

The Career of Sywǎndǒ 荀子

E Bruce Brooks 白牧之

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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

Abstract. Sywǎndǒ'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 Sywǎndǒ “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 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 syòu-tsái 秀才, not in the sense of GZ 20 (remarkably talented; Rickett 1/326; c0300), but in the Hàn sense of Jyǎ Yí 賈誼 at 18 (SJ 84, 5/2491). Yìng Shàu (Fvng-sú Tūng, c200) later altered 五十 to 十五, thus completing Sywǎndǒ'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 state theory institute. And from which Jì-syà master did Sywǎndǒ learn ritual (SZ 19) or music (SZ 20)? Lyóu Syàng (adding 秀才) and Yìng Shàu (changing 伍十 to 十五) seem to advance increasingly legendary claims about Sywǎndǒ. The early evidence tells us that Sywǎndǒ came to Chí at a mature age, as an already seasoned scholar.

Early Years. Sywǎndǒ 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, with Lǚ the likeliest possibility, but there is no sign of relation to the Analects school, 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 (Chv́n 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-. Sywǎndǒ'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's idea of culture.

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 春申君. 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 春申君 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.

Mentions of Sywǎndǒ in the Writings

The writings were collated in c015 by Lyóu Syàng; he 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 material to keep his image current. It is widely agreed that material at both ends of our Sywǎndǒ text is in fact spurious. Any genuine 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 (8:7⁶ 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 Shī-chyóu 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 Mǎwángdwēi Hwáng/Lǎu texts.

SZ 16:4 (849 words or 14·2 minutes).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 from Sùng (0285). More likely is an appeal to his Dàuist-inclined successor Syāng-wáng, who began to rebuild Chí in 0283. Sywǎndž warns of dangers which in fact Chí had just suffered. The offer to show how a ruler “can dominate others . . . so no one in the whole world feels resentment” makes sense as a warning not to repeat the Sùng disaster. It deplores ontending over territory 爭地, of which Chí already has more than enough. It argues that “prizing life” (貴生 or 養生) will emphasize lǐ and yì. This would agree 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).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). 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; an open discussion). A debate with a Chǔ general, the Lord of Lín-wǔ, before King Syāu-chǐng of Jāu (r 0265-0245). Since Sywǎndž appears as a colleague of the general, another protégé of Sywǎndž's patron Chūn-shǐn Jyǔn (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 Why the meeting? In 0250, Jāu was besieging Yēn, and Chǔ was preparing to conclude the conquest of the territory of Sùng and Lǔ, which it did 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 Jāu in 0257. Jāu's eastern venture would have been contrary to Chǔ's own eastern plans, and unhelpful in containing Chín. A mission to Jāu in **0250**, staking out interests and suggesting how Jāu might better use its remaining military strength, would have made sense for Chǔ.

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).

SZ 15:2, a question from the disciple Chǐn Syàu 陳囂, 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 make sense as a supplement to the discussion. The emphasis (15:6b) on holding and not merely annexing would be appropriate to the Chǔ plan to annex Lǔ in 0249. A date of **0250** seems plausible.

SZ 15:3, a question from Lǐ Sǐ 李斯, shows his preference for Chǐn's ways over those of Sywǎndǔ; it might have been written to account for his 0247 departure to serve Chǐn, surely an embarrassment to Sywǎndǔ. Thus suggests a date of **c0246**. c0278.¹⁶

Missing from the above is the interview which probably preceded Sywǎndǔ's appointment to Lán-ling. Its substance may be preserved in:

SZ 9:1. Someone asks¹⁷ how Sywǎndǔ would govern. His Jì-syà post involved only philosophical responsibilities and he had never held government office, so the question makes sense in **0254**. So does the fit of the 9:1 recommendations (he would enforce ideological purity) with Sywǎndǔ's apparent suppression of the Analects and the Mician and Mencian schools after 0249, bringing all major opposition thought to an end.¹⁸

Passages Datable from Context

SZ 9:8 mentions the **0285** expulsion of Chǐ from Sùng by the armies of five states, not necessarily as a recent event; the whole career of Sywǎndǔ seems to be post-0285.

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 can be 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**.

SZ 19:1, 2d-11. Several points in this chapter (禮論 “On Ritual”) relate to issues controversial in c0270. Mwò are contrasted with 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. 19:9c explains the logic of mourning only one year for near kin: the seasonal cycle is complete and normal life may be resumed. this is the argument which is rejected in LY 17:19 (c0270). LY 17:19 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 “bells and drums” in music. **SZ 19:5** and **19:7** give details on ritual clothing, and **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.

¹⁶Lǐ Sǐ had a second son old enough to hunt with at his native Shàng-tsài, and must have been at least 30 when he came to study with Sywǎndǔ in c0248, implying a birthdate of c0278; Bodde **First** 56-57, 80 suggests c0280. Lǐ Sǐ died in Chǐn in 0208, at the age of c70.

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 northern Mencian schools did continue to write in Chǐ.

²⁰Brooks **Analects** 258, 261.

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. This appears to be an editorial addition to the basic Heaven tract (17:1-10; see below). The persons mentioned (Shvǎn Dàu, Lăudž, Mwòdž, Sùng Kǎng) represent 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 Lăudž, which might have been unwise after Sywǎndž went to Chǔ in 0254, suggests that this list is earlier than that in 18:1-7. I 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-hài. 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**.

SZ 5:1 refers to a physiognomist said in SJ 79 to have predicted the ministership of Tsài Dzǎ in Chín (**0255**); that date is thus a terminus a quo for this passage.

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 substituting for the cosmological DDJ 25. 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 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 Sywǎndž 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**.

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 asserts 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 (died 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 – a concern not to overreach – which it may not be an exaggeration to call Dàuist. A plausible date for this part of SZ 21 is then **c0248**.

Conclusion

Among the implications of these studies of chronological affinity are: (1) The Sywǎndǔ corpus grew over Sywǎndǔ’s lifetime, and reflects the development of his thought as well as changes in his life situation; (2) the corpus continued to grow after his death, enhancing his image as a Chǔ literary figure and keeping him current with the evolution of the Confucian canon, the implied organizational structure being essential to the transmission of his works to later ages; (3) a version of that organization (Sywǎndǔ and his disciples) evidently obtained also in his lifetime, probably from the time he first came on the scene, at about the age of 30, as a master in his own right; and (4) the addition of new material over the course of Sywǎndǔ’s life and afterlife did not always take the form of separate essays (or chapters), but sometimes consisted in the addition of new sections or paragraphs to old material. Chapters 17-19 and 21 in particular seem to include material of different dates. This suits their nature as primary philosophical statements: such material is in particular need of renewal as time passes.

These suggestions require to be tested against other indications, both inside and outside the text, and are thus offered here tentatively. The interim test of these and any such group of identifications is whether, when put together, they make consecutive historical sense. That test is carried out in the Summary Chronology, following, where all the above passages are listed in order, together with dates otherwise ascertainable. The proposal is that the whole is not self-contradictory, and at points even suggestive. That is the conclusion, necessarily an interim conclusion, of the present essay.

²¹It is aware of the last passages in the DDJ (c0250); see Brooks **Lǎu Dǎn**.

²²See Brooks **Tutor**. He will have returned to Chǔ in 0286, and was probably appointed Tutor to the Heir Apparent soon after that, by the then reigning Chǔ King Chǐng-syāng-wáng (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 (Jàu) into elite but not affluent circumstances	
• 0290	Studied with Gvnmóudž, 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 Jyǔ	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 Jāu 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
	SZ 5:1 should be dated later than this year	
• 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 Jyǔn	72
	Sywǎndž is relieved of his position as governor at Lán-líng	
• 0235	Sywǎndž dies and is buried at Lán-líng	75

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