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KERTAS-KERTAS PENGAJIAN TIONGHOA

PAPER ON CHINESE STUDIES Vol. IV

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- | | | |
|--|-----------------|-----|
| 1. History As Rhetoric:
A Reading Of The Zuozhuan | John C. Y. Wang | 1 |
| 2. The Mathematical Link Between
China And India | Ang Tian Se | 21 |
| 3. A Study Of Song-Sequences Of
Withdrawal From Worldly Strifes | Lim Chang Mee | 49 |
| 4. Emperor Gaozong (R-1127-1162) And
The Founding Of Southern Song China | Gong Wei Ai | 67 |
| 5. 李珣詞述評 | 林水檉 | 91 |
| 6. 秦觀詩中的釋語和釋典叙例 | 楊清龍 | 101 |
| 7. 蘇曼殊詩歌初探 | 王介英 | 127 |
| 8. Motif-Motif Sima Qian Menulis Shi Ji
(Historical Records) | Hou Kok Chung | 145 |
| 9. Resensi Buku:
Shijie Wenxuejia Da Cidian
(Kamus Biografi Penulis-Penulis Sedunia) | Soo Khin Wah | 169 |

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HISTORY AS RHETORIC : A READING OF THE ZUOZHUAN ¹

John C. Y. Wang

The Zuo zhuan is generally considered a genuine historical account of the Chunqiu period. Herrlee G. Creel, for example, says in *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, "In working intensively with the *Zuo zhuan* over several decades I have come increasingly to feel respect for the essential soundness of its historical base."² And Cho-yun Hsu relies heavily on the work in his important study, *Ancient China in Transition*.³ Yet one needs not read far into the book to realize that a good deal of its material can only be characterized as sheer fiction. In an entry for the 10th year of Duke Xi 僖 (650 B.C.), for example, we read:

The ruler of Jin 晉 changed the burial site of Crown Prince Gong 共 (Shensheng 申生). In the autumn Hu Tu 狐突, while travelling to the lesser capital Quwo 曲沃, ran into the crown prince (his apparition). The prince invited him to mount his carriage as an attendant and said to him, "Yiwu 夷吾 is without propriety [in changing my burial site]. I have already made a request of the Di 帝 (the Supreme Being) who will present Jin to Qin 秦, and Qin will offer sacrifices to me." Hu Tu replied, "I have heard that the spirits of the dead would not enjoy [sacrifices offered by people]

other than his own. Nor would the people offer sacrifices to the dead from a different clan. [This being the case] wouldn't your sacrifices come to an end? Moreover, what crimes have the people committed? Not only would your sacrifices be lacking, you would also be blamed for meting out inappropriate punishments. May my lord think it over again." "All right," said the prince, "I will make another request [to the Di]. Seven days later, west of the New City (Xincheng 新城), there will be a shaman in whom you will see me." Hu Tu promised [to be there], whereupon the prince disappeared. At the appointed time, Hu Tu went [to the spot as agreed.] The prince [through the shaman] told him, "The Di has granted me permission to punish the guilty. He will be defeated at Han 韓." ⁴

Are we really to believe what has transpired in this episode?

For a genuine account of an authentic historical period, therefore, the *Zuozhuan* seems to be over-laden with anecdotes and gossip. How should we account for such an incongruity? In an essay on the book written some time ago, I tried to explain this by a blurring of the line between history and fiction, a line which many modern philosophers of history have found increasingly difficult to draw: "To him (the author of *Zuozhuan*), history obviously meant more than just a listing of a succession of events. Among other things, it also meant an attempt to make connections among the various isolated events so reported, to make some kind of sense and meaning out of an otherwise confusing and incoherent past. . . Viewed in this light, even the anecdotal and seemingly 'unscientific' way in which the author goes about presenting his material in the book will seem less offensive. For what is history if not another form of storytelling?" ⁵

The episode about the encounter between Hu Tu and the ghost of Prince Shensheng, as noted above, appears as an entry in the 10th year of Duke Xi (650 B.C.). Five years later, in the 15th year of Duke Xi (645 B.C.), Jin and Qin did meet in a battle at Han, and Duke Hui 惠 of Jin was defeated and taken prisoner. Among other things, therefore,

Prince Shensheng's posthumous displeasure could be viewed as one of the author's efforts to explain what happened at Han.

Once we consider the *Zuozhuan* as a story, however, we move into the area of rhetoric. For we now can ask not only *what* is told in the story, but also *how* it is told. As Wayne Booth says in his *Rhetoric of Fiction*, "Regardless of how we define art or artistry, the very concept of writing a story seems to have implicit within it the notion of finding techniques of expression that will make the work accessible in the highest possible degree."⁶ Rhetoric to Booth, then, and here I follow his use of the term, is simply the means by which the author communicates with the reader and wins the reader over to his/her side of viewing things.

That the author of the *Zuozhuan* is using the text as a means to communicate with and persuade the reader can be seen in most of the longer and more fully developed episodes in the book, especially in the detailed and dramatically narrated battle scenes for which the book is famous. In my essay referred to above I dwell on the battle at Chengpu 城濮 fought between Chu 楚 and Jin in the 28th year of Duke Xi (632 B.C.). My chief concern there is to show how the various narrative elements are intermingled to form a dynamic artistic whole. I would like to examine the same episode again — this time to show how the author is trying to manipulate our responses as we read it. But first a translation of the episode in question.⁷

The Battle of Chengpu Duke Xi 27th Year (633 B.C.)

The ruler of Chu was about to besiege Song 宋⁸ He sent Ziwen 子文 to drill the troops at Kui 睢. The drill lasted a whole morning, during which Ziwen did not kill a single soldier [for disobedience]. Then Ziyu 子玉 drilled the troops at Wei 蕲. He did not stop until after a full day, during which he whipped seven soldiers and pierced the ears of three others. The senior officials of Chu all [came to] congratulate Ziwen, and he offered them wine. Wei Jia 蒯賈, who was still young, was

late in coming, and did not offer congratulations. When asked by Ziwen about this, he replied, "I don't know what to congratulate on. When you handed the administration of the government over to Ziyu, you said, 'This is for the sake of pacifying the state.' But to achieve peace within while inviting defeat outside – what gain is there? Ziyu's defeat is all because you have recommended him. To recommend him to cause defeat to the state – what is there to congratulate about? Ziyu is obstinate and without propriety. He cannot [be trusted to] govern the people. Give him over three hundred chariots, and he won't be able to come back with them! If he comes back, I will congratulate him then. What lateness is there?"

In the winter the ruler of Chu and other feudal lords surrounded Song. Gongsun Gu 公孫固 of Song went to Jin to report the emergency. Xian Zhen 先軫 said, "To repay kindness and help those in trouble,⁹ to obtain prestige and achieve hegemony – it is here now!" Hu Yan 狐偃 said, "Chu has just obtained [the allegiance of] Cao 曹 and contracted a marriage with Wei 衛. If we attack Cao and Wei, Chu will surely come to their aid. Qi and Song will then be spared."

Thereupon [Duke Wen of Jin] made a grand review of his troops at Beilu 被廬, formed three armies, and consulted [his ministers] about a commander-in-chief. "Xi Hu 郤縠 will be all right," said Zhao Cui 趙衰. "I have often heard him speak: He delights in the rites and music and has admiration for the books of *Poetry* and *History*. The books of *Poetry* and *History* are where righteousness resides; rites and music contain examples of virtue; and virtue and righteousness [in turn] form the basis of profit. *The Books of Xia* 夏書 state, 'Accept them by what they say, test them clearly with an assignment, and reward them with chariots and robes for what they have accomplished.'¹⁰ May your lordship test him!" So [the duke] made Xi Hu command the army in the center with Xi Zhen 郤臻 as his deputy. Hu Yan was asked to command the first army, but he yielded to Hu Mao 狐毛¹¹ and became the latter's deputy. The duke then ordered Zhao Cui to be a high officer,¹² but he yielded to Luan Zhi 欒枝 and Xian Zhen. So Luan Zhi was

made the commander of the second army with Xian Zhen as his deputy. Xun Linfu 荀林父 was the charioteer [for the duke himself] and Wei Chou 魏犝 was the spearman on the right of the chariot.

When the ruler of Jin had first returned to [his state], he instructed his people [in various things]. After two years he wished to employ them [in war]. But Hu Yan said, "The people have not yet known righteousness; they have not completely settled down yet." At this he went out to consolidate the rule of King Xiang 襄 of Zhou 周¹³ and then came back to devote himself to matters beneficial to the people. The people thus began to cherish their livelihood (i.e., were settled). He was about to employ them when Hu Yan [again] said, "The people have not yet learnt trustworthiness. They have not understood its usefulness." At this he attacked Yuan 原 to show the people trustworthiness.¹⁴ [As a result] those who exchanged goods did not seek too much of a profit, and kept their words without failing. "Can we employ them now?" asked the duke. Hu Yan said, "The people have not yet learned the rites and have not yet shown respectfulness." Thereupon [the duke] conducted a grand review of his troops to show the people the proper etiquette and set up appointments officers to rectify official positions. Only after the people showed no bewilderment in following orders did he begin to employ them. To drive out the guards at Gu 穀,¹⁵ to lift the siege of Song, and to become a hegemon with one battle — all this was [the result of] his instructing [the people in proper ways].

In the spring, Duke Xi 28th Year (632 B.C.), the ruler of Jin, wishing to attack Cao, asked for [the right of] way through Wei, but Wei refused him. Turning around, [the forces of Jin] crossed the Southern River [south of Wei]. They invaded Cao and attacked Wei, and on the day of Wushen 戊申 of the first month took Wulu 五鹿

In the second month, Xi Hu of Jin died. Xian Zhen¹⁶ assumed commandship of the center army, and Xu Chen 胥臣 became the deputy commander of the second army. This was done to exalt virtue.

The ruler of Jin and the ruler of Qi made a covenant at Lianyu 斂孟¹⁷. The ruler of Wei asked to join the covenant; but the men of Jin would not allow it. The ruler of Wei then wished to side with Chu; but his people did not. So they expelled him in order to please Jin. The ruler of Wei went to stay in Xiangniu 襄牛¹⁸.

Prince Mai 買 of Lu had been sent to guard Wei. The men of Chu tried to come to Wei's rescue, but were unsuccessful. The duke [of Lu] was afraid of Jin. So he killed Prince Mai so as to please it, but told Chu, "Prince Mai did not finish his guarding duties."

The ruler of Jin surrounded Cao. While attacking the city gate, many of his soldiers perished. The people of Cao displayed the corpses over the city walls. The ruler of Jin was troubled by this. He heard his people plan and say [among themselves], "Let's camp among their graves." The army was moved there [accordingly]. The people of Cao were greatly frightened, made coffins for the Jin soldiers they had killed and had them sent out. Taking advantage of the great disturbance [the Jin army] attacked [again]. In the third month, on *bingwu* 丙午, they entered Cao. [The ruler of Jin] reproached him (the ruler of Cao) for not having employed Xi Fuji 僉負羈 [in a higher position]¹⁹ and for having three hundred people riding in carriages.²⁰ "I have come to show myself," he added.²¹ He also ordered [the soldiers] not to go into Xi Fuji's house, and absolved the other members of his clan from any wrongdoings. This was to repay [an earlier] favor. Wei Chou and Dian Xie 顓頊, however, were angry and said, "You haven't yet rewarded those who have toiled for you. What is there to recompense?" So they set Xi Fuji's house on fire. Wei Chou was injured in the chest. The duke wanted to execute him, but treasured his abilities. So he sent someone to both inquire after and look over him. If [Wei Chou] was [truly] sick, he was going to kill him. Wei Chou wrapped up his chest and received the visitor, saying, "Thanks to his lordship's grace, am I not well?" [Having said this] he jumped up and down many times, and forward many times. Thereupon [the duke] spared him, but executed Dian Xie as a warning to the entire army and set up Zhou Zhiqiao 舟之喬 as the spearman on the right of his chariot.

The people of Song sent Menyin Ban 門尹般 to the Jin army to report their trouble. The duke said, "The people of Song have reported their trouble. If we ignore them, our relationship will be broken up. If we tell Chu [to stop besieging Song], they will not listen. If we go into war [with Chu], Qi 齊 and Qin will probably not allow it. So what shall we do?" Xian Zhen replied, "Let Song leave us [for now], but [instead] bribe Qi and Qin to speak to Chu on its behalf. [At the same time] we can seize the ruler of Cao and divide the fields of Cao and Wei to give the people of Song. Chu is fond of Cao and Wei and will surely not allow this [to happen]. Qi and Qin, being covetous of the bribe while angry with Chu's obstinacy, will certainly go into war." The duke was pleased. He seized the ruler of Cao and divided the fields of Cao and Wei to give the people of Song.

The ruler of Chu went to stay in Shen 申.²² He asked Shen Shu 申叔 to give up Gu,²³ and Ziyu to leave Song, saying, "Don't engage the Jin army. The ruler of Jin spent nineteen years away from home, and yet in the end he obtained the state of Jin. He has experienced fully all kinds of dangers and difficulties. He has understood completely the real and false feelings of the people. Heaven has granted him years and has eliminated his enemies. How could we remove what heaven has set up? *The Military Chronicles* 軍志²⁴ state: 'Stop when it is just right.' Again: 'Withdraw when you see difficulties.' And again: 'The virtuous cannot be opposed.' These three sayings can indeed apply to Jin!" Ziyu, however, sent Bofen 伯芬 to request permission to fight, saying, "I dare not presume that I will certainly achieve victory. I would like, however, to shut the mouths of my slanderers." The king became angry and gave him fewer troops [than asked for]. Only troops of the Western Guang²⁵ and the Eastern Palace and the six hundred soldiers (*liaozu* 六卒) of [his grandfather] Ruo'ao 若敖 actually joined him.²⁶

Ziyu sent Yuan Chun 宛春 to tell the Jin army, "Please restore the ruler of Wei and reinstate Cao, and I will also raise the siege of Song." "How rude is Ziyu," said Hu Yan. "Your lordship gains only one advantage

while he, a minister, gains two. We must not lose [this opportunity to attack]." But Xian Zhen said, "Please agree to it. To establish other people is called propriety. If Chu with one word can establish three states and we with one word destroy them again, then we are without propriety. How can we fight? If we do not agree to Chu's request, this is to forsake Song. To save her only to forsake her, how can we face the other feudal lords? Chu will have performed three good deeds while we made three enemies. When enemies are many, how can we fight? We had better privately promise to restore Cao and Wei in order to create a rift between them and Chu, and [at the same time] detain Yuan Chun to provoke Chu. When the battle has begun, we will plan for the rest (i.e., restoring Cao and Wei)." The duke was pleased. He therefore detained Yuan Chun in Wei, and privately promised to restore Cao and Wei. Cao and Wei severed their relations with Chu.

Ziyu was angry, and proceeded to engage the Jin army. But the Jin army retreated. The lower officers said, "It is a disgrace for a lord to run away from a minister. Moreover, the Chu army is weary [for being too long in the field]. Why should we retreat?" Hu Yan said, "The army is strong when it is in the right, weary when it is in the wrong. It does not matter how long it has been in the field. Were it not for the help of Chu, we would not be where we are. To retreat ninety *li* to avoid them is how we repay a kindness.²⁷ If we turn our backs on their kindness and do not keep our promise, and [moreover] offer protection for their enemy [i.e., Song], then we will be in the wrong while Chu in the right. Their troops have always been well fed and cannot be called weary. If we retreat and Chu also turns back, [it is a case where] a lord retreats but a minister presses on: the wrong will then be with them." [Accordingly] the Jin army retreated ninety *li*. The Chu soldiers wanted to stop, but Ziyu would not allow it.

In the summer, the fourth month, on *Wuchen* 戊辰 the ruler of Jin, the duke of Song, Guo Guifu 國歸父 and Cui Yao 崔夭 of Chu, and Prince Yin 愔 of Qin all arrived at Chengpu.²⁸ The Chu army encamped with its back to Xi 郟,²⁹ and the lord of Jin was troubled by this. He heard his soldiers sing among themselves:

The grass on the plain is flourishing;

You have forsaken the old while plotting for the new.

The duke was suspicious of the [significance of the] song. Hu Yan said, "It means fight! If we fight and win, we will obtain the [allegiance of the] other feudal lords. If we do not win, we still have mountains outside and rivers inside.³⁰ Absolutely no harm will be incurred!" "But what are we to do about Chu's favor to us?" asked the duke. Luan Zhi said, "All the Ji 姬 states north of the Han River have been eliminated by Chu. You have forgotten a great disgrace [to your clan] while remembering a small kindness. We had better fight." The ruler of Jin dreamt that he was wrestling with the ruler of Chu, who fell upon his reclining body and sucked up his brains. For this reason, he was frightened. Hu Yan said, "How lucky! We have [the help of] heaven while Chu prostrates for its guilt.³¹ Indeed we are going to subdue it!"

Ziyu sent Dou Bo 鬬勃 to request a fight and said, "We would like to have a contest with your warriors. Your lordship can lean on the cross-board of your chariot to look on, and I, Ziyu, will watch it with you."³² The ruler of Jin sent Luan Zhi out to reply, "Our humble lord has heard your command. The kindness of the lord of Chu we dared not forget; this is why we have retreated to here. If we have retreated for his minister, how should we presume to face the lord himself? However, since we do not have permission [not to fight], may we trouble the minister to tell his followers to make ready the chariots and be conscientious about the affairs of their lord. We will see you tomorrow morning."

The chariots of Jin numbered seven hundred, and the horses were all fully harnessed and armored. The ruler of Jin ascended the ruins of Youshen 有莘³³ to inspect the army. He said, "The young and the old all act properly. They can be used." He then ordered to have the trees of that place cut down to increase the weapons. On *jisi* 己巳 the Jin troops were drawn up north of Shen.³⁴ Xu Chen, as deputy commander of the second army, opposed [the forces of] Chen and Cai. Commanding the

center army [of Chu] with the six hundred soldiers of Ruo'ao Ziyu declared, "Today will surely see the last of Jin!" Zixi 子西 led the left army, and Dou Bo the right army. Xu Chen, having covered his horses with tiger skins, first attacked [the forces of] Chen and Cai, which fled. Thus the right army of Chu was scattered. Hu Mao set up two big banners³⁵ and retreated with them. Luan Zhi ordered tree branches to be dragged by his chariots and pretended to flee. The Chu army gave chase. Xian Zhen and Xu Zhen with the duke's own troops in the center army attacked [the pursuing Chu army] from the side, while Hu Mao and Hu Yan with the first army attacked Zixi from the other side. Thus the left army of Chu was scattered. The Chu troops were completely routed. Ziyu gathered his soldiers and stood ground. Therefore he was not defeated [as the other commanders]. The Jin soldiers rested for three days, feasted on [Chu's] provisions, and did not return until *guiyou* 癸酉

On *jiawu* 甲午 [the ruler of Jin] came to Hengyong 衡雍, and made a temporary palace for the [Zhou] king at Jiantu 踐土³⁶

Three months before the battle, the ruler of Zheng had gone to Chu and offered the service of his army. Now that the Chu army had been defeated, he was frightened and therefore sent Ziren Jiu 人子九 to make peace with Jin. Luan Zhi of Jiu went to make a covenant with the ruler of Zheng. In the fifth month, on *bingwu* 丙午, the ruler of Jin and the ruler of Zheng made a covenant at Hengyong.

On *dingwei* 丁未 [the duke of Jin] presented the spoils of Chu to the king: a hundred chariots drawn by four armored horses each and a thousand foot soldiers. The ruler of Zheng assisted the king who employed King Ping's ceremony. On *jiyou* 己酉 the king entertained [the duke] with sweet wine and allowed him to toast him. The king ordered Yin Shi 尹氏, Wangxi Hu 王子虎 and the court secretary (*neishi* 内史) Shu Xingfu 叔兴父 to issue a written edict appointing the ruler of Jin as leader of the feudal lords, and to bestow on him the robes for riding in a golden imperial carriage as well as in a war chariot, a red bow and a hundred red arrows, ten black bows and a thousand black arrows, a jar of

sacrificial wine made from black millet, and three hundred brave bodyguards. They said, "The king says to his uncle:³⁷ Respectfully follow the orders of the king, so as to pacify the four quarters and arrest and eliminate his detractors." After declining three times the ruler of Jin accepted the order and said, "I venture to make obeisance once more and touch my head against the ground to receive and make known the great, brilliant, and splendid command from the Son of Heaven." [With this] he received the tablet [bearing the edict] and went out. [All through the meeting] he went in and out to have audience with the king three times.

The ruler of Wei hearing that the Chu army was defeated became frightened, fled to go to Chu, and thus came to Chen. He sent Yuan Xuan 元暉 to escort [his brother] Shuwu 叔武 to take the covenant. On *guihai* Wangzi Hu made a covenant with the feudal lords in the king's court. The agreement states: "We will all assist the royal house, and must not harm each other. If anyone breaks this covenant, may the perceptive Spirits destroy him, make his people fall, and cease to protect his state. This holds true even for the descendants of his great grandson, old or young." The superior man comments that this covenant was [a model of] faithfulness; and that as for Jin, it succeeded in overcoming [its enemy] with virtue in the battle.

Earlier, Ziyu of Chu had made himself a cap ornamented with gems and jade-studded tassels, but had not worn it.³⁸ Before the battle he dreamt that the Spirit of the Yellow River spoke to him, "Give me [the cap] and I will give you the marsh lands of Mengzhu 孟諸."³⁹ But he would not offer it. [His son] Taxin 大心 and Zixi asked Rong Huang 榮黃 to persuade him, but he would not listen. Rong Huang said, "There are those who would give up their lives to benefit their state. How much less would they begrudge [giving up] gems and jade? These are but dirt, and yet they can be used to help the army. Why are you so partial to them?" He would not listen to him. [Rong Huang] came out and told the two, "It is not the Spirit who will defeat the chief minister. The chief minister, being not concerned about the people, will defeat his very self!" After [Ziyu] was defeated, the king's messenger said to him, "If your

highness returns, what are you going to do about the elders of Shen and Xi 息?"⁴⁰ "He was going to end his life," said Zixi and Taxin "But we two stopped him, saying, 'How will the king execute you?'"⁴¹ Upon reaching Liangu 連穀⁴² [Ziyu] died [by suicide]. When the ruler of Jin heard this, he was visibly pleased, and said, "There will be no one to give me headaches now. Although Wei Luchen 蒯呂臣 will surely become the chief minister, he will only preserve himself. He will not be concerned about the people."

The battle at Chengpu was one of the most crucial battles during the Chunqiu 春秋 period. At stake was the power of control over the North China heartland. As the victor in the conflict, Duke Wen of Jin became the undisputed leader among the various feudal lords and Jin remained a major state until almost the end of the period. Chu, on the other hand, was thwarted in its effort to extend its sphere of influence into the central plain and had to settle as a regional power in the less developed south.⁴³

Since the conflict was caused directly by Chu's attack on one of Jin's allied states, Song, the main narrative quite appropriately begins with a description of the Chu side. The impression we get of Ziyu, Chu's new chief minister, as well as the general situation in Chu is a disquieting one. Ziyu is shown as a harsh and insensitive commander-in-chief. While it takes his predecessor, Ziwen, only half a day to drill the troops, Ziyu takes up to a full day and in the process has flogged seven soldiers and pierced the ears of three others.

A reception is given to celebrate the transfer of power. Wei Jia, father of the famous Sunshu Ao 孫叔敖, but still a young man at this time, is not only late in coming but also refuses to offer congratulations as the other officials have done. When asked by Ziwen about this, he says,

I don't know what to congratulate about. When you handed the administration of the government over to Ziyu, you said 'This is

for the sake of pacifying the state.’ But to achieve peace within while inviting defeat outside – what gain is there? Ziyu’s defeat is all because you have recommended him. To recommend him to cause defeat to the state – what is there to congratulate about? Ziyu is obstinate and without propriety. He cannot [be trusted to] govern the people. Give him over three hundred chariots, and he won’t be able to come back with them! If he comes back, I will congratulate him then. What lateness is there?

This rather blunt criticism of Ziwen’s decision to appoint Ziyu as his successor reveals several things. First, Ziwen decides to turn the ministership over to Ziyu because he wants to bring peace to the state. Does this mean, then, that Ziyu has become so powerful and restless that unless he becomes the chief minister there will be civil disturbance in Chu? Second, Ziyu is called “obstinate and without propriety,” one of the most serious indictments a person can receive in the *Zuozhuan*. Although this aspect of Ziyu’s character is yet to be shown to us, Wei Jia’s accusation is so direct and forthcoming that it forces us to take note. In any case, our suspicion is aroused and we want to go on to see whether Wei Jia is justified in making such a serious accusation. We certainly want to find out about his dire predictions of a disaster for Chu. Third, Wei Jia, as the narrative tells us, is still young. For a young official to act so rudely before his superior, there must be something seriously wrong within the hierarchy of government. An ominous note of discordance has been struck.

The narrative now shifts to the side of Jin. In sharp contrast to the problematic situation in Chu, what we see here is a picture of harmony, courtesy, and modesty. Duke Wen appoints Xi Hu to be the commander of the center army only after his other generals have recommended him as a capable and worthy person. Hu Yan is asked to be the commander of the first army, but he yields to the more senior and more capable Hu Mao. Similarly Zhao Cui yields the commandership of the second army to Luan Zhi. To show how well-prepared Duke Wen is in taking on Chu, the author uses a flashback in which we are told how at the beginning of his rule he has followed Hu Yan’s advice in instructing the people in the virtues of