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Qin Shi Huang

The First Emperor of Unified China — The Emperor Who Unified China, Created the Imperial System, Standardized Writing and Measures, and Built the Great Wall

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PART ONE

The Making of a Conqueror

Chapter One

A World at War — The Warring States

第一章：战国——兵戈之世

The Fading of the Zhou

In the eleventh century BCE, according to the tradition that every Chinese schoolchild later learned, the virtuous rulers of a western people called the Zhou overthrew the last cruel king of the Shang dynasty and founded a new order. The Zhou kings claimed that they ruled by the Mandate of Heaven, a moral commission that Heaven granted to the worthy and withdrew from the wicked. To govern the vast territory they had conquered, they sent royal kinsmen and loyal allies out to the east to hold walled towns and the lands around them. These lords owed the king loyalty, tribute, and military service. In return they ruled their domains as hereditary possessions.

For about two and a half centuries the arrangement held. Then, in 771 BCE, the Zhou capital in the Wei River valley was sacked by an alliance of rebellious lords and non-Zhou peoples, and King You was killed. His son, King Ping, fled east to a secondary capital near modern Luoyang. The kings of the Eastern Zhou, as the period after 771 is called, kept their title and their ritual dignity, but they never recovered their military power. Real authority passed to the great lords of the regional states.

Historians divide the centuries that followed into two periods named after books. The first, from 770 to about 481 BCE, is called the Spring and Autumn period, after a chronicle of the state of Lu traditionally associated with Confucius. The second, from about 481 to 221 BCE, is called the Warring States period, after a later collection of political anecdotes, the Zhanguo ce, or Stratagems of the Warring States. The names are a little misleading. The Spring and Autumn period was hardly peaceful. But there was a real change in the character of war and politics between the two, and that change made the First Emperor possible.

In the Spring and Autumn period there were well over a hundred states, large and small. Warfare was still shaped by aristocratic codes. Battles were fought by nobles in chariots, supported by modest bodies of foot soldiers. Campaigns were usually short. The great powers competed for the position of ba, or hegemon, a kind of senior protector who organized alliances in the name of the Zhou king. Conquest happened, but the destruction of an entire noble house was a grave matter, and ritual mattered: the chronicles record generals who refused to attack an enemy that was still crossing a river, because it would have been dishonorable.

By the fifth century those restraints were collapsing. The small states had been swallowed one by one. Within the larger states, the old ruling houses were themselves being overthrown or hollowed out by ministerial families. The most dramatic case was Jin, once the dominant power of the north, which was partitioned in 453 BCE by three of its great families. Their successor states, Han, Zhao, and Wei, were formally recognized by the Zhou king in 403 BCE, an event that many later historians, including the great Song dynasty chronicler Sima Guang, took as the symbolic beginning of the Warring States. In the eastern state of Qi, the ruling house of Jiang was replaced in 386 BCE by the ministerial Tian family. Legitimacy was no longer a matter of descent. It belonged to whoever could hold power.

The Seven Powers

By the fourth century BCE the Chinese world was dominated by seven great states, which later writers called the "seven heroes" of the Warring States. On the east coast lay Qi, wealthy from salt, iron, and trade, with a capital at Linzi that was one of the largest cities in the world. To the south lay Chu, a vast, culturally distinctive state stretching across the middle Yangtze, with its own traditions of religion, art, and poetry, which the northern states regarded as half-barbarian. In the far northeast lay Yan, around the area of modern Beijing. In the center, on the plains of the Yellow River, lay the three successor states of Jin: Han, small and squeezed between larger neighbors; Wei, which was for a time the leading military power; and Zhao, in the north, which bordered the steppe and learned to fight on horseback. And in the far west, in the valley of the Wei River where the Zhou had begun, lay Qin.

Around and between the seven survived a few minor states, such as Lu, Song, Wey, and Zhongshan, as well as the shrunken royal domain of the Zhou kings themselves. Beyond them, to the north and west, lived pastoral and semi-pastoral peoples whom the Chinese states called by various names; to the south lived the many peoples of the Yue. The "Central States," as the core states called themselves, regarded themselves as the civilized world. Its boundaries were not fixed, and Qin and Chu in particular were states that had grown by absorbing the peoples on their frontiers.

The Revolution in War

The defining fact of the Warring States period was the transformation of war. The aristocratic chariot battle gave way to the mass infantry army. States began to register their peasant populations and conscript adult men for military service. Armies that had numbered in the thousands now numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands. The ancient sources give staggering figures: Qin is said to have fielded six hundred thousand men against Chu in 224 BCE, and the casualties claimed for some battles run to the hundreds of thousands. Modern historians treat these figures with caution, because ancient writers had every incentive to exaggerate and no way to count precisely. But even allowing for exaggeration, the scale of warfare was unlike anything earlier China had known.

New technologies accompanied the new armies. Cast iron, produced in quantity from the fifth century onward, became common for agricultural tools and, increasingly, for weapons. The crossbow, with its bronze trigger mechanism, gave ordinary infantrymen a weapon that could pierce armor at long range and required less training than the composite bow. Cavalry, borrowed from the steppe, became important in the north after King Wuling of Zhao famously ordered his soldiers, around 307 BCE, to adopt the trousers and short coats of the horse-riding nomads. States built long defensive walls along their borders. Siege warfare became a specialized science, and treatises on attack and defense circulated among military men.

War on this scale required a new kind of state. It needed accurate population registers so that men could be conscripted and taxes collected. It needed granaries and roads to supply armies in the field. It needed officials who could keep records, measure land, and enforce orders. It needed generals chosen for competence rather than birth. The old hereditary aristocracy was poorly suited to these tasks, and rulers increasingly bypassed it, appointing salaried officials who owed their positions to the ruler alone. Across the Warring States, the

outlines of a centralized bureaucratic state began to emerge, though none pursued that path as far or as ruthlessly as Qin.

The social consequences were profound. Peasants became the foundation of state power, as taxpayers and soldiers. Land became, in many places, something that could be bought and sold. A new class of men, the shi, rose to prominence. Originally the lowest rank of the aristocracy, the shi became a broad group of educated men who lived by their skills: as officials, advisers, military experts, diplomats, teachers, and philosophers. They traveled from court to court seeking employment, and rulers competed to attract them. A talented man from one state might become chancellor of another. Loyalty was increasingly a matter of contract rather than birth.

The War Seen From Below

It is easy to describe the Warring States in terms of kings, generals, and philosophers, because they are the people the sources remember. For the farming families who made up the great majority of the population, the age meant something different. It meant registration, conscription, and taxation by states that needed ever more men and grain. It meant the passage of armies, which ate what they found, and the sieges of cities, in which the defenders sometimes, according to the Zuozhuan and later texts, were reduced to exchanging their children so as not to eat their own. It meant the loss of sons in battles whose casualty figures, even if exaggerated, ran to tens of thousands. It meant deportation when a territory changed hands, and resettlement when a state needed farmers in a newly conquered region.

The philosophers of the age were acutely aware of this suffering. Mozi denounced offensive war as the greatest of crimes, pointing out that a man who stole a pig was punished, while a ruler who seized a state was praised. Mencius told King Hui of Liang that while the king's dogs and pigs ate food meant for people, and there were starved bodies on the roads, the king said it was not his fault but the year's; this,

Mencius said, was no different from stabbing a man and saying it was not oneself but the weapon that killed him. The Daoist texts mocked the ambitions of rulers and recommended a small state with few people, where the inhabitants would hear the dogs and cocks of the next village but never visit it.

The desire for peace was universal. What divided the thinkers was how to achieve it. The Confucians and Mohists hoped that rulers could be persuaded to govern with benevolence. The Legalists believed that peace would come only when one state was strong enough to destroy all the others. The history of the next two centuries would prove the Legalists right about the means, and leave the Confucians to argue, for two thousand years afterward, about whether the price had been worth paying.

The Hundred Schools

From this world of competition and insecurity came the most creative period in the history of Chinese thought, the age of the "Hundred Schools." Thinkers of every kind offered rulers a solution to the problem of disorder.

Confucius, who lived from about 551 to 479 BCE, at the end of the Spring and Autumn period, taught that order could be restored by returning to the moral and ritual traditions of the early Zhou. A good ruler governed by virtue and example rather than by punishment; his ministers should be men of moral cultivation; families should be ordered by filial piety; and society should be held together by li, the rituals and proprieties that taught everyone their place. His followers, among them Mencius in the fourth century and Xunzi in the third, developed these ideas in different directions. Mencius argued that human nature was good and that a ruler who oppressed his people could lose Heaven's mandate. Xunzi argued that human nature was bad and had to be shaped by ritual, education, and law. Xunzi's pupils would include two men central to this story: Han Fei and Li Si.

Mozi, in the fifth century, taught universal care, opposed offensive war, and condemned the extravagance of aristocratic ritual and music. His followers became experts in defensive warfare and traveled to help besieged cities. The Daoist texts associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi counseled withdrawal from the struggle for power, simplicity, and harmony with the Way of nature. Cosmologists such as Zou Yan developed theories of yin and yang and the Five Phases, which explained the rise and fall of dynasties as part of a natural cycle. Strategists, among them the military writers associated with Sunzi, analyzed war as a science of deception, logistics, and timing. Diplomats of the "School of Alliances" made careers persuading rulers to join or break coalitions.

And there were the thinkers whom later tradition grouped together as fajia, the "school of law," usually translated as Legalists. The label is a later classification, and the men it covers did not form a school in the way the Confucians did. What they shared was a conviction that the state could be made strong and orderly through clear laws, consistent rewards and punishments, and the concentration of power in the hands of the ruler. They regarded appeals to ancient virtue as dangerous nostalgia. The past, they argued, had faced different problems; a wise ruler adapted his methods to the present. People were moved by self-interest, by the desire for reward and the fear of punishment, and a properly designed system could harness those motives to serve the state. Agriculture and war were the two essential activities, because they produced the grain and the armies on which survival depended. Merchants, wandering scholars, and private swordsmen were parasites who drew men away from fields and battlefields.

The most influential of these thinkers in practice was Shang Yang, who served Qin in the mid-fourth century BCE. The most brilliant in theory was Han Fei, a prince of the state of Han, who synthesized the earlier Legalist traditions in the third century. Both will appear in later chapters. Their ideas were not the only influence on Qin, which

drew on many traditions, but they gave Qin's leaders a vocabulary and a justification for the most thoroughgoing reconstruction of state and society attempted anywhere in the ancient world.

The Logic of Annihilation

As the fourth century gave way to the third, the competition between the great states became increasingly zero-sum. Diplomacy revolved around two strategies. The "vertical alliance," associated with the persuader Su Qin, sought to unite the states of the east, stretching north to south, against the rising power of Qin in the west. The "horizontal alliance," associated with Qin's minister Zhang Yi, sought to detach individual states from the coalition by bribery, threat, and promises, binding them east to west to Qin. Whether these two men actually played the roles that later stories assigned them is doubtful; the anecdotes about them in the Stratagems of the Warring States are partly fictional. But the pattern they represent was real. Again and again the eastern states formed coalitions against Qin, and again and again the coalitions collapsed as their members pursued their own interests.

The rulers of the great states took the title of king, wang, which had once belonged only to the Zhou monarch. Wei and Qi did so in the 340s and 330s, Qin in 325 BCE, and the others followed. The Zhou kings were left as ritual figures, presiding over a tiny domain around Luoyang, consulted for ceremonies and ignored in practice. In 256 BCE Qin extinguished even that remnant, deposing the last Zhou king and seizing the nine bronze cauldrons that symbolized the right to rule. There was no longer even a pretense that the Chinese world had a single legitimate sovereign. The question was simply which of the warring kings would win.

Many thinkers of the age believed that the answer would be unity. Mencius, asked by a king how the world could be settled, replied that it would be settled by becoming one, and that the one who could unify it would be the ruler who did not delight in killing. The irony of history

is that the world was unified by the ruler who seemed least likely to meet Mencius's standard. By the third century, the state best equipped to win the final contest was the one that the eastern states regarded with the greatest fear and contempt: Qin, the state they called a country of "tigers and wolves."

To understand why Qin won, and why the boy born in Handan in 259 BCE inherited the means to win, we have to look west, to the frontier valley where the Qin people had spent five centuries learning to survive.

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