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Mozi

The Sage of Universal Love and Innovation — A Portrait of China's Master Philosopher

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PART ONE

The Man and His World

Chapter One

A World That Would Not Stop Bleeding

血流不止的天下

The Long Twilight of Zhou

To understand Mozi, one must first understand the world that broke around him.

Five centuries before his birth, around 1046 BCE, a people from the western valleys known as the Zhou overthrew the Shang dynasty, whose kings had ruled the Yellow River plain for half a millennium. The Zhou victors faced a problem that every conquering dynasty faces: how to hold a vast territory with limited means of communication and control. Their solution was a network of fiefdoms. Relatives of the royal house, loyal allies, and descendants of older ruling lines were granted lands to govern in the king's name. In return, they owed the Zhou king military service, tribute, and ritual deference.

To justify their conquest, the Zhou developed a powerful idea: the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven, they taught, grants the right to rule to a virtuous house and withdraws it when that house becomes corrupt and cruel. The Shang had lost the Mandate through their wickedness. The Zhou had received it through their virtue. The idea was a double-edged sword. It legitimized the new dynasty, but it also implied that the Zhou, too, could lose the Mandate if they failed.

For roughly two and a half centuries, the system held. Then, in 771 BCE, the Zhou capital in the west was sacked by an alliance of rebel lords and non-Zhou peoples, and the king was killed. The royal court fled east and reestablished itself at Luoyi, near modern Luoyang. Historians call the period that followed the Eastern Zhou. The kings still reigned, but they no longer truly ruled. Their domain shrank to a small territory around the capital. Real power passed to the great regional lords, who now governed their states as independent rulers in all but name.

Historians divide the Eastern Zhou into two eras. The first is the Spring and Autumn period, named after the chronicle of the state of Lu that records its events year by year, running roughly from 770 to 481 BCE. The second is the Warring States period, from about 475 BCE until the Qin unification in 221 BCE. Mozi was born at the hinge between these two eras. He grew up as one world was ending and a harsher one was being born.

The Old Rules of War

In the early Spring and Autumn period, warfare among the Zhou states was, at least in theory, governed by a code. It was an aristocratic affair. The decisive weapon was the war chariot, expensive to build and maintain and requiring years of training to use well. The men who fought from chariots were nobles, members of a hereditary warrior class who shared a common culture, common rituals, and often common ancestors. Battles were frequently short. Campaigns were seasonal, fought between the harvest and the spring planting. The goal was usually to humble a rival, extract concessions, or settle a question of precedence, not to annihilate an enemy state.

The surviving records preserve stories that seem almost unbelievable to a modern reader. A commander declines to attack an enemy army while it is crossing a river, because it would be dishonorable to strike before they had formed their ranks. A charioteer pauses in the middle of a pursuit to help an enemy fix his broken chariot. An archer, having

exhausted his arrows, bows to his opponent. Some of these stories may be idealized. They were told in later centuries partly to show how far things had fallen. But they reflect a real memory of a time when war among the Zhou states was constrained by shared aristocratic values.

The most famous of these stories concerns Duke Xiang of Song, in 638 BCE. Facing a larger army from Chu at the Hong River, he refused his officers' advice to attack while the enemy was crossing, and then again refused to attack before they had formed their battle lines. When the battle finally began, Song was crushed and the duke himself was wounded. He defended his decision to the end: a gentleman, he said, does not strike an enemy who is not yet ready. Later commentators were divided. Some praised him as the last true gentleman. Others mocked him as a fool whose scruples got his own soldiers killed.

That debate, between honor and effectiveness, was already being settled in favor of effectiveness. By Mozi's time, it was over.

The New Machinery of Slaughter

Several changes, unfolding over two or three centuries, transformed warfare from a ritualized aristocratic contest into something closer to what we would recognize as total war.

The first was iron. Bronze had been the metal of the old aristocracy: expensive, rare, and controlled by elites. Iron, once the techniques for casting it became widespread, was cheap and abundant. By the Warring States period, iron tools were transforming agriculture, allowing more land to be cleared and plowed, which in turn allowed larger populations. Iron weapons were slower to arrive on the battlefield, but they came. A state with more peasants and cheaper weapons could field larger armies.

The second was the crossbow. Chinese crossbows, with their intricate bronze trigger mechanisms, could be operated by an ordinary

conscript after relatively little training, and they could pierce armor at a distance. The crossbow helped to make the mass infantry army practical. It also made the individual aristocratic warrior far less decisive.

The third change was in the size of armies. Spring and Autumn armies were counted in the thousands or the low tens of thousands. By the later Warring States period, the records speak of armies of hundreds of thousands. Even if these numbers are inflated, as many historians suspect, the scale of mobilization had clearly grown enormously. States began to register their populations, organize them into units of five and ten households for mutual responsibility, and draft their young men for service. War was no longer the business of a warrior class. It was the business of everyone.

The fourth change was in the duration and purpose of campaigns. Wars were no longer seasonal skirmishes to settle questions of rank. They were wars of conquest, aimed at absorbing territory and population. At the start of the Spring and Autumn period, there were well over a hundred states of various sizes in the Zhou world. By the Warring States period, the number had fallen to a few dozen, and the great powers could be counted on two hands: Qin in the west, Chu in the south, Qi in the east, Yan in the northeast, and the three states that had emerged from the partition of the old state of Jin: Han, Zhao, and Wei. The small states that survived, among them Lu, Song, Wei (a different Wei), Zheng, and others, lived in the shadow of these giants.

The fifth change, and the one most important for understanding Mozi, was the rise of siege warfare. When the goal of war becomes conquest, cities become the targets. Walls grew higher and thicker, built of rammed earth layered and pounded until it was nearly as hard as stone. Attackers responded with siege engines: towers, ladders, battering rams, catapults, and tunnels dug beneath the walls. Defenders responded with countermeasures. Sieges could last months. When a city fell after a long resistance, the consequences for its inhabitants could be catastrophic.

A later text, the Zuozhuan, preserves a grim phrase describing a city under siege so long that its people "exchanged children and ate them, split bones and cooked with them." The phrase became a stock expression for the extremity of siege. It was not merely a figure of speech.

The Cost to Ordinary People

Mozi's writings return again and again to what war meant for the ordinary people who had no say in starting it.

A military campaign, he points out, could not be fought in winter because of the cold, nor in summer because of the heat. It had to be fought in spring or autumn. But spring was the season of planting, and autumn the season of harvest. Every campaign therefore took farmers from their fields at exactly the moment their labor was most needed. If they were away in spring, the fields went unplanted. If they were away in autumn, the crops rotted unharvested. In either case, the result was hunger.

He catalogues the material losses as well: the bamboo arrows, the feathered pennants, the tents and armor and shields and sword hilts that went out with an army and never came back; the spears and lances broken and scattered; the oxen and horses that left fat and returned lean, or did not return at all. He counts the people who died on the roads from lack of food, the soldiers who perished of disease in camp, the men killed in battle beyond counting. And he notes that the families of the dead lost not only their sons but the ancestral sacrifices those sons would have offered. Whole lineages were extinguished.

His tone in these passages is not the tone of a poet lamenting the tragedy of war. It is the tone of an accountant. He wants his readers to see the ledger. On one side are the costs: the dead, the starving, the fields untilled, the wealth destroyed. On the other side are the

benefits: some land, perhaps; some glory for the ruler; some plunder. And in his judgment, the ledger never balances.

This accounting style is one of the most distinctive things about Mozi. Where other thinkers of his time talked of virtue and ritual, of harmony and the Way, Mozi talked about food, clothing, shelter, population, and order. He asked of every policy a simple question: does it benefit the people, or does it harm them?

The Rise of the Wandering Advisors

The collapse of the old order created a new kind of person, and it is this new kind of person that Mozi became.

In the old Zhou system, government was a family business. Offices passed from father to son within noble lineages. A man's rank was determined by his birth, and his education, in ritual, archery, charioteering, music, and the classics, prepared him for the station into which he had been born.

But as the old aristocratic families were destroyed by war, displaced by rivals, or simply impoverished, a class of educated men emerged who had learning but no hereditary position. They were called shi. The word originally referred to the lowest rank of the aristocracy, the knights or retainers who served the great lords. Over time it came to mean, more broadly, a man of education and ability who sought employment in government.

At the same time, the rulers of the competing states had an urgent need for talent. A state that wished to survive needed capable administrators, clever diplomats, skilled generals, and sound advisors. The old families could not supply enough of them, and in any case the old families were often the ruler's rivals for power. So rulers began to recruit men of ability from wherever they could be found, and to reward them on the basis of results rather than birth.

The result was an extraordinary marketplace of ideas and talent. Wandering advisors traveled from court to court, offering their services and their theories of government. Some were strategists who promised military victory. Some were diplomats who promised alliances. Some were philosophers who promised that their way of governing would bring order, prosperity, and the allegiance of all the people under Heaven.

Confucius, who lived from about 551 to 479 BCE, was the first great figure of this new type. He came from a family of minor aristocrats who had fallen on hard times. He spent much of his life traveling from state to state, seeking a ruler who would put his ideas into practice. He never found one. But he attracted disciples, and through them his teaching survived and spread.

Mozi was born perhaps a decade after Confucius died. He entered a world in which the role of wandering teacher and advisor had already been established, and in which the Confucians were already the leading school. He would follow the same path, but from a very different starting point and toward a very different destination.

A Hundred Schools Contending

Later Chinese historians would call this era the time of the "Hundred Schools of Thought." The phrase is an exaggeration, but not by much. In the two and a half centuries between Confucius and the Qin unification, Chinese thinkers explored nearly every major question that philosophy has ever asked. What is the good life? What makes a government legitimate? Is human nature good or bad? What is the relationship between names and things? How do we know what we know? Is there a cosmic order, and if so, how should we relate to it?

The major schools that emerged from this ferment would shape Chinese civilization for the next two thousand years. The Confucians, or Ru, emphasized ritual propriety, filial piety, humaneness, and the cultivation of virtue through study of the ancient classics. The

Daoists, whose great texts are the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, sought harmony with the spontaneous Way of nature and distrusted elaborate social conventions. The Legalists, whose theories would guide the Qin conquest, held that order could be achieved only through strict laws, harsh punishments, and the concentration of power in the ruler. The Yin-Yang theorists sought to understand the cosmic forces governing nature and history. The Logicians debated paradoxes of language and reference. Agriculturalists, strategists, and diplomats each had their own schools as well.

And then there were the Mohists.

For roughly two centuries, the Mohists were not one school among a hundred. They were one of the two great schools. Han Feizi, the Legalist philosopher who wrote in the third century BCE, opened one of his essays with a striking observation: "The prominent teachings of the age are those of the Confucians and the Mohists." Mencius, the great Confucian of the fourth century BCE, complained that the words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di filled the world, so that anyone who did not follow one followed the other. Even allowing for rhetorical exaggeration, it is clear that Mohism was, for a time, a dominant force in Chinese intellectual life.

To understand why, we need to understand the man who founded it.

Where Mozi Stood

Before we turn to Mozi's life, it is worth pausing on a question that will run through this entire book: what, exactly, was Mozi's diagnosis of his world?

Many of his contemporaries looked at the chaos around them and saw a moral decline from a golden age. The old rituals were no longer observed. The old hierarchies were no longer respected. The solution, they thought, was to restore the old ways.

Mozi looked at the same chaos and saw something different. He agreed that the world was in disorder. He even agreed that the sage-kings of antiquity had governed better. But he did not think the problem was a failure to observe the old rituals. He thought the problem was something more fundamental: partiality.

People cared for themselves and not for others. They cared for their own families and not for other families. Rulers cared for their own states and not for other states. And because each person, each family, and each state pursued its own benefit at the expense of others, the result was a world of theft, violence, and war. A thief steals from another household because he cares for his own household and not for the other. A noble attacks another noble's lineage because he cares for his own lineage and not for the other. A ruler attacks another state because he cares for his own state and not for the other.

The cure, therefore, could not be to restore the old hierarchies, which were themselves built on partiality. The cure had to be something new. Mozi called it jian ai: inclusive care, or impartial concern for all. If people regarded other people's states as they regarded their own, who would attack them? If people regarded other people's families as their own, who would harm them? If people regarded other people as they regarded themselves, who would injure them?

It was a radical idea. It cut against the deepest instincts of human beings, and against the deepest values of the culture in which Mozi lived, a culture built on loyalty to family, lineage, and lord. It would provoke fierce opposition. And it would make Mozi, for a time, one of the most influential thinkers in China.

But before he was a philosopher, he was a craftsman. And it is to that craftsman that we now turn.

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