War and Conquest in Ancient Asia and the Pacific

Warfare in the modern world is typically waged between nation-states. For various reasons one of these states, with its own clearly defined borders, chooses to go to war with another. While civil wars continue to plague some countries, modern warfare has most often been between nations rather than within nations.

Warfare in the ancient world, including Asia, often had a different purpose. Modern nations such as China, India, Korea, and Japan did not always exist as clearly defined nation-states, with fixed borders and a central government accepted by the entire population. These regions tended to be more in the nature of collections of smaller kingdoms. Sometimes these kingdoms united to form larger states. Just as often, though, they fought with one another as one tried to extend the reach of its authority and influence. While external enemies remained a threat, internal enemies often were the target of warfare and conquest. The result was a long, bloody process of uniting regions into larger nations.

China

The dominant military power of ancient Asia was China. In the absence of any records, little is known about war and conquest—or any other topic—in prehistoric China. China as a nation began to emerge during the era called the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, followed by the Xia Dynasty. Most of what is known about these eras is legendary, even mythical, although archaeological finds have confirmed that at least some of what was written about them by later Chinese writers is probably based in fact. The known history of China begins with the Shang Dynasty (sometimes referred to as the Yin Dynasty), which ruled from about 1500 to about 1045 BCE. Much of the history of the Shang and the dynasties that followed into the Common Era is a history of internal warfare and rebellion.

The Shang Dynasty itself began in war, for historians believe that the dynasty's founder was a rebel who overthrew the earlier Xia Dynasty. Over the next several hundred years the Shang emperors fought a series of wars to defend their realm, which encompassed primarily northern China, from invaders from the steppes (vast, open grasslands) of inner Asia. At this point China as a nation was by no means fully formed. The region consisted of numerous settlements and city-states that did not coalesce into a unified nation until much later. Thus, warfare was typically a matter of conflict between neighboring city-states as they jockeyed for power and tried to extend their authority over a broader region.

The Shang Dynasty was overthrown by the Zhou Dynasty in about 1045 BCE. The Zhou were a people who had settled to the west of the territories ruled by the Shang, and for a long period they submitted to Shang authority. But as the Zhou population grew, its region became more powerful than that controlled by the Shang, particularly since the Shang were continually waging war with northern invaders. Thus, the Zhou defeated the Shang and established a dynasty that ruled 200 to 250 city-states until 256 BCE.

Their reign was not without complications, however. Barbarians from the north, particularly the Xiongnu, a nomadic people who controlled a large central Asian empire, continued to invade Chinese lands. (The Xiongnu are frequently referred to in the literature as Huns, but they are not to be confused with the Teutonic Huns of Europe.) In 771 BCE they successfully overran the western portion of the Zhou lands, including its capital city. The king was killed, and his son fled to the east. Thus, the Zhou Dynasty is divided into two periods, the Western Zhou (1045–771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou is further divided into two periods. The first, called the Spring and Autumn Period, was a time of great instability. Among the large number of Chinese city-states, no single state had much power. Thus, they joined into a series of continuously shifting alliances as a way of defending themselves from the northern barbarians.

The name of the second phase of the Eastern Zhou, the Warring States Period, gives a clear indication of the nature of Chinese life during this time. Many of the military and political alliances that had been forged during the Spring and Autumn Period fell apart. China descended into considerable chaos as various states tried to fill the power vacuum and absorb other states, and the Zhou emperor ruled in name only. Warfare between states was nearly constant. By the end of the period, instead of hundreds of city-states, the number was eight or nine, with each vying to gain control of all of China. The nature of warfare changed dramatically during this period. Earlier, war had been conducted in feudal fashion,
It was during the brief, but ruthless Qin Dynasty that China's kingdoms merged for the first time into an imperial nation. The Qin emperors, who ruled from 221 to 207 BCE, confiscated all weapons, including those of the nobles who had fought during the Warring States Period. This step was taken to prevent uprisings. The Qin rulers also expanded China's borders by going to war against the northern barbarians. During the Warring States Period nobles had built walls and fortifications to defend their realms. The Qin emperors ordered that all these walls be linked to form China's first great wall to keep out foreign invaders. (The Great Wall of China familiar to tourists was built much later, under the Ming Dynasty.)

Despite the efforts of the Qin rulers to quell dissent and rebellion, they were unsuccessful. Near the end of the dynasty the nobles began to reassert their power. Peasants, prisoners, and soldiers rebelled. The result was the overthrow of the Qin Dynasty and the creation of the Han Dynasty, which ruled until 220 CE. The Han Dynasty, however, began with an interregnum period from 206 to 202 BCE called the period of Chu-Han Contention. During this period, in the vacuum created by the overthrow of the Qin Dynasty, two factions emerged that went to war to determine which would lead the kingdom. One faction was the Han people; the other was the Chu. These factions were led by the nobles who had been stripped of their power during the Qin Dynasty. The numerous battles these two sides fought—the battles of Julu, Pengcheng, Lingbi, and Xi River, for example—became part of the cultural identity of the Chinese and are still depicted in Chinese movies, television shows, and even board games. The power struggle was fierce; at times the warring armies were as large as half a million men. After the tide shifted back and forth several times, the Han, led by Liu Pang (r. 206–195 BCE), emerged victorious and created the Han Dynasty.

The Han Dynasty tried to scale back the level of warfare. To the north the rulers paid tribute to the Xiongnu and tried to buy peace through intermarriage. The dynasty also tried to appease other neighboring nomads, which continued to be a threat. At the same time, the Han Dynasty used its superior military force to extend its borders into the regions of present-day Vietnam and Korea. The military also functioned to keep open the Silk Road, the trading route that eventually extended westward all the way to Rome. In 154 BCE the military had to put down the Rebellion of the Seven States, led by several minor princes who objected to the Han Dynasty's efforts to centralize the government. The rebellion was marked by initial ferocious fighting, but in the end it lasted only three months.

Less than three decades later the Han Dynasty concluded that its treaties with the Xiongnu were ineffective and costly. In 129 BCE a force of 40,000 Chinese cavalry attacked. Warfare persisted intermittently until 119 BCE, when a Chinese force of 100,000 cavalry and 200,000 foot soldiers drove the Xiongnu into the Gobi Desert. The campaign, while successful, was costly; the Chinese took 140,000 horses into the desert, but fewer than 30,000 returned. The Xiongnu, however, just would not go away. In the first century of the Common Era, China dispatched one of its most famous generals, Pan Ch'ao (31–101 CE), to subdue and drive them out of the Tarim Basin to China's west. In 97 CE he commanded an army of 70,000 men to drive them even farther west; he went as far as the Caspian Sea, where he struck an alliance with the Parthian Empire. Despite all of China's successes against the Xiongnu, in 311 CE, 100 years after the end of the Han Dynasty, the Xiongnu sacked Luoyang, the capital of the Han.

One of the last military actions of the Han Dynasty was the suppression of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, sometimes called the Yellow Scarves Rebellion. The rebellion took place in 184 and was led by Daoist peasants who objected to the regime's decision to make China a Confucian rather than a Daoist state. Despite fielding an army of 360,000, the rebels were unsuccessful and were put down in 185. Fighting erupted again in 186, 188, and 192, when the rebellion was finally ended.

For many historians, the Yellow Turban Rebellion, so called because of the yellow headscarves the rebels wore, was the unofficial start of the Three Kingdoms Period (220–263 BCE) that followed the Han Dynasty. Again, China was wracked by instability. The "three kingdoms" were those of Wei, Shu, and Wu, though they were not really kingdoms but regions whose emperors each claimed to be the legitimate heir to the Han Dynasty. The period was marked by a great deal of infighting, which eventually led to the defeat of the Shu by the Wei. The Wei, in turn, were then defeated by an alliance of the Wu and the Jin Dynasty (265–420 CE). The period was extremely bloody, with a large percentage of the population killed during the wars that raged from about 190 to 280. On the heels of these civil wars came the War of the Eight Princes (also called the Rebellion of the Eight Kings or Rebellion of the Eight Princes), another period of civil war from 291 to 306 CE. The rebellion was centered in northern China. Again, it led to huge population losses, which greatly reduced the power of the Jin Dynasty. The dynasty itself was rent by divisions, leading to the creation of the Western Jin Dynasty, (265–316 CE) and the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420 CE). One of the most important battles in ancient Chinese
One of the results of this long history of warfare was the production of texts about military strategy. One is referred to as the "Thirty-Six Strategies." The origin of the book is shrouded in mystery. Historians generally believe that it was compiled by a General Wang during the Warring States Period. It consists of a number of proverbs about warfare, many of which were probably traditional by that time. The number 36 is a figure of speech used to refer to "numerous" strategies, divided into six sections. To cite one example, the text advises military commanders to "deceive the sky to cross the ocean." The text explains this precept by saying that the clever commander hides his true intentions by going about daily activities in full view of the enemy; hiding or moving about in the darkness only attracts suspicion.

The other great military text from ancient China is The Art of War, written, it is thought, in the sixth century by Sun-tzu. The book has 13 chapters and is still regarded by military planners as the definitive treatise on military strategy—particularly on how to win a battle or war without actually fighting but rather by outsmarting the enemy. The book continues to be required reading for officers in Asian militaries. Many of the book's statements have become proverbial, such as the famous quote "All warfare is based on deception." The book was rediscovered in the West in the 1980s when corporations and political candidates began using its precepts to plot business or campaign strategies and outsmart their rivals. The book has also entered the popular culture in the West, with numerous references to it in movies, plays, sports, music, board games, and television shows.

Based on these and other texts, as well as on the archaeological record, historians and archaeologists have been able to reconstruct the nature of warfare in ancient China. They know, for example, that weapons during much of ancient China's history were made of bronze. Examples include the spear, whose point was made of bronze, and the dagger-ax, which was the primary weapon of foot soldiers. A dagger-ax consisted of a dagger-shaped blade mounted perpendicularly on a wooden haft, or handle. Often the blade consisted of a dagger on one side and a scythe-shaped blade on the other. Other weapons included the sword, many quite elaborate and ornate, and the crossbow. Chinese soldiers also wore armor, which tended to be light and flexible rather than heavy and thick, trading the stopping power for speed and maneuverability. The Chinese invented gunpowder, probably in the third century CE, but gunpowder was not used as a component of military weapons until much later.

The horse-drawn chariot was a primary instrument of war. Ancient China was a feudal society, and there emerged a warrior class that emphasized the skills of horsemanship and the handling of the chariot. Horseback riding tended to be difficult for Chinese men, who wore robes rather than trousers, but skills in military horsemanship were highly developed among members of the aristocratic warrior class, and many troops stormed into battle on horseback. In about the fifth century CE the stirrup was introduced, allowing mounted warriors to retain stability and balance and so fight on horseback with swords and lances.

Early warfare tended to be ceremonial and ritualized. As time went on it became more brutal and bloody. Much emphasis was placed on deception and tricking the enemy. Also common was siege warfare, where an attacking army surrounded a city, bombarded it with missiles launched by catapults, and wore down the residents over time. In more conventional battles the norm was not to arrange regiments of troops in a fixed order of battle but rather to rely on firepower using crossbows. Large numbers of archers loaded their weapons, took aim on the order of their commander, and then fired simultaneously, in this way overwhelming the enemy by the sheer number of arrows that had to be ducked.

Naval warfare played a major part in the history of ancient China. During the Qin Dynasty, for example, China had a fleet of ships capable of transporting close to one million pounds of grain to feed troops during war. The Qin also had a fleet of lou chuan, or "castle ships," with large, elevated decks. The Han continued to build warships, and its fleet reached 2,000 castle ships able to carry 200,000 seamen.

India

The history of warfare and conquest in ancient India in many ways parallels that of China. Rather than being a unified nation-state, India was a collection of numerous smaller kingdoms. At times the number of kingdoms was as few as 16. Such was the case during the Iron Age in about 500 BCE, when the 16 kingdoms were collectively called the Mahajanadapas. At other times the number of kingdoms and principalities was much larger, as many as 100 or more. As in China, these kingdoms often competed with one another for territory and resources, so they often went to war. Warfare, though, was conducted on a smaller scale than it was in China and consisted primarily of border skirmishes.
India, however, faced more external threats than did the Chinese. Like China, India was subject to invasion by barbarians from the north. One of the greatest civilizations of the ancient world, the Indus Valley civilization, was destroyed by northern Aryan invaders in about 1600 BCE. Additionally, in the fifth century BCE India was invaded by the Persians under the king Darius the Great (r. 522–486 BCE) and was ruled by the Persian Empire for nearly 200 years until Macedonia, under the leadership of Alexander the Great (r. 336–323 BCE), conquered the Persian Empire, including its holdings in India. One of the key events in this conquest was the Battle of the Hydaspes River (now called the Jhelum River) in 326 BCE. Alexander invaded to subdue the various Indian kings, but one, Porus (d. between 321 and 315 BCE), who ruled the area around Punjab, resisted. Alexander sent a large army against him. Porus and his army put up fierce resistance, but eventually Alexander won and made the area the eastern border of his empire.

India as a unified empire did not flex its military might until the Maurya Dynasty, which maintained a standing army of three-quarters of a million troops, most belonging to a warrior caste. The empire, founded about 321 BCE by Chandragupta, was based in eastern India but in time stretched across western, central, and portions of southern India. One of the greatest achievements of the Maurya was the liberation of those parts of the country that were occupied by the Macedonians. One of Chandragupta's ministers, Kautilya (fl. 300 BCE.), wrote a text called the Arthashastra, a book that examined the military arts along with politics, economics, and other subjects.

One of the most important rulers of the Maurya was Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka (r. ca. 265–238 BCE. or ca. 273–232 BCE.). Early in his reign Asoka was a talented military commander. His major achievement was to lead a large army against the Kalinga, one of the kingdoms of southern India. Although he triumphed, he lost an estimated 10,000 troops, and when he saw the devastation the war had caused both to the armies and to the civilian population, he renounced war and accepted the teachings of Buddhism. However, as many historians note, he had no further reason to go to war, for he had successfully united most of what is modern-day India.

In the centuries that followed the end of Maurya rule, India again fragmented. The invading Kushans established an empire that stretched across the center of India. The later Gupta Empire, which ruled from CE 240 to 550, again united India, primarily because of its strong military organization.

One of the most important military weapons of the Gupta Empire, as well as the empires of its predecessors, was the chariot. Indian chariots were more like troop-transport vehicles, in contrast to the light Roman and Egyptian chariots that normally come to mind. They carried at least two men—the driver and an archer—but many carried up to seven and were so heavy that four and even six horses were needed to pull them. Sometimes the chariots were simply driven at high speed into the middle of a fight, where their large wheels crushed enemy infantrymen. Meanwhile, the archers were as high as six feet off the ground, giving them a tactical advantage over enemy troops on the ground.

Another important tool used by Indian armies, which came into use in about 1500 BCE, was the elephant, which Indians continued to use in war until the 19th century. Elephants were a measure of wealth and prestige; Chandragupta's army had more than 21,000. Elephants were analogous to modern-day tanks. They were covered with armor and often had long daggers, sometimes poisoned, attached to their tusks. Each elephant provided protection for as many as six infantrymen, who fought with bows and arrows, lances, and javelins and then retreated behind the elephant when necessary. Elephants were also used to break down walls and enemy fortifications. One battle tactic, used by Porus at the Battle of Hydaspes, was to range the elephants in a line, providing a kind of moving fortress or wall. Like chariots, they were often driven directly into the battle, crushing enemy troops underfoot as archers mounted on the elephant's back shot at men below. Some elephants were even trained to swing weapons such as balls and chains back and forth.

Unlike China, which made extensive use of horse-mounted cavalry, Indians did not in general fight with cavalry. One exception was the Rajput Kingdom, which had an extremely skilled cavalry. Otherwise, the main force of an Indian army was its infantry, which fought primarily with bows and arrows and hundreds of different types of swords. The armies of India tended to be huge, much larger than the armies fielded by other empires at the time. Even though the kingdoms at war might have been small, it was not unusual for their armies to number in the hundreds of thousands. India maintained a navy for military purposes; during Maurya rule the navy became quite extensive. Although the navy was used to subdue islands and provinces along the coast, naval warfare was not a prominent feature of India's military history.

India was particularly noteworthy for its use of planned battle tactics and formations. Some of these battle formations were complex and included the chakra (wheel), suchi (needle), chayana (hawk), mala (garland), garuda (eagle), and padma (lotus). These terms reflected the shape of the formations. Thus, for example, in the padma formation archers (as well as the commanding general) were on the inside, surrounded by cavalry and infantry in the shape of a lotus flower, protecting the archers. If enemy troops managed to force their way into the area between the "petals" of the flower, the archers mounted on the elephants were to range the elephants in line, providing a kind of moving fortress or wall. Like chariots, they were often driven directly into the battle, crushing enemy troops underfoot as archers mounted on the elephant's back shot at men below. Some elephants were even trained to swing weapons such as balls and chains back and forth.
two petals would swing together, crushing the troops between them. The garuda formation featured elephants and the most skilled archers at the "beak," archers who were almost as good at the "head," "wings" of swift cavalry and infantry troops, and a "body" of reserves behind.

Korea

Like China and India, Korea consisted of a number of city-states, except that the number was much smaller, reflecting the small size of the Korean peninsula. During the first millennium BCE, the three city-states that dominated were Koguryo, Paekche, and Silla, though other minor city-states existed as well. Within each of these city-states were several groups. Historically, these city-states have been called the Three Kingdoms, and the Three Kingdoms Period extended from the first century BCE to 668 CE, when Silla defeated Koguryo.

Militarily, the most powerful and dominant of the kingdoms was the Koguryo (the name from which Korea evolved). Beginning in 37 BCE and into the first centuries of the Common Era a succession of monarchs united the kingdom, extended the kingdom's boundaries and, in particular, resisted the Chinese. During the reign of Taejo (53–146 CE) the Koreans mounted a number of well-conceived attacks on the Chinese garrisons at Lolang, Xiantu, and Liaodong. Their efforts were successful, and Koguryo became entirely independent. The regime also launched attacks against smaller states to absorb them. Later, under King Gwanggaeto the Great, who reigned from 391 to 412 CE, the kingdom further expanded its territories through military conquest; in fact, the king's name means "great expander of territory." His army conquered at least 64 walled cities and 1,400 villages against a group called the Buyeo. He subdued additional peoples, annexed portions of the peninsula, conquered Silla, and waged war against Japan. The result of his efforts and those of his son was to turn Korea into a unified country for some 50 years.

Less is known about ancient Japanese battle tactics or military organization. Although there was a measure of internal warfare, Korea did not engage in extensive armed conflict with neighbors, and weapons technology was not as highly advanced as it was among the Chinese. In general, Koreans fought using farm implements and other common objects. Among them were the ji pang e, a cane; the jang bond, or long staff; the jung bong, a staff of middle length; the tahn bong, or short stick; the jang tan-do, or long dagger; and the nat, or sickle. Koreans, though, did not carry these simple weapons into battle without training. Martial-arts training provided warriors with the skills they needed, including the hyungs, or patterns, to turn these objects into lethal weapons. Accompanying this was training in hand-to-hand combat. Many of these Korean martial arts continue to be taught in the modern world.

The ancient Koreans, especially those in the kingdom of Silla, maintained a strong warrior class. Boys and young men were sent to schools that emphasized training in military tactics and the use of weapons, and the most promising ones were given further training and became members of the warrior class.

Japan

Warfare was infrequent during the Jōmon Period, the earliest period of Japanese history, which began about 13,000 BCE and extended to about 300 BCE. During the fourth and third centuries BCE waves of immigrants from Korea and China changed the fundamental makeup of Japan. From about 300 BCE to 300 CE the Yayoi Period of Japanese history (named after the modern Tokyo suburb in which archaeological remains of the culture were found in the 19th century) was marked by the introduction of metal weapons and the rise of an aristocratic warrior class. Most of the warfare in which Japan took part was internal. Japan at the time was not a unified nation-state but a collection of villages and small cities. Japan was an agricultural society, and imbalances in the productivity of its numerous communities led to conflict. The basic unit of society was the clan (uji), and each clan, led by a noble, fielded an army to defend its interests. This emphasis on an aristocratic warrior class continued into the Yamato Period that followed the Yayoi. The Yamato emperors continued the process of subduing groups and even attacked part of Korea in 391 CE. The pattern, then, was similar to those of China, India, and Korea, as small kingdoms vied with each other over resources and in the attempt to forge a larger kingdom.

Little is known about ancient Japanese battle tactics or military organization. It is known that some warriors fought on horseback, but most were foot soldiers. The archaeological record shows arrow points, swords, knives, and axes made of iron. Bronze weapons included halberds, swords, and spears. Because ancient Japanese society was feudal and clan based, no nation-state mounted a centralized army; rather, military forces were small, and their members consisted of the men that the feudal overlord could press into service.
Oceania

Social organization throughout Oceania, including Micronesia, New Guinea, and Australia, was highly fragmented in ancient times. None of these peoples built an empire or even a nation. The basic unit of organization was the tribe. Tribes were typically run by a "big man," the tribal leader. Geographically, the unit of organization was the island or, on larger islands, the village. Sometimes primitive warfare broke out as populations grew and tribes competed for resources; at times they resorted to cannibalism. Also, population pressures often forced islanders to leave to find new lands.

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