

Warring states period

Chinese people are fond of saying that their country has the longest continuous history of any still existing state, yet the subject of this history – “China,” “the Middle Kingdom” – has itself varied considerably over time. What we mean by “Chinese people” is also less than clear. People who historically have lived in what today is China have represented many hundreds of different ethnic groups, and even within the largest of these – the Han people – a number of mutually incomprehensible languages have been spoken. It is only in the latter part of the nineteenth-century that it becomes possible to talk about a Chinese “nation,” understood as a community of people which encompassed the whole country. What made a person Chinese, and what brought a sense of unity to the Chinese people, was instead a shared set of rituals and seasonal celebrations. These rituals go way back. The first powerful rulers – the Shang, 1600-1046, BCE, who ruled over a kingdom in the fertile valley of the Yellow River – engaged in human sacrifice and ancestor worship, and they were the first to use characters, divinations inscribed on so called “oracle bones,” as a means of writing. While human sacrifice soon ceased, ancestor worship and the Chinese form of writing has survived to this day.

During the following dynasty, the Zhou, 1050-777 BCE, the kings became increasingly powerful and the territory they controlled increased dramatically. They regarded themselves as “Sons of Heaven” who had been given a “Mandate of Heaven” to rule the country. This mandate could be revoked, however, by any rebels who could demonstrate that they were powerful enough to take over the state. A successful rebellion was proof that Heaven had bestowed its favors on the rebels. Towards the end of the Zhou dynasty, political power began to fragment as regional leaders who had been given their own land by the kings asserted their independence. Eventually seven

separate states emerged, and during the subsequent Spring and Autumn period, 771-481 BCE, these kingdoms were constantly at war with each other. The period is named after the "Spring and Autumn Annals," a history of the state of Lu, which was the name of one of the warring states.

The wars continued for several hundred years although historians usually distinguish the Warring States period, 475-221 BCE, as a separate era. During the Warring States period, we could perhaps say, China was not a country as much as an international system in its own right. The seven independent states engaged in all the traditional forms of power politics: forging alliances, making treaties and fighting wars, and taking turns in the status as the most powerful state in the system. The armies were enormous, counting up to perhaps 1,000,000 men, and it is said that some 100,000 soldiers might die in a single battle. Not surprisingly, the Warring States period is a favorite of twenty-first-century costume dramas on Chinese TV. Eventually one of the states, Qin, emerged on top. The question for the smaller states was how they should react to Qin's ascendancy, and the topic was much discussed by philosophers and military strategists at the time. These scholars would often travel around China giving advise to the various rulers. *[Read more: Sunzi and modern management techniques]*

At the time, two strategies were particularly prominent, associated with two different schools of strategic thought. The first school advocated a "vertical," or north-south, alliance referred to as *hezong*, according to which the six states should joint together in an alliance to repel Qin. The other school advocated a "horizontal," or east-west, alliance called *lianheng*, according to which the states should rather become Qin's allies and seek its protection. The question, in other words, was whether the states should use balance of power politics to counter Qin or to jump on the Qin bandwagon. At first the balancing strategy had some success but

eventually it broke down due because of fears and mutual suspicions among the six smaller states. Skillfully planting rumors and sowing discord, the diplomats of the Qin court successfully played its opponents against each other.

Since this was a bleak time of insecurity and war, it is surprising to learn that the Warring States period also was a time of great economic progress and cultural flourishing. Military competition, it seems, helped spur innovation. The imperative for all seven states, as the popular dictum put it, was to “enrich the nation and to strengthen the army.” This was first of all the case as far as military hardware was concerned, with new forms of swords, crossbows and chariots being invented. In addition, each state became far better organized and administrated. Taxes were collected more efficiently, the independent power of the nobility was suppressed, and a new class of bureaucrats took over the running of state affairs and organized their work according to formal procedures. A powerful state required a powerful economy, and to this end farming techniques were developed and major irrigation projects undertaken. In addition, the production of the new weapons required the development of new industrial techniques. The amount of cast iron produced by China already in the fifth-century BCE would not be rivaled by the rest of the world until the middle of the eighteenth-century CE, over two thousand years later. And economic markets developed too, with coins being used to pay for goods from all over China but also from distant lands far beyond – including Manchuria, Korea and even India.

The intellectual developments of the period were at least as extraordinary. The Warring States period was known as the age of the “Hundred Schools,” and it was the time when all major Chinese systems of thought first came to be established. Eventually nine of these schools came to dominate over the others, a group which included Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism and Mohism. *[Read more: The Mohists]* Many of these ideas too

were propagated by scholars who wandered from one court to the other, and since there were multiple centers of competing power, even unorthodox ideas would be given a sympathetic hearing somewhere. Kongzi, 551–479 BCE – better known outside of China as “Confucius” – is no doubt the most famous of these wandering scholars. Born in the state of Lu in what today is the Shandong province, Kongzi rose from lowly jobs as a cow-herder and clerk to become advisor to the king of Lu himself. Yet political intrigues forced him to leave the court, and this was when he began his life as a peripatetic teacher. Kongzi’s philosophy emphasized the importance of personal conduct and he insisted that the virtue of the rulers was more important than formal legal rules. Moral conduct, as Kongzi saw it, is above all a matter of maintaining the obligations implied by the social relationships into which we enter. Society in the end consists of nothing but hierarchical pairs – between father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, ruler and subject, and between friends. The inferior party in each pair should submit to the power and to the will of the superior, but the superior has the duty to care for the inferior and to look after his or her welfare. A well-ordered society is a society where these duties are faithfully carried out. *[Read more: Kongzi and his institutes]*

Daoism is a philosophy associated with Laozi, a contemporary of Kongzi and the author of the *Daodejing*, a text of aphorisms and wisdom. Yet there is little historical evidence for the actual existence of a person by that name and Laozi’s teachings are for that reason best regarded as a compilation of texts produced by other authors. *Dao*, “the way,” is the name of a religious teaching but it is also a set of hands-on advice for how to live a successful life. Daoist monks emphasized the spiritual dimensions of human existence and sought to communicate with the spirits of nature. They meditated on mountain tops and in other scenic settings and tried to capture the *qi*, the “natural energy” or “life force,” which animates everything that is alive. Yet Daoist monks were

also very preoccupied with matters of longevity and health. It was Daoist monks above all who developed Chinese medicine, including acupuncture, massage and *taiqi* exercises. But they have also concerned themselves with ways to make money, with how to produce many children and even with sexual practices. Daoism has had an impact on politics too, and its spiritualism and disdain for formal rules have inspired many political movements which have set themselves against the political authorities of the day.

But it was the Legalists who were to have the most direct impact on practical politics. Legalism is a literal translation of the school of political philosophy which the Chinese know as *fajiao*, and the law was indeed important to them but only as a tool of statecraft. The Legalists assumed that all people act only in their own self-interest and that they follow no moral codes with which they disagree. It is only the law, and its enforcement, which can keep people in line and guarantee peace and order in society. The law must therefore be clear enough for everyone to understand it, and the punishments which it metes out must be harsh enough to make sure that everyone obeys. In the end it was only the state and its survival that mattered to the Legalists. In fact, the ruler was free to act in whichever way he wanted as long as it benefited the state. This applied not least to matters of foreign policy. Alliances could be made but also broken; ostensibly friendly countries could be attacked without warning; peace negotiations could serve as a pretext for starting another war, and so on.

Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, 259-210 BCE, came to power on the back of advice such as these. He suppressed the rivaling states and united the country, standardized weights and measures, the Chinese language, and even the width of roads and of the axles of carts. In an attempt to restart Chinese history, and to do it on his own terms, he ordered all classical texts to be burned and he had Confucian scholars

buried alive. The First Emperor died from mercury poisoning at the age of 50 – ironically, after digesting some pills designed to make him immortal. *[Read more: The necropolis of the First Emperor]* Despite the Legalists' ruthless advice, or perhaps because of it, the Qin dynasty only lasted 15 years, and after Qin Shi Huang's death the country soon descended into yet another round of wars. Yet Confucianism and Legalism would continue to play an important role throughout Chinese history. Although Confucianism has been regarded as the official doctrine of the Chinese state, it has often been the principles of the Legalists which the rulers actually have relied on. *[Read more: Chairman Mao and Legalism]* Confucianism is the velvet glove and Legalism the iron fist.