

Evolution of the Bà 霸 “Hegemon” Theory

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Abstract. Everyone knows that the bà 霸 institution, the Jōu Kings’ delegation of power to a series of strong vassals, was important in Spring and Autumn China.¹ Unfortunately for this consensus, the Chūn/Chyōu 春秋 (CC), our primary source, *does not mention* the bà institution. The later Dzwǒ Jwàn 左傳 (DJ) *does* mention it, and uses three different terms for it: mǐng-jǔ 盟主, [hóu]-bwó 侯伯, and bà 霸. None of these terms appears in the CC. I find that the three DJ terms reflect three stages in the evolution of the bà theory, and that the theory is not an 07th century historical fact, but an 04th century historiographical construct.

Single-Term Passages. Of 52 relevant DJ passages, 47 use only *one* of the terms. The three terms thus define three groups of passages, which besides using a different term for “hegemon,” also differ as to which rulers held the hegemon position:

- The mǐng-jǔ 盟主 group mention only Jìn rulers, the first being Wǐn-gūng, as holding the position.² Chín and Chǔ rulers aspire to it but do not obtain it.³
- The bwó 伯 group also mention only Jìn, and of Jìn rulers only Wǐn-gūng, as holding the position.⁴ Wú aspires to it but does not obtain it.⁵
- The bà 霸 group recognize Chí Hwán-gūng and Jìn Wǐn-gūng as holding the position, and mention Chín Mù-gūng as the bà of the Western Rúng.⁶ Of the ruler of Sùng, one passage says that he did not obtain it, another that he did.⁷ Two Chǔ rulers and one Tsáu ruler aspired to it. but did not obtain it.⁸

The progress from Jìn-only to Chí *and* Jìn holders of the position is clear.

¹The bà system “was initiated by Chí, realized with Jìn . . . The purpose of this system was . . . to restore royal authority; however, rather than restoring it, the bà replaced it” (CHAC 565f; spelling modified). See further Appendix 2, below.

²DJ 6/7:8, 8/3:7, 9/9:5, 9/23:4, 9/26:14, 9/31:6, 10/1:1, 10/7:7, 10/11:5, 10/13:3, 10/25:3, 10/32:3, and 12/1:4 (the state of Jìn); and 9/26:7, 9/36:1, 10/2:5, 10/4:1, 10/5:6, 10/24:2; and 10/29:5 (various Jìn rulers). I follow Yáng Bwó-jyǔn’s numbering of DJ passages.

³DJ 6/6:3a, 10/4:1.

⁴DJ 8/16:7, 9/25:10, and 10/19:6 (Jìn); 5/28:3b and 10/19:3 (Wǐn-gūng).

⁵DJ 12/1:2 (wrongly categorized as “Natural Heaven” in Brooks **Heaven**; in terms of the labeling adopted in that article, it should instead be “T” for “Transitional Heaven”) and 12/13:4. Note the contradiction with the CHAC position quoted in n1, above.

⁶See respectively DJ 10/10:2 (Chí Hwán-gūng), 5/27:4 and 10/3:1 (Jìn Wǐn-gūng), and 6/3:4 (Chín Mù-gūng).

⁷DJ 5/19:3 and 10/3:1.

⁸DJ 5/22:9 and 10/4:3 (Chǔ); 12/7:5 (Tsáu).

The Nature of the Hegemon Position. Details in DJ passages which use only one of the three terms show a clear evolution between *all three* stages:

- The mǎng-jǔ passages, taken in order as they occur in DJ, imply an evolution of the position over the 08th through 06th centuries. Passages in early DJ reigns show the mǎng-jǔ (Legge, “lord of covenants”) as considerate of the people and of other states: “not throwing away the lives of the people” (6/6:3a), returning lands taken from another state if that state becomes friendly (6/7:8), correcting the states (9/26:7, 9/31:6) with little or no use of force (9/26:14), and not exhausting the troops or wearying the people (10/1:1). The mǎng-jǔ is said to gain his authority by virtuous conduct, moral leadership (6/7:8, 9/9:5, 9/26:7, 10/2:5), and enforcement of just actions (9/26:14, 10/1:1). Then comes a change. Two later passages are less solicitous of small states, and more punitive in tone. One (10/13:9) stresses kindness to relatives (but not to everyone), cultivation of great states (not small ones), and rewarding or punishing those who do not make contributions (a duty not previously mentioned). The other (10/23:2) stresses punishing the disobedient.

In both the bwó and bà groups, no change over time in the nature of the hegemonic position is depicted in the text, and its duties are spelled out in passages relatively early in that sequence. Each group is intelligible as a DJ compositional layer.

- The duties of the bwó are structured as orders: “to relieve the distressed, distribute necessities in times of calamity, and punish offending states” (5/1:3), “to reverently discharge the King’s commands, so as to give tranquillity to the states . . . and drive away all who are ill affected to the King” (5/28:3b). A key change from the mǎng-jǔ position is the duty owed the Jōu King. The bwó had his authority from the King (5/28:3b), and always supported him (10/9:3).
- The role of the bà is to (1) be friends with states that observe propriety, (2) help states that are strong and firmly based, (3) complete the separation of the disaffected, and (4) overthrow states which are disordered or confused (4/1:5). The bà obtained his position by ruling his own country well (5/27:4, 8/18:3), by assisting others (5/19:3), and by military prowess (5/27:4, 6/3:4, 7/12:2), not by virtue (5/19:3). Key differences are the emphasis on force, the abandonment of the weaker states, and the absence of the Jōu King as a source of authority. DJ 5/27:4, like LY 13:29, emphasizes training the people, and 10/10:2 recalls Hwán-gūng as having become bà “by dispensing bounties to the people.”

The Five DJ Passages using *more than one term* suggest how the DJ saw the sequence of these concepts. DJ 8/8:1 and 9/27:4 are indeterminate. 10/1:2 explains the rise of the mǎng-jǔ by the inability of the King and his bwó (the leaders of the states) to keep order among the states. The mǎng-jǔ is then the *first* phase. In 12/12:4, the bwó is ceremonial; real power is held by the bà. The bà, here and in 8/2:3, is the *final* phase of the implied evolution mǎng-jǔ > bwó > bà. This is an order of increasing severity. It ends, as above noted, with Chí being added to the list of hegemons.⁹

We must next ask: Is this system, or something like it, implied in the CC text, or must it be regarded as a later, retrospective invention of the Dzwǒ Jwàn?

⁹For the layer theory of the DJ implied by these conclusions, see now Brooks **Heaven**.

CC Check. The CC implies a system in which interstate alliances or wars were the medium of *lateral* political relationships. It does not suggest effective *vertical* political relationships (other than merely ceremonial ones) with the weak Jōu King. Among states with a Jōu heritage, Jìn was evidently the strongest for much of the period. The DJ *míng-jǔ* theory can be seen as legitimating that strength, by portraying it as being exercised *on behalf* of Jōu. The DJ claim of a formal delegation of power from Jōu to Jìn is found at DJ 5/28:3. Here is the text of the CC for those few months:

- 8. 5th month. . . The Prince [of Lǚ] met with the Lord of Jìn, the Lord of Chí, . . . and they made a covenant at Jyèntǔ [in Jǐng].
- 10. The [Lù] Prince paid court to the place where the King was 王所.
- 16. [Winter]. The King hunted 狩 in Hí-yáng [in his own domain].¹⁰
- 17. . . . The [Lǚ] Prince paid court to the place where the King was.¹¹

There is no CC record of any formal conferral of power. The King is present, but he takes no formal part in the proceedings. The Lú Prince visits him separately. One gets the impression that King's presence was compelled by Jìn, and was part of a *claim* of Jìn to be acting for Jōu. Soon afterward, Jìn seizes the Wèi ruler, and sends him to the King. The implication is that Jìn is interfering in Wèi affairs by authority of the King. Nothing in the CC record implies that such authority was *willingly* granted, or that Lǚ in particular liked the situation with which it and the other states were confronted.

The Bamboo Annals. But perhaps Lǚ was merely being sullen. For a check on the DJ claim of formal delegation to Jìn on this occasion, we may also consult the Bamboo Annals (BA), ostensibly the court chronicle of Jìn itself. Under date of 0632, in both BA versions, we find no entry whatsoever for the claimed conferral on Jìn. That alone should be final. Both BA texts have, for the King's hunt that winter:

- 周襄王會諸侯于河陽 Jōu Syāng-wáng convened the Lords at Hí-yáng.

This is irregular¹² and thus dubious. In the received BA, a delegation to Jìn *does* occur, but directly after the Jōu collapse in 0771. Under date of 0770, that text has:

- 元年辛未，王東徙洛邑，錫文侯命 In his first year . . . the King moved to Lwò Yì, and conferred the Mandate on Lord Wǎn [of Jìn].

This refers to the forged Shū text 文侯之命. Whichever “Prince Wǎn of Jìn” is meant,¹³ or whatever version of the BA we consult, the DJ claim of Jōu power delegated to Jìn in 0632 has no parallel in Jìn texts, which either make no claim at all (the reconstructed text), or make an earlier claim (the received text). I conclude that the DJ account is a DJ invention, meant to rationalize what was originally a local power situation as being instead a *formally delegated responsibility* situation.

¹⁰I agree with Yáng Bwó-jyǜn that the meaning “held court” for 狩 does not work *for CC*. It is however taken in that sense by the BA authors; see below and n13.

¹¹Of the three occasions in the CC when the Lǚ Prince pays a formal visit to the Jōu King, one is this entry; another is an entry occurring a few months later. Most suggestive.

¹²Other royal convenings in both versions of BA use simply 王.

¹³The 0770 one or Chǔng-ǎr in 0632. DJ 10/32:3 perhaps chooses *both*; in it, the Jōu King refers to previous assistance from the “two Wǎn,” that is, the two Wǎn-gūng.

Theoretical Fit. The DJ tale of the first Jìn hegemon thus finds no support in the CC record, and none in the presumptive Jìn record. It does fit well with the period of the DJ itself: the 04th century. The DJ must be in origin a Lǚ text, based as it is on the Lǚ chronicle. The DJ’s first hegemon theory (mǐng-jǔ) rationalized Jìn power by accommodating it under a theory of Jōu validity. Lǚ’s claim to importance in the 04c was based on a special link with Jōu via its founder Jōu-gūng. That claim would be strengthened if a Jōu mandate, rather than Jìn power, could be construed as the source of Jìn authority in the Spring and Autumn system. DJ references to training the people before battle are anachronistic for Spring and Autumn, but have an echo in LY 13:29 (c0322), and the populist tenor of LY 12-13 in turn is identical with the line taken by Mencius in 0320. These two theories are thus generally compatible with 04c Lǚ ideas.

Not so the third DJ hegemon theory (bà). This version makes Chí Hwán-gūng the first bà, before Jìn Wǎn-gūng. That idea is developed in the Chí statecraft writings called Gwǎndǔ, but it is absent from their earliest (mid 04c) layers. Conspicuous in this late stratum of DJ are omens of the future greatness of the exile from Chǔn who founded the usurping Tyén line in Chí (3/22:1), thus legitimizing the usurpation, and of the future of Chí under Tyén rule (9/29:13). Mencius 1B1 calls a man who thinks in terms of the Chí Hwán / Jìn Wǎn theory “a true man of Chí.” These DJ statements would have had no, or negative, political utility in Lǚ.

The most likely reader of the DJ in its final form will have been the King of Chí. I think we must accordingly posit a move of the text’s proprietors from Lǚ to Chí, and see the revised hegemon theory, with its primacy of Chí, and its reliance on state force rather than state compassion, as a Chí revisionist adjustment in a previous Lǚ-type theory of Spring and Autumn. The move probably occurred at some time after Chí’s 0343 military victory over Ngwèi, the Jìn successor state. Chí marked that victory by usurping the Jōu title Wáng 王 “King” the following year, 0342.¹⁴ We may plausibly see the revision of earlier DJ theory in a pro-Chí direction a response to the seeming new order of things. It openly accepts the seeking of political unity by military force.

Later Developments. Thus far the DJ. But the bà theory continued to evolve. In the early 03c, Sywǎndǔ had one list of bà (SZ 11A3: Chí, Jìn, Chǔ, Wú, Ywè); Hàn writers have other variants. Common to all are the two hegemonies of the final DJ stage (Chí and Jìn) and the number five, surely through pressure from the wǔ-syíng model. The DJ bà theory at this point is reduced to a mere matter of numerical schematism, and fades out as a serious historiographical proposal.

Conclusion. Only by confronting the DJ bà theory with what would have been its 07c context can it be seen as what it evidently was: a theoretical construct based on awkward Spring and Autumn facts, adjusted to fit Warring States theoretical needs. Only by removing that DJ construct from our assumptions about Spring and Autumn realities can we understand that period as what the CC shows it to have really been: a multi-state power system.

¹⁴On the shift to Chí, see now Brooks **Heaven** 77f, which suggests that it may have been associated with Mencius’s return to Chí after arranging for his mother’s funeral in Lǚ, c0317.

State	M'vng-jǔ		[*Hóu]-Bwó			Bà		
	Ruler	Role	State	Ruler	Role	State	Ruler	Role
-	-	-	10/19:6	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	10/23:2	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	10/24:2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10/25:3a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	10/29:5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
10/32:3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	12/1:2	-	-	-	-
12/1:4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12/7:5	-
-	-	-	-	-	[>]	-	-	12/12:4
-	-	-	12/13:4*	[=]	[=]	-	-	-
Column Totals (Passages)								
13	7	2	5	3	5	6	8	3
Total M'vng-jǔ: 22			Total [Hóu]-bwó: 13			Total Bà: 17		

Appendix 2: The Hegemon Theory in Modern Times

The multi-state system of Spring and Autumn was based on power relations. It was dominated by Jìn, at least as far as the Sinitic states were concerned, and was flavored, rather than constituted, by the continuing ceremonial presence of the powerless Jōu. That system may perhaps be compared with the Egypt-dominated Amarna system in the ancient Near East. The DJ *idea* of that system emphasized the overarching and legitimating role of the Jōu, and was biased toward concepts of due process and agreed standards. It thus falsified the Spring and Autumn facts, and invited theoretical misapplication. One instance of such misapplication is the League of Nations.

Since the French Enlightenment, China had been seen by Europeans, among other things, as a rational polity, benign and functional beyond anything Europe itself had known. The Spring and Autumn paradigm that was created by the Dzwǒ Jwàn and further romanticized by later Chinese thinkers was a part of that exotic heritage during the period of Kant’s 1795 essay “On Permanent Peace,” a time when European theorists were seeking some theoretical alternative to the warfare which seemed to be endemic in their own multi-state system.

The League. These concerns peaked with WW1, which suggested that nation states were ineffective in restraining the aggressions of nation states. The League of Nations, created by treaty in 1919, became operative in 1920. Whatever may have been the role of Chinese precedent in the thought of its founders, its founding inspired new interest in the Spring and Autumn Chinese situation as it was then understood. That understanding, unfortunately, was compromised by the acceptance, not only of DJ theorizing, but of the romantic tales of the Jàn-Gwó Tsǜ 戰國策 (JGT), most of which date from early Hân; these greatly exaggerate the role that had been played by diplomacy in early Chinese interstate affairs. The JGT is not a history; it is an exercise in collective wish-fulfilment by various late pre-Imperial and early Imperial literati. These were unsound foundations for later political theory.

The League lasted 0 or 2 years, according as one dates its failure from Poland's seizure of Vilna (1920) or France's occupation of the Ruhr (1922). It foundered in part over uncertainty as to whether it was an alliance or a world government. It worked better as the former, as had also been the case with the Spring and Autumn Chinese states. The League of Nations, whatever might originally have been expected of it, thus stands as experimental evidence for the behavior of power states in a system *without* any overarching authority or agreed method of treaty enforcement.

No theory in the human sciences has ever been invalidated by its failure. A utopian misreading of the Chinese multi-state system has been introduced several times to the West since 1919, and it is now a probably ineradicable part of the lore stock of the International Relations field. One hopes that the implications of the actual Spring and Autumn period may some day be considered by those interested in modern problems. Different as they were in many ways, it would still be of some interest to examine the real workings of the Spring and Autumn multi-state system, and those of the League. Each, if accurately observed, might shed analytical light on the other.

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