The date of the Dzwō Jwàn is a significant scholarly issue for two reasons. First, the Dzwō Jwàn is a monumental work, covering a period that is among the most poorly understood in all of Chinese history. Scholars are eager to know more about how they can use this source. Second, there are few internal clues in the text that researchers can exploit to establish firm absolute dates. To be sure, passages are routinely provided with specific dates, but therein lies the problem: there is usually no external confirmation, so it is not clear whether the accounts are contemporaneous with the events they describe, or whether they were written at a later time. Compounding this ambiguity is the possibility that the text may quote or incorporate genuine ancient documents.

There are two general camps, which, for the sake of convenience, I shall call “Chūn/Chyōu” and “Jān-gwō.” The “Chūn/Chyōu” view is that the Dzwō Jwàn is a primary document from Chūn/Chyōu times and thus can be used as a source for Chūn/Chyōu history. In practice, this point of view comes in two forms: a strong form claiming that the entire text – or at least the overwhelming majority of it, excluding specified interpolations – dates from the Chūn/Chyōu; and a weak form claiming that the received text may be the product of a Warring States redactor, but that the text still contains large sections of genuine Chūn/Chyōu material. The “Jān-gwō” view, by contrast, holds that the text was compiled in Warring States times and conveys a retrospective and romanticized image of Chūn/Chyōu history. According to this view, the Dzwō Jwàn is still vitally important to the intellectual history of the Warring States and Imperial eras, but is not much more appropriate as a source for Chūn/Chyōu history than, say, the Sān-gwō Yēn-yī for the Three Kingdoms.

Any interpretation of the Dzwō Jwàn must deal with a substantial number of passages that can only be considered “errors.” These include: prognostications that history does not confirm until long after the end of the Chūn/Chyōu period; prognostications that history subsequently refutes – again, long after the end of the Chūn/Chyōu period; mistaken astronomical information that must reflect later calculations rather than contemporary observations; and outright anachronisms.¹

¹Now transmitted as a commentary to the Springs and Autumnns (Chūn/Chyōu), but probably an independent text in its original form; see Lū Dzwō-shē 471-478.

²On prognostication in the Dzwō Jwàn generally, see Jāng Shōfǎ 40-60, Kalinowski Rhétorique, and Katō Shunjū.

³For example, scholars have long doubted the account in Jāu 29 (0513) of the casting of the iron “penal tripod.” See Wagner Iron 57f (where the event is misdated to 0512).
These issues have been discussed by eminent scholars, so I need not rehearse the details here. Yang Bwó-jywén concludes on the basis of the prognostications that the text must have been compiled between the years 0403 and 0389, and other studies of the same evidence have yielded dates even later than that. The magnitude of the error in certain astronomical data, similarly, suggests a date of c0365.

I think such passages are devastating to the “Chǔn/Chyōu” view. Taken singly, any one of them might be dismissed as inconclusive, but collectively, they are compelling because they all point in the same direction. Moreover, it is sometimes forgotten that these are the only passages in the entire text that can be dated directly. The point is not that there happen to be a few odd passages incompatible with the “Chǔn/Chyōu” theory. All the datable passages in the text are from no earlier than the fourth century, whereas no proponent of the “Chǔn/Chyōu” view has ever identified a single passage that must antedate the Warring States. The score is about 20-0.

“Chǔn/Chyōu” advocates usually sidestep this problem by declaring these passages to be interpolations, and then dispensing with them entirely. This is what I mean by the “hermeneutics of Emmentaler.” As more and more of these alleged interpolations are discovered and removed from consideration, the image of the text that emerges is that of a great wheel of Swiss cheese, with Jân-gwó bubbles and Chǔn/Chyōu interstices. One cannot identify a passage as an “interpolation” simply because it is inconvenient to one’s theories about the date and composition of a text. There must be some linguistic or philological protocol. But these are rarely offered, nor are we often told how and why a later writer goes about surreptitiously interpolating things like prognostications that history eventually proves untrue.

These points are well known, and yet “Chǔn/Chyōu” advocates exist, so their sense must be that the overall quality of the text still evokes the Chǔn/Chyōu, at least to the extent that the “error” passages may be disregarded as careless Warring States packaging. This would be a weak form of the Chǔn/Chyōu view. My sense is that the ambience of the text is redolent of the Warring States. The language sounds like archaising fourth-century writing, not like seventh-century writing. Though I can offer no irrefragable supporting arguments, there is one inadequately appreciated datum, namely the prevalence of the word ñau in the Dzwō Jwân as an ethical term. This is rare in literature before the Warring States. There are sporadic occurrences – one in the “Jywshr” for example (我惟事王德延), and Shr 245 refers to the ñau of Lord Millet (“Lord Millet’s reaping had the ñau of assisting [the vegetation]”) – but in the Dzwō Jwân this sense is attested far more than sporadically.

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1Yang Chêngshū 212-230. Nyóu Nyéndâi 19 surveys nine other Chinese views; all are within a few decades of Yang’s range. Nyóu himself proposes a range of c0375/c0355.

2See Kamada Saden 327-330; the most detailed study remains Shinjô Temmongaku.

3Yuri Pines (WSW 8 Aug 2001) cites two mistaken predictions: Syî 23 (Jîn will be the last of the Jî states to perish), and Syàng 31 (Jîng will enjoy several generations of good fortune) that imply a date before the 04c. Pines himself suggests a latest plausible date of c0450.

4For an example, see Pines Foundations 221-226 and 233-246.

5See, in addition to Pines, Hú Lângâu 21-76.
The Fraser-Lockhart index lists dozens of references for dàu under such categories as “good government, the way, path of duty, reason, principle, general rule.” And we know now from the Gwŏdyen manuscripts (among other texts) that the dàu was a crucial ethical and political concept in fourth-century philosophy, but there is not much evidence that it enjoyed this status before then. If the Dzwŏ Jwăn is indeed a Chŭn/Chyŏu text, its use of the term would qualify at least as idiosyncratic – and probably as revolutionary.

Next, there are certain bizarre features of the narrative in Dzwŏ Jwăn that are not easily compatible with the “Chŏn/Chyŏu” thesis. Take the character of Lord Mù of Chîn. In the Battle of Hán 烏 (Syî 15), for example, he is portrayed as a paragon of virtue and forbearance; he attacks Jin only in order to punish its treacherous ruler, Yiwû. After capturing Yiwû (otherwise known as Lord Hwèi of Jin; r 0650-0637), he spares his prisoner and eventually returns him to his homeland. In the aftermath of his victory, Lord Mù continues to treat the nation of Jin kindly, because his quarrel has been not with its people, but with its lord. His troops, moreover, are said to be possessed of great fighting spirit, and he commands them with insight and aplomb. Above all, he listens to his advisors.

Eighteen years later, in the Battle of Yáu 烏 (Syî 32-33), Lord Mù plans an unsound campaign of conquest despite the pointed remonstrances of his ministers. Now he exemplifies all the commonplace characteristics of a doomed ruler in the Dzwŏ Jwăn: he is overconfident, has no sense of ritual, and is greedy for territory. Of course, his forces are smashed and he is humiliated.

Lord Mù was hardly a sage – this is the same Lord Mù who forced the three good Džyw brothers to be buried alive with him when he died – but there is no hint in the account of the Battle of Hán that he was the kind of ruler who would ignore the counsel of sage ministers in a vain attempt to seize a few scraps of territory. It is remarkable that the same man should make all the shortsighted mistakes that, eighteen years earlier, he so wisely identified and so admirably avoided.

I think this difficulty is a consequence of the competing constraints on the author or authors of the Dzwŏ Jwăn: the philosophical theory that Heaven always helps the virtuous defeat the iniquitous; and the historical fact that Chîn defeated Jin in 0645, but was defeated by the same enemy in 0627. In the Battle of Hán, the author is compelled to portray Lord Mù as a moral hero and Yiwû as a tyrant. The Battle of Yáu is written as simply another episode in the ongoing struggle between right and wrong – but this time, Lord Mù must be depicted as the personification of impropriety. Neither of these passages tells us very much about the real Lord Mù.

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9See Goldin After 43f, Cook Debate, and Ding Szsyăng 242-267.
10Eno Cook 145 n10. Wû Chyén discusses many of the extended senses of dàu in the Dzwŏ Jwăn but does not attempt to show that they are attested in earlier material.
11DJ Syî 15 (0645).
12DJ Syî 32 (0628) and Syî 33 (0627).
13DJ Wûn 6 (0621); see also Shěn 131, which commemorates the event, and is analyzed in Goldin Culture 19f.
One final, general comment about the battle scenes in the Dzwō Jwán: they read like the nostalgic chimeras of later ages, not like forthright contemporary accounts. They are all about heroism, honor, and Heaven-ordained victory or defeat; they glorify individual valor and condemn ignominious folly, with little consideration of practical concerns such as strategy and logistics. Moreover, they never convey the horrors and atrocities of war: the reader is spared the gruesome sight of civilians raped and slaughtered, the screams of tortured prisoners, or even the inevitable stench of corpses decaying on the battlefield.

In conclusion, the Dzwō Jwán espouses fourth-century ideas in fourth-century language, and every datable passage in it must be assigned to the fourth century. I believe it is a fourth-century text.

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