1.2.1 Introduction

The life of Yan Ying, the main protagonist of the Yanzi chunqiu, was defined by two facts. The first is the position of the family into which he was born. The Yan family was a long-established family holding a minor hereditary rank within the state of Qi, the major power on the Shandong peninsula. Although the origins of the Yan family were lost in the mists of time, they seem to have been established as a ministerial clan since at least the time of Lord Huan of Qi. However, it was not until the time of Yan Ying’s father, Yan Ruo 晏弱 (d. 556 BCE), that the family emerged into international prominence. By the time that Yan Ying took office, although his family still ranked far below such luminaries as the Guo 鄔 and Gao 高 clans who had held the highest ranks within the government as a hereditary prerogative for many centuries, they were undoubtedly firmly established within the ruling elite of the state of Qi. This long-standing hereditary rank within the state of Qi presented Yan Ying with life-long obligations: not only was he destined to hold ministerial office in his turn as the heir to his father, Yan Ruo, but he was also responsible for the well-being and security of his clan as a whole—a vast extended family with property and positions of their own in every corner of the country. In a number of the stories that figure in the Yanzi chunqiu (for example 4.12: “Master Yan went on a diplomatic mission to Lu. The ruler of Lu asked him how he could serve a wicked and devious ruler. Master Yan replied that it was to protect his family” Yanzi shi Lu. Lujun wen he shi hui qu zhi jun. Yanzi dui yi bi zu 晏子使魯。魯君問何事回曲之君。晏子對以庇族), Master Yan stresses that while in a dangerous situation he could potentially pack up and leave, his family would have to stay to face the wrath of those he had offended. It would be simply impossible to take everyone with him. Such a selfish act was more than he was prepared to contemplate. This dilemma should be considered a reflection of the situation of the historical Yan Ying. Regardless of whether the historical figure expressed

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1 See Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳, Guanzi jiaozhu 管子校注 [Book of Master Guan Collated and with a Commentary] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004) 368 ["Dakuang 大匡"]. The relevant story records the events of the nineteenth year of Lord Huan of Qi’s reign; that is 667 BCE.
2 The date of Yan Ruo’s death is given in the Zuozhuan, 1033 [Xiang 17]. His funeral is the subject of a story about Master Yan’s excellent knowledge of ritual that is recorded in a number of ancient texts.
3 See Yanzi chunqiu, 257–258.
his worries and moral concerns about the prospect of abandoning the rest of his clan to their fates in the elegant rhetorical terms found in the Yanzi chunqiu or not, Master Yan's difficulties in how to balance his obligations to protect his family with his qualms about serving in the governments of a succession of unsatisfactory rulers and dictators is strongly rooted in fact.

The second fact that served to define Yan Ying's life was that he lived through an extremely turbulent time in the history of the state of Qi. During the course of his political career, beginning in approximately 550 BCE and ending in 500 BCE with his death, Yan Ying served in a wide variety of governments. First, as a young man, he is said to have served under Lord Ling of Qi (r. 581–554 BCE). After Lord Ling's death, he served his heir, Lord Zhuang of Qi (r. 553–548 BCE). In 556 BCE, Yan Ying's father died, thus clearing the way for him to inherit the family's ministerial rank. This would place Yan Ying at the very heart of the administrational structure when Qi was hit with an enormous crisis with the murder of Lord Zhuang in highly scandalous circumstances. Yan Ying would remain in the government during the rule of two dictators—Cui Shu (d. 546 BCE) and Qing Feng (d. 538 BCE)—before the Jiang ruling house was restored in the person of the Honourable Chujiu, better known by his posthumous title of Lord Jing. Yan Ying would serve under Lord Jing of Qi for forty-eight years, until his death. Thus, although the date of Yan Ying's birth is not known, he cannot have been much less than eighty years of age. His exceptionally long life allowed him to live through a number of appalling crisis situations; his high office meant that he experienced them at first hand.

1.2.2 The Father: Yan Ruo

Although Yan Ying's family had apparently been working within the government of the state of Qi for some generations, holding some kind of official rank, nothing is known about any of his ancestors. Yan Ruo, his father, was the first and only member of the family to achieve any kind of renowned before

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4 The “Shizhong Yangong shendao beiming 侍中晏公神道碑銘” (Tomb Stele for the Palace Attendant Yan [Shu]) by Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) suggests that the distinguished Song dynasty statesman Yan Shu 晏殊 not only claimed to be a direct descendant of Yan Ying, but also that the family represented a branch of the Jiang ruling house of Qi. This appears to represent a much later tradition, aimed at the aggrandizement of the Yan family; see Xuan Zhaolqi, Liu Yingqiu 宣兆琦, 劉迎秋, “Lun Yan Ying de zhengzhi shijian 論晏嬰的政治實踐 [A Discussion of the Political Practices of Yan Ying],” Yantai shifan xueyuan xuebao (Zheshe ban) 烟台師范學院學報(哲社版) 1996.1: 20.