

### The Warring States Period: Historical Background

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The Oxford Handbook of Early China

*Edited by Elizabeth Childs-Johnson*

Print Publication Date: Jan 2021

Subject: Archaeology, Archaeology of China, Archaeology of East Asia

Online Publication Date: Nov 2020 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328369.013.26

### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter starts with introducing major textual, archeological, and paleographical sources for the history of the Warring States period. It then focuses on the inter-state dynamics following the de facto dissolution of the state of Jin in 453 BCE and up to the Qin unification of 221 BCE. In particular, the chapter explores the rise and fall of the state of Wei as the major hegemonic power in the end of the fifth and the first half of the fourth centuries BCE; the subsequent rise of Qin and attempts to block it through formation of anti-Qin alliances; and, finally, the collapse of these alliances and the acceleration of Qin's territorial expansion in the third century BCE.

Keywords: alliances, Bai Qi, Chu, diplomacy, historiography, Qi, Qin, sources, Wei, Zhao

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<sup>1</sup>At first glance, the political situation of the Chinese world during the Warring States period (453–221 BCE) seems to continue the basic trend of the preceding Springs and Autumns period (chapter 22), namely the ongoing political fragmentation. This fragmentation brought about ever more prolonged, large-scale, and devastating wars, which post-factum gave the period under discussion its gloomy name. Historians who focus on this—admittedly, singularly important—feature of the Warring States era consider it one of the nadirs in the history of Chinese civilization.

A closer look, however, will show fundamental differences between the Warring States period and the preceding age. First and most notable is the trend toward territorial integration of individual states. Loose aristocratic polities of the past were gradually replaced by a centralized bureaucratic state that maintained a much higher degree of domestic order than was attainable during the Springs and Autumns period. Second, the Warring States period was marked by unprecedented dynamism. Armies marched hundreds and even thousands kilometers; peasants migrated—voluntarily or not—to new lands far away from their places of birth; and ambitious statesmen routinely crossed the borders in search of better employment, “serving Qin in the morning and Chu in the evening” (*zhao Qin mu Chu* 朝秦暮楚). This was the age rife with opportunities for skilled individuals of whatever pedigree; the age of painful conflicts but also of manifold new departures, especially in

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the realm of thought (see chapters 30–33); and the age in which the male's career was determined by his worth rather than birth. Third, this was the age of considerable expansion of the Chinese world. In search for new material and (p. 582) human resources, the competing “hero-states” of the Warring States period were engaged in conquest and incorporation of areas previously on the margins or outside the reach of the Zhou civilization. This territorial expansion shaped the geopolitical contours of much of “China proper” as it is known in the imperial era.<sup>2</sup>

## Texts and sources

In 213 BCE, just a few years after the establishment of the first unified empire on Chinese soil, the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇帝 (emp. 221–210 BCE) heeded the advice of his prime minister, Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 BCE) and issued an infamous order to burn the impractical books from private collections. Among the books to be burned were histories composed at the courts of the vanquished Warring States. A century later the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BCE) lamented the loss:

The historical records were stored only in the Zhou archives, and hence were all destroyed. How regrettable! How regrettable! All we have left are the Qin historical records, though they do not record days and months and the text is sketchy and incomplete. (*Shiji* 15:686; Watson 1993:87)

This complaint encapsulates the major problem faced by the historians of the Warring States period. The *Qin Records* salvaged by the future Han chancellor, Xiao He 蕭何 (257–193 BCE), from the Qin archives became the backbone of Sima Qian's own reconstruction of the Warring States history and especially of its chronology (Fujita 2008). Yet the sketchiness and laconism of this source made Sima Qian's task extremely challenging. The historian was able to utilize fragments of other materials in addition to *Qin Records*, such as genealogies of the ruling houses of rival states as well as a few surviving non-Qin chronicles, but these remained of secondary importance. Not a single surviving historical work of the Warring States period could match in comprehensiveness, details, or accuracy the major source for the preceding Springs and Autumns period, *Zuo zhuan* (for which see chapter 23). As a result, the Warring States-period sections in Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*—our major source for the history of that age—contain not a few lapses, especially with regard to chronology and sequence of major events (Yang Kuan 1998:14–16; Pines 2020).

To augment the paucity of reliable historical sources, Sima Qian resorted to multiple anecdotal and quasi-anecdotal collections, most notably those currently incorporated in the *Stratagems of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce* 戰國策). The *Stratagems* is a heterogeneous compilation put together by the Han archivist, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) from several disparate collections. The text comprises hundreds of vignettes, most of which (p. 583) center around a speech by one of the so-called peripatetic persuaders (*youshui* 遊說) who dominated the inter-state relations of the Warring States period. These vignettes and speeches contain rich information about military history, diplomacy, and court in-

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trigues of that age; but the reliability of this information is often questionable. The *Stratagems* were not designed as a historical treatise, and historical accuracy was not the goal of the text's authors and compilers. References to the past events in the *Stratagems* usually appear in the context of political argumentation, which makes the speakers prone to embellish certain events, gloss over others, and at times invent their information altogether. To aggravate matters, the currently available text of the *Stratagems* suffers from considerable textual corruption, which brings about confusion concerning the identity of certain speakers and of the events to which they refer. All these diminish the historical value of the *Stratagems* and of those related anecdotes that were incorporated in the *Records of the Historian* (He Jin 2001).

Another important source of historical information about the Warring States period are the texts of the contemporaneous Masters (or Philosophers, *zi* 子) discussed in chapters 31–33. As historical argumentation was extremely common in the ideological debates of that age, philosophical texts contain references to hundreds of events from the recent and distant past. This is particularly true of the texts from the third century BCE, such as *Han Feizi* 韓非子 or *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, whole sections of which are dedicated to analyzing events of the past and deducing proper lessons from attainments and failures of former statesmen and rulers. These texts may become invaluable in augmenting Sima Qian's data, but utilization of their information requires utmost caution. The overt polemical nature of the Masters' texts makes them even more susceptible to the author's tampering with historical facts than is the case of the *Stratagems*. Moreover, the Masters' texts are not concerned with either historical accuracy or even with systematic presentation of the past. Relating the information in these texts to that in the *Records of the Historian* is an arduous task.

Transmitted texts aside, a historian of the Warring States period may benefit from two additional sources of information. The archeological revolution of recent decades brought to light thousands of contemporaneous sites—from cemeteries to residential areas, from fortifications to ritual structures, from palaces to workshops, from remnants of hydraulic works to roads, long walls, and military installations. These rapidly expanding data allow us to reassess many factors in the lives of contemporaneous societies, ranging from demography and economy to arts, technology, social history, changing cultural identities, and the like (see, e.g., Falkenhausen 2006; Barbiery-Low 2007; Shelach-Lavi 2015 and chapters 26, 28, 34, 35). Although by their nature the archeological data are less pertinent to political history per se, they can be useful in some respects. For instance, they allow tracing with relative precision phases in the territorial expansion of the state of Qin from its original location in the upper Wei 渭 River basin to the middle reaches of the Yellow River and beyond to the Loess Plateau in the north and toward Sichuan Basin in the south (Teng Mingyu 2003, 2014; Falkenhausen 2004:110–115). Similarly, mortuary data allow us to trace the southward expansion of Chu settlements, a topic that is barely mentioned in our sources (Yang Kuan 1998:297n1).

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(p. 584) Another and more important source of information about the history of the Warring States period are paleographic sources. The *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年), looted ca. 279–280 CE from the tomb of King Xiang of Wei 魏襄王 (r. 318–296 BCE), became the earliest historical text unbeknown to Sima Qian that came to light after the publication of the *Records of the Historian*. This annalistic text, akin in its structure to the *Springs and Autumns Annals* of the state of Lu (chapter 23) allowed correction of some of Sima Qian's mistakes and even spurred interest in historical criticism in general.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this spectacular discovery, paleographic findings of recent decades primarily comprise administrative, legal, and religious texts. These greatly expanded our knowledge of the Warring States social, economic, and administrative structure but were less informative in terms of political history. This situation changed in 2011 with the publication of the bamboo manuscript *Xinian* 繫年 (*String of Years* or *Linked Years*) from the collection of the Tsinghua (Qinghua 清華) University (Pines 2014, 2020). The last four sections of this text provide precious information about the history of ca. 450–396 BCE, which is not adequately covered in the extant sources. More information about the Warring States-period history can be extracted from several other bamboo manuscripts and a few lengthy bronze inscriptions. Among the latter, the most notable come from the royal cemetery of the state of Zhongshan 中山. Their publication in the 1970s brought to light the previously much neglected cultural trajectory and history of this polity (Wu Xiaolong 2017).

## Formation of the multistate world: The rise and decline of Wei

In 453 BCE, the state of Jin became engulfed in a bitter conflict among four major aristocratic lineages, the heads of which for generations occupied top positions in the Jin government. After twists and turns, the coalition of the Wei 魏, Han 韓, and Zhao 趙 lineages eliminated their rival, the Zhi 知 lineage, finalizing thereby the partition of the state of Jin into three independent polities. Although it will take another fifty years before the status of the three “usurping ministers” as independent regional lords will be officially confirmed, the year 453 can serve as a convenient starting point of the Warring States history.

Eager to solidify their position and bolster their legitimacy, the heads of the newly formed “Three Jin” polities started implementing a series of social, administrative, military, and economic reforms. The details of these reforms (as of fifth-century-BCE history in general) are sketchy, but their direction—centralization, strengthening the ruler's (p. 585) authority, increasing the state's control over its material and human resources, and bolstering agricultural production—is clear enough. Of particular importance was the readiness of new leaders, most notably Lord Wen of Wei 魏文侯 (r. 445–396 BCE), to employ in top positions men-of-service (*shi* 士) instead of hereditary nobles. The state of Wei attracted a stellar group of advisers, including the military genius Wu Qi 吳起 (d. 381 BCE); an economic reformer, Li Kui 李悝 (fl. 400 BCE); and several disciples and followers of Confu-

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cius. Thanks to these men the state of Wei quickly rose to the position of superiority within the Zhou cultural realm.

In the immediate aftermath of the victory over the Zhi lineage, the heads of Wei, Han, and Zhao continued to act in the name of the puppet lord of Jin, which ensured their ongoing cooperation in struggling against external foes. Wei benefitted most from these amicable relations with the two fraternal states. In the late fifth century BCE its armies expanded westward into the eastern reaches of the Wei River, repelling the Qin resistance; north-eastward, where they occupied the state of Zhongshan in 406 BCE; and, together with Han and Zhao allies, southward, where they inflicted a series of defeats on the state of Chu. The Three Jin states benefitted in particular from cooperation with the southeastern kingdom of Yue 越, which by the late fifth century BCE had reached the peak of its power. In 441 and 430 BCE the coalition armies inflicted heavy defeats on the state of Qi 齊 in the east, causing its rulers to erect the Long Wall along Qi's southern border, probably the first ever construction of a Long Wall in China's history (Pines 2018). In 405–404 BCE the Jin armies again invaded Qi, completely overpowering it. Triumphant, heads of the Wei, Han, and Zhao houses presented the war captives to the Zhou king. The ceremony was attended by the humiliated lord of Qi as well as rulers of several medium-sized states, such as Lu 魯, Zheng 鄭, Song 宋, and Wei 衛. It was out of gratitude for this manifestation of respect that the Zhou Son of Heaven decided in 403 BCE to recognize the position of the Three Jin leaders as regional lords.

The Three Jin states continued a series of victories in 398–396 BCE, inflicting a heavy defeat to their major rival, the southern superpower of Chu. The southerners lost three top generals and the Chu chronicle admitted: “the Chu forces threw away their banners, tents, chariots and weapons, and returned, running like fleeing dogs” (*Xinian* 23, translated in Pines 2020:238). Yet these successes proved to be short-lived. Soon after the death of Lord Wen of Wei the erstwhile cooperation among the Three Jin states gave place to competition and mutual struggle. The expansion stopped, and some of the neighbors, most notably the state of Qin (see the next section), inflicted several defeats on the Wei armies. Wei also lost control over the state of Zhongshan, which was separated from the core Wei land by the territories of the state of Zhao. Only the southern expansion continued: the apex of it was the elimination of the state of Zheng by Han armies in 375 BCE and parallel conquest of Chu territories to the south of the Yellow River by Wei armies. In 361 BCE the Wei state felt confident enough to relocate its capital to Daliang 大梁 (currently Kaifeng), on the southern bank of the Yellow River. Parallel to this relocation it exchanged lands with Han and Zhao, allowing each of the states to attain a higher degree of territorial integration.

**(p. 586)** The major problem of Wei was its location: this state (just like its ally, the state of Han) was surrounded by formidable enemies on all sides. A chapter of *The Book of Lord Shang* (*Shang jun shu* 商君書) penned in a state of Wei 魏 explains this predicament:

The state that has to fight on four fronts values defensive warfare; the state that borders the sea values offensive warfare. If the state that has to fight on four

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fronts is fond of raising troops to repel the four neighbors, it will be imperiled. The four neighbors raise an army [each] for just one campaign, while you have to raise four armies [to repel them]; hence you are called the imperiled state. (*Book of Lord Shang* 12.1)

This passage encapsulates the problems that brought about the decline of Wei. In 354 BCE, when the Wei armies laid a siege to the Zhao capital of Handan 邯鄲 in the north, Qi and Qin seized this opportunity to attack Wei from east and west. Wei survived this double assault, but the writing was on the wall. Yet, Lord (later King) Hui of Wei 魏惠王 (r. 369–319 BCE) remained adamant. In 344 BCE he assembled the leaders of many medium-sized polities and representatives of major powers, bringing them to the audience with the Zhou Son of Heaven; in return he was recognized as king (*wang* 王), a title that according to the Zhou ritual norms was an exclusive possession of the Zhou royalty. This hubris backfired: in two years Wei fell victim to coordinated incursions by Qi from the east, Qin from the west, and Zhao from the north. The results were disastrous: Wei armies suffered a series of humiliating defeats; the heir apparent was imprisoned by the Qi armies, and another prince of blood was seized by the Qin forces. This was the end of Wei's hegemony in the Central Plains. Hereafter this state survived only as a secondary actor on the inter-state arena.

## Ephemeral alliances: Qin and its rivals

The collapse of Wei hegemony ca. 340 BCE brought about major reconfiguration in the balance of power in the Zhou world. First, it marked the shift of the center of political gravity from the Central Plains to the periphery, most notably to the states of Qin and Chu, and to a lesser extent to the states of Qi and Zhao. Second, insofar as no state could subjugate its major rivals militarily, they turned greater attention to diplomacy, making the Middle Warring States period into the golden age of traveling persuaders. Third, diplomacy aside, rival states sought ways to increase land and population under their control, in particular through expansion into the peripheral territories inhabited by non-Sinitic tribes. The story of wars and alliances of that period is extremely messy, but behind the ever-changing power configurations one can distinguish the single process of gradual but steady increase in the power of Qin at the expense of its rivals.

The state of Qin entered the Warring States period when it was at the nadir of its power. Domestic struggles and a series of military setbacks turned Qin into a marginal (p. 587) player, causing Sima Qian to observe: "Qin originally was a small and remote state, all the Xia [=Chinese] shunned it, treating it as Rong and Di [=‘barbarians’]" (*Shiji* 15:685). Albeit historically inaccurate (Pines 2005–2006), this assessment grasps well Qin's low position at the beginning of the fourth century BCE. It was then that Lords Xian 秦獻制 (r. 384–362 BCE) and Xiao 秦孝制 (r. 361–338 BCE) launched their reforms, reinvigorating their polity and turning it into one of the "hero-states" of the Zhou world.

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Qin reforms, especially those associated with Shang Yang 商鞅 (d. 338 BCE) and his followers, are discussed in chapter 27 and will not be addressed here; suffice it to say that they allowed this state to fully mobilize its human and material resources, turning its army into the most formidable force in the Zhou world. Starting with the 360s BCE the Qin forces repeatedly emerged victorious in their battles against Wei and Han, allowing Qin eventually to absorb the Wei territories to the west of the Yellow River bend and then to cross the River eastward, expanding simultaneously along its southern and northern shores into Shanxi and Henan. In 325 BCE, Lord (later King) Huiwen of Qin 秦惠文王 (r. 338–311 BCE) elevated himself to the position of a king. This was a symbolic act: Qin was no longer subordinate to the Zhou house but considered itself its equal and potentially its replacer. Qin was not the first to adopt the royal title; Chu's rulers did it centuries ago, while Wei and Qi monarchs recognized each other's position as kings back in 334 BCE. Yet it was Qin's adoption of this title and its forsaking of amicable relations with the Zhou kings (Pines 2004:12–20) that dealt the mortal blow to the semblance of Zhou superiority in the sub-celestial realm. As rulers of Yan 燕, Zhao, Han, and even the tiny Zhongshan followed the Qin pattern by recognizing each other as "kings," the once-prestigious title of *wang* lost its erstwhile aura of exclusivity. The Zhou kings retained the exclusive appellation as "Sons of Heaven," but their ritual superiority vis-à-vis the newly proclaimed kings diminished.

In the aftermath of King Huiwen's assumption of the royal title, Qin increased its pressure on the eastern states. For Qin's immediate neighbors, Wei and Han, this menace became unbearable. Unable to withstand the Qin assault militarily, leaders of these two states became engaged in vibrant diplomatic activities fluctuating between allying themselves with Qin and receiving thereby a degree of protection from its assaults, and joining the anti-Qin alliance, which was supposed to counterbalance the Qin military might. For a few decades thereafter the political arena of the Zhou world was dominated by the competition between the so-called Horizontal (pro-Qin) and Vertical (anti-Qin) alliances.

Fluctuations of these alliances stand at the core of the anecdotes in the *Stratagems of the Warring States*. Sima Qian made his best to put these anecdotes in a convincing chronological framework, but his efforts were only partly successful. Significant segments of the *Stratagems* present the history of competing alliances as a heroic struggle between two individuals: Zhang Yi 張儀 (d. ca. 309 BCE) and Su Qin 蘇秦 (d. 284 BCE). Su Qin reportedly tried to find employment in Qin but was rejected; to punish this state for this humiliation he invested all his efforts in forming the anti-Qin Vertical Alliance. Zhang Yi, in contrast, acted for the sake of Qin, trying to convince kings of the Warring States to ally with the superpower rather than fighting it and suffering inevitable defeat. (p. 588) The *Stratagems* record a series of speeches by the two statesmen pro and contra alliances with Qin. The historical veracity of many of these speeches is minuscule, and their attribution to Zhang Yi and Su Qin is more than disputable; the very fact that a whole generation separates the lives of both statesmen shows that they could not compete with each other. Yet inventions and embellishments aside, the factual skeleton remains valid: several anti-Qin coalitions were formed following King Huiwen's ascendancy, causing Qin much concern. For instance, in 318 BCE the united forces of Wei, Han, Zhao, Chu, the north-

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eastern state of Yan, and even, if our sources are reliable, the Xiongnu 匈奴 tribesmen attacked the Qin but were repelled suffering huge casualties (*Shiji* 5:207). In 296 BCE the coalition of Han, Wei, Zhao, Qi, and Song launched a more successful attack on Qin, causing the latter to give up some of its recent conquests (*Shiji* 5:210). A joint attack on Qin was repeated in 287 BCE. Qin, in turn, was successful at times in forming counter-alliances either with Wei and Han, or with Chu and Qi.

There is no doubt that the anti-Qin Vertical Alliance thwarted some of Qin's attempts to expand eastward; yet the viability of this alliance (as well as that of its antipode, the Horizontal Alliance) remained limited. As Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE) with the advantages of hindsight explained, neither "serving one strong [country, i.e., Qin] to attack many weak" nor "allying with many weak to attack one strong" was an efficient strategy (*Han Feizi* 49:452 ["Wu du" 五蠹]). What each country sought was lands, and insofar as territories could be acquired by timely betrayal of erstwhile allies this course of action was considered entirely legitimate. To aggravate the atmosphere of mistrust, the diplomats of that age more often than not acted not just for the sake of their employer but for their own sake, seeking material and territorial gains for themselves, even if this meant effectively betraying the country they represented. In an attempt to cement alliances, some diplomats gained simultaneous positions in several polities; Su Qin reportedly was employed at the same time by no less than six states that allied against Qin (*Shiji* 69:2,261). Naturally, each of the employers had good reasons to suspect that Su Qin was not completely loyal to him but actually served his rivals, which further complicated the possibilities of effective cooperation.

Perhaps the single most significant impact of the alliances on Qin's trajectory was the temporary shift of its expansion from eastward to a southward direction. In 316 BCE, the Qin courtiers decided to abandon assaults on its eastern neighbor of Han and focus instead on its weak southern neighbors, Shu 蜀 and Ba 巴 located in Sichuan. To attain this goal Qin had to invest heavily in building roads in mountainous terrain that separates the Wei River basin from the fertile Sichuan basin; but once the logistical challenge was dealt with, the conquest was relatively smooth. This was a major strategic gain. Not only was Sichuan rich in natural resources, such as iron and salt, but, once the raging waters of the Min 岷 River had been controlled through the efforts of the governor of the region, Li Bing 李冰 (fl. 250 BCE) and his son, the Chengdu Plain produced an enormously abundant and reliable harvest of grain, which the Qin used to supply its armies. The colonization of Sichuan through the establishment of military settlements and through sending to the region many thousands of convicts to exploit its mineral and natural resources provided the Qin rulers (p. 589) with a viable model of effective incorporation of the newly conquered territories into their expanding realm (Sage 1992; Korolkov 2010).

Qin's conquest of Sichuan brought about major strategic change in its position vis-à-vis its southeastern neighbor, Chu. For centuries both countries maintained a loose alliance, only infrequently violating it for the sake of territorial gains in the Dan 丹 River Valley that separated their territories. Traditionally, Chu's major rival was the state of Jin and later its successors, particularly Wei. Chu had the broadest territories of all the Warring States,



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although in terms of population it apparently fell behind its northern rivals. It was also less centralized than other Warring States. Early in the fourth century BCE the statesman and military commander Wu Qi, who relocated to Chu from Wei, tried to strengthen the power of the Chu kings at the expense of the nobles but failed; in 381 BCE Wu Qi was killed and his reforms discontinued. Chu's nobles were more powerful than their peers elsewhere in the Warring States world, but still they were not in a position to directly threaten their king; rather they acted as the king's trusted lieutenants (Zheng Wei 2012). And whereas Chu was less successful in its northward expansion, it compensated these setbacks with active incorporation of southern and southeastern territories. Its major achievement came by ca. 306 BCE when it was able to utilize internal strife in the eastern kingdom of Yue and absorb much of Yue's territories.

The *Stratagems of the Warring States* cite the Qin statesman Zhang Yi: "In general, the most powerful states under Heaven are either Qin or Chu. If both are engaged in battle in which they are matched, only one would be able to survive" (*Zhanguo ce* 14.18:514). Indeed, Chu was the most potent of Qin's rivals. The Qin conquest of Sichuan increased the tension between the two countries. Henceforth, Qin outflanked Chu from the east and potentially threatened the Chu capital, Ying 郢, located just north of modern Jingzhou, Hubei province. During the last decade or so of the fourth century BCE Qin and Chu were engaged in complex diplomatic maneuvering, once renewing their alliance, once going to war. The results were gloomy for Chu: if our sources are to be trusted (and this is a big *if*), Qin not just repeatedly duped King Huai of Chu 楚懷王 (r. 328–299 BCE) but eventually seized him during the king's visit to Qin and prevented his return back. This mean act made the two erstwhile allies into mortal enemies, as is known from the frequently cited Chu promise: "even if only three households left in Chu, Chu will be the one to extinguish Qin" (*Shiji* 7:300).

The third major power that contested the supremacy in the Zhou world was the state of Qi. At the beginning of the Warring States period this immensely rich and densely populated state was in a relatively weak position, suffering from internal struggle within the ruling Tian 田 lineage. By 386 BCE the Tian house finalized its century-long usurpation of the supreme power in the state of Qi, deposing the last legitimate ruler from the Jiang 姜 clan. For a generation or so thereafter, the Tian rulers refrained from military activism, focusing on solidification of their domestic power. In particular, they become renowned patrons of scholars who gathered in Qi, turning it into the most thriving center of learning in the Zhou world. Gradually under King Wei 齊威王 (r. 356–319 BCE) and his successors Qi resumed assertive military policies, scoring several successes in battles with Wei and other rivals. And yet, the ambitions of Qi rulers to unify All-under-Heaven were not (p. 590) easily realizable. Mengzi 孟子 (ca. 380–304 BCE) plainly compared their desire to unify the realm through military means to "looking for fish by climbing a tree" (*Mengzi* 1.7).

Qi's policies were to a significant degree determined by its peculiar geographic location. Bordering the sea was expedient in terms of protecting one's rear, but it also limited the country's possibility to expand into the non-Sinitic periphery. For Qi, any territorial expansion

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sion could come only on behalf of powerful or medium-sized Zhou polities, which would inevitably cause a backlash from the country's multiple rivals.<sup>4</sup> Qi received a precious opportunity to improve this situation in 314 BCE, when King Kuai of the neighboring state of Yan 燕王噲 (r. 320–314 BCE) decided to emulate ancient Thearch Yao, yielding the throne to his meritorious minister, Zizhi 子之. King Kuai's motivations for this extraordinary step are not clear, but the results of his decision were both unequivocal and disastrous: the state of Yan sank into a bloody conflict between Zizhi and the legitimate heir, Ping 平, and the eventual turmoil allowed Qi to occupy much of the Yan territory. The results were disappointing from the point of view of Qi though. The Qi army failed to solidify its control over Yan and was driven out of this state, allowing restoration of the legitimate Yan dynasty. The state of Yan, once an amicable neighbor of Qi, became its mortal enemy, although its rulers reportedly concealed their ambitions for revenge, waiting for an appropriate opportunity.

By the year 300 BCE it seemed that Qi approached the apex of its power. Prudent diplomacy ensured its cooperation with Wei and Han against Qin; and when Chu failed to join the anti-Qin coalition, Qi orchestrated an assault on this state as well, inflicting a major defeat on it in 301 BCE. Under the rule of King Min 齊閔王 (r. 301–284 BCE) Qi started absorbing small polities in southern Shandong. Even Qin back then felt unable to check the rise of Qi; in 288 BCE the king of Qin agreed to share the new title of "thearch" (*di* 帝) with King Min. Although both rulers had to yield to the pressure of other regional lords and relinquish the new title, King Min felt confident enough to pursue his assertive course further. His decision to annex the state of Song in 286 BCE proved to be fateful.

Song was the largest and richest among the medium-sized polities of the Warring States period, and its position as a focus of contest among Chu, Qi, and Wei secured for several generations its independence. Once Qi annexed it, this was an open challenge to other regional lords, and they did not procrastinate in their reaction. A powerful coalition led by Zhao and Yan and joined by Qin, Han, and Wei led an assault on Qi in 284 BCE. The primary forces of the coalition were Yan armies led by the general Yue Yi 樂毅, who struck from the barely protected northern frontier of Qi, across the Ji 濟 River. Qi's collapse was complete: its armies were routed, King Min fled and was killed by the Chu general who was nominally dispatched to save him, and Qi was on the verge of extinction. Although in 279 BCE, the Tian house succeeded to restore its rule over the core (p. 591) territories of Qi, this country never resumed its position as a potential leader of All-under-Heaven.

It is worth noting here that numerous Warring States-period anecdotes attribute the misguided policy of King Min to the plot by Su Qin, who clandestinely acted on behalf of the king of Yan. By directing Qi to conquer Song, Su Qin had effectively alienated Qi's erstwhile allies and prepared the ground for Yan's deadly assault. Needless to say, the veracity of this version of events is unverifiable. What matters though is the implicit irony in the story: Su Qin, the staunchest enemy of the state of Qin, played a crucial role in the demise of the only state that might have been sufficiently powerful to combat Qin's ex-

pansion. By 284 BCE, Qin emerged as the major beneficiary of the new power configuration in the Zhou world.

### Toward unification: The autumn of traveling persuaders

The last decades of the Warring States history were marked by an almost unstoppable expansion of the state of Qin at the expense of its major rivals. The collapse of Qi as an effective superpower allowed Qin to increase its pressure on the neighboring Wei and Han, which were battered by almost annual incursions. Although these incursions failed to bring about decisive victories—in particular Qin’s repeated sieges of Wei’s capital, Daliang, were unsuccessful—they still inflicted huge casualties on Qin’s rivals. Su Qin’s brother, Su Dai 蘇代, is said to have observed: “Qin killed several million people of the Three Jin [states]. Those who are alive today all are the orphans of those who died by Qin” (*Zhanguo ce* 30.1:1,130 [“Yan 燕 ce 2”]).

Parallel to its pressure eastward, Qin focused on expansion in a southeast direction, against the state of Chu. In 279–278 BCE the campaign led by one of Qin’s most brilliant generals, Bai Qi 白起 (d. 257 BCE), inflicted a major defeat on Chu. First the Qin army captured Chu’s major stronghold on the Han 漢 River, the city of Yan 鄢, which it flooded through diverting the water of the nearby Yi River 夷水; reportedly, “hundreds of thousands” of civilians and military personnel perished. This was followed by the rapid assault on Chu’s capital, Ying, which was conquered and looted. The victorious Qin armies advanced further southward, well into modern Guizhou and Hunan; and although these southernmost territories were ultimately returned to Chu, Chu’s erstwhile heartland remained henceforth under Qin’s control. This campaign effectively neutralized Chu as a competitor of Qin.

By the second quarter of the third century BCE only one state was able to effectively withstand the Qin armies, the state of Zhao. Initially the least important among the three successors of Jin, Zhao steadily improved its position, particularly through expanding northward toward the steppe belt where it became engaged in steady conflicts with nomadic tribes. The tribal method of mounted warfare impressed the Zhao (p. 592) leaders, especially King Wuling 趙武靈王 (r. 325–299 BCE), who ordered his subjects in 307 BCE to adopt “northern tribesmen’s clothes” (i.e., trousers), thereby facilitating usage of cavalry. Zhao proved its military prowess in 296 BCE when it eliminated the kingdom of Zhongshan, established by a Sinicized branch of the White Di 白狄 tribesmen (for this state’s history, see Wu Xiaolong 2017). Throughout the first decades of the third century BCE, Zhao was able to withstand the Qin assault, inflicting occasional defeats on the Qin armies and simultaneously expanding its territories at the expense of Wei and Qi. The decisive battle between Zhao and Qin seemed inevitable.

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This battle finally ensued in 262–260 BCE in the vicinity of Changping 長平, in the hilly terrain of southern Shanxi. Both sides committed most of their military forces to the campaign, which reportedly involved almost one million combatants. Unable to defeat each other, both armies remained entrenched in fortified encampments in the hills separated by just a few kilometers of the valley. After two years of standoff, a Zhao commander was lured to strike the Qin troops. A carefully preplanned Qin cavalry maneuver split the Zhao forces into two, and additional Qin forces dispatched through an emergency conscription succeeded to cut off the supply routes of Zhao soldiers. After 46 days the starved Zhao troops surrendered to the Qin commander, Bai Qi, who ordered the massacre of over 400,000 prisoners, erecting a terrace made of their skulls (*Shui jing zhu* 9:835). The state of Zhao faced imminent annihilation.

Luckily for Zhao, Qin was too exhausted to immediately utilize its victory, and when it resumed a campaign against Zhao's capital, Handan (259–257 BCE), the latter was unsuccessful. Wei and Chu, fearful of excessive empowerment of Qin, abandoned their neutrality and sent troops to save Zhao from extinction. The renewed anti-Qin coalition succeeded in slowing the pace of Qin expansion. However, it was not a viable alliance. Soon enough, rival Warring States were re-engaged in mutual conflicts, allowing Qin to prepare for its final assault.

In 256 BCE, after the death of King Nan 赧 of Zhou the royal house fell in turmoil and Qin intervened, annexing the Zhou royal principality (Pines 2004:19–23). Militarily it was a minor event, but its symbolic implications were huge. The cessation of the eight-centuries-old dynasty of the Sons of Heaven meant that the ritual center of the Zhou civilization had been lost. The authors of *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, composed ca. 240 BCE in the state of Qin, lamented:

Nowadays, the house of Zhou has been destroyed, [the line of] the Sons of Heaven has been severed. There is no turmoil greater than the absence of the Son of Heaven; without the Son of Heaven, the strong overcome the weak, the many lord it over the few, they use arms to harm each other, having no rest. (*Lüshi chunqiu* 13.5)

The authors' gloomy estimate that without a singular locus of power the entire sub-celestial realm is doomed to sink in endless turmoil reflects a common conviction of the thinkers of the Warring States period: to attain peace, All-under-Heaven should be unified (Pines 2000). By mid-third century BCE Qin was the only candidate to attain this goal. Its ultimate realization was delayed due to a variety of factors: either machinations (p. 593) of powerful courtiers who utilized the victories of Qin armies to aggrandize their allotments rather than to benefit the state; or inter-ministerial conflicts and succession crises; or insufficient manpower in Qin, which, demographically speaking, lagged behind its eastern neighbors; or sporadic successes of anti-Qin coalitions to thwart its leaders' efforts to subjugate the neighbors.<sup>5</sup> Yet none of these factors could in the long term save the fate of Qin's rivals. A young scholar, Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 BCE), who decided in the 240s BCE to seek a career in Qin, observed: "This is the time for swift move by the plain-clothed [i.e., poor

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but ambitious men-of-service like himself]; it is the autumn of travelling persuaders." Indeed, gone was the age of diplomats: the realm was due to be unified.

Li Si's eventual employer, King Zheng 政 of Qin (king from 246 to 221 BCE; emperor from 221 to 210 BCE), was determined to translate Qin's superiority into ultimate success. Heeding the advice of Li Si and likeminded statesmen, he started campaigns of annihilation against the rival "hero-states." Han was subjugated first in 230 BCE, followed by Zhao (228 BCE, last resistance smashed in 222 BCE), Wei (225 BCE), Yan (226–222 BCE), Chu (224–223 BCE), and finally Qi (221 BCE). Having accomplished within just ten years the subjugation of "All-under-Heaven," King Zheng, proud of his achievements, in 221 BCE proclaimed himself emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝, literally "August Thearch"). Gone was the age of the Warring States. A new era in Chinese history had begun.

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### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 568/19) and by the Michael William Lipson Chair in Chinese Studies.

<sup>(2)</sup> The single most detailed study of the Warring States history is by Yang Kuan (1998); for an excellent English summary of parts of Yang's discussion, see Lewis 1999.

<sup>(3)</sup> For the complex nature of the *Bamboo Annals* see Shaughnessy 2006; cf. Nivison 2009; Cheng Pingshan 2013. For their historiographic impact see Qiu Feng 2013.

<sup>(4)</sup> One exception to this rule was the situation in southern Shandong, particularly in the Si 泗 River Valley, where many tiny polities survived without being conquered by Qi. For a possibility that Qi refrained from southward expansion because of its reluctance to advance too far away from the protective Long Wall, see Pines 2018.

<sup>(5)</sup> For the list of these factors, see, for example, *Han Feizi* 17.43:398 ("Ding fa" 定法); *Book of Lord Shang* 15; and narrations scattered throughout the *Stratagems of the Warring States* and *Records of the Historian*.

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