The year 221 BCE marks a momentous beginning in the political history of humankind. After a series of wars, the king of the northwestern state of Qin brought the Chinese world—which for him equaled to the civilized world, “All under Heaven”—under his control. Triumphant, the king ushered in a series of ritual, administrative, and religious innovations to mark his unprecedented success, adopting the new title of “emperor” (huangdi 皇帝, literally “the august thearch”) instead of a mere “king” (wang 王). This was the official proclamation of a new, imperial, age in Chinese history, an age that was to last for 2,132 years under an almost uninterrupted succession of emperors, until the last child monarch, Puyi 溥儀, abdicated on February 12, 1912, in favor of the newly proclaimed Chinese Republic.

The durability of the Chinese empire defies easy explanation. Chinese emperors ruled over a vast land, with territory as diverse and population as heterogeneous as in other large continental empires, and they faced similar threats of foreign invasions, internal rebellions, and sociopolitical crises. What differed in the Chinese case was not the empire’s indestructibility—for it witnessed several spectacular collapses—but its almost miraculous resurrection after years of disorder. This resurrection was not merely symbolic—as it was in the case of the various self-proclaimed heirs of the Roman Empire, for instance—but substantial, as far as political structure is concerned. Despite changes over the centuries in every sphere of life—from demography and topography to religion and socioeconomic structure—the basic premises of imperial rule, which were shaped in the age of the first imperial dynasties, remained largely intact. The notion of the nominally omnipotent monarch, who considered the inhabitants of All under Heaven as his subjects, presided over an ostensibly meritocratic officialdom, tolerated few, if any, instances of institutional autonomy, and pronounced his care for “the people” while denying them a role in decision-making was as valid for the Qin (秦, 221–207) and Han (漢, 206 BCE–220 CE) eras as it was for the late imperial dynasties, Ming (明, 1368–1644 CE) and Qing (清, 1644–1912). While at times de facto power relations deviated considerably
from this model, and various political, religious, and ethnic groups intermittently challenged the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty, none called into question these ideological foundations of the imperial political system. What was the secret of this long-lived success?

Among the possible explanations for such longevity, the role of ideology appears particularly compelling. For a modern observer, the Chinese empire looks like a classical hegemonic construction in the Gramscian sense. Its basic ideological premises were shared by every politically significant social group and even by its immediate neighbors; no alternative political structure was considered either legitimate or desirable; and even those rulers whose ethnic or social background must have encouraged them to be critical of the imperial polity were destined to adopt it and adapt themselves to it. Until the late nineteenth century, empire was the only conceivable polity for the inhabitants of the Chinese world.

This imperial intellectual hegemony was achieved neither through excessive coercion nor through intensive brainwashing, but rather, it can be argued, due to the unusual background to the creation of the empire. The empire was not only a military and administrative but also an intellectual construct; it was envisioned and planned long before it became a reality. Throughout the centuries of political division and sociopolitical crisis of the Chunqiu (春秋, Springs and Autumnns, 770–453) and Zhanguo (戰國, Warring States, 453–221) periods, statesmen and thinkers in the Chinese world sought remedies against the ongoing turmoil. Through repeated trial and error, they developed distinctive administrative and military mechanisms that were later utilized by the empire’s builders; in addition, they formulated ideals, values, and perceptions that laid the intellectual foundation for the imperial unification. These ideals, among which the unification of All under Heaven under the omnipotent monarch figured most prominently, became the building blocks of Chinese political culture, legitimating the empire long before it came into being and eventually ensuring its hegemonic position. Identifying this common legacy within the diversity of the Warring States ideologies is the main goal of this book.

My discussion focuses on three main issues in Warring States thought, each of which is present in almost every major text. In Part I, the longest section of the book, I discuss Zhanguo views of rulership—arguably, the crucial issue in Chinese political culture. I trace both the evolution of the concept of the omnipotent monarch and the different proposals on how to prevent this monarch from abusing his power. Although unanimously committed to the monarchic principle of rule, thinkers also realized that most sovereigns fell short of the ideal of a sage monarch. The preferred solution of many was to encourage the ruler to refrain from actively exercising his power and to relegate everyday tasks
to his underlings. The resultant tension between the ostensibly unlimited power of the sovereign and his sideling in practice eventually generated endless conflicts between the emperors and their entourages, but it also made possible maintenance of the imperial system even under inept and mediocre rulers. The monarch remained the ultimate symbol of unity and order, the supreme arbiter in cases of political controversies—but usually it was his devoted officials who actually ran the empire in his stead.

The formation of this social group of intelligent, responsible officials is traced in Part II, which focuses on the intellectually active members of the shi stratum, the educated elite of the Warring States. I analyze the ways in which the shi secured, first, their intellectual autonomy from power-holders and, second, their position as politically indispensable public servants and as moral guides for society. I focus on the reasons why the shi overwhelmingly opted for a political career as a main avenue of self-realization and argue that this voluntary acceptance of a government career in the ruler-centered polity proved to be the single most important choice made by the Warring States (and subsequent) intellectuals. It provided the rulers with a wide pool of gifted servants, but it also created an immanent tension between the high self-esteem of the lofty shi and their inferior position vis-à-vis the ruler. Prior to the imperial unification, the existence of the interstate market of talent that allowed shi to shift allegiance from one court to another emboldened them, encouraging some to defy the ruler. This oppositional stance backfired, however, bringing about attempts to limit the autonomy of the shi. In the unified empire, the descendants of the shi—the imperial literati—were mostly either subjugated or co-opted by the rulers; but even after losing their relative autonomy, they did not lose the pride, self-confidence, and sense of mission of their pre-imperial predecessors. The intellectuals’ political commitment proved to be one of the most important legacies of the Warring States to the unified empire.

The final part of my discussion deals with the third component of the imperial polity, “the people,” that is, the usually silent but potentially rebellious stratum of commoners. My discussion focuses on the commoners not as objects of monarchical munificence, but as potential political actors, whose impact on political processes was widely recognized, albeit not necessarily welcomed. I shall try to assess why the almost universal recognition of the people as the foundation of the polity, whose well-being should be the ultimate goal of policymakers and whose feelings should be constantly addressed, never brought about any meaningful attempt to allow them to directly voice their grievances or to otherwise influence political processes. This tension between an ostensibly respectable for the people and their practical sideling from political life was capable of being maintained as long as commoners enjoyed tolerable living
conditions and a minimal degree of upward mobility. When this was not so, the desperate masses could turn to rebellion. As I show, the “people-oriented” discourse of the Warring States period contributed, if only inadvertently, to the legitimation of popular uprisings, but it also allowed the co-opting of rebels within the imperial political system, thus preventing them from challenging the foundations of the imperial rule.

In addressing three major components of the pre-imperial and imperial polity—the ruler, the intellectual elite, and the commoners—I try to locate the foundational aspects of Chinese political culture. It was the interaction among these three segments of society that determined the degree of stability of the empire, and these were the three groups frequently singled out by pre-imperial thinkers for their intellectual explorations. My selection of these topics comes at the expense of other aspects of pre-imperial political thought, including its metaphysical, cosmological, and religious foundations and the debates over proper relations between society and the state. Some of these topics have already been addressed in English studies, but others deserve further treatment. Yet my study is neither a textbook, nor do I claim comprehensiveness. Rather, my goal is to focus on those topics of pre-imperial political thought that bear on subsequent Chinese political culture across the centuries and that have been insufficiently addressed in the past.

Note on Methodology

Some readers may be surprised by the format of my study, especially insofar as I rarely use a single text or a putative “school of thought” as an analytical unit. In focusing on the common legacy of the Warring States thinkers, I do not gloss over their sharp disagreements, but I do not intend to reify these disagreements either, as is often done in studies focused on competing schools of thought. While classification of different texts as belonging to distinct “schools” or “scholastic lineages” (jia 家) may be a convenient heuristic device, it has obvious limitations, and these were exacerbated in many modern studies that were influenced by the twentieth-century ideological controversies, when pre-imperial debates were often interpreted as struggles between ideological “camps.” This perception was taken to the absurd in the early 1970s, when radical leaders of the Cultural Revolution identified the polemics between “Confucians” (ru jia 儒家) and “Legalists” (fa jia 法家) as an eternal controversy running all the way from the Chunqiu period to the current struggle between the “two lines” in the Chinese Communist Party. It was only with the ebbing of these ideological controversies that leading Chinese scholars, such as Liu Zehua, began to abandon the “competing schools” paradigm as an analytical tool.
inadequacy of the “school” perspective has been also noted by several Western scholars, such as Michael Nylan and Mark Csikszentmihalyi, who argue that “all the pre-Han and early Western Han thinkers seem to have been, in essence, ‘eclectics’ when viewed from the much stricter normative models of later times.”

With this understanding in mind, I shall emulate Liu Zehua in addressing the intellectual dynamics of the Warring States not through the prism of specific schools, but rather by identifying a broad perspective of a common discourse in which most contemporary thinkers and statesmen took active part. Practically, this means that my study is based not on a selective reading of a few texts attributed to major thinkers, but on my attempt to incorporate most of the extant corpus of pre-imperial literature, including both the transmitted and the archeologically discovered texts. In the preliminary stage of my research, I surveyed (first manually, then electronically) most of these texts, looking for common topics. I then tried to arrange relevant passages in a rough temporal sequence, to outline patterns of intellectual change throughout the Warring States period. Having prepared the outline, I then extracted those passages that are either the most influential in terms of subsequent discourse, or the most reliable in terms of their dating (for example, those from archeologically discovered manuscripts), or alternatively the most articulate and most illustrative of the ideas discussed. The resultant picture has allowed me to highlight many previously neglected aspects of the intellectual dynamics of the Warring States.

The advantages of my approach are several. First, it highlights common concerns and common perceptions among the Warring States thinkers instead of focusing on individual differences. Second, it allows a discussion based not on highly contested interpretations of a single passage or text, but rather on a broader sample that strengthens the persuasiveness of the argument. Third, this perspective bypasses methodological challenges presented by the view that few texts have individual authors. According to this view, most forcibly proposed by Mark Lewis and supported in a modified form by William Boltz, the texts are a result of a lengthy process of accretion, during which they were “actively composed and recomposed” from smaller textual units. This hypothesis, which I accept with certain modifications, makes it difficult to date precisely either the text itself or any of its component units.

It is in light of this problem of provenance and authenticity that my method becomes particularly useful. An archeological metaphor may explain its advantages. Archeologists differentiate between large-scale studies, such as regional surveys, and small-scale ones, such as specific excavations. While the latter allow for more precision, the former, due to their larger scale and comprehensiveness, can tolerate minor inaccuracies without losing their value. Such regional
surveys can detect synchronic patterns as well as diachronic processes, which are invisible in the small-scale excavations of a single site, let alone a single household.\textsuperscript{15} Mutatis mutandis, this applies in textual studies as well. An in-depth study of a single text (or, even better, of a single textual unit, such as a chapter or a paragraph) can yield remarkable results in terms of precision, but it cannot detect synchronic patterns or diachronic processes, and it is vulnerable to skeptical views of textual authenticity. By contrast, my approach allows the detection of these patterns and processes and is less vulnerable to doubts about specific passages than in-depth textual studies.

What matters to my study is not the precise date of each textual unit I use, but that all units should be written before the imperial unification and reflect the intellectual milieu of the Warring States. On this score my study may be open to criticism in light of the suppositions of certain scholars (in studies yet to be published) that the massive editorial efforts of the Han dynasty librarians such as Liu Xiang 劉向 (c. 79–8 BCE) may have distorted the content of pre-imperial texts.\textsuperscript{16} Yet I do not believe that the evidence supports this view. Not only do visible differences in the content and vocabulary of pre-imperial texts rule out the possibility of uniform ideological “cleaning,” but, more importantly, a comparison of the transmitted texts with the archeologically unearthed manuscripts also supports the authenticity of the former. Han editorial efforts focused on such aspects as unifying the language of the texts, standardizing the use of characters and grammatical particles, replacing tabooed words, and rearranging textual units within a larger text. Nowhere can we discern traces of the Han redactors having significantly modified or expurgated politically problematic statements of the Warring States’ thinkers.\textsuperscript{17} Nowadays, moreover, it is possible to confirm the pre-imperial pedigree of most of the ideas and approaches discussed in this book on the basis of archeologically discovered manuscripts, as we shall see in the following chapters. Since my conclusions are not based on a single text, but on a systematic assessment of the bulk of the extant corpus of pre-imperial literature, I believe that they can survive the challenge of radical textual skepticism.

**Peculiarities of My Study**

My decision to address anew the political thought of the Warring States—the single most discussed topic in the study of Chinese history—derives not only from my desire to employ new research methods and to incorporate newly excavated materials that have tremendously expanded our knowledge of political, social, and intellectual life of the pre-imperial Chinese world. A more immediate impulse was my wish to reverse the loss of interest in the political sphere
of pre-imperial Chinese intellectual history in the West during the last twenty years. Initially, this loss of interest was probably a reaction against the vulgar politicization of intellectual history in the People’s Republic of China in the early 1970s and also against simplistic interpretations of ancient Chinese thought as entirely this-worldly; today, however, it is spurred by a variety of new academic fashions. In distinction from their Chinese colleagues, Western scholars have been less interested in addressing political topics even when recognizing that those occupy a pivotal place in the intellectual life of the Warring States.18

One of the major goals of this book is to reverse this trend and refocus scholarly attention on some central aspects of Chinese political thought. Topically, my study owes greatly to Chinese scholarly approaches, especially to Liu Zehua, whose ideas of monarchism as the essential feature of Chinese political culture greatly influence my research. Methodologically, though, I am closer to Western scholars, especially insofar as textual analysis is concerned. Moreover, unlike many Chinese studies, mine is not aimed at locating the historical roots of current political malpractices, but rather at identifying the contribution of Zhanguo thinkers to the longevity of the Chinese imperial polity. I hope that my analysis will shed a new light on the legacy that the Warring States bequeathed to the age of the unified empire. Analyzed from this long-term perspective, the intellectual life of the Warring States is relevant not only for scholars of early Chinese history, but for all those who deal with traditional—and arguably also modern—Chinese political culture and for those involved in comparative analysis of traditional political ideologies worldwide.

Moving along the way I conducted my research, I would like to call attention to my two major premises. First, my approach is historical, and I am interested not only in ideas as such, but in their emergence and evolution. Fascinated, like many others, by the continuity of Chinese civilization, I still hope as much as possible to avoid a common trap of viewing certain behavioral and intellectual patterns as “intrinsically Chinese,” that is, timeless and changeless. While many of these patterns, such as the ritually based social hierarchy, ancestral worship, and the monarchic principle of rule, have a pedigree traceable to the earliest stages of stratified society on Chinese soil, this does not mean that they never changed. Especially during the Chunqiu and Zhanguo periods, as “Chinese” society witnessed unprecedented transformations, many of the previously established concepts were questioned, modified, or imbued with new meaning. Omitting these fluctuations from scholarly analysis, as is so often done, creates a skewed picture of Chinese intellectual history and inadvertently contributes to the view of the Chinese past as ossified. In contrast, I believe that the ideological life of pre-imperial China was determined not by fixed and unchangeable patterns, but primarily by reasonable choices that thinkers and
statesmen made during times of crisis. It is by highlighting the background and reasons for these choices that I try to make the distinctiveness of China’s political trajectory intelligible.

Second, my discussion of intellectual life is emphatically contextual. I do not consider texts to be self-contained realities. Philology is of course essential in dealing with ancient texts, and this study is based on what I hope will be accepted as meticulous philological analysis of the texts under discussion. But philology should be applied together with a historical approach and not in its stead. The texts were, after all, written by authors who were products of their times and were involved in the political and social life of their age, and the texts were directed at specific audiences with which they interacted. A neglect of the sociopolitical and intellectual settings of a text, or in Paul Goldin’s apt term, its “deracination,” often leads to speculative attempts to find in the texts alien political or philosophical ideas (from deontology to gender equality), which in all likelihood were inconceivable to both the authors and their audience.

Relating the texts to their sociopolitical context results in a different picture from that attainable by a purely textual study. The process allows us to notice barely enunciated subtexts and even to see the importance of a thinker’s sudden silence when a sensitive topic is discussed. It also enables us to qualify the self-proclaimed idealism of many thinkers by investigating the immediate political implications of their proposals. Such readings sometimes reveal that lofty statements may conceal sinister motives, while laudable moral ideals may become intolerable when translated into administrative reality. Further, it allows us to avoid ideologically biased readings of ancient texts. Instead of judging the political ideas of ancient Chinese thinkers from a modern perspective—be it in terms of class struggle, human rights, patriotism, gender equality, or democracy—we should try to understand them in their own, immediate context. What were the thinkers’ goals? How did their ideas influence the political dynamics of the time? How did contemporaries assess them? Answering these questions can keep us from turning ancient Chinese thinkers into pawns in modern ideological and scholarly games.

That said, I do not deny that modern perspectives can be relevant for the analysis of ancient Chinese texts. Many of the issues faced by ancient Chinese thinkers—from the need to ensure peace to the search for a proper place for the intellectuals in society—are as relevant today as they were two millennia ago. But we must remember how different their sociopolitical setting was from our own. Their goals were neither democracy nor equality, but simply peace and stability, which the majority identified as attainable only within a universal empire. It is against this background that we can judge the achievements and failures of the Warring States intellectuals. None of them could anticipate the
nature of the future imperial polity. Yet their collective vision brought about the most durable political structure in human history. How they did so is the subject of this book.

A Note on Translation

All translations in the text are mine unless indicated otherwise. For the reader’s convenience, I identify, whenever relevant, the scroll (juan 卷, indicated by Roman numbers), chapter (pian 篇), and section/paragraph (zhang 章) of the premodern Chinese texts; they are separated by a period and are followed by the page number of the modern edition, separated by a colon. Whenever I cite recently unearthed texts, I indicate the slip number according to the sequence proposed by the original publishers; the characters are invariably written in their modern form according to the editors’ or other scholars’ suggestions.