of political events, 490 instances of warfare (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XXVI), alliances, treaties, and moral dilemmas involving the states of the Zhou dynasty, thus allows for an analysis of the evolution of ritual and statecraft. Despite its multiple contributing authors and cumulative biases of

each one, it nevertheless contains a strong indication of the motives and values associated with the Zhou and those writing about it. For example, it uses precise variations on terminology, for example when describing such things as the death or defeat of various people in the text, implying a judgement valuation on each event (Durrant et. al., 2016, p. XXII). This therefore allows this essay to bring together the perceived value of these events from this kind of textual analysis. This is also recognised by Durrant et. al. in the following extract:

“We will never know for sure the balance between “how it really was” and the attitudes, rhetorical modes, and intellectual currents ascendant during the period of Zuo Zhuan’s formation, but we are on firmer ground with the latter.”(Durrant et al., 2016, p. LXXVI).

The text also serves as a lens for understanding early “Confucian” thought, as understood from Gentz’ (2012) perspective, which influenced, and likely provides a window into the prevailing opinions of the literate classes of the period. The Gongyang Zhuan specifically describes Confucius’ methods of composing the Annals. It puts emphasis on Confucius’ intentions to maintain historical accuracy as his top priority, whilst providing his opinions and commentary as subsidiary. This adds credibility to the historical accuracy of the Zuo Zhuan (Gentz, 2012, p. 64).

Archaeological assemblages found in tombs of the middle Spring and Autumn period (770-476) show a growing split between the common people and a small elite class. This is reflected in the Zuo Zhuan where there is a noticeable increasing emphasis on lineages (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XXIX), suggesting a strong general tie to historical reality.

The Zuo Zhuan begins with a passage likened by Durrant et. al. to a preface to the later text. This passage details the familial lineage and circumstances of Lord Yin’s coming to power. The very beginning of the Zuo Zhuan is thus concerned with familial lineage, a theme which continues throughout the text and will be linked later in this essay to the broader ritual framework of blending familial reverence with political authority.

Warring States thesis

Mark Edward Lewis's *Ritual Origins of Warring States* (1997) examines how ritual practices shaped and reflected the profound sociopolitical changes of the Warring States period in China (475–221 BCE) (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XII; Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Lewis argues that rituals were not just symbolic acts but essential tools for political consolidation, social cohesion, and cultural identity during this era of intense competition among states. He restricts the term “ritual” to “formalized, communicative action that relates its performer in some way to a superhuman power” (Lewis, 1997, p. 74). He presents a model of the manner which

rule through cult was progressively developed into rule through bureaucratic administration.

Referencing the *Zuozhuan*, Lewis explains how sacred vessels previously used to fix power and privilege under the early Zhou had become repurposed for fixing the written and codified powers of states that arose within the Warring States period (Lewis, 1997, p. 76). A tangible and material example like this from ritual objects provides us with an archaeologically supported trend.

One significant example Lewis discusses is the transformation of ancestral rituals (Lewis, 1997, p. 95). Traditionally centred on familial lineage, these practices were appropriated by rulers who extended them to the state level. For instance, the Shang-Zhou model of ancestral cults, originally designed exclusively for nobility, was adopted and adapted by competing states to legitimize their rule and foster loyalty among subjects, later recognized as state bureaucracy. This ritual framework allowed rulers to project themselves as paternal figures over the state, blending familial reverence with political authority.

Another example is the use of military rituals, which Lewis highlights as a key innovation during the Warring States period (Lewis, 1997, p. 94). States increasingly staged elaborate sacrificial ceremonies before battles to invoke divine favour and demonstrate their commitment to victory. The Qin state in particular, excelled at these practices, using rituals to symbolize the unity and discipline of its armies. Lewis points out that such military-focused rituals helped reinforce the centralization of power and the ideological framework necessary for effective governance.

He also offers a more nuanced and holistic view of the standard presentation of the "law vs. ritual" debate. He does this by acknowledging the distinction between the two, but explains that the legal codes were applied differently for different ranks and status. Thus he argues that this places the application of legal codes and punishments within the broader framework of ritual bestowals of rank from the ruler (Lewis, 1997, pp. 79–80), rather than a separate legalist category.

Lewis explores philosophical debates about ritual, citing the contrasting views of Confucian and Legalist thinkers. A large focus is made on the idea of "rectification of names", where Confucius makes the accurate naming of elements within the framework of rites essential for the proper application of law and punishments (Lewis, 1997, p. 86).

Through these examples, Lewis demonstrates how rituals were adapted to serve the evolving needs of the region, transforming from localised royal traditions into dynamic instruments of political and cultural innovation. This analysis underscores the central role of ritual in shaping the foundational scaffolding of state and breaks down some dogmatic categorisations that would otherwise hinder a proper view of early imperial China's evolution.

Discussion

The Zuozhuan repeatedly reinforces the centrality of ritual in governance. Its authors attribute many periods of state stability to ritual fidelity.

Early shifts such as the “Middle Western Zhou Ritual Reform” marks a shift from the early ritual world of animal motifs of sacrificial bronze vessels to more orderly and systematic ritual systems that reinforced political and social hierarchy (Durrant et al., 2016, p. XXIX). This shift appears to be replicated many times, in broader systematic scale changes as Lewis describes and also specific examples through to the Warring States period.

One localised example from the Zuozhuan, focusing on Zichan of Zheng, also helps demonstrate the need for a broader shift in one's frame of reference. Through several periods of tension, Zichan of Zheng maintains good order within his domain. This is best exemplified when he casts in metal a written penal code for his domain (Durrant et al., 2016, pp. 1403–1405). He is formalising the penal code and quite literally, solidifying it, within what Lewis (1997) would term, the ritual framework of ruler authority. This is a practical example of how the ritual framework of familial rank evolved into legal authority, formalising bureaucratic rituals throughout the state.

This is not however, according to the Zuozhuan, how some saw it at the time. A letter wrote by Shuxiang to Zheng leaders regarding this, reduced this effort in governance by Zichan, to a departure from ancestral ways:

“In the beginning I expected much from you, but now I no longer do so. Long ago the former kings consulted about matters to decide them but did not make penal codes, for they feared that the people would become contentious. When they still could not manage the people, they fenced them in with dutifulness, bound them with governance, employed them with ritual propriety, maintained them with good faith, and fostered them with nobility of spirit. They determined the correct emoluments and ranks, to encourage their obedience, and meted out strict punishments and penalties, to overawe them in their excesses. Fearing that that still was not enough, they taught them loyalty, rewarded good conduct, instructed them in their duties, employed them harmoniously, supervised them with vigilance, oversaw them with might, and judged them with rigor. Moreover, they sought superiors who were sage and principled, officials who were brilliant and discerning, elders who were loyal and trustworthy, and teachers who were kind and generous. With this, then, the people could be employed without disaster or disorder. When the people know that there is a code, they will not be in awe of their superiors. All together, they bicker, appeal to the code, and seek to achieve their goals by trying their luck. They cannot be governed.

When there was disorder in the Xia government, they created the “Punishments of Yu.”
When there was disorder in the Shang government, they created the “Punishments of Tang.”
When there was disorder in the Zhou government, they composed the “Nine Punishments.”
These three penal codes in each case arose in the dynasty's final age.

Now as chief minister in the domain of Zheng you have created fields and ditches, established an administration that is widely reviled, fixed the three statutes, and cast the penal code. Will it not be difficult to calm the people by such means? As it says in the Odes, Take the virtue of King Wen as a guide, a model, a pattern; Day by day calm the four

quarters. And as it says elsewhere, take as model King Wen, And the ten thousand realms have trust. In such an ideal case, why should there be any penal codes at all? When the people have learned how to contend over points of law, they will abandon ritual propriety and appeal to what is written. Even at chisel's tip and knife's edge they will contend. A chaotic litigiousness will flourish and bribes will circulate everywhere. Will Zheng perhaps perish at the end of your generation? I have heard that "when a domain is about to fall, its regulations are sure to proliferate." Perhaps this is what is meant?" (Durrant et al., 2016, pp. 1403–1405)

Shuxiang appears to list all the positive attributes a leader would have to not require a formal penal code, thus implying Zichan is somewhat lacking as a ruler and that such a move will fail and create dissent amongst the governed. It is perhaps worth noting that with hindsight, Shuxiang's line terminated shortly after his death, whereby Zichan's domain survived for some decades (Durrant et al., 2016, p. 1405).

Regardless however, of the efficacy of the penal codes themselves, it is important to highlight that the Zuo zhuan records the differences in perspectives at the time, of what was seen as embodying ritual propriety. Shuxiang saw this as a departure from promoting ritual propriety in governance, whereas Zichan would presumably have seen it in terms of Lewis' (1997) thesis, where he was nestling new legalist methods under a broader ritual framework of administration. With the benefit of hindsight of thousands of years of state growth, we can nevertheless see this in terms of Lewis' thesis. Whilst shifting the frame of reference when assessing ritual propriety, we can consider Zichan's methods of governance as exemplifying a growing trend of broadening ritual frameworks that employ practical administrative steps for state governance.

During the early Warring States period, there is an interesting change of the use of the term "baixing" (translated as: "many surnames" (Lewis, 1997, p. 81)/ "a hundred clan names" (Durrant et al., 2016, p. 1000)). In modern Chinese it means "common people" however when written in the Zuo zhuan, it referred to the clans of officials only. Lewis describes how this change in meaning came about, through extending surnames to the population in the process of administering the domain. The idea of the "rectification of names" and the importance placed on their proper assignment can be read from the Zuo zhuan. Following the battle of Xin Zhu, Confucius hears that the Qi commander is rewarded with ritual dignities beyond his station:

"Not long thereafter, the leaders of Wei rewarded Zhongshu Yuxi with settlements. He declined and requested instead curved frames for suspending musical instruments and the use of martingales of silken cords when he visited court. His requests were granted.

Confucius heard of this and said, "What a pity! It would have been better to give him many settlements. It is precisely ritual objects and names that cannot be granted to others, for these are the things by which a ruler governs. The right names are for bringing forth trust; trust is for guarding ritual objects; ritual objects are for embodying ritual propriety; ritual propriety is for carrying out justice; justice is for bringing benefit; benefit is for governing the people. These are the great principles of government. If these things are granted to others, it amounts to handing over government to others. Once the government is gone, then domain

and patrimony follow, and the process cannot be stopped.””(Durrant et al., 2016, pp. 711–713).

Despite the fact the leaders of Wei were at the mercy of the victor’s demands for spoil, it is still seen here by Confucius as an unfortunate departure from ritual propriety. He then lays out his sequential justification for the importance of ritual names and objects. Interestingly he also foretells a breakdown of government and a runaway effect extending to domain and patrimony, thus reinforcing the perceived existential importance placed on adherence to ritual propriety. It is again clear that those providing commentary and seeking to attribute cause and effect, saw ritual propriety as a core tenet.

Conclusion

The breakdown of ritual propriety was certainly evident and is supported throughout the Zuo zhuan. However, as Lewis does infer, this is a symptom of a growing nexus of power where familial level ritual cohesion was simply now insufficient. The same ritual principles were then transposed to a broader state level, albeit still relevant and functional. During the Warring States period many trials of various state, empire and tribal structures would’ve naturally developed, recorded or not. But what is unavoidable to note, is that the broader framework of state structure that prevailed, in evolutionary terms, is the one which was most successful. What Lewis demonstrates, is that what persisted was a structure that evidently magnified and transposed earlier Zhou ritual frameworks. Nestled within them, legalist methods and principles developed, imbued with authority from the broader, ever present ritual framework of rank and kin lineage.

Lewis’ Warring States thesis strongly reflects what the authors of the Zuo zhuan saw as the primary causes for the breakdown of order and stimulus for conflict. The Zuo zhuan attributes the cause for many events that culminate in the fragmentation of Zhou feudal networks and a transition to the Warring States, to repeatedly not adhering to ritual propriety. As opposed to perhaps elaborating on why the rites themselves were not followed. These were likely related to increasing resource utilisation, developments in military technology, and generally of a growing civilisation. With increasing need for resources comes conflict.

The focus on ritual propriety would be unsurprising if the authors writing on statecraft, were conservative in outlook. Considering their status quo was the Zhou feudal system, any breakdown of order and/or conflict in their world would automatically be accompanied by some identifiable non-adherence to ritual propriety. Simply because the Zhou system had incorporated those ritual systems to maintain that very order. Therefore, with a conservative opinion, the blame for them breaking down naturally lies externally, with dishonourable agents. Considering Lewis’ thesis and hindsight, it is perhaps more realistic to see the Zhou feudal system as no longer fit for purpose

and reluctant to change its ritual doctrine. Therefore the threshold between feudal system and state system had been met, with the accompanying conflict and reorganisation imminent.

The transition to the Warring States period was therefore perhaps not due, as the Zuo zhuan describes, to loosening of ritual propriety. But rather the breakdown and repurposing of ritual frameworks was a symptom of growth and state formation. Something that Lewis' thesis elaborates on well. It appears that any adherence to ritual propriety, at the Zhou feudal system level, would have therefore perpetuated an outdated system not fit for the growing Chinese civilisation. Lewis' interpretation has thus not wholesale invalidated the Zhou ritual frameworks as outdated, but has tracked the evolution of ritual values and systems recorded in the Zuo zhuan to later Chinese states.

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