

The Warring States Period of Ancient China:
480 BCE to 221 BCE



BACKGROUND:

The period of the **Warring States (Zhanguo or Chan-Kuo)** refers to the era of about **475 BCE to 221 BCE**. It commenced at a time of when the numerous petty city-state kingdoms of the Spring and Autumn period had been consolidated into seven major contenders and a few minor enclaves. The above map shows a delineation of the states. The exact description of the states is subject to some uncertainty, and the above map is based upon the map of the Warring States given on page 27 of *China: Empire and Civilization*, edited by Edward L.

Shaughnessy and published by Oxford University Press in 2000.

There was a larger state of Jin which broke up into the states of Han, Wu and Zhao. There also were the state of Chu to the south and the states of Qi and Yan to the east. These states, Han, Wu, Zhao, Chu, Qi and Yan, were thought to be the six major contenders for domination. As it turned out, it was the state of Qin in the west that emerged victorious, a major surprise for many contemporary historians, as the nation was not considered fully culturally Chinese, with some even calling it “barbarian.”

Advances in military technology gave superiority to larger states with the

resources to take advantage of the newer technology. Part of this technology was the casting of individual weapons which allowed the arming of foot soldiers. In previous eras the fighting was done by aristocrats in chariots. Chariots were not produced on a mass production basis so participation in the battles was limited to a small proportion of the population, the ruling elite of the city-states. But with the development of the casting of individual weapons there was a marked advantage to states with the economic resources to produce the weapons and the population to provide large armies to use these weapons. This military technology made the consolidation of smaller states into larger states an inevitability.

The Warring States period is usually interpreted as a time of endless brutal wars that came as a result of friction among the seven states and that this unfortunate state of affairs could end only with one state bringing all into one empire. This interpretation is probably propaganda for the "One China" policy. First of all, the Warring States period was not so bleak. It was a time of great intellectual ferment. The Confucian philosophers Mencius and Hsun-tzu taught and wrote during the period. Administrative systems were developed for territorial states to replace the methods that worked only for relatively small city states. The wars that occurred

were not generally ones due to diplomatic or territorial frictions among the seven states but instead were wars stemming from one state attempting to conquer and control all of the states. In other words, the formation of the empire came not as a result of anarchy but as a result of greed and drive for power. The wasteful and bloody conquest of the separate states was justified as an unfortunate necessity to end the era of anarchy, but the wars were primarily those of empire-building.

The kingdom of Qin of the northwest finally conquered the southeastern kingdom of Chu in 223 BCE. The last opponents were conquered two years later in 221 BCE, thus creating the Empire of Qin (China). This dynasty did not last long. After the death of Shihuangdi (First August Emperor) in 210 BCE his successor held the Qin Empire together for only a few years. Shihuang-di was searching for an elixir that would give him immortality. Some of the elixirs he tried may have shortened his life.

The ruling family of Han then took control of the former Qin Empire which became the Han Empire. The Han adopted from the Qin Empire the idea of professional bureaucrats running the empire, but instead of the legalists the Han bureaucrats were scholars chosen by competitive examinations. The Han Empire roughly matched the period of the Roman Empire in the West.

CHARACTER PORTFOLIOS:

Since the Warring States Period spans multiple generations and the fluid timeline of this crisis will stretch beyond the lifespan of any single person the assets of the major houses are being consolidated into the roles of “Lords” for this committee. As a Lord of a given house, you will have access to all the resources of your house over the course of its existence, without the pesky downsides of regular human mortality. For example, if a hypothetical Lord of the Chu were to gain access to large quantities of ore, they could transport those resources to the Chu forges and have them cast into swords. House resources go far beyond forges, however, and as long as you can justify your house’s access to a resource in a private directive, crisis staff should have no problem with you using it in the most creative and effective way possible. Good luck, and enjoy!

Lord of the Qin:

Master Wu, a general from Wei, once wrote “the people of Qin are ferocious by nature... strict and impartial... brave and high in moral.” With the blood of the western warriors flowing in your veins, conquest and assimilation is your greatest duty in life. With the mountains to your backs, the steppe to the north, and the Yangtze River to your south, your march eastwards can only end in victory for your people. But be warned: in the early Warring States period, your nation is still technologically backwards compared to the others, and your soldiers—when they are organized enough to be called that—will

turn their backs on you if your enemies are willing to offer them enough. You are seen as barbarians by your closest neighbours, the Chu, Wei, and Zhao, and your people’s lack of loyalty to the state only proves their point. In your mind, the question is not if the Qin will conquer China, but how many internal obstacles it will face along the way.

Lord of the Chu:

Stradling the banks of the Han River, your esteemed nation has been the greatest power in central China since 704 B.C.E., when your ancestors proclaimed themselves kings equal to the Zhao—if not greater. The river has long protected you, even drowning the Zhao king once during a war, seen by many of your people as your divine right to rule. Your kingdom historically was the last that the Qin threatened with war due to your renown as a strong military country; nevertheless, stagnation in your court and the slow loss of your allies may well be your downfall. Your generals waste their time discussing whether to attack the Han or the Zhao when instead they could be marching your banner through the streets of Handan, and your refusal to help your military allies in the past has made diplomacy all the more difficult. At times, it seems as though the people have forgotten of the river that drowned the King of Zhao and of your divine right to rule. Do you still deserve the mandate over the middle kingdom?

Lord of the Han (Jin) :

As one of the three Jin kingdoms, you maintain close ties to Wei and Zhao, with whom you have dynastic ties as well as

formerly being part of the same kingdom. The other countries in the middle kingdom have only recently recognized your independence, however, and so your diplomatic ties are absent at best. This is still better than your cultural and economic ties, however: being a mountainous nation, travel is difficult, and your people have little knowledge of the other realms. The great Han engineers, such as Zheng Guo, who historically designed a large canal for the Qin, are still unknown to other countries at this point in our timeline. Despite this isolating obscurity, your only fortifications are the mountains and your still small army. The mandate over the middle kingdom is still far from your grasp, but perhaps you more than any others in committee should remember that the diplomacy often achieves what war never can.

Lord of the Wei (Jin) :

You were once part of the great kingdom of Jin, just like the Han and Zhao, with whom you therefore have maintained diplomatic and dynastic relations. Unfortunately, most of the other kingdoms in China do not yet know much about you, having only recently recognized your independence. Your fortifications and army are small, often causing you to feel dwarfed by the shadow of Zhao to your north. Like a brotherly rivalry, you often find yourself outdone by the older, more established kingdom; nevertheless, you are the middle sibling. You are more powerful militarily than the Han—by the tiniest of amounts. You are still reliant on the Zhao for much of your protection and the Han for their great engineers, but if you can throw off these diplomatic and cultural shackles effectively and at the right time, the mandate over the

middle kingdom may indeed fall into your hands.

Lord of the Zhao (Jin) :

When the withering kingdom of Jin dissolved into three entities two hundred years ago, the main branch of its dynasty—including its last king—became your first. Ruled by the closest descendents of the Jin, you are stronger diplomatically and militarily than the Han and the Wei, who also were part of the Jin and with whom you maintain strong ties. But while your brother nations are still largely reliant on you militarily and diplomatically, all is not rosy for you abroad. Both have recently become discontent with simply dawdling in your shadow, and other nations recognize you as the primary descendant of the dysfunctional, corrupt Jin dynasty. While you were once the strongest power in the middle kingdom, you have now lost the awe with which the people saw your rule. The Chu power to the south is particularly threatening, but also is the Qin, who have been militarizing rapidly. For you, the greatest challenge seems to be not to take but to take back the mandate over the middle kingdom.

Lord of the Qi:

Founded thousands of years ago, the Qi have lasted through the Spring and Autumn periods through sheer force of will. Excellent fortifications to the south as well as very tactful diplomacy with your neighbours have kept your kingdom small but strong and safe. Your people are renowned for their architecture, having built many complex, organized cities marvelled at by the other kingdoms, with well

maintained roads and temples marinated in jewels. You are proud of your eastern culture, distinct from the more barbarian ways of life to the north and west. Master Wu, a historian and general, spoke highly of your culture, and Confucius was particularly impressed by your Shao music and the Jixia University. Unfortunately for you, your focus on maintaining borders and not expanding them has rendered your military overly defense-based. Master Wu has further noted that, like the wide, flowing grass fields in your country, “although Qi’s troops are numerous, their organization is unstable...” The bureaucracy has begun to show its weak points, as well. Your struggle for the mandate over the middle kingdom will begin with an internal fight.

Lord of the Yan:

Though far away from the center of the fight for the mandate over the middle kingdom, the kingdom of Yan is hardly a peaceful place. Surrounded by barbarian Mongolic groups to the north and only recently formed Koreanic states to the east, your respites are short and rare. Raids are common, and your people are some of the poorest of the civilized groups in China. Despite being immediately north of Qi and having minor trade relations with them, your people are mostly uneducated farmers and fishermen, struggling to survive in their homes near the borderlands. The fortifications to your north are strong but old, and the military, though disciplined, is finding it increasingly difficult to find money to fund its maintenance. Your people need a benevolent ruler to guide and help them after raids, but you often find yourself with barely enough funds to ration out to everybody. Although war has not often

served in your favour, the breakup of the Jin into the Zhao, Wei, and Han has offered a chance to replenish your coffers. Although you do wish to honorably serve your people, the times have become desperate. And if, indeed, the other nations in the middle kingdom have begun a great fight for the mandate, you will need the strength to fight off all conquerors—or become one yourself.

Lord of the Zhongshan:

A tiny, almost insignificant nation squeezed between the Zhao and Yan, the Zhongshan lasted for more than a century through the Warring States Period due to its reliance on allies. The chaotic times, however, have made this increasingly difficult. While you were previously able to rely heavily on the Zhao, who surround you, for military support, you are now seen as a “disease in the heart” of your protector, a bit of land that the Lord of the Zhao could use for his own purposes. Nevertheless, your economy is flourishing: trade with Yan has never been higher, and the prevalence of iron tools nowadays has made your predominantly first-sector economy thrive in surpluses of meat and grain. Bronze and ceramic workshops dot the marketplaces. It is unknown where your culture comes from. Your capital city, surrounded by the Taihang Mountains and two rivers, is reminiscent of the Mongolian plains yet as civilized as the Zhao and Yan. Some ask if you are northern hordes that adopted Chinese culture or if you are Chinese settlers influenced by the hordes; either way, perhaps this distinct identity is what can keep you alive for another hundred years. Perhaps it is time for you to share your prosperity with the rest of the middle kingdom.

Lord of Ba:

Smack dab in the middle of the Han, Wei, and Qin, you have maybe a hundredth of the military resources of any other nation in China, your curved swords being the only unique aspect of your army. Nevertheless, you did historically survive for most of the Warring States Period due to strategic trade relations and by renting parts of your army out as mercenary units for other nations. And the Ba drummers and dancers are popular throughout China. Although the mandate is hardly within your reach right now, you have developed the unique ability to make exactly the kind of diplomatic relationships necessary to form a coalition against any usurpers of the status quo. In a small nation thriving only due to its commerce, maintaining the current borders might feel like your best option. You might also submit to a more powerful neighbour in the hopes that you can work your way up in power; the name “Ba” may well be spread across a map of China if you play your cards correctly.

Lord of Shu:

Like the Ba to your east, you are a pathetic nation compared to most of your neighbours in the middle kingdom. Also like the Ba, you have complex trade relations and frequently rent out parts of your army as mercenaries, giving you the exact relationships needed to make sure somebody is always able to ride to your aid. Perhaps this cultural and tactical similarity is due to the fact that many Ba refugees have begun to enter your lands as the Chu advance northwards. While this migration has allowed for this very interesting cultural fusion, it has begun to take its toll on your

economy as there is not enough land for everybody. Some of your subjects have become antsy in regards to the newcomers, and it has soured relations with Ba, whom you long considered your brother. They do share a dynasty, after all. If, however, you do manage to settle these internal problems or use them to your advantage at the negotiating table, you may find yourself in a much more powerful position.

Lord of the Yue:

Far from the other Chinese nations, you have a distinct proto-Cantonese culture. The southern part of the middle kingdom is pleasant and peaceful in comparison—of course, this is largely because you share no borders with any of them. You are separated from the Chu and all the others to the north by swathes of uncivilized people on the eastern coast, people who do not yet have a king to look up to and be guided by in the path to great honor. Your civilized culture is somewhat obscure to the northerners but is your greatest source of pride. Your masterful swordsmen and sailors and beautiful members of court are famous throughout much of east Asia. What really sets you apart from the states to the north, however, is that you have a navy—the only truly impressive one in the middle kingdom. Until now, it has only been used to ward off barbarian pirates, but perhaps it is time for a greater purpose. The mandate does not strictly have to belong to a northerner, after all.

Lord of Gojoseon:

King of the Koreans, a people who share borders with the Jurchen in the north and the Mongolians in the west: so many

barbarians. Your closest civilized neighbor, the Jen in the southern Korean peninsula, are many miles away. But across the seas, you can smell trouble brewing in China. The few merchants who have traversed the Gulf of Jili have brought back rumours of a great period of chaos and war, with much more to come. It seems that the Chinese, long disunited, have begun their wars for unification again. You have three options: sit back and watch to see who might overpower you next, aid one or two friendly nations in their conquests, or even seek deserved land for your new kingdom. Who said China had to be ruled by the Chinese?

Lord of Jen:

A less established kingdom than Gojoseon, your Korean subjects live a quiet, harmonious life of farming and fishing, safe under your protection from the hunter-gatherer groups that still roam the peninsula to the east. You are fairly isolated, but through your talks with the ambassador from Gojoseon, you have come to hear of a great war beginning to form in China. You have never established contact with the kingdoms there, and your nation is stable for now, but letting your armies fight more worthy opponents is always a good reason for seeking prestige and expansion.

Lord of the Xiongnu:

Like the Dongnu, you are a steppe horde. Many modern-day historians believe that you are the ancestors of the Huns, who 600 years after the events of this committee migrated to Europe and helped bring about the downfall of the Western Roman Empire. But you are not yet ready for such greatness. Your people are spread out, disorganized;

you hardly have a kingdom to call your own. Only your Tengri religious beliefs unify you. You are able to organize raids against the Zhao and Yan to your south from time to time, but it is difficult to incentivize the Xiongnu peasantry with much more than Chinese silk and precious metals. If you can organize your people, you might find that horses can be used for more than just travel between the mountains.

Lord of the Dongnu:

Like the Xiongnu, you are a steppe horde. You are called “barbarians” by the Zhao and the Yan to your south as well as by the Gojoseon to your southeast; most people in China have never heard of you, and rightfully so. Your people are disorganized and stateless, to the point where you can hardly call them “yours.” Many of them still live a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, not living in what the Chinese consider “civilization.” But you have had enough of the haughtiness from your southern neighbours. Your people are prone to raiding your wealthy, powerful southern neighbours, but it is time for something greater. Nowadays, when you pray to the Tengri gods by bowing to your sword, you pray for something more than just survival: you pray for a name to yourself and victory to your culture.