Spring and Autumn* Historiography*: Form and Hierarchy in Ancient Chinese Annals. By Newell Ann Van Auken. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. Pp. xv+328. $65.00 hardcover; $64.99 e-book.

Huan Tan 桓譚 (36 B.C.E.–35 C.E.), the independent thinker of the early Eastern Han, famously wrote that if the *Chunqiu* 春秋 had not come with a commentary, even a sage would not be able to figure out what it meant, even if he bolted the doors to his home and studied it for a decade.[1] Newell Ann Van Auken has now proved him wrong. In a series of works on this text—enigmatic because it appears so dull and yet has been claimed to be so profound—she has unlocked the meaning that this text seeks to convey.[2] She attributes the distinct point of view expressed in the text to a tradition cultivated among Lu record-keepers, a tradition that regulated how they rendered contemporary events according to a definite format. The *Chunqiu* was written in extraordinarily insipid and disjointed prose, but this was not because the record-keepers were linguistically inept—they wrote that way for a purpose and they expressed themselves not only by judicious choice of words, but first and foremost in form, for "the primary message of the *Spring and Autumn* was conveyed not by its content, but by its form" (p. 2).

Huan Tan was thinking of the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 commentary, and of course no one can conjure up the detailed narrative it presents from perusing the *Chunqiu*, but the same applies to the casuistic exegesis characterising the other commentary traditions, the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 and the *Guliang zhuan* 穀梁傳 , for this often is esoteric and impossible to figure out by examining the text itself. Whatever the authors of the commentaries themselves thought, the adherents of these traditions all held that Confucius 孔子 (551–479 B.C.E.) had edited the *Chunqiu*, originally the official chronicle of the state of Lu, to express his "praise and blame" (*baobian* 褒貶) of the events of the period it covers, formulating thereby a moral-political guide for all posterity. In her book Van Auken shows that one can bid leave of Confucius and still have a text with a meaningful message.

---

[1] Huan Tan, "Zhengjing pian 正經篇," in Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之ed., *Xinjiben Huan Tan xinlun* 新輯本桓譚新論 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), p. 38.

[2] Newell Ann Van Auken, "A Formal Analysis of the 'Chuenchiou'" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2006), laid the groundwork and she studied the *Zuozhuan* commentaries on *Chunqiu* wordings in *The Commentarial Transformation of the* Spring and Autumn (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016). She has also published a number of articles on related subjects.

After a chapter of orientations, five core chapters follow which deal with the *Chunqiu*'s dating patterns, with how individual rank was encoded, with the interstate order imagined by *Chunqiu*, with the question whether *Chunqiu* contains moral judgments, and with how the *Chunqiu* conceals cases where the state of Lu 魯 appears in a bad light. In a final twenty-page chapter Van Auken accounts very lucidly for her conclusions, and this is topped by three appendices supplying documentation and additional discussion. Van Auken very ably leads the reader along, making it possible to jump between the different parts of her argument. A reviewer will have difficulty improving her resumé of the book, presented on its very first page:

> In this book, I show that the *Spring and Autumn* is based on a system of regular recording conventions, that the *Spring and Autumn* records use form to display the relative importance of individuals, states, and events, and that its records are profoundly concerned with rank and prestige and convey a message that situates Lu and its rulers at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. I argue that the formally regular core of the *Spring and Autumn* was produced by record-keepers in the state of Lu, not by a later editor, and that its records embody the values and priorities of the state of Lu. (p. 1)

The *Chunqiu* employs 16,768 graphs to write 2,049 records, chronicling as many events of the state of Lu and its neighbours that took place between 722 and 479 B.C.E. Events are all dated to a year in one of the twelve Lu lords in the period and as a rule to a season; they may additionally be dated to a certain month and, for events considered important, to a certain day in the sexagenary cycle. Actors are rulers and nobility in a large number of states, first and foremost Lu and its allies and adversaries.

The language used is bare in the extreme, employing no overt value judgments.[3] The intentions or motivations of the actors figure only exceptionally. Events are only once linked causally and events that clearly form a sequence are mostly not marked to make this explicit.[4] No speech is recorded, only actions. No modal particles are used and no negations occur. The only adjectives/adverbs used are *da* 大 (big) and *xiao* 小 (small).

---

[3] Ritual irregularities are five times signalled by use of *you* 猶 (notwithstanding, in spite of); it is difficult not to read this as covert censure; it is interpreted by *Zuozhuan* as such, giving rise to general pronouncements on ritual correctness on three occasions. That these concern ritual perhaps reveals what lay close to the hearts of the *Chunqiu* record-keepers.

[4] The exceptions alluded to here are a number of *yi* 以 signalling intention and one *gu* 故 signaling causation. The only consistently used sentence connective is *sui* 遂 with twenty-two occurrences, but this still amounts to very low-key narrative integration.

So how is it at all possible to say something coherent with such limited resources? First, all events are recorded from the perspective of Lu. The state of Lu is never mentioned by name; references to Lu are either implicit or use the only pronoun used in the text, *wo* 我 (us, our).[5] Also, when several actors participate in an event, Lu comes first in the list, outranking even Zhou, the nominal ruler of the realm. From the beginning till the end, the sequence of these actors is basically the same, even though we know from *Zuozhuan* that major changes in the power balance occurred during the two and a half centuries the *Chunqiu* covers. A great many interactions between the states are mentioned, some of which imply a certain subservience on the part of one state to the other, but Lu never figures as the weak part in such interactions, though we know it was weaker than several of its neighbours. The ideal primacy of Lu and the correct order of the states are two of the messages *Chunqiu* sought to impart.

On the basis of how they and their representatives are referenced, states can be categorised in three tiers: bottom-tier states (Wu 吳 , Yue 越 , Di 狄 , Rong 戎 , Jing 荊 , etc.) are characterised as ethnic groups and referred to by their ethnonyms, whereas middle-tier states (Ju 莒 , Zhu 邾 , Xu 徐 , Qin 秦 , etc.) may either appear simply by the name of their state/people, or in the form of an indefinite and anonymous reference to "a person of the so-and-so state." In records of military actions, interstate meetings, or covenants, including multi-state lists and unilateral military actions, top-tier states (mainly Jin 晉 , Qi 齊 , Song 宋 , Chu 楚 , Wei 衛 , and Zheng 鄭) may additionally be represented by the names of their rulers, noblemen and heirs or heirs apparent ("Marquis of Jin", "Xun Linfu of Jin" etc.).

The persistence of this idealised interstate order, from generic appellation to specific mention, is also one of the major messages encoded in *Chunqiu*. Within each tier, and thus for the whole gamut, there is a ranking signified by the place of occurrence in state lists, reflected in the order of the entities mentioned above. The top tier, of which Lu was of course a member, comprises the states that lie within the Zhou culture sphere and intermarry with Lu; the middle tier comprises statelets to the east of Lu, populated by indigenous peoples, plus Qin to the west, still held to be an outsider to Zhou culture, and the bottom tier lies on the margins of Zhou culture. In this area, *Chunqiu* proved unable to maintain an idealised fixed ranking, especially with regard to the state of Chu, since it rose in rank during the period, showing how the *Chunqiu* to some extent had to adapt to the times.

---

[5] *Shi* 寔 in *Gongyang zhuan* and *Guliang zhuan* is treated as a pronoun, but is probably an adverb which means "for sure, in reality."

Van Auken divides all 2,049 records into forty-two exclusive "event types" that she broadly categorises into five groups. Thus, one group comprises event types relating to covenants, meetings, as well as military events such as attacks, incursions, and sieges; these are events that may involve actors from multiple states. This group accounts for 36% of all records, demonstrating the central position held in *Chunqiu* by meetings between states and military activities. 15.8% are concerned with diplomatic activities of a more peaceful and routine nature, and another 30.6% with events related to the fate or actions of individuals, such as natural deaths, homicides, etc. These three groups already account for 82.8% of all records.

Event types are topically defined, but they differ in that some are highly formulaic and other less so. Highly formulaic event types are central to Van Auken's discussion, forming the "formally regular core" of the text. These employ definite grammar and a very restricted set of verbs. All 215 attack records use the main verb *fa* 伐, all sixty-one incursion records use *qin* 侵, and all thirty-six records about laying siege use *wei* 圍. All 206 deaths from (more or less) natural causes are recorded using *beng* 崩, *hong* 薨 or *zu* 卒, depending on the status of the deceased person. Among the ninety-four homicides recorded, if the victim is a ruler, the verb *shi* 弑 is used, while *sha* 殺 is used in all other cases.

Van Auken starts out her book by stating that "[t]his is not a book about the history of the Spring and Autumn period," but "about how events were recorded" in the *Chunqiu* (p. 1). The need to concentrate in a field as knotty as *Chunqiu* studies is understandable, but an adequate appreciation of the historiography of the text depends also on its relation to the events it reports, to the history itself. If there is a mismatch between the epochal changes recorded mainly in *Zuozhuan*—for instance, the rise in power of high ministers and their lineages in the latter half of the period—and the way they are reported in *Chunqiu*, this will speak to the nature of the text as a historical source; only by bearing such tensions in mind can the historiographical stance of the *Chunqiu* be appreciated. There surely was also a tension between raw power and ritual legitimacy occasioned by the ascent of the state of Chu colliding with the norms followed by *Chunqiu*, norms which harked back to the time when Chu ranked low in the interstate hierarchy.

This brings up the problem of the historicity of the information supplied by *Chunqiu*. Van Auken notes the views on this subject by James Legge (1815–1897) and George A. Kenedy (1901–1960), surely not representative of present-day Western sinology. *Chunqiu* is (of course) not "a faithful record of facts" (Legge's position, quoted by Van Auken on p. 14), nor is it "neutral, objective, and complete" (Kennedy's position, referred to on p. 8). While modern-day readers will despair if they think they can understand the period by reading the *Chunqiu* year by year as an ordinary historical account, there may be other approaches to the text that can tease out the historical information it contains. *Chunqiu* may be unreliable on certain "sensitive

matters," but a statistical study can reveal quite a lot about the geopolitical and social changes of the period, knowledge consonant with that we learn from other sources. Here, I am thinking of the work on the *Chunqiu* carried out in the 1970s by the quantitative historian Dega V. Deopik (b. 1932).[6] Though their research interests differ (history vs. historiography), there is a considerable overlap in method between Van Auken and Deopik and an encounter between the two would yield fruitful results.

The question of historicity also applies to the *Chunqiu* as an artefact with its own history. If the *Chunqiu* is indeed a chronicle that has entries added as they happened or as reports about them arrived in Lu, then almost two and a half centuries have passed since the first entry and the last. Are there signs in the distribution of different event notations that support the claim of continual addition? Are there signs of attrition? Conversely, is there a consistency which implies the presence of an editor? These are also questions of a historical nature, and they have repercussions on the view of the historiography of the text. Van Auken addresses the problem in her conclusion, as she considers the implausibility to suppose that the formally regular core in *Chunqiu* was a result of later editorial activities. This takes point of departure in an understanding of the contents of the text, but it may be possible to approach this problem by means of a statistical analysis of the distribution of textual features. This is the approach adopted by Deopik; he also concludes that the text is the result of piecemeal addition and piecemeal attrition over the centuries.

Notwithstanding her view of the general nature of the text, Van Auken opens for the possibility that some records were later additions. In an endnote she mentions records which stand out in several ways: Possible additions "include those concerning Eldest Daughter Ji of Song 宋伯姬 , a renowned paragon of feminine virtue, and those concerning the wicked consort of Lord Zhuang, posthumously known as Lady Ai 哀 , who colluded in the murder of the young Lord Min." These were later considered models of extreme goodness and depravity, respectively. The two have "far more records than most women, and some of these records contain irregular features," making them dubious (p. 303).

There may be other records that are equally dubious. If we disregard as obvious pious interpolations the notices about the birth and death of Confucius (in *Gongyang*

---

[6] For those of us who do not read Russian, there exists a Chinese translation of Deopik's (傑奧皮克) main article as "Gudai dongfang biannianshi *Chunqiu* de dingliang fenxi changshi" 古代東方編年史《春秋》的定量分析嘗試," in *Shixue lilun* 史學理論 4 (1987), pp. 134–61. The studies by Artemiy M. Karapetyants focus (as far as I can make out) primarily of the dating system. An English translation of these texts is called for.

zhuan and *Guliang zhuan*, and the *Zuozhuan* editions of the *Chunqiu*, respectively), we only hear of one other birth in *Chunqiu*, that of the future Lord Zhuang.[7] This in itself is odd. Lord Zhuang was moreover exceptional among the heirs to the Lu throne, because he alone was the eldest son of the ruler's main wife. It appears likely that some later editor wished to draw attention to this fact—no one could have known his future destiny at the time of his birth. As the *Zuo Tradition* translators remark, this "suggests a post factum manipulation of this exceptional record."[8] A later editor adding this item would then be assumed to have access to sources (on royal births) not included in the *Chunqiu* he was working on, but what kind of sources could they be?

A different kind of case are the two occurrences of *chu* 初 in *Chunqiu* which note when a change in Lu funeral rituals[9] happened and when a change in land taxation happened.[10] Though it is perhaps not impossible that Lu chroniclers should have kept track of all institutions practiced in their time and have recorded the slightest deviations from them when they occurred, it is common for retrospective historical records to concern themselves with when institutions still prevalent at the time of writing had their first appearance.[11] *Zuozhuan* has more than forty notations of this kind and these occurrences may point in the direction of a retrospective editing of the text.

The question of why the *Chunqiu* was compiled in the first place is taken up by Van Auken towards the end of the book in a discussion of its audience (pp. 230–31). The *Chunqiu* "registers events that were, to the record-keepers, current events carried out by contemporary actors, documenting them for an audience of contemporaries and preserving them for the future." Since the *Chunqiu* "sets forth a particular vision of the hierarchy, with Lu at the top" (p. 229), this was presumably the message that the audience were to receive. But who constituted the audience, concretely speaking? The *Zuozhuan* carries a story about how a Jin nobleman visited Lu in 540 where he

---

7 Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, ed., *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), Huan 6.5, p. 109.

8 Durrant, Stephen, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan* 左傳: *Commentary on the* "*Spring and Autumn Annals*" (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 94.

9 Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, Yin 5.4, p. 40.

10 Ibid., Xuan 15.8, p. 758.

11 See also Xu Zhaochang 許兆昌, Xinian, Chunqiu, Zhushu jinian *de lishi xushi* 《繫年》、《春秋》、《竹書紀年》的歷史敘事 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2015), pp. 56, 179. This work is an attempt to read *Chunqiu* as an historical source on its own, year by year.

was displayed a text named as *Lu Chunqiu* 魯春秋 (the *Chunqiu* of Lu),[12] presumably the text we know as *Chunqiu* some two generations before it grew to its present extent. He exclaims that only now does he realise that "the rituals of Zhou are all here in Lu," due to the influence of the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong 周公). That *Chunqiu* was seen as embodying Zhou values (and existed before Confucius was even born) is interesting in itself, but was the Jin nobleman part of the audience the *Chunqiu* was directed at? Why then wasn't he acquainted with it before his visit to Lu? May he not have been extraordinarily treated to a view of what was otherwise the exclusive domain of the ruling house of Lu on his visit? An analogy would be the books catalogued by the *Hanshu Yiwenzhi* 漢書藝文志; these are often viewed as a catalogue of books in general circulation throughout Han China, but the *Yiwenzhi* is actually the record of books compiled for the sole edification of the emperor, access to which was severely restricted. What I wish to suggest is that the *Chunqiu* had no "audience" in the common sense of the word, that it was an internal record, perhaps used in the education of heirs to the throne but not widely disseminated, certainly not to foreign countries. Also, the fact that Lu takes precedence in a chronicle sponsored by the state itself is perhaps not so much an ideological stance to be propagated to foreign leaders as a simple instance of parochialism, probably reflected in all such chronicles. There are unsolved questions in this area, not the least how the *Chunqiu* left the confines of the Lu court and became an object of scholastic study, but Van Auken is to be thanked for bringing up the topic of the possible audience for the *Chunqiu*.

As Van Auken writes in her introduction, the approach she adopts in her book is "definitely not new" (p. 5). Work along the same lines was carried out in an equally systematic manner by ancient and medieval scholars as well. This approach centred around the identification of *li* 例 in the *Chunqiu*, *li* being one of the terms used for the formulaic wordings of different event types evidenced in it.[13] In the literature at our disposal, *li* in the relevant sense is first mentioned in the *Gongyang zhuan*,[14] but occurs frequently in fragments attributed to Han exegetes.[15] A culmination of this interest was

---

[12] Yang, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, Zhao 2.1, p. 1226–227.

[13] The term *li* is not easy to translate; it probably had its origin in legal thought; Van Auken favours the translation "precedent." In the earliest records, *tiaoli* 條例 (itemised event types) appears often.

[14] Chen Dongdong 陳冬冬, ed., Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan *tongshi* 《春秋公羊傳》通釋 (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2015), p. 190.

[15] Indeed, in *Commentarial Transformation* Van Auken speculates that "embedded in the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳) are fragments of an early commentarial work that uses this very approach" (p. 5).

Du Yu's 杜 預 (222–285) combined commentary on the *Chunqiu* and *Zuozhuan* and its companion work *Chunqiu shili* 春秋釋例 (Explanation of the rules of formulation in the *Chunqiu*). This fact is briefly mentioned, but the only thing we hear about Du Yu's "event types" is that their number—fortuitously—is the same as the number that Van Auken operates with (p. 239). In her book on *The Commentarial Transformation of the* Spring and Autumn, Van Auken devoted considerable space to a discussion of Du Yu's central claim that the formulaic wordings for different event types had their origin in the beginning of Zhou when China was at its cultural apogee, emblematised in the person of the Duke of Zhou, whereas deviations from these were introduced by Confucius in a time of chaos. Of course, none of this is acceptable on face value, but Van Auken offers a sympathetic interpretation of Du Yu's position.

In the traditional quest for the hidden meaning of the *Chunqiu*, the phrase *bili shuci* 比例屬辭 occupies a central role. There are different interpretations, but *bili* 比例 means, more or less, to assemble *Chunqiu* entries of the same event type for analysis, and *shuci* 屬辭 means to formulate the principles underlying the wordings expressing said event types. This is, to a large extent, what Van Auken does in her book and a comparison might have proven fruitful. While it is surely correct to say that it would require a separate monograph to deal with the complexities of this tradition throughout the dynasties until Chen Pan 陳槃 (1905–1999), including perhaps Chao Yuepei 晁岳佩 (b. 1956), the latest writer known to me to carry on this tradition in a comprehensive and systematic way,[16] the reader deserves some intimation about which issues these many scholars have grappled with and what their results might be, or a notice about a planned study of the topic. If a point of departure had been taken in Du Yu, this would also tie together the present book with Van Auken's last book on *The Commentarial Transformation* which showed how *Zuozhuan* contained a commentary on the wordings of the *Chunqiu*, for Du Yu's program was to interpret the *Chunqiu* solely by referring to the *Zuozhuan*, including its commentarial parts.

There are still knots to be unravelled in the study of this dense text, but thanks to the efforts of Van Auken, we are now on a solid footing. She is to be warmly thanked for her contribution to this field.

DOI: 10.29708/JCS.CUHK.202407_(79).0007

Jens Østergaard Petersen
Independent scholar

[16] Chao Yuepei 晁岳佩, *Chunqiu sanzhuan yili yanjiu* 春秋三傳義例研究 (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2011).