

## Comparison of the political and military logic of the ancient Greek city-state alliance and the Spring and Autumn princely system

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**Abstract:** This paper uses the method of comparative history to systematically compare the similarities and differences between the ancient Greek city-state system (8th-4th century BC) and the Chinese Spring and Autumn princely system (770-453 BC) in terms of state system and war mode. The study found that there are essential differences between the two systems under the appearance of "small countries": Greek city-states form loose alliances based on the principle of sovereign equality, and the purpose of war is to maintain independent status; The Spring and Autumn princes were based on the patriarchal hierarchical order, maintaining the "world" system through the hegemonic alliance system, and the war gradually evolved from ceremonial conquest to annexation war. Institutional differences profoundly affect the mode of warfare: the Greek citizen phalanx reflects the combination of democratic politics and limited warfare, and the Spring and Autumn aristocratic chariot system reflects the military monopoly of the hierarchical society. Military technological innovations (such as the Greek spear phalanx and the rise of the Spring and Autumn infantry) drove social change, ultimately leading to different historical endings - the external conquest of Macedonia and the internal unification of the Qin and Han dynasties. This study is of great theoretical significance for understanding the diversity of ancient international systems and the interaction mechanism between war and political order, and provides a historical mirror for contemporary international relations research.

### 1. Introduction

There were a variety of political patterns in the ancient world, among which the ancient Greek city-state system and the Chinese Spring and Autumn prince system were the most representative[1]. Although both show the characteristics of decentralized power and pluralistic competition, there are significant differences in their state organizational forms, alliance mechanisms and war models, which not only shape their respective historical processes, but also have a profound impact on later generations of political civilization[2]. Western academic circles have a long history of research on Greek city-states and have formed a rich academic tradition; Chinese scholars have also studied the history of the Spring and Autumn Annals and have built a complete interpretation system. However, there is still a lack of research on systematic comparison of the two systems, especially from the perspective of international relations theory[3]. Therefore, this paper adopts the method of comparative historical analysis, draws on the theoretical framework of Charles Tilley on "state formation and war", regards the state system as the structural constraint of the war model, and regards war as the dynamic mechanism to promote the evolution of the system[4]. In order to reveal its internal mechanism and historical trajectory, enrich the comparative vision of the history of international relations, verify the cross-civilizational applicability of the theory of "war-state formation", and provide a historical reference for understanding the contemporary international system[5].

## **2. Comparative analysis at home and abroad**

### **2.1. Characteristics of the domestic (Spring and Autumn princes) system**

#### **2.1.1. Political organizational structure**

The Spring and Autumn vassal states were built on the basis of the feudal system of the Zhou Dynasty and formed a strict hierarchical order. According to the "Zuo Commentary", the Zhou Tianzi divided the princes into five titles: duke, marquis, uncle, son, and man[6]. There were about 170 princely states in the early Spring and Autumn Annals, and by the end of the Spring and Autumn Annals, only more than ten powerful states remained. This system is linked by patriarchal blood, and Zhou Tianzi, as the "co-lord of the world", enjoys the highest authority in name[7]. The calligraphy principle of "respecting the king and repelling the barbarians" in the Spring and Autumn Annals reflects this concept of order. Even if the Zhou royal family declined, the princes still needed to maintain the nominal relationship between the monarch and his subjects through ceremonies such as "pilgrimage" and "tribute". Gu Donggao counted in the "Chronological Table of Events in the Spring and Autumn Annals" that in the 242 years of the Spring and Autumn Annals, the princes met the emperor more than 60 times, and it was gradually abolished until the end of the period. This hierarchical political structure profoundly influenced the pattern of international relations during the Spring and Autumn Annals[8].

#### **2.1.2. Alliance mechanism and hegemony system**

During the Spring and Autumn Annals, a mature alliance system was developed, and covenants were concluded through the assembly of princes, establishing hegemony and mediating international disputes. Duke Huan of Qi established the "Five Prohibitions" with the princes at the Kuiqiu Meeting (651 BC): "No obstacle valley, no easy tree, no concubine as wife, no maid as wife, no killing doctor", establishing an international code of conduct[9]. After the Battle of Chengpu (632 BC), Duke Wen of Jin became the hegemon, and for more than 100 years, Jin and Chu dominated the international pattern of the Spring and Autumn Annals. The "Zuo Commentary" records that Jin and Chu held "meetings to stop the war" (579 BC and 546 BC) many times in an attempt to maintain the balance of power through diplomatic means. Although the hegemon has no coercive power, he enjoys the authority to convene alliances, arbitrate disputes, and organize common defense, which is much more institutionalized than the Greek Union. The alliance system is a unique "international law" system of the Spring and Autumn Annals, which maintains the basic order when the rites collapse and music collapse[10].

#### **2.1.3. Evolution of war modes**

The Spring and Autumn War underwent a transformation from "ceremonial conquest" to "annexation war". The early wars were bound by the Zhou rites, and the "Zuo Commentary" records that the Battle of Hongshui (638 BC) of Song Xianggong "did not drum and did not line up", "did not seriously injure", and "did not capture Ermao", reflecting the ethics of aristocratic warfare. However, with the collapse of etiquette and music, the purpose of war shifted from "punishment" to "annexation". King Chu Zhuang's ascent to the Central Plains (606 BC) marked a blatant challenge to the authority of Zhou Tianzi. At the end of the Spring and Autumn Annals, the destruction of the country became the norm: according to the statistics of the "Zuo Commentary", in the 100 years after the second meeting of the army in 546 BC, there were more than 50 incidents of destruction. Zhao Dingxin used the theory of "war escalation" to analyze that the pressure of resource competition and military-technological changes (the rise of infantry) drove wars from ceremonial conflicts to survival competitions.

#### **2.1.4. Military organization and social foundation**

The early Spring and Autumn War was centered on chariots. Each chariot is equipped with 3 armored soldiers (drivers, archers, gunners) and dozens of infantry (infantry), forming the basic combat unit "multiplier". The "Zuo Commentary" records that in the Battle of Jin and Chu (597 BC),

the Jin army had "seven hundred chariots" and the Chu army had "six hundred chariots", which was unprecedented. Chariot warfare is subject to strict etiquette: the "Zuo Commentary" records that "a gentleman is not seriously injured, does not capture Ermao, and does not block the pass", and the "appointment of the battle" before the war and the "no hardship" during the war reflect the concept of noble honor. Chariots require flat terrain and long-term training, limited to the noble class, forming a military aristocratic monopoly. However, infantry gradually rose in the late Spring and Autumn Annals. The "skilled warriors" of Qi and the "marching" system of Jin armed the peasants, changing the form of war. Jin's military reforms such as "Zuo Yuantian" (645 BC), "Zuo Zhou Bing" (627 BC), and "Zuo Qiu Fu" (590 BC) expanded the source of troops, and the scale of the war expanded from hundreds of chariots to tens of thousands of infantry. Yang Kuan believes that the rise of infantry has dismantled the military monopoly of the aristocracy and promoted social mobility and civilian political participation[11].

## **2.2. Characteristics of the foreign (ancient Greek city-state) system**

### **2.2.1. Political organizational structure**

Ancient Greek city-states were independent political communities with complete sovereignty. According to Hansen, about 700-1000 city-states existed in classical times. These city-states vary significantly in size: at the height of Athens, the population was about 30-400,000 (including slaves and Gentiles), compared to a typical city-state population of only a few thousand. Aristotle argues in *Politics* that the ideal city-state should maintain a scale of "mutual knowledge of citizens", reflecting the Greeks' preference for small political units. There was no legal hierarchical relationship between the city-states, and even if Sparta or Athens established hegemony, they could not achieve institutionalized suzerainty. Thucydides recorded that although the Athenian League of Delos was called the "Alliance", it was actually Athens' maritime empire, and the member states always resisted this hegemony. This political structure of sovereign equality formed the basis of the Greek city-state system[12].

### **2.2.2. Alliance mechanism and hegemony system**

Ancient Greek alliances were mostly formed temporarily to deal with external threats. The League of Delos (478 BC) was originally a naval alliance established to counter the Persian threat, with member states paying "tribute" or providing warships, and Athens led military operations. However, Athens gradually transformed alliances into tools of imperial rule, imposing taxes, interfering in the internal affairs of member states, and even suppressing those who left (as in the Samus Rebellion in 440 BC). The Peloponnesian League (formed around the 6th century BC) adopted a more egalitarian parliamentary system, with major decisions required a vote by member states, and Sparta was the leader but had limited power. Thucydides records that before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, Corinth criticized Sparta for its slow action at the Council of Leagues and pushed for its declaration of war on Athens. These alliances are characterized by the lack of permanent institutions and mandatory binding, the retention of full diplomatic autonomy by member states, and the disintegration of alliances as external threats disappear or internal contradictions intensify[13].

### **2.2.3. Characteristics of war patterns**

The primary purpose of the war of the Greek city-states was to preserve political independence. Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, revealed that the conflict between Athens and Sparta was rooted in the expansion of the Athenian Empire and threatened the autonomy of the city-states. The result of war is usually the defeated side paying reparations, demolishing walls, or being forced to join the victorious alliance, but rarely completely annexation. Even after the brutal Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC), Sparta did not annex Athens, only demanding that it join the Peloponnesian League and give up its overseas territories. This war restraint reflects the consensus that "the sovereignty of the city-state is sacrosanct". Exceptions often lead to moral condemnation: Athens massacred all male citizens and enslaved women and children in the Milos Incident (416

BC), and Thucydides' "Milos Dialogue" became a classic example of power politics, but such extreme acts were rare at the time[14].

#### **2.2.4. Military organization and social foundation**

Greek military power was based on the militia system, with a hoplite phalanx formed by land-owning middle-class citizens with their own armor and weapons. Hansen estimated that typical hoplite equipment (armor, shields, spears, short swords) was worth about 200 drachmas, equivalent to 200 days' wages for skilled workers, which ensured the property eligibility of the participants. Phalanx tactics emphasized collective discipline: soldiers lined up in dense horizontal formations (usually 8 rows deep), covered each other with shields, stabbed forward with spears, and relied on overall advance to crush the enemy formation. Hansen emphasized that this tactic is typical of "shock decisive battles", seeking to quickly decide the outcome through a meeting. The citizen soldier system has profound political significance. Morris pointed out that the centrality of middle-class citizens in the phalanx promoted the development of democratic politics, and that the Athenian democratic reforms were closely related to the use of poor people as oarsmen on naval triremes[15].

### **2.3. Comparative analysis at home and abroad**

#### **2.3.1. Comparison of political systems**

Greek city-states were based on the principle of sovereign equality, and the alliance was loose and temporary, lacking hierarchical order; The princes of the Spring and Autumn Annals were based on patriarchal blood and the order of rites and music, and achieved relatively institutionalized international coordination through the hegemonic alliance system. Greek city-states are independent political communities with complete sovereignty, and there is no legal hierarchical relationship between city-states; The Spring and Autumn princely states were built on the basis of the feudal system of the Zhou Dynasty, forming a strict hierarchical order, with patriarchal blood as the bond, and Zhou Tianzi enjoyed the nominal highest authority as the "co-lord of the world". This fundamental difference in political systems leads to significant differences in the mechanism of alliances, the purpose of war, and the end of history.

#### **2.3.2. Comparison of the nature of war**

The purpose of the Greek war was to maintain independence and rarely annex; The Spring and Autumn War evolved from a ceremonial conquest to a war of annexation, reflecting the transformation from "punishment" to "survival competition". The primary purpose of Greek city-state wars was to preserve political independence, and the result of the war was usually that the defeated side paid reparations, demolished walls, or was forced to join the alliance of the victorious side, but was rarely completely annexed; The Spring and Autumn War experienced a transformation from "ceremonial conquest" to "annexation war", and the early wars were bound by the Zhou rites, but with the collapse of rituals and music, the purpose of the war shifted from "punishment" to "annexation", and the destruction of the country at the end of the Spring and Autumn Annals became the norm. This difference in the nature of war reflects the different political logics and concepts of the international order.

#### **2.3.3. Comparison of military organizations**

The Greek Citizen Soldier Phalanx embodies the combination of democratic politics and limited warfare; The Spring and Autumn aristocratic chariot system reflected the military monopoly of the hierarchical society, and the rise of the infantry in the late period promoted social change. The Greek military force was based on the militia system, which was composed of hoplite phalanxes composed of land-owning middle-class citizens with their own armor and weapons. In the early Spring and Autumn Annals, the war was centered on chariots, which required flat terrain and long-term training, limited to the ranks of ministers and officials, forming a military aristocratic monopoly, but in the late Spring and Autumn Annals, infantry gradually rose, changing the form of

warfare and promoting social mobility and civilian political participation.

#### 2.3.4. Comparison of geographical environment and cultural identity

Geographical factors have an important impact on the formation of the two systems. The mountainous maritime environment of Greece caused natural division, and no river valley could accommodate a large enough population to form a unified state. Maritime trade facilitated colonial expansion, but the colonies maintained political independence, such as Syracuse, which originated from Corinth but became an independent power. In contrast, the plain environment of China's Yellow River Basin is conducive to agricultural intensification and population concentration. Li Feng shows through archaeological evidence that the feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty relied on the Yellow River, Weihe River and other water systems to establish a transportation network, forming a relatively unified political and cultural space. Cultural identity is also crucial. Although Greek city-states share language and religion (Olympiad and Delphi oracle), "city-state patriotism" has always overwhelmed pan-Hellenic identity, and Aristotle emphasized that "man is the animal of the city-state" rather than "Greek". The princes of the Spring and Autumn Annals shared the Zhou Li culture, and the "distinction between Huayi and the barbarians" built a sense of civilized community, and even if the Zhou royal family declined, the concept of "the world" still provided a cultural foundation for unification.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper systematically compares the ancient Greek city-state system and the Spring and Autumn prince system, and reveals the deep differences and historical significance of the state system and war mode under the two "small countries" pattern. At the institutional level, the Greek city-states were based on the principle of sovereign equality, and the alliances were loose and temporary, lacking hierarchical order; The princes of the Spring and Autumn Annals were based on patriarchal blood and the order of rites and music, and achieved relatively institutionalized international coordination through the hegemonic alliance system. In terms of the nature of the war, the purpose of the Greek war was to maintain independence and rarely annexed; The Spring and Autumn War evolved from a ceremonial conquest to a war of annexation, reflecting the transformation from "punishment" to "survival competition". In terms of military organization, the Greek militia phalanx embodies the combination of democratic politics and limited war; The Spring and Autumn aristocratic chariot system reflected the military monopoly of the hierarchical society, and the rise of the infantry in the late period promoted social change. At the end of history, Greece was conquered by an external force (Macedonia), and the politics of the city-state ended but the cultural tradition continued; The Spring and Autumn Annals moved towards the unification of the Qin and Han dynasties through internal integration and established the imperial tradition.

The theoretical contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects: first, it enriches the comparative vision of the history of international relations, and the existing international relations theories are mostly based on European experience (Westphalian system), and this paper reveals the diversity of ancient international systems through non-Western cases; Secondly, the cross-civilizational applicability of the theory of "war-state formation" is verified, and both Greece and Spring and Autumn show the law of military competition promoting institutional change, but the final difference shows the moderating role of cultural concept and geographical environment. Third, it reflects on geographical determinism and cultural determinism, both geography and culture are important variables, but the single causal model should not be mechanically applied, and the importance of historical contingency and actor choice should be emphasized.

There are also certain limitations in the research: the problem of comparability of historical materials, there are differences in nature, detail and credibility between Greek historical materials (Thucydides, Herodotus) and Chinese historical materials (Zuo Commentary, Shiji), and the comparison needs to be handled with caution; The in-depth excavation of the causal mechanism is insufficient, limited by space, and the role of economic foundation, class structure and other factors cannot be fully developed. The quantitative analysis of war details is insufficient, and in the future,

the historical database method can be used to quantitatively compare the frequency, scale, and casualties of wars.

Future research can be expanded in the following directions: the comparison will be extended to the Warring States period, and the institutional transformation from the Spring and Autumn Annals to the Warring States period will be examined how the institutional transformation affected the war mode; introducing the Roman Republic as a third-party comparison to explore another path of "small countries moving towards unification"; Deepen the analysis of factors such as economic foundation and social structure, and build a more comprehensive interpretation framework.

The comparative study of the ancient international system not only has academic value, but also provides a historical mirror for understanding contemporary international relations: the diversity of sovereignty concepts, the "absolute sovereignty" of the Greek city-states and the "nominal suzerainty" of the Spring and Autumn princes represent two sovereignty concepts, and the contemporary international system (United Nations, the European Union) also faces the tension between sovereignty transfer and national independence; The effectiveness of the alliance mechanism, the looseness of the Delos League and the Peloponnesian League and the relative stability of the Spring and Autumn Council system reveal that an effective international mechanism requires the common identity and institutionalization of member states. The dialectical relationship between war and order, both Greece and Spring and Autumn reshaped the order through war, but the former failed to establish a stable hegemonic system, and the latter moved towards unification, which suggests that the construction of contemporary international order needs to find a balance between power competition and institutionalization.

History will not be simply repeated, but the laws of history are worth pondering. The rise and fall of ancient Greece and the Spring and Autumn Annals enlighten us: the state system shapes the pattern of war, and war in turn reshapes the political order. This understanding not only helps to deepen our understanding of the ancient world, but also provides valuable historical wisdom for thinking about contemporary international relations.

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