

The Career of Sywǎndǔ 荀子

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WSWG Notes 142 (9 Sept 1997) and 197 (31 Aug 1999)

Abstract. Sywǎndǔ's life is hard to read from his works because of posthumous additions and later editorial rearrangement. I here attempt to discern a factual core.

Information Outside the Writings

Prodigy. We start with a problem in reading SJ 74. It says that Sywǎndǔ “at 50 first came to Chí as a wandering scholar” (年五十始來游學於齊, 5/2348). The 始 “first” shows that the visit was notably late, not early. 游學 is to be read in a sense analogous to 游說 “traveling persuader:” as an expert, not a student. Lyóu Syàng's 劉向 collation note (Yén 1/332f) rearranges the SJ 74 account, and adds the term syòu-tsái 秀才, not in the sense of GZ 20 (talented above one's station; Rickett 1/326; c0300), but in the Hàn sense of Jyǎ Yí 賈議 at 18 (SJ 84, 5/2491). Yǐng Shàu (Fǎng-sú Tūng, c200) later altered 五十 to 十五, completing Sywǎndǔ's transformation into a prodigy. This image has been embraced by later writers.¹ But what we know about Jì-syà suggests that it was not a teaching institution; it figures in SJ 74 as a government theory institute. And from which Jì-syà incumbent did Sywǎndǔ learn ritual (SZ 19) and music (SZ 20)? Lyóu Syàng (adding 秀才) and Yǐng Shàu (changing 伍十 to 十五) seem to advance increasingly legendary claims about Sywǎndǔ. The earlier evidence thus tells us that Sywǎndǔ came to Chí at a notably mature age, as an already seasoned scholar.

Early Years. Sywǎndǔ was from Jàu, one of three successor states of Jìn; his surname 荀² links him with a great family of Jìn. Frequent references to poverty in his writings suggest that the family in his day was not prosperous, though on the record he was able to travel. If not in Jì-syà, where did he study? His identification with the Confucius tradition suggests early study outside his native Jàu, where those teachings seem not to have taken root. Lǚ is the obvious possibility, but there is no sign of relation to the Analects school of Lǚ, which in any case had by c0305 taken an antiwar position (LY 15:1-2) and soon lost political favor in Lǚ (see Brooks **Analects** 145).

¹Knoblock **Xunzi** 1/4: “We do know that he was precocious and traveled from his native Zhao to Qi when only fifteen to pursue his studies in the intellectual center of ancient China, the Jixia Academy.” See now also Goldin **Rituals** xiii-xiv; Sato **Order** 46-48.

²The form 孫子 also occurs, as in Lyóu Syàng's collation note. It has been said to be an avoidance of Hàn Sywǎn-dí's name 詢, but the usual substitution (Ch'ín Ywǎn 130) is 謀. There may be a dialect factor: like other Warring States word pairs, 荀 and 孫 differ by presence or absence of medial -i-. Sywǎndǔ's interviews with Chín figures have 孫子, perhaps implying a Western amanuensis; SJ 74 (which has 荀) is familiar with Chí thought, and may reflect Eastern pronunciation; Lyóu Syàng's note may then simply be using Western pronunciation.

In one Shī transmission genealogy,³ Sywǎndǒ is listed after Master Gǔnmǒu of Lǔ, perhaps the court music master of Lǔ; he may then have been Sywǎndǒ's teacher. This agrees with Sywǎndǒ's frequent use of the Shī and his seeming familiarity with the associated dances. Ritual performance was central to Sywǎndǒ.

Positions. After noting that Sywǎndǒ was fifty when he first came to Chí, SJ 74 lists Chí philosophers Dzōu Yǎn 騶衍 and Dzōu Shwǎng 騶爽 and notes that Tyén Pyén 田駢 (also from Chí) and the others (including Shǔn Dào 慎到 from Jào) had earlier died, so Sywǎndǒ was the eldest member, and “thrice served as libationer 祭酒,” presumably at some annual ceremony; but, encountering opposition, he went to Chǔ as Director (Lìng 令) of Lán-líng under the patronage of the Chǔ magnate Chūn-shǔn Jyǔn 春仲君. This was at earliest in spring 0254 (the Lán-líng area was conquered by Chǔ in winter 0255/54). Then Sywǎndǒ's stints as Libationer were in 0256, 0255, and 0254, and he went to Chí in 0257. If he was then 50, his birthdate was 0307, but “50” may well be a round number; for reasons later to appear, I assume a birthdate of 0310. His Chǔ patron Chūn-shǔn Jyǔn lost his life, and Sywǎndǒ his position, in the rulership transition of 0238, when Sywǎndǒ was c72. He was buried in Lán-líng. We thus reach a life span c0310-c0235, and an age at death of c75.

Information From the Writings

These were collated in c015 by Lyóu Syàng, who reduced 322 pyēn to 32.⁴ This implies wide circulation, and attests Sywǎndǒ's influence in Hàn,⁵ which increases the likelihood that his posthumous school added new material to keep his image current. It is widely agreed that material at both ends of our Sywǎndǒ text is in fact spurious. Any given chapter is also liable to contain later additions by Sywǎndǒ or his editors.

The questionable writings are SZ 1-2 and 25-32. SZ 25-32 present Sywǎndǒ as a Chǔ literary figure (the fù 賦 in SZ 26 is a Chǔ literary form). Sywǎndǒ in retirement may have dallied with poetry, but so may his successors at Lán-líng. The Chūn/Chyōu and the Yì are mentioned rarely in the inner chapters (8:7 and 5:6), but more often in the outer ones (1:8, 1:10, 27:49, 27:80 and 27:38, 27:49, 27:81), perhaps an adaptation to an already emerging canon.⁷ Meditation as part of self-cultivation in SZ 2 goes beyond anything which is warranted by the material in the probably genuine SZ 3-24.⁸

³Given as an alternate (一云) in JDSW 1/19b; the names are 子夏, 曾申, 李克, 孟仲子, 跟牟子, 孫卿子, 大毛公; see also Karlgren **Early** 12-13 and Brooks **Fóuchyōu Bwó**.

⁴That the text was to some extent arranged already in the time of Sǔmǎ Tán is suggested by his statement 序列著數萬言而卒 (SJ 5/2348:8); the present Sywǎndǒ wordcount is 75,815. Lyóu Syàng probably combined shorter pieces to make some of the present long chapters.

⁵Karlgren **Early** 18, 32-33

⁶But as an afterthought, which Knoblock (2/284 n57) plausibly regards as an interpolation; more specifically, a Hàn syncretic harmonization following MC 3B9 and especially 4B21.

⁷The 詩, 書, 禮, 樂, 易, 春秋 are listed in the Gwōdyèn text 六得 (c0290; **Gwōdyèn** 188). The Yì, which is also ignored in the Mencian writings, steadily rose in Confucian esteem during Hàn; at the 051 Shí-chyǔw Gý conference it finally (if briefly) was put at the head of the canon. Lyóu Syàng makes Sywǎndǒ a student of the Yì, but this is apparently just his imagination.

⁸For the ongoing vogue of meditationist statecraft, see the Mǎwǎngdwēi Hwáng/Lǎu texts.

THE SEVEN PERSONAL REFERENCES

Seven passages in the probably authentic writings mention Sywǎndž by name, and purport to be transcripts of private conversations or persuasions addressed to persons of importance. These are our first chronological markers.

SZ 16:4 (849 words or 14·2 minutes, a full-scale exposition).⁹ This is the only use of 荀卿子 in the text. It is said¹⁰ to be a persuasion 說 before the Chí prime minister, urging him to influence his ruler in the direction of lǐ 禮 and yì 義. Knoblock argues that 16:4 fits the time between Chí Mǐn-wáng's conquest of Sùng (0286) and the allied response which drove Chí out of Sùng (0285). More likely is an appeal to his successor, the Dàuist-inclined Syāng-wáng, who took charge of rebuilding shattered Chí in 0283. In it, Sywǎndž warns of the dangers which in fact Chí had just suffered. The offer to show how a ruler “can dominate others . . . so that no one in the whole world feels resentment” makes sense as a warning to not repeat the Sùng disaster. It deploras rapacious contending over territory 爭地, of which Chí already has sufficient. It argues that a true concern for “prizing life” (貴生 or 養生) will emphasize lǐ and yì. This would agree well with the problems facing Chí in **c0280**, when Sywǎndž was 30, and also (in the 養生 detail, adroitly) with the Dàuist inclinations of Syāng-wáng.¹¹

SZ 16:6 (262 words or 4·4 minutes; a reasonable preliminary).¹² An interview with the Lord of Yǐng, Fàn Swēi, the minister of Chín. Fàn Swēi gained that position in 0266; Chyén Mù, followed by Knoblock, puts the meeting at **0264**.¹³ Sywǎndž adroitly praises the power and efficiency of Chín, urging that all it now needs is Rú officials.

SZ 8:2¹⁴ (411 words or 6·9 minutes, a plausible audience with a ruler). An interview with King Jāu of Chín (r 0306-0251), probably in the same year, **0264**. Sywǎndž justifies the value of the Rú despite the King's skepticism. At the end, the King remarks “Good” (善), a stock idiom of approval, but no appointment results.

SZ 15:1 (2,131 words or 35·5 minutes; a discourse, not an interview). A debate with a Chǔ general, the Lord of Lín-wǔ, before King Syàu-chǐng of Jāu (r 0265-0245). Sywǎndž impresses both of them with his [essentially civilian] insight. Since he appears as a colleague of the general, another protégé of Sywǎndž's patron Chūn-shǎn Jyǎn (who had organized the relief of Jāu's capital Hándān in 0257, and probably arranged this meeting), the terminus a quo for the meeting is Sywǎndž's move to Chǔ in 0254.¹⁵

⁹At an estimated rate of 1 second per word (Brooks **Interviews** 149). The average length of a genuine Mencius interview (which perhaps preserves only the high spots) is 2·75 minutes.

¹⁰In a label rejected by Knoblock as a later addition (2/243 n25).

¹¹養生 is common in the Jwāngdž. In SZ 2:2, as here, Sywǎndž uses it in the opening of an argument about virtue; elsewhere, he associates it with commoners (8:7) or the deluded (19:1d, 20:6, 22:6d). Note his use of Dàu at the end of this address, to describe his own teachings.

¹²Note that it is objectively necessary to recognize material of diverse date in SZ 16. It cannot be treated as an integral composition.

¹³Chyén Mù also thinks that this was the year after Sywǎndž left Chí, which is not correct. If he regards the two events as connected, doubt is thrown on his 0264 suggestion.

¹⁴For Knoblock's note that SZ 8 contains a “wide variety” of material, see 2/253.

¹⁵This consideration eliminates 0260 (Knoblock 1/23-24) and 0257 (Chyén Mù 1/570).

Why the meeting? In 0250, Jàu was besieging Yēn, and Chǔ was poised to take the second step in conquering Lǔ and vicinity, including former Sùng, which it would do in 0249. Chǔ, displaced from the west in 0278, hoped to supplant Chí as the chief eastern power, and needed allies against Chín; this is why Chǔ rescued Jàu in 0257. In this context, Chǔ (or its strategic brain, Chǔn-shǔn Jyǔn) would have found Jàu's eastern adventure contrary to its own eastern plans, and unhelpful in containing Chín. A mission to Jàu in **0250**, staking out interests and suggesting how Jàu might use its diminished but considerable military strength, would have made sense for Chǔ.

SZ 15:2, a question from the disciple Chǔn Syàu 陳鷲, refers to the preceding discussion and is plausible as coming at or after the Jàu meeting, still in **0250**.

SZ 15:4-6 are miscellaneous military remarks, which might have been written at any time, but also make sense as a supplement to the discussion. The emphasis (15:6b) on holding and not merely annexing would be appropriate to the Chǔ intention to annex Lǔ and its neighbors in 0249. A date of **0250** thus seems appropriate here also.

SZ 15:3, a question from Lǐ Sǐ 李斯, shows his preference for Chín's ways over those of Sywǎndǔ; it might have been written to account for his 0247 departure to serve Chín, surely an embarrassment to Sywǎndǔ. Thus suggests a date of **c0246**. Since Lǐ Sǐ had a second son old enough to hunt with while at his native Shàng-tsà, he must have been at least 30 when he came to study with Sywǎndǔ (at latest, 0248), implying a birthdate of c0278.¹⁶ He died in Chín in 0208, at the age of c70.

The above are the passages in which Sywǎndǔ's own name appears. Missing from them is a record of the contact which presumably preceded his being given the post of governor at Lán-líng. That missing interview, or its substance, may be preserved in:

SZ 9:1. Someone asks¹⁷ how Sywǎndǔ would govern. His Jì-syà appointment had involved no governmental responsibilities, and he had never held a government post, so the question makes sense in **0254**. So does the fit of the 9:1 recommendations (he would enforce ideological purity) with what happened to the Analects and the Mencian and Mician schools after 0249: all of them somehow ceased to issue texts, and all significant opposition to Sywǎndǔ's doctrines came to an end.¹⁸

CONTEXTUALLY LOCATABLE WRITINGS

SZ 20 樂論 "On Music" responds to the Micians, who thought court music performances wasteful. Of the three Mician tracts on this subject, only the first (c0320) is extant; the two lost tracts are inferentially dated to c0295 and c0270.¹⁹ Only the last could be contemporary with Sywǎndǔ. **SZ 20**, which speaks as though in response to a recent statement by the Micians, can plausibly be placed in that period, **c0270**.

¹⁶A roughly similar conclusion as to birthdate (c0280) is reached by Bodde **First** 56-57, 80.

¹⁷The phrase 請問 does not imply a student question; in 15:1 it is used of the King of Jàu.

¹⁸Brooks **Ethical** 101f, 117.

¹⁹Refugees from the Analects and probably the northern Mencian schools went north to Chí, where they continued to issue texts, whence the Chí Analects with its two extra chapters, and the four chapters which Jàu Chí removed, as inferior in quality, from the Mencius text.

SZ 19:1, 2d-11. Several points in this chapter (禮論 “On Ritual”) seem to have provoked reactions in c0270, or to echo enmities of that time. *Mwò* are distinguished from *Rú* in 19:1d, and the Mician terms for an unknown person (臧 and 或) are used, pejoratively, in 19:4a. The three-year mourning is explained in 19:4b, and continues to 19:9c, which explains the logic of mourning only one year for near kin: the seasonal cycle is complete and normal life may be resumed. This is exactly the argument which is rejected in LY 17:19 (c0270). The LY passage also reacts to MZ 48:8, and in turn is ridiculed by MZ 48:12.²⁰ LY 17:9 protests against excessive attention to “jade and silk” in ritual, or to “bells and drums” in music. SZ 19:5 and 19:7 go into great detail on ritual clothing, and the final section, 19:11, adds notes on “bells and drums.” The material thus has several connections with **c0270**. The phrase 人道 “the Way of Man” links 19:2d with 19:4, 9c, and 11, but not with 19:2a-c, for which see below.

SZ 23. LY 17:2a (c0270) is a statement on human nature, which was disputed between Sywǎndž (SZ 23) and the Mencians (MC 6A1-8). That dispute, and at least the relevant part of SZ 23, may plausibly be assigned to the same general period, **c0270**.

SZ 17:11-12. These appear to be an editorial addition to the basic Heaven tract (17:1-10; see below). The persons mentioned (Shvǎn Dàu, Lǎudž, Mwòdž, Sùng Kǎng) represent the Legalist, Dàuist, and Mician statecraft theories; each is shown to be partial, and of itself inadequate as a principle of government. The list is different from, but its purport is not in principle greatly different from, the partly overlapping list in 18:1, but criticism of Lǎudž, which might have been less wise after Sywǎndž’s move to Chǔ in 0254, suggests that this list is earlier than that in 18:1-7, and I thus suggest a tentative date of **c0270**. For SZ 18:1-7, see next.

SZ 18:1-7. This chapter (正論 “Corrections to [Other People’s] Theories”) is composite; the use of different incipits (and the lack of names of opponents) marks 18:1-7 as one group, and 18:8-10 (explicitly against Sùng Kǎng) as another. The first group is itself a mixture. 18:1 opposes the secrecy theory of the 04c Shvǎn Bù-hàì. 18:2 takes up the regicide question aired in the spurious MC 1B8 (c0285). 18:3 opposes the views on punishment of Jì-syà thinker Shvǎn Dàu. 18:5 opposes the abdication theory put into practice by the King of Yēn in 0316, with bad results, but advocated by the Mencians in MC 4 and 5; their example of Yáu and Shùn is opposed in SZ 18:5. 18:6 defends the moral influence of the ruler. 18:7 argues that grave robbing does not impugn lavish burials (opposed by Mician tracts of c0378, c0357, and c0330). Sywǎndž’s view was ridiculed by the Shī-quoting, grave-robbing *Rú* of JZ 26:4, perhaps c0260. Then SZ 18:1-7 should be somewhat earlier, perhaps **c0265**.

SZ 17:1-10 天論 “On Heaven.” Only this part of the chapter reads like a consecutive treatise; it ends with a long poetic section (17:10). It praises the power of Heaven, but denies that its workings have anything to do with man. Cosmological theories were central to Chí thought. Being appointed in 0257 to give the Jì-syà a more Confucian tone, Sywǎndž seems to have moved to assert his position against this Chí worldview. This he might well have done after his first annual presidency, in **0256**.

²⁰Brooks *Analects* 258, 261.

SZ 19:2a-c introduces the concept of 太一 (Grand Unity) as the goal of a ritually perfect culture; it is probably a gesture toward the Chǔ god of that name, who figures as the first deity in the Chǔ text *Nine Songs*, and in the 太一生水 text appended to one of the Gwōdyèn DDJ florilegia, apparently in substitution for the DDJ 25 cosmology. This material may have been added to SZ 19 (otherwise a consecutive treatise) to adjust it for a Chǔ readership, soon after his appointment at Lán-líng, perhaps **c0253**.

SZ 21:1-5a. 21:4 is a version of the “partial understanding” philosophers we met in 17:12. Its enemies list is only partly the same. It pairs Jwāng Jōu with Hwèidǔ, and faults Jōu for overemphasizing Heaven and slighting man. Jwāngdǔ/Hwèidǔ passages which might have provoked this by recommending a Heavenly viewpoint are JZ 18:2, where Jwāngdǔ [sic] scandalizes Hwèidǔ by not mourning for his wife; and JZ 5:6, where he tells Hwèidǔ that humans can be without human emotions (the preceding JZ 5:5 recommends Heavenly Food). These passages cannot be precisely dated as of this writing, but the substitution of Jwāngdǔ as an opponent marks this list as probably later than that of 17:11-12, in which Lǎudǔ (0286) was prominent.

This part of SZ 21 focuses on the mind. It has contacts with the Gwǎndǔ meditation chapters, the last of which, GZ 38 白心, has a completion date after 0250.²¹ Statecraft with a Dàuist tone (and the relaxation of opposition to Lǎudǔ) might have been agreeable to Kǎu-lyè-wáng (r 0262-0245), who may have studied the DDJ under the Gwōdyèn Tutor,²² and whose military policies reflect a caution which it may not be an exaggeration to call Dàuist. A plausible date for this part of SZ 21 is then **c0248**.

SZ 18:8-10 explicitly oppose Sùng Kǎng, who recommended not reacting to insult as a cure for war. Humility in war also figures in GZ 38:4 (mid 03c). This and the relation to the war issue which Sywǎndǔ took up in 0250 (and the fact that Sùng Kǎng is singled out for special opposition, whereas in 17:10 he figures merely as another Mician) suggests a date of **c0250**.

[To be continued; Summary at end includes only passages here discussed]

²¹For details, see Brooks **Meditation**.

²²See Brooks **Tutor**. The Tutor returned to Chǔ in 0286, and was probably appointed Tutor soon after that, by the then reigning Chǔ King Chǐng-syāng-wng (r 0298-0263); he was buried near the old Chǔ capital, and thus before 0278, perhaps c0280. The age of Kǎu-lyè-wáng at his accession in 0262 is not known, but only he was available to be instructed by a tutor appointed after his father's accession in 0298.

Summary Chronology

Most dates are circa; Sywǎndž's age is given at right:

• 0310	Born (Jǎu) into elite but not affluent circumstances	
• 0290	Studied with Gvǎnmóudž, the ritual master of Lǔ	20
• 0286	Lǎudž dies in Lǔ	25
• 0286	Chí conquers Sùng, next door to weak Lǔ	24
• 0285	Allies, including Chín and Chǔ, eject Chí from Sùng	25
• 0284	Chí Mǐn-wáng dies in far-off Jyǎ	26
• 0283	Chí Syāng-wáng succeeds to the rulership of devastated Chí	27
• 0280	SZ 16:4 , Sywǎndž's presentation to minister of Chí Syāng-wáng	30
• 0270	SZ 20 , an objection to the Mician disapproval of music	40
• 0270	SZ 19:1, 2d-11 , an objection to Mician mourning practices	40
• 0270	SZ 23 disputes nature 性 with primitivists and Mencians	40
• 0270	SZ 17:11-12 . Objections to several named statecraft theorists	40
• 0265	SZ 18:1-7 . Opposition to several unnamed statecraft theorists	45
• 0264	SZ 16:6 , Sywǎndž's presentation to Fàn Swēi, minister of Chín	46
• 0264	SZ 8:2 , Sywǎndž's presentation to King Jǎu of Chín	46
• 0257	Sywǎndž goes to Chí as senior stipendiary at Jì-syà in Chí	53
• 0256	SZ 17:1-10 , a refutation of Chí cosmological theories	54
• 0254	Chǔ conquers half of Lǔ/Sùng; Sywǎndž becomes its governor	56
• 0254	SZ 9:1 outlines Sywǎndž's program as governor	56
• 0253	SZ 19:2a-c reformulates ritual theory in Chǔ terms	57
• 0252	SZ 21:1-5a faults the otherworldliness of Jwāngdž	58
• 0250	SZ 15:1-2, 4-6 , Sywǎndž included in military mission to Jàu	60
• 0250	SZ 18:8-10 , denunciation of antiwar theorist Sùng Kǔng	60
• 0249	Chǔ completes its conquest; Lǔ is exterminated as a state	61
	Sywǎndž shuts down Analects and Mician and Mencian schools	
• 0248	SZ 21:1-5a recommends a Dàuist theory of rulership	62
• 0246	SZ 15:3 interpolated to explain the departure of Lǐ Sǐ to Chín	
• 0238	King of Chǔ dies, as does Sywǎndž's patron Chūn-shǔn Jyǎn	72
	Sywǎndž relieved of his position as governor at Lán-líng	
• 0235	Sywǎndž dies and is buried at Lán-líng	75

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