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# SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT
## Problems and Opportunities

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Early China's intellectual flowering evolved in response to a very peculiar sociopolitical situation.[1] On the one hand, it came against a backdrop of profound political crisis, the deepest in China's history prior to the early twentieth century. On the other hand, the latter half of that age of turmoil—the Warring States period (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 453–221 BCE)—witnessed rapid socioeconomic, military, and administrative advancement. Tackling the challenges and seizing the new opportunities became the focal point of concern for the majority of contemporaneous thinkers. Their answers determined the contours of China's imperial polity and, more broadly, of China's culture for millennia to come.

### Background: Western Zhou "Soft Power"

The Western Zhou 西周 era (ca. 1046–771 BCE) was much idealized by the Warring States thinkers, especially the Confucians; hence, accounts of this age in the received texts should be read *cum grano salis*. This being said, the currently available paleographic and material evidence suggests that violence during that age was less intensive than thereafter (Li 2006). The Zhou kings, who bore a prestigious title of "Sons of Heaven," maintained their superiority over nominal allies and neighboring polities less through coercion and more through what can be called "soft power." Of particular importance was the kings' religious role as mediators between humans and the supreme deity, Heaven, through the Mandate of which (*tianming* 天命) they nominally ruled. The kings further benefited from their position as heads of the royal Ji 姬 clan, whose members ruled many of the regional polities (besides which, leaders of not a few other polities established fictitious Ji affiliation). The royal domain was also the unrivaled cultural center of the realm, as buttressed among other things by the status of Chinese as the sole written language in the East Asian subcontinent (Goldin 2017: 123–124). All these ensured the relative stability of the Zhou realm even after the royal domain's military and economic superiority over outlying polities eroded.

The clearest manifestation of the Zhou kings' "soft power" was their ability to launch sweeping ritual reforms throughout the Zhou realm well after the Zhou military power was past its prime. The reform, which is most clearly observable through the dramatic change in mortuary assemblages (Falkenhausen 2006: 29–73), aimed at solidifying the pedigree-based social system, in which birthright was the primary determinant of one's position and

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accompanying rights and duties. Ritual norms (*li* 禮) regulated everything—from sacrifices and sumptuary rights to the norms of intercourse among the elite members. More broadly, they regulated the entirety of sociopolitical life.

The overarching importance of the ritual system remained visible even after the collapse of the Western Zhou in 771 BCE. The dynasty was badly battered—at the peak of the crisis "for nine years [749–741 BCE] Zhou was without a king, and the rulers of the states and regional lords then for the first time ceased attending the Zhou court" (*Xinian* 繫年 2, cited from Pines 2020: 157)—but it survived in the eastern part of the royal domain, around the modern city of Luoyang 洛陽. Textual and archeological evidence alike shows the ongoing adherence to ritual norms throughout the subsequent aristocratic age, the Springs-and-Autumns period (*Chunqiu* 春秋, 770–453 BCE). The importance of these norms is most easily observable from the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo Tradition* or *Zuo Commentary* on the *Springs-and-Autumns Annals*), our major source of knowledge of that period's history (e.g., Pines 2002: 89–104). Analysis of mortuary assemblages in the aristocrats' tombs also unequivocally shows that ritual gradations continued to be observed in general across the Zhou world, certain infractions and modifications notwithstanding (Falkenhausen 2006).

The fact that common ritual norms continued to be maintained for centuries after the collapse of effective Zhou rule is an impressive testimony to the lingering "soft power" of the Zhou. Yet in the long run, this power weakened and could no longer safeguard the Zhou sociopolitical order. This waning was gradual but irreversible. For instance, following the downfall of the Western Zhou, the notion of Heaven's Mandate—the pivot of the Western Zhou political ideology—became dissociated from the idea of singular and universal rule of the Sons of Heaven. Henceforth it could refer to a regional lord's hegemonic power, or the right to rule one's state, or just to an opportune moment or individual destiny. As such, the role of *tianming* in ensuring political stability was greatly eroded (Luo and Pines 2023). Similarly, as generations passed and kinship ties among the Ji clansmen weakened, the appeals to clan solidarity could no longer prevent internecine wars and annexation of weaker Ji polities by their stronger "brethren." Gradually, it turned out that even the power of ritual norms did not suffice to cope with a plethora of new challenges. By the outset of the Warring States era, it was clear that the usefulness of Zhou's "soft power" had come to an end.

## The Downfall of the Interstate Order

The Springs-and-Autumns period was one of many ages of political fragmentation in the East Asian subcontinent, but it is exceptional insofar as the multistate system at the time was considered not an aberration but a fait accompli, and significant efforts were invested to perfect and stabilize it. The legitimacy of this system derived from its being embedded in the legacy of the Western Zhou period. Most of the competing polities of the Springs-and-Autumns period were either established directly by Zhou kings, who distributed fiefs to their kinsmen in the eastern part of the Zhou realm (Li 2006), or at least received the kings' recognition. With the withering of the effective power of the Sons of Heaven, these former fiefs evolved into fully autonomous polities, engaged in diplomacy and war with their peers. How to maintain interstate relations in the absence of the effective power of the Zhou kings became the focal point of statesmen's concern.

Judging from the *Zuozhuan*, the Zhou ritual norms played the singularly important role in solidifying the multistate order, akin to that of international law elsewhere (Pines 2002: 107–118). They regulated interstate intercourse, determined (even if not decisively) the interstate hierarchy, and were applied even to warfare (for instance, forbidding assault on a state

that was mourning its ruler). Appeals to ritual norms could help a small state in alleviating the bullying by its powerful neighbors. Most importantly, ritual dictated ongoing respect to the Zhou Sons of Heaven who, however weak, were supposed to remain above the regional lords. Moreover, ritual outlawed annexation of weaker polities, insofar as the establishment (or abrogation) of these polities remained the prerogative of the Son of Heaven. It is with regard to these last two functions, however, that the ritual system proved to be less effective.

In a nutshell, the problem of the ritual norms was their insufficient enforceability. Their efficiency depended on the good will of powerful states, which could not be taken for granted. Only the first of the so-called hegemons of the Springs-and-Autumns era, Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685–643 BCE), displayed earnest commitment to the ritually correct order. After attaining superiority over other polities in the eastern parts of the Zhou realm, Lord Huan was careful to demonstrate his respect to the Son of Heaven (even pretending to act on the Son of Heaven's behalf). Furthermore, in the latter half of his career, Lord Huan avoided annexations and even supported the restoration of a few weaker neighbors that had been eliminated by non-Sinitic invaders. In the eyes of posterity, he became a model overlord, a leader who combines power with magnanimity and who plays according to the rules. His example was of limited appeal in the long term, though. The intensifying competition among major powers in the generations after Lord Huan's death precluded paying attention to ritual niceties.

The death of Lord Huan and the subsequent succession struggle put an end to Qi's superiority. Soon enough, two rival blocs emerged: the northern alliance led by the state of Jin 晉, and the southern one led by Chu 楚. The alliance leaders pretended to adhere to ritual norms, especially when dealing with their allies; but all too often these norms were brushed away due to constraints of power struggle, the leaders' personal ambitions, or the pressure from domestic constituencies such as powerful ministerial lineages (especially in Jin). Take for instance the respect shown to Zhou kings. The first of Jin's hegemons, the illustrious Lord Wen 晉文公 (r. 636–628 BCE), positioned himself as the protector of the Son of Heaven. Yet when the latter refused Lord Wen's request to grant him extra sumptuary privileges, Lord Wen acquiesced but retaliated shortly thereafter by *summoning* the king to the alliance's meeting (*Zuozhuan*, Xi 25.2 and Xi 28.9). These events demonstrated both the power of ritual (Lord Wen dared not abrogate royal sumptuary privileges without the king's permission) and its inefficiency in preventing the king's humiliation. The kings were still nominally superior to Jin's rulers, but the latter rarely bothered to display much awe of their royal patrons.

The interdiction to annex weaker states was abandoned even faster. Prior to their attaining hegemonic positions, Jin and Chu were both engaged in robust territorial expansion, and although during the era of their parallel hegemonies (632–546 BCE) the pace of annexations receded, they were not discontinued altogether. The need to expand was blatantly justified by a Jin statesman in 544 BCE: "Yu 虞, Guo 虢, Jiao 焦, Hua 滑, Huo 霍, Yang 楊, Han 韓, and Wei 魏 were all ruled by the Ji 姬 (Zhou royal) clansmen. Jin became great by [annexing them]. How else can lands be taken, if not by invading small [polities]? From the time of lords Wu 武 and Xian 獻, Jin annexed many states: who can regulate this?" (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 29.11). This brazen recognition that might makes right reflects a new cynical atmosphere that permeated the Zhou world in the second half of the Springs-and-Autumns period. Gorgeous ceremonies, carefully prepared covenants, or appeals to ritual, good faith (*xin* 信), and the legacy of the former kings—none could prevent treachery, deceit, land grabbing, and the like.

The final, desperate attempts to stabilize the multistate system came in 546 and 541 BCE, when a group of intermediate states, battered by repeated Jin and Chu incursions, initiated two disarmament conferences, in which both superpowers agreed to merge the rival blocs into one mega-alliance, ruled simultaneously by Jin and Chu. This plan malfunctioned from

the very beginning, however, due to the competition between Jin and Chu leaders about who would be the first to smear sacrificial blood on his lips, becoming thereby the titular "master of the covenant" (*mengzhu* 盟主). Chu leaders solved the problem by threatening to resort to arms if Jin did not yield. A Chu leader declared brazenly, "Jin and Chu have been faithless with each other for a long time, caring only to do whatever is advantageous. So long as we fulfill our ambition, what use do we have for good faith?" (*Zuozhuan*, Xiang 27.4c). The outcome was predictable. The disarmament initiative led not to stability but to a brief period of hegemony by the ruthless King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 540–529 BCE). After his downfall, Jin restored some of its lost prestige but was no longer inclined to act according to moribund ritual norms. Bullying allies, humiliating or blackmailing foreign leaders, relinquishing obligations toward allied polities, and the like—all became the standard of interstate behavior for Jin and Chu, as well as for the newly rising major powers of Wu 吳 and Yue 越. That the subsequent period is known as the age of the Warring States comes as no surprise.

## The Aristocratic Age and the Devolution of the State's Power

Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) succinctly summarized the deterioration of political order during his age as the devolution of the state's power, first from the Son of Heaven to regional lords, then from the regional lords to grandees or nobles (*dafu* 大夫), and finally reaching the point of the nobles' "retainers holding the state's [power to issue] commands" (*Analects* 16.2). This observation can serve as an excellent introduction to the second facet of the Springs-and-Autumns era's political crisis. Just as the Son of Heaven's power was eclipsed by that of the regional lords, so the latter were in due time sidelined by their nominal underlings, heads of powerful ministerial lineages; yet the nobles also failed to stabilize their authority.

The Springs-and-Autumns period was the golden age of hereditary aristocracy. The power of this stratum was embedded in the very foundations of the Zhou system, in which a noble lineage acted as the basic socioeconomic, religious, military, and political unit (Zhu 1990), but by the middle of the Springs-and-Autumns period it reached new levels. By then, ministerial (*qing* 卿) lineages formed a new social segment distinguishable from the rest of the nobles. The emergence of this new stratum derived from two major peculiarities of the contemporaneous political structure, namely the systems of hereditary office holding and of hereditary allotments. Both systems are traceable to the Western Zhou period, but it was only by the late seventh century BCE that they outgrew their original scope and turned into a major threat to domestic stability (Qian 1989). Of the two, the system of hereditary allotments was the more consequential. Originally it was designed as a means of compensating an official for his services. Upon appointment, a new official was granted an allotment comprising several settlements (or several dozen settlements for top appointees) and their adjacent fields. The allotment's master commanded all of its economic and human resources; the allotment's inhabitants paid him taxes, served as auxiliaries in his military forces, and owed him their exclusive allegiance. The allotment was ruled by the master's personal appointees, mostly his kin and retainers. In principle, the allotment was alienable: upon cessation of service, the official was supposed to return the allotment to the lord, preserving just a few settlements as his hereditary possession (Lü 2006: 117–146).

In the short run, the system of granting allotments as a substitute for the minister's salary was sustainable, but it was undermined by the system of hereditary ministerial positions. Whereas until the early Springs-and-Autumns period, it was still customary for every new ruler to replace his predecessor's appointees with new ministers, mostly from among his closest kin,

gradually this situation changed (Hsu 1965: 26–34). Should a single minister succeed in preserving his position during the reigns of two or more rulers (which usually happened when a new incumbent was too young to intervene in appointments), he could amass sufficient power to manipulate succession of the office in favor of his son. In that case, the office itself and the related allotment would become a hereditary possession of a ministerial lineage, and the ruler could not but acquiesce. Specifics of this process varied by place and time, but the overall direction was clear: slowly but steadily the rulers were losing their administrative power, and with it the ability to command the resources of their state.

Transformation of allotments from ad hoc possessions of individual ministers into hereditary holdings of ministerial lineages had profound implications for the nature of the polities of the Springs-and-Autumns period. Most fundamentally it meant dispersal of political, economic, and military authority. Having monopolized the material and human resources of the allotment, powerful ministers could rival their nominal superiors, the regional lords, in terms of wealth and military prowess. Gradually, ministerial allotments turned into mini-states in their own right. Each was run by its master's court, patterned after the regional lord's court; each had its own independent administrative system, weights and measures, cultic center (the ancestral temple of the allotment's master), and military forces that were only indirectly subordinate to the regional lord (Lü 2006: 147–173). Some allotments began emulating regional polities in seeking territorial expansion; it was not uncommon for some of the ministers to conduct independent foreign policy in the interest of their allotment, invading minor polities or concluding alliances so as to expand the territory under their direct control. The desire to expand an allotment at the expense of one's neighbors also exacerbated tensions among ministerial lineages, further aggravating the domestic turmoil that plagued the polities of the Springs-and-Autumns period.

The empowerment of allotments meant progressive devolution of economic, military, and most notably political authority. The rulers could no longer impose their will on powerful underlings, and some paid a high price for trying to remove their ministers. Powerful ministers assassinated lords of Jin in 607 BCE and 573 BCE; of Zheng 鄭 in 566 BCE; of Qi in 548 BCE; they expelled the lords of Wei 衛, Yan 燕, and Lu in 559 BCE, 539 BCE, and 517 BCE (and again in 468 BCE), respectively, to mention only a few notable cases. In most of these polities, the ruler's power survived in name only; in actuality, they were ruled by aristocratic oligarchies, coalitions of several ministerial lineages who rotated chief positions among themselves, reducing the regional lord to a powerless figurehead (Pines, forthcoming: chapter 7). Some of the lords succeeded in preserving their power by skillfully utilizing cleavages among their ministers. Others were less successful. The state of Jin—the major superpower of the Springs-and-Autumns era—was ruled for more than a century by unstable coalitions of ministerial lineages, until the three survivors of internecine struggle (the Wei 魏, Han 韓, and Zhao 趙 lineages) had finally partitioned it in 453 BCE. In the state of Qi, the struggle among ministerial lineages yielded a single survivor: the Chen 陳 (Tian 田) lineage, the heads of which had ruled the state since 481 BCE on behalf of puppet lords, until finally usurping the Qi throne in 386 BCE. Whereas the devolution of the ruler's power was less severe in peripheral polities such as Chu (Blakeley 1992) and, possibly, Qin (cf. Thatcher 1985; Yoshimoto 1995), overall the pattern of the rulers' loss of control was the dominant trend of the aristocratic age.

The devolution of power first in the Zhou realm in general and then in individual polities resulted in woeful turmoil. By the end of the Springs-and-Autumns period, most polities became entangled in a web of debilitating power struggles between powerful nobles and the lords, among aristocratic lineages, and among rival branches within some of these lineages, in addition to endless wars with foreign powers. The ensuing tumult invalidated much of the

stabilizing effect that the Zhou ritual system was supposed to exercise. In one of the most ideologically significant speeches recorded in the *Zuozhuan*, a sagacious Qi minister, Yan Ying 晏嬰 (Yanzi 晏子, d. ca. 500 BCE), told his ruler that only universal adherence to ritual norms would restore sociopolitical stability and eventually prevent the potential usurpation by the Chen lineage (*Zuozhuan*, Zhao 26.11). This was wishful thinking, though. Both textual and archaeological sources testify to the increasingly frequent infraction of ritual norms, caused by the ministers' desire to elevate themselves above their sumptuary rights. Unenforceable as they were, the ritual norms could not stem the forces of disintegration.

In 403 BCE, the Zhou king made a fateful decision, formally elevating the three usurping ministers—the heads of the Wei, Han, and Zhao lineages in Jin—to the position of regional lords. This was the formal recognition of the new balance of power that overshadowed ritual norms of the past. Fifteen centuries later, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) identified this step as the beginning of the end of the Zhou order (*Zizhi tongjian* 1:1–6). This was a correct observation. The society of graded lineages was approaching its end. Domestically, just as internationally, might made right.

## New Society, New State

The Warring States period was an age of dramatic sociopolitical changes. Some of these evolved in direct response to the weaknesses of the aristocratic age; others were byproducts of a series of technological breakthroughs which revolutionized economy and warfare and opened new opportunities for astute statesmen and thinkers. Combined, these changes brought about an entirely new political entity: a centralized and profoundly bureaucratized state, adept at full utilization of its human and material resources, and engaged in a life-and-death struggle against its peers. The winner in this centuries-long competition, the state of Qin, was arguably the most successful of all in pursuing centralization and bureaucratization.

One of the most notable results of the early Warring States reforms was the restoration of the ruler's effective authority. The system of hereditary appointments was largely discontinued, and so was the system of hereditary allotments. The roots of this change can be traced to the attempts of the Springs-and-Autumns period ministerial families to centralize power in their allotments by appointing salaried and replaceable retainers as the allotments' administrators. Once some of these allotments (e.g., those of the Wei, Zhao, and Han lineages in Jin) turned into full-fledged regional states, the new system was adopted in these states and in due time emulated elsewhere (Zhao 1990: 244–251). The restoration of the ruler's power to appoint and dismiss chief executives was the major step toward formation of what Mark E. Lewis aptly names the "ruler-centered state" (Lewis 1999: 597). Furthermore, the ministers could no longer rely on state-like allotments. Territorial grants were not entirely discontinued, but in most cases they allowed the grantee only to benefit from the allotment's incomes, not to rule it as a private mini-state. Hence, with a very few exceptions, territorial grants, even if lavish, posed no threats to the state's territorial integrity and its domestic order (Lü 2006: 261–72).

Discontinuation of the system of hereditary allotments was paralleled by improved centralized control over localities. Amid manifold experimentations, a new system of two-tier territorial control evolved, the so-called commanderies and counties (*junxian* 郡縣). Both commanderies (originally units of military control over newly acquired territories, which gradually were adopted through most of the realm) and counties were ruled by the center's salaried appointees who were normally rotated after a fixed period to avoid the formation of autonomous satrapies (You 2022). Alongside this, the state deepened its penetration into local

society on the sub-county level (Sun 2020). The expanded bureaucratic apparatus was tightly controlled from the center and meticulous regulations were designed to monitor the officials' performance (cf. Yates 1995; Korolkov 2024).

Centralization of the state's power went in tandem with the demise of hereditary aristocracy. Already in the late Springs-and-Autumns period, rulers were trying to seize the opportunity of the noble lineages' decimation in bloody internecine feuds so as to replace hereditary ministers with appointees from the low nobility, the *shi* 士 stratum. *Shi*, who lacked an independent power base, originally earned their living primarily as retainers of powerful nobles; but as more opportunities opened at the top of the government apparatus, they moved in to fill the void. Soon enough the rulers discovered the double advantage of employing *shi*: first, dramatic broadening of the number of potential employees, which allowed selection of the best candidates for top positions; and second, political security. Under no circumstances were the *shi* appointees able to defy the sovereign in the way the hereditary ministers could.

The rise of *shi* at the expense of hereditary nobles was accompanied by two far-reaching developments. First was the proliferation of the meritocratic ideal of "elevating the worthy and employing the able" (*shangxian shineng* 尚賢使能). Marquis Wen of Wei 魏文侯 (r. 446–396 BCE), the founder of the independent Wei polity and the most powerful leader of the early Warring States period, had fully demonstrated the advantage of employing skillful administrators from inconspicuous pedigrees; soon enough his example was followed by other rulers. In due time, a new broad elite of *shi* (which can henceforth be translated as "men of service") came into existence, absorbing the remnants of hereditary nobility. The role of pedigree in determining one's status did not disappear, but it diminished dramatically. Second, parallel to their political rise, *shi* succeeded in positioning themselves as society's moral and intellectual leaders, the teachers of the rulers above and commoners below. The ensuing combination of political and spiritual authority dramatically bolstered the pride and sense of mission of the *shi*, which is visible in a great variety of Warring States texts (Pines 2009: 115–135).

The rulers' embrace of the meritocratic principles of appointment reflected not just their intellectual openness but also the fact that new economic and military developments required a variety of skills which could not be found within the narrow stratum of hereditary nobility. Two of these developments are exceptionally important. First was the dramatic increase in agricultural productivity, prompted in particular by the iron revolution (Wagner 1993), the introduction of new farming techniques, proliferation of wheat as a new staple food (instead of the less nutritious millet), active development of fallow lands, and so forth (Falkenhausen, forthcoming). Combined, these developments not only brought about rapid demographic growth (Pines 2023) and acceleration in the marketization and monetarization of the economy but also created a fertile ground for the formation of an agro-managerial state. This state was determined to increase agricultural production through a variety of means: initiating hydraulic projects, distributing iron tools to the peasants, lending them oxen and other traction animals, and also modifying the taxation system so as to direct more peasants to developing fallow lands. The government apparatus had to learn a variety of new skills, most of which would be unimaginable in the aristocratic Bronze Age.

The second major revolution was in warfare. Proliferation of new types of weapons—most notably the crossbow—allowed profound restructuring of the military. A large unit of trained crossbowmen could nullify the advantages of war chariots, which were the weapon of choice during the aristocratic age (Yates with McEwen 1994). Soon enough, large-scale infantry armies took precedence over the chariot-based ones, relegating military nobility to the dustbin of history. Henceforth, military prowess was determined primarily by the state's ability to

mobilize, train, discipline, and motivate peasant conscripts and to provide them with adequate weapons and supplies (Lewis 1999: 620–632).

New armies changed the nature of warfare. The number of combatants constantly increased, and so did the campaigns' length and destructiveness. Gone were erstwhile chivalry codes and adherence to ritual norms; massacre of Prisoners of War was henceforth legitimate, even if not necessarily welcome; and collateral killing of non-combatant populations or destruction of civilian infrastructure—from dams to granaries—was also acceptable. Some texts openly advocate: "in spring encircle their farmlands, in summer eat their provisions, in autumn seize whatever they have reaped, in winter expose their stores" (*Book of Lord Shang* 15.4 ["Lai min" 徠民]; *Yizhoushu* 8:122 ["Da wu jie" 大武解; trans. McNeal 2012: 113]). New norms ensued on the battlefield as well. Gone were the acts of individual bravado that are frequently mentioned in the *Zuozhuan*. The armies prized discipline and coordination among units. War was no longer a manifestation of manliness, causing some current scholars to speak of "the feminization of combat" (Lewis 1990: 111–113; Galvany 2020: 644). Indeed, an anecdote about the legendary strategist Sun Wu 孫武 (the alleged author of *Sunzi's* 孫子 *Methods of War*) tells of how he turned the ruler's concubines into fearsome warriors through imposing draconian discipline (*Shiji* 65: 2161–62; Sawyer 1993: 151–53). The point is clear: in the new era, everybody can become a good fighter.

The age of universal conscription changed not just the nature of warfare but that of the state itself. Henceforth it had to penetrate society to its lowest levels, to be able to identify and mobilize every subject (including, in times of emergency, women and the elderly; Yates 1979; Pines 2016b), and to capture and mercilessly penalize absconders. In the most radical case—that of the state of Qin in the wake of Shang Yang's 商鞅 reforms (359–338 BCE)—the entire social structure was overhauled so as to provide meritorious soldiers with adequate social, economic, and sumptuary incentives and therewith motivate them to fight to the death. The experiment, one of the boldest attempts at human engineering in China's if not human history (Pines 2016a), had attained its goal. Qin armies became the unstoppable war machine which, in due time, unified "All-under-Heaven."

## Epilogue: Stability Is in Unity

The Warring States thinkers and reformers coped successfully with many of the maladies of the aristocratic era. The states they created were far more stable, centralized, and efficient than their predecessors. The advantages of these states are most clearly manifested by the robust demographic growth across the Warring States world, which occurred despite incessant internecine wars. Overall improvement in living standards across the social strata—which is suggested, even if indirectly, through the archeological evidence (Falkenhausen, forthcoming)—further testifies to this success. And yet all these achievements were annulled by one dramatic failure: the inability to put an end to the ever-escalating warfare and ongoing bloodshed.

The story of Warring States diplomacy is a sad one. The interstate system was doubly anarchic: not just because every state pursued selfish interests notwithstanding its treaties and obligations to its allies but also because diplomacy as such became associated with "roving persuaders" (*youshui* 游說), unscrupulous statesmen who traversed the Zhou world proposing alliances primarily to benefit themselves rather than their polities. In an age when mutual treachery and deceit were the norm, any hope for peaceful coexistence among rival states was a pipe dream. Not surprisingly, one of the clearest points of consensus among competing thinkers was that "stability is in unity" (*Mengzi* 1.6): only the political unification of "All-under-Heaven"

under the aegis of a single omnipotent monarch would bring lasting peace (Pines 2000). This common conviction contributed decisively to the legitimation of the imperial political order long before the Chinese empire was formed in 221 BCE (Pines 2012: 11–43).

The question remained: how to bring unity? Many thinkers hoped that it would be achieved through "soft power" methods. Some, such as Confucius, aspired to the restoration of the Zhou order in which "music, rites, and punitive expeditions are issued by the Son of Heaven" alone (*Lunyu* 16.2). Others, such as Mozi 墨子 (ca. 460–390 BCE) and Mengzi 孟子 (ca. 380–304 BCE)—notwithstanding considerable differences between their views—hoped that the future unifier's moral superiority would engender universal compliance and peace (Pines 2009: 31–36). Others, like the authors of the *Laozi* 老子 and those who shared this text's ideas, sought metaphysical stipulations to the realm's unity, for instance, considering political unification of the realm as correspondent to the cosmic unity of the Way (Pines 2009: 25–44). Differences aside, these thinkers were unified in their hope that unification and the ensuing stability could be attained by peaceful means. Their hopes did not prevail, though. The triumph of Qin's unification was the triumph of "hard power," prompted by thinkers such as Shang Yang, who advocated attaining "a rich state with a strong army" (*fuguo qiangbing* 富國强兵), and called for resolute war until the last of the enemies was subjugated and "the fourth" unifying dynasty (after Xia, Shang, and Zhou) emerged (*Book of Lord Shang* 7.3 ["Kai sai" 開塞]).

In the short term, Qin's policies proved most efficient. It succeeded neither through endorsing old rituals nor through the rulers' sagacity and morality, nor by looking for metaphysical justifications for its conquest, but rather due to comprehensive mobilization of its material and human resources and skillful use of rewards and punishments. Yet once the unification was achieved, it turned out that safeguarding the realm required different methods than those used to conquer it (as noted by Jia Yi 賈誼 [200–168 BCE], *Shiji* 6: 282; Watson 1993: 81). Subsequent dynasties starting with the Han 漢 (206/202 BCE-220 CE) learned to utilize "soft power" approaches as more sustainable—even if admittedly less efficient—than the "hard power" ones.

## Note

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# 2
# HEAVEN, SPIRITS, AND FATE

*Michael Puett*

The emergence of the philosophical tradition in China was intimately bound up with the religious practices of the day. In some cases, philosophical movements developed in opposition to these practices; in other cases, philosophical movements were inspired by them. But, regardless of the nature of the relationship, it is difficult to understand significant parts of the development of the philosophical tradition without understanding the religious background against which so many of the movements were operating.

These facts have certainly long been recognized by scholars. However, the extraordinary archaeological discoveries of the past several decades have fundamentally altered our understanding of the religious practices against which and through which the philosophical movements were developing. This in turn has opened up new perspectives on understanding many of the key philosophical concepts from early China as well.

## Religious Practices of the Bronze Age

Our earliest written sources from China appear on a series of turtle plastrons and ox scapulae dating to roughly 1200 BCE. Inscribed on these materials are divinations to the royal ancestors of the living king. From the names of ancestors, it is clear that this is the Shang 商 dynasty—the second of the proverbial Three Dynasties (Xia 夏, Shang, Zhou 周) of the Bronze Age.

The divinations take the form of prayers to the ancestors. The king will pray for good harvests, victory in battle, cures for illnesses, etc. The inscriptions will also include the opposite of the prayer, so that the ancestors can make it clear if they will not support the prayer. Thus, a typical inscription will read, "May it be that we will win the battle." The opposite will read, "We will not win the battle." The divination is then aimed at seeing if the ancestors will support the prayer for victory or not.

It is clear from the inscriptions that the ancestors are capricious. Not only will they frequently not respond positively to human prayers, they will also actively work against the living. One set of inscriptions, for example, focuses on the illness of Fu Hao 婦好, the consort of King Wuding 武丁. The first set of divinations is designed to find out if the illness is a consequence of one of the ancestors' cursing Fu Hao. When it is discovered that the illness is indeed an ancestral curse, the next set of divinations is aimed at discovering, first, which ancestor is

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