History 484

Chinese Philosophical Views of Warfare in the Late Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Era

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Chinese Philosophical Views of Warfare in the Late Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Era

The periods known as the Late Spring and Autumn Era and Warring States Era (722-221 BCE) saw a dramatic change in Chinese political and social organization, fueled by ceaseless warfare. This period swallowed an Eastern Zhou feudal society of a weak central king who only directly controlled parts of the kingdom, the remainder being controlled by allegiant aristocrats, and turned the society into one marked by a central bureaucracy, headed by a king, who directly controlled all the land and soldiers in his kingdom.[1] Total war could be efficiently waged; massive armies could be easily fielded; chronic fighting broke out among the many kingdoms in the region fragmented by weak Zhou rule; and those who did not adapt were quickly conquered by their neighbors. The region-wide escalation in violence and need for victory warranted a desperate shift to meritocracy where specialized talent in both civil *Wen* and martial *Wu* were sought after, and prompted the rise of the 100 Schools, a range of philosophical ideas that pondered, among other things, warfare. This essay will evaluate and compare the two main views of *jus ad bellum* (righteous warfare) that developed in the 100 Schools; one, headed by thinkers like Confucius, considered warfare to be generally immoral and only permissible in instances of self-defense or in defeating evil,[2] while the contrasting legalist and realist view was that aggressive warfare should always be a fundamental goal of the state in the violent political

[1] History 484, Lecture 2.
[2] History 484, Lecture 3.

climate.[3] While both views stress that war is inevitable in certain circumstances, the main difference lies in what each view considers *jus ad bellum.*

But what is *jus ad bellum*? To understand this concept, it is worthy to mention the ultimate goal that is identified by most philosophers operating in this era: the survival and prosperity of the state. In the chaos of this time period with incessant fighting and fragmented territories, it is no surprise that state survival was necessarily on the forefront of rulers' minds and by extension the minds of the philosophers they consulted. Exactly how each philosophical view believes state survival can be successfully achieved will colour their perception of what is *jus ad bellum* and provide the primary distinction between these contrasting outlooks on warfare.

The realist view, in its distinctively legalist tone, is direct in its approach to preserve the state, and this position is most clearly advocated for by Lord Shang, a prime minister of Qin.[4] In the *Book of Lord Shang*, the state's strength depends on its success and investment in two things: agriculture and warfare.[5] He makes it clear that "from antiquity to the present time, no one has attained supremacy without conquest, and no one has come to ruin without military defeat;"[6] clearly, to Lord Shang, warfare is intrinsically tied to the very survival of the state. Lord Shang also makes frequent reference to wealth: "the gate to riches and honour should lie in war and nothing else"[7] and wraps it succinctly in his slogan "rich state and powerful army."[8] War and riches were inseparable; a strong army requires a wealthy economy, but a wealthy economy requires a strong army for protection[9]. In Lord Shang's mind, the only way to achieve the

[3] Ibid.
[4] David Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War" in *The Prism of Just War*, ed. Howard Hensel (New York: Routledge, 2010), page 197.
[5] Ibid.
[6] History 484, Lecture 3.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

security and wealth of the state was with a powerful army and necessarily aggressive campaigns. Han Fei, another strong proponent of the realist stance, echoes the general sentiments of Lord Shang; he mentions that "aggressive war leading to … territorial aggrandizement is cause for celebration"[10] and therefore aggressive expansionist warfare is an inherently positive deed, because it is the only way to ensure the safety of the state. To Lord Shang and Han Fei, all aggressive war serves to strengthen and enrich the state; therefore, all aggressive war is *jus ad bellum.*

In contrast, the schools of Confucius, Mo Di, Mencius, and Xun Kuang take another stance.[11] Instead of advocating for warfare as intrinsic and essential, they generally agree that it is to be avoided except in very certain circumstances. Drawing on the perceived idealistically virtuous era of the Western Zhou kings Wen and Wu, Confucius and his derivatives generally see another way to ensure the safety and wealth of the state: the ruler should seek to manifest illustrious virtue, which will naturally guarantee the safety of his own state (as no foreign power would dare attack someone so righteous and respectable) and also serve to expand his rule, because the citizens of foreign states will willingly want to be ruled and submit to his rule.[12] As Mencius most clearly stated, "… when virtue is used to overcome people, they are pleased in their hearts and sincerely submit."[13] Warfare is reserved for those incorrigibly evil or wicked who are not susceptible to being affected by illustrious virtue and thus must be ended by force of arms;[14] this may mean defending the state in case of attack, or it may mean punitive offensive campaigns to remove a despot, as the first Western Zhou kings did. Ultimately, though, there

[10] David Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War" in *The Prism of Just War,* ed. Howard Hensel (New York: Routledge, 2010), page 198.
[11] History 484, Lecture 2.
[12] History 484, Lecture 3.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

seems to be consensus that as long as warfare is used to "suppress the violently perverse and rescue the people from chaos,"[15] then it is permissible. Other texts like *Master Wu* defines *jus ad bellum* as "meant to end disorder in a state"[16] and *Master Wen* defines it as "punishing an oppressor and rescuing the weak."[17] There is a common theme in this Confucian approach to statecraft in that generally, warfare is to be avoided, except for the few times in which it can be conducted righteously in self-defense or removing tyranny. The primary mode of power for a ruler is his virtue, with warfare only as the last resort; compare this to the realist stance, where warfare is the primary means to safeguard the state.

It is worth having a brief discussion on the topic of *jus in bello,* or righteous conduct in war, as viewed by both sides. Generally, the realist and Confucian schools both agree that this means being humane – no wanton killing of civilians, no destruction of property, and general restraint.[18] This is understandable from the Confucian perspective – "virtue itself is a source of power"[19] – and from their style of approach. War is secondary to virtue, so in war, virtue must still be shown. The realist approach is again grounded in practicality – being "virtuous" in war simply leads to a more effective campaign. In his famous *Art of War*, Sunzi advises to "treat prisoners of war kindly … use victory … to enhance your own strength."[20] In this case, *jus in bello* has turned into a tool for effective war, righteously waged or not.

In conclusion, the two views of warfare that developed within the 100 Schools were similar in ultimate goal – the strength of the state – but how the state gets there is a point of

[15] David Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War" in *The Prism of Just War,* ed. Howard Hensel (New York: Routledge, 2010), page 202.
[16] Paul Van Els, "On Classifications of Warfare in Early China" in *Debating War in Chinese History,* ed. Peter Lorge, (New York: Leiden Brill, 2013), page 19.
[17] Ibid, page 30.
[18] David Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War" in *The Prism of Just War,* ed. Howard Hensel (New York: Routledge, 2010), page 206.
[19] Ibid, page 208
[20] Ibid, page 207.

contention between the chief proponents, Lord Shang and Confucius. Their different styles of approaching the problem – either directly or through the more complicated means of virtue – enables them to hold very different ideas of what is acceptable as, and in, war.