Introduction

Your servant respectfully maintains that an enlightened ruler must have substantive accomplishments. And what are the accomplishments of an enlightened ruler? I say: if the state is small, he is able to enlarge it; if it is weak, he is able to strengthen it; he yet is capable of making others revere him. These are the substantive accomplishments of an enlightened ruler.

Through what achievements is the ruler revered? When battles in the field are won, the ruler is revered. When territory is acquired through siege, the ruler is revered. Now the means of winning battles in the field and acquiring territory through siege lie with devoting one’s energy to siege and battle, and that is enough. For this reason, worthy officers and enlightened rulers know to preserve the tactics of siege and battle.

The sentiments expressed in this brief passage, which opens a manuscript found in 1973 in a tomb near Changsha, Hunan, in central China, may strike many readers familiar with early Chinese thought as somehow atypical of that time and place. This impression could not be more wrong. It grows out of a vision of early Chinese intellectual history that has been overdetermined by late imperial ideology and a particular strain of Confucianism. This vision of early China’s philosophical legacy needs little elaboration here, for in its outline form it is both eminently recognizable and obviously anachronistic. The standard line goes something like this: Early Chinese thought was dominated by Confucianism, which was above all a humanistic and civilian political philosophy that rejected violence and warfare and embraced pacifism and harmony. Even a casual familiarity with historical events, written sources, or the material record of the fifth through first centuries BCE—the classical era proper and the focus of this book—will shatter this vision of a
peace-loving empire. The centuries leading up to the classical period were characterized by constant, bloody warfare, and the period itself saw the violent destruction of the old Zhou social structure and much of the Zhou culture. The fifth to third century was a particularly brutal era that witnessed the continued growth and proliferation of armies, the creation of increasingly efficient and elaborate weapons of destruction, the development of ever more sophisticated strategic models, and the building of complex state structures capable of waging war on an unprecedented scale. The third and second centuries BCE saw the culmination of these centuries-long conflicts in the creation of a unified empire built from the rubble of the old Zhou order. Finally, during the second and first centuries BCE, as the new empire was consolidated, attention was turned outward toward its peripheries and their inhabitants, and a new centuries-long pattern of often violent interaction with central Asia got underway.

Moreover, a careful look at sources from the period shows that “Confucianism” was by no means the dominant intellectual position at the time. Indeed, if we cling to the later idealization of early Confucian thought as pacifist, we must conclude that this body of thought could not have seemed compelling to early rulers or generals. Clearly, warfare was at the center of political concerns throughout the entire classical period, and evidence abounds that it received careful attention from some of the most sophisticated minds of the day, Confucian and otherwise.

As was already noted, this has all been acknowledged within the field of early China studies, both in the West and in Asia. Nevertheless, the patterns of historical inquiry prevalent in the field today still derive largely from the notions and approaches inherited from or informed by traditional Chinese scholarship. Thus, the Analects of Confucius and the Mencius still sit at the center of our own canon of Sinology, alongside the Laozi and Zhuangzi, which perhaps form their counterparts, a mystical and poetic yin to the drier and more down-to-earth yang of the Confucians. This is an overly simplistic if convenient paradigm from which to approach ancient China, for it obscures many differences between the classical period and later imperial times, providing for an erasure of distinctions and changes both across time and within the classical era itself. Most problematic of all, it allows us to accept many of the principles and assumptions of later imperial scholarship while at the same
time asserting the creation of a new, more modern and more scientific mode of critical inquiry.

Yet we are forever hampered by our sources. The percentage of once prominent, widely circulating, and presumably influential materials from the classical period that survives to this day is miniscule, and to further limit our vision of the past by embracing the very works that the later tradition selected for us, while relegating so many others to obscurity, is to deny ourselves the possibility of glimpsing any hint of what early China might have been like, if indeed it was not a harmonious Confucian-inspired empire of benevolent rulers and loyal ministers. So while the general consensus has somehow been reached and scholars will nod their heads approvingly when told that Confucianism was neither as one-sided nor as politically prominent as many late imperial scholars might suggest, we have yet to make much progress in redefining our own intellectual discourse to reach beyond the old stereotypes and the familiar texts and formulate a new set of questions and tools.7

What we do have, ready at hand, is a large corpus of new textual materials from which to draw. Some of these are literally new to us, as with the manuscript cited above. Although discovered texts have been unearthed continuously throughout China’s long history, a series of remarkable discoveries began in the early 1970s with the excavation of the early Han funerary libraries at Yinqueshan in Shandong province (including many military treatises, among them a manuscript of Sunzi’s Art of War) and then the spectacular finds at Mawangdui near Changsha, Hunan (including two manuscript copies of the Laozi and several texts now usually associated with Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor). The 1980s and 1990s produced numerous finds as well, ranging from administrative, legal, and divinatory texts from a Chu kingdom tomb in Baoshan, Hubei, to the mantic, medical, and mathematical texts of the early Han found near Jiangling, Hubei.8

The publication of such materials, and the scholarship based on them, has often been slow; restoration is a painstaking and costly process, but one with which researchers are now increasingly familiar. In any event, early China studies have undergone a sort of renaissance, born of these new discoveries and the methodological rigor they have required of their students. Additionally, these texts have in many cases drawn our attention back to materials from the transmitted record that
had long been neglected or treated with some disdain. Thus the publi-
cation of the various manuscript finds and research based on them has
become a catalyst in the reconfiguration of ancient Chinese social and
intellectual history that is currently unfolding. In a recent issue of the
Harvard University Gazette, Tu Weiming likens the importance of several
tomb texts found in 1988 at Guodian, Hubei, which include passages
known to us from the Laozi as well as a number of other texts clearly
associated with the early Confucian school, to the discovery of the Dead
Sea Scrolls in the West, and he suggests that now “the history of ancient
Chinese philosophy in general will have to be reconfigured.” In fact, in
the face of so many newly discovered texts, as well as new attention to
long known but often overlooked materials, such reconfiguration has
been ongoing for at least a generation. Unfortunately, the vast major-
ity of work being done in this field has concentrated on those texts or
areas already deemed significant by a scholarly tradition beholden to
late imperial perspectives.

If scholars like Tu truly hope to reinvigorate early China studies,
the starting point seems simple: broaden our curriculum. The follow-
ing chapters of this book are an initial attempt at doing just this. The
Confucian tradition and its representative thinkers are included here,
but alongside political philosophers, statesmen, and strategists whose
intellectual affiliations are not always easy to discern. Fairly eclectic texts
such as the Lüshi Chunqiu and the Guanzi will be important to the inquiry
below, as well as works generally categorized as military texts, such as
the Sima fa and the Sunzi Bingfa. But the second half of the book will
engage in a detailed study of a handful of chapters from one early text
in particular, the Yi Zhou shu. These chapters date to no later than the
fourth century BCE and may well date even slightly earlier (this holds
true for large portions of the rest of that text as well). The material
from this early section of the Yi Zhou shu seems to have been well known
throughout the classical period proper, and interest in its contents was
not limited to any one school of thought. For reasons we will explore in
chapter 3, however, attention to the text as a whole declined over the
centuries to the extent that it is now virtually unheard of outside of a
small handful of specialists.

The text takes on special meaning here because among all early
sources, it contains the most elaborate and detailed information on
the theme that gives structure to the present study, the early Chinese conception of the interplay between the civil (wen) and martial (wu) realms of government as a defining mode of creating and administering an empire. Outside of the Yi Zhou shu, the clearest expressions of the importance of this interplay of wen and wu in early thought tend to be abstract. These can be found in a number of texts dating to the very end of the Warring States period (the third century BCE) or from the Western Han (second and first centuries BCE), but these texts in turn share much in common with slightly earlier Warring States traditions. This suggests that the theoretical dynamics of treating the civil and martial as a conceptual pair emerged over many centuries, but like so much of the intellectual heritage of this time, were only given careful, systematic articulation in the third and second centuries BCE as part of broader attempts to formulate a coherent and unified cosmology and ideology out of diverse earlier traditions.

It will be helpful as we proceed to keep that broader process in mind. It often involved articulating correlations already implicit and occasionally explicit among Warring States traditions, making what amount to several already organic systems of thought cohere by highlighting some of the sympathetic aspects among them. At the same time, the reverse must also have been true, as significant differences were explained away or simply elided to create a convincing and comprehensive intellectual framework for a political system that could lay claim to being a seamless extension of organizing structures inherent in the natural world. Speaking much more broadly, this process did not actually stop after the Western Han, but continued endlessly down the centuries as new challenges to empire arose and new forms of administration were developed. Nevertheless, the classical period was formative, leaving its mark on the course of all later ideological innovation. The fifth through first centuries BCE can and in many ways must be treated as a single epoch when addressing social and intellectual history.

The exact role of military power in this newly emerging universal ideology, we might guess, was open to debate. Generally speaking, it is problematic for all states and is especially urgent where an empire is being built through conquest.12 Why was military conquest leading to the creation of order justified in the past, and why is it now no longer an option, except for its occasional use by the government to secure
or expand its accomplishments? The simple textbook answer would be that the Confucian vision of Heaven’s Mandate allows for occasional outbreaks of revolutionary war when the moral force of a ruling house has declined and Heaven deems its overthrow necessary to select a new, morally capable leader. Unfortunately, this concept is not particularly sophisticated, and it cannot have satisfied many political thinkers in the fourth and third centuries BCE, who had begun to sense that Heaven had lost interest in the moral unfolding of human history.

In any case, it is clear that concern over the role of the military was keen and generated diverse opinions. Undeniably, important strains of thought rejected the centrality of military force in the developing ideology, including those of prominent Confucian thinkers. While neither Mencius nor Xunzi completely denied any role to the military in their political thinking, both tried to shift the focus of debate away from warfare and toward moral suasion. Mencius rejected the basic premise of what must have been the single most important narrative in all of early Chinese military thought, the story of the Zhou conquest of the old Shang house. For Mencius, that battle could not have been bloody and violent, but must rather have involved the voluntary surrender of Shang armies to the virtuous Zhou forces. Xunzi rejects the military strategists of his day and their vision of government and the military as deceitful and manipulative. Notice that there is not a single Confucian position on military force; positing such broad oversimplifications obscures the true nature of early Confucianism and early intellectual history in general. As we will see in the chapters to come, there were probably strains of “Confucianism” that embraced military strategy in particular and the idea of an active role for military concerns in government policy in general. In fact, there is no evidence that Confucius himself rejected military concerns, and our best indications are that military training was a part of his curriculum.

Nevertheless, there is a broader discourse about the legitimate use of military force that both Xunzi and Mencius are participating in and that spans virtually the entire range of early texts as well, not limited to any school of thought. The vocabulary of this discourse often appears superficially at least to be Confucian, but in reality thinkers from many different traditions were engaged in creating, sustaining, and transforming this discourse, and it is again a misperception based on later
assumptions that Confucians necessarily dominated this process. Given this popular discourse, any strain of thought that argued for the exclusion of military concerns from the broader intellectual realm would have looked naïve and incomplete. Not only were there eloquent debaters within the Confucian tradition itself who wanted to preserve military concerns as an aspect of state ideology, as we will see in chapter 1, but there were prominent intellectual and strategic traditions in many states that placed military concerns at or near the center of political and therefore moral discussions. The role of military thinking in early Chinese intellectual history has been a relatively neglected field, but even outside of the strictly military corpus, as exemplified by the Sunzi or the Wuzi, it is apparent that theories and thinking about warfare played a prominent role in the intellectual history of classical China.

As noted above, in the political environment of the Warring States era, it would have been nearly impossible to deny the importance of military concerns. During the early Han, despite the apparent resolution of the central political problems fueling the incessant wars—that is, the creation of a unified polity and the death of the old multistate system—the Han emperors still faced considerable challenges to the project of empire. Sometimes these came from within the ruling family itself, at other times from local power bases not yet fully incorporated into the Han system. And as political scientists and historians have noted, the creation of a centralized empire seems to be a catalyst for the creation of its own enemies, as people on its peripheries in turn adopt or are pressed into more systematic and lasting forms of organization. There can be little doubt that questions concerning the legitimate use of military force, that is, questions that grew out of the relationship between civil administration and the application of coercive power, must have remained at the heart of the early Han project of realizing and consolidating their empire.

Indeed, the early Chinese discourse on the relation between the civil and the martial realms of government came to encompass many sophisticated analyses of the generation, exercise, and reproduction of power, and they lay at the heart of some of the defining conceptions of the state. Prominent among these was the issue of the relationship between the state and its subjects, an issue engaged by the wen-wu dichotomy in a number of ways. Naturally, the very notion of who was a subject and who
was an enemy became deeply enmeshed in this discourse. Eventually, all who were perceived as susceptible to the ethical suasive power embodied in the civil administration of a sage ruler were taken as fit subjects, deserving of emancipation from the tyrannical rule of immoral, self-serving lords. This vision of moral leadership generated a conception of righteous warfare that harked back to older forms of authority rooted in the decrepit Zhou political system, while also justifying an expansionist policy that ultimately demolished the remnants of that system and went far beyond the scope and scale of government ever achieved under the Zhou model. In so doing, the discourse on the civil and martial placed warfare squarely under the rubric of a paternalistic concern for the well-being of the people, a cornerstone of early Chinese moral and political thought that was certainly embraced by the Confucians but must also have both predated Confucianism proper and enjoyed a wider influence than any one school of thought could ever have achieved. Moreover, early paternalistic conceptions of government must have changed considerably with the changing social and political realities of the Eastern Zhou; we will briefly explore changes in the scope of such paternalistic values in chapter 2.

Additionally, the dynamic of the oppressive lord’s relationship to his subjects was treated as analogous to other unfair relations in society, such as the nobility’s domination of local populations or even the criminal’s mistreatment of his victims. Therefore, the discourse on wen and wu came to engage issues of criminal punishment, the creation and reproduction of social order, and the transformation of local customs and practices through education or moral transformation. These issues are themselves of course crucial to the success of centralized rule, and will be discussed in chapter 1.

Finally, the dichotomous and ultimately complimentary framework of the wen-wu concept was woven into the fabric of everyday life in a number of ways. Throughout the Warring States period, as strong states expanded and competed for human and material resources, there was constant pressure to devise more efficient forms of social organization and mobilization. Elaborate systems of mathematically precise social units were envisioned, and they inevitably combined civil administration with military training, taxation, and recruitment. There is good evidence that by the fourth century BCE, older forms of social organization largely
modeled on the “feudal” holdings of the nobility were being dismantled and replaced with closely monitored and accountable administrative units whose dual purpose was defined by the wen-wu dichotomy. Consequently, an examination of the discourse on the relationship between these two sides of government activity promises to shed light on a broad array of social, intellectual, and political issues in early Chinese history.

Part I of this study explores the vocabulary of this discourse, demonstrating that there was a sophisticated and broadly based discourse during these centuries on the nature of warfare, its cosmological and moral underpinnings, its role in history, and its importance to the stability of the state. Chapter 1 illustrates the broad outlines of this discourse by focusing on the terms wen and wu, the civil and the martial, used in philosophical and military texts as a dynamic pair (akin to yin and yang) to frame the various issues involved. Chapter 2 shows how this discourse overlapped with a complex and influential notion of righteous warfare, that is, morally legitimate use of force, as a means to end chaos and tyranny and usher in proper civil administration.

Part II of the work is a detailed study and translation of the military chapters of the Yi Zhou shu. Chapter 3 demonstrates the authenticity of the text and specifically the military portions, addressing the early history of the text and its relationship to military thinking. Why the text fell into neglect and was even held in contempt is also discussed. Chapter 4 translates chapters 6 through 10 of the Yi Zhou shu, the core of the military section of this work, and addresses their broader significance to the development of the genre of military texts that became so important in the Warring States era. I argue that one of the five chapters is a textual relic of an ancient practice of miaosuan (battle calculations performed in the ancestral temple prior to a campaign), a largely unstudied aspect of early Chinese warfare. Three of the remaining four chapters are rhymed, and I argue that this structure reveals something about the social context in which these texts were generated and used. Chapter 5 turns to a detailed examination of certain linguistic features of these military chapters that allow us to determine their dates (fifth to fourth century BCE) and also translates additional material from the Yi Zhou shu that helps demonstrate the relationship between these military chapters and the rest of the work as a whole.