In recent years, newly unearthed manuscripts from ancient China have prompted a number of important studies reexamining changes in conceptions of the role of minister during the Springs-and-Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) and Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國, 453–221 BCE) periods, especially as they relate to notions of “loyalty” (zhong 忠), “trustworthiness” (xin 信), and just what may constitute appropriate forms of remonstrance. Such studies have shown how the notion of “loyalty” gradually changed from one of selfless action in accordance with the long-term interests of the state, under the guise of which ministers could occasionally find grounds to act independently of the directions of the ruler, to one in which itinerant advisers, with interests less tied to any particular state, shifted the locus of loyalty to more abstract ideals and precepts and thereby redefined the role of minister as a more independent actor demanding a greater degree of reciprocal respect on the part of the ruler.1

The present essay seeks to shed further light on this complex set of issues by focusing on one particular corpus in which such issues are brought into sharp relief: the Yanzi chunqiu— a work that itself involves both the Springs-and-Autumns and the Warring States periods in interesting and complicated ways. At the same time, it will also attempt to demonstrate how the examination of these issues may cause us to reevaluate the importance of this long-neglected work to the study of pre-imperial Chinese political and intellectual history, and may even lead us to gain some tentative insights into the dating of the work itself.

Yanzi and the Yanzi chunqiu 晏子春秋

Perhaps more than any other literary and historical figure in the early Chinese tradition, Yanzi, or Yan Ying 晏婴, aka Yan Pingzhong 晏平仲 (d. 500 BCE), is

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essentially defined by his refusal to place private loyalties over allegiance to the state and its people. His first appearance in the Zuo zhuan 左傳 in a narrative of any extended length has him ironically defining the proper conception of ministerial loyalty through an act of self-preservation: his refusal to show his respect for his recently assassinated ruler, Lord Zhuang of Qi 齊莊公 (r. 553–548 BCE), by dying or fleeing. Lord Zhuang had just been murdered by the very man who had been responsible for bringing him to the throne in the first place, his prime minister Cui Zhu 崔杼, after Lord Zhuang had severely offended Cui through private acts of folly and arrogance. Yanzi, in his indelible wisdom, refuses to take the fall on behalf of such a morally intractable ruler, opting instead to remain alive and well in Qi, reasoning as follows:

Yanzi was standing outside Cui’s gate, and one of his followers asked him:

“Will you die [for your ruler]?”

“Was he my ruler alone? Why would I die [for him]?” replied Yanzi.

“Will you take your leave?”

“Was [his death] my crime? Why would I flee?”

“Will you return home?”

“With our ruler now dead, to where shall I return? Does he who rules the people do so for the purpose of bullying them? It is the altars of state that he is to preside over! Does he who serves as minister to the ruler do so for the purpose of filling his own mouth? It is the altars of state that he must nourish! Thus, if the ruler dies for the altars of state, one should die for him; if he flees for the sake of the altars of state, one should flee with him. But if he dies or flees for his own reasons, who but his personal cronies would dare take on such a burden? Now this person [Cui Zhu] has his [own choice for] ruler [established] and then assassinates him—what would give me cause to die for [this ruler]? What would give me cause to flee for him? To what end would I return home?”