

Did Qin have a policy of mass slaughter?

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For more than a century before the Qin state defeated all its rivals to create the united imperial China in 221 BCE, violence enveloped Eastern Asia. Seven great powers called “warring states” maintained a balance of power by bloody war and treacherous diplomacy. Qin was the most militaristic of the warring seven. Did it have a policy of mass slaughter?

Mark Lewis thinks so: “A final maxim of Fan Sui that articulated recent political developments and defined the new ambition of Qin was ‘attack not only their territory but also their people.’ This meant to aim not only at territorial expansion, but also at the destruction of armies on such a scale that rival states would lose the capacity to fight. Here we find enunciated as policy the mass slaughter of the third century [BCE].”¹ Citing Lewis with approval, Victoria Hui adds, “Apparently the *Sunzi*’s advice that ‘preserving their army is best, destroying their army second-best’ had become outdated by then.”²

The interpretation of Lewis and Hui is wrong, this essay argues.

Let me start with a little historical background. Ancient China was populated by feudal states where power diffused among hereditary aristocrats who tended to put the interests of their own families and fiefs above that of the state. In the fourth century BCE, major states initiated reforms to curb aristocratic abuses, centralize power, and harness the socioeconomic forces unleashed by China’s passage into the Iron Age. Political restructuring was slow and hard won. For example, the great Qin reformer Shang Yang was killed in aristocratic backlash as soon as the ruler who supported him died. Nevertheless, over the decades, reform efforts aiming to “enrich the state and strength the army” enhanced the state’s capacity to mobilize resources and field larger armies. The scale of war escalated.



The long reign of King Zhao of Qin, which lasted from 306 to 251 BCE, is the focus of the issue under discussion. Having won the throne with the support of the queen dowager and her brother Lord Rang, King Zhao saw significant aristocratic revival during the first part of his reign. Lord Rang promoted Bo Qi, probably the most successful and brutal general of the warring states. In their times, Qin gained much by taking lands from the states Han, Wei, and Chu. It also engaged in many futile operations. Lord Rang seized as his own fief remote lands not contiguous to Qin, and from its prosperous cities extracted riches that surpassed the state treasury. To enlarge his fief, he repeatedly crossed hostile territory to attack Wei, but was always foiled by the rescue of Zhao and Yan.³ These mixed results indicated a foreign policy not different from that of other warring states, geared toward grabbing immediate returns without imperial vision. The classic verb for Qin's action on other states is *canshi*, literally to eat like a silkworm. A caterpillar devours a leaf not by swallowing but by relentless shaving. Swallowing implies a notion of the whole; shaving does not. Encroachment and enrichment seemed more the concern of Qin decision makers than the unification of China, at least up to that time.

In 266 BCE, Fan Ju (also pronounced as Fan Sui), a servant from Wei, went to Qin and pointed out to King Zhao that Lord Rang's strategy of traversing foreign territories to take lands too remote to hold benefited himself at the expense of the state. For a vision of empire building, Fan promoted the policy "to befriend distant states and attack neighbors, so that every inch of land the king wins would be his to keep."⁴ Fan won the confidence of King Zhao, who dismissed Lord Rang but retained Bo Qi.

Fan suggested Qin first target Han, a neighbor strategically located on Qin's routes of expansion.⁵ *Stratagems of the Warring States* contains the passage: "Qin invaded Han and invested Xing. Fan Ju said to King Zhao of Qin: 'Some target men (*ren*), others target territories. Lord Rang invaded Wei ten times but failed to harm it, not because Qin was weak and Wei strong, but because he targeted territory. Territory is dear to the ruler. For the ruler, ministers (*chen*) are glad to die. By targeting the ruler's beloved, Lord Rang pitted himself against men willing to sacrifice their lives, which is why he gained nothing in ten invasions. Now you majesty is about to invade Han and invest its city Xing. *I hope you target not only their territory but also their men (ren)*. While surrounding Xing, your majesty should negotiate with Zhang Yi. If he is smart, he would cede some land to preserve his own position and the remaining of Han. If he fails to get the point, you should cause his dismissal and negotiate with someone more malleable."⁶

The seventh sentence of the passage quoted, which I italicized, is the sole source offered by Lewis as the evidence for Qin's "policy of mass slaughter". I disagree with his interpretation for the following reasons.

By 266 BCE, when Fan Ju reached Qin, fierce large-scale wars were already common and grand victories loudly advertised. Everyone knew the massive casualties that Lord Rang and Bo Qi inflicted on Wei and Han, for instance the 240,000 enemy dead claimed for the battle of Yique.⁷ Fan Ju would be trying to sell a plain falsehood, if by "Lord Rang targeted territory" he meant failure at mass slaughter.

For mass slaughter, the more appropriate word for the target would be *min* (people) or more specifically, *bing* (soldier). However, Fan used the more general and personal word *ren*, which translators such as J. I. Crump renders as “man.”⁸ It agrees with Fan Ju’s specific concern with the behaviors of *chen* (minister or officer).

Nothing in the context suggests “targeting *ren*” to mean military carnage. Rather, everything points to political espionage, which targets not mass soldiers but individual ministers in powerful positions. Contrary to Hui’s suspicion, warring-state strategists embraced Sunzi’s preference for psychological manipulation that targets the enemy’s decision-making capacity. This was the real content of Fan Ju’s policy of “targeting men”, such as targeting Han’s Zhang Yi. The policy was applied in other instances. When the defensive strategy of Zhao’s experienced field commander frustrated Qin advancement at Changping, Fan’s political operation caused his replacement by a young aristocrat whose brilliant theory proved disastrous at the battlefield.⁹ Such plots and bribes contributed much to Qin’s campaigns that unified China. Games of cloak and dagger are bloody, but they could be attempts to save on blood that would drench the battlefield.

The 260 BCE battle of Changping claimed the largest casualties in pre-imperial wars. Qin and Zhao had faced off each other in a three-year stalemate. After Fan’s political espionage deprived the Zhao army of a competent commander, Qin secretly replaced its own field commander by Bo Qi, the most fierce and feared general of the time. In a brilliant maneuver with 25,000 troops plus 5,000 cavalry, Bo cut Zhao’s supply line and forced its army of alleged 400,000 to surrender. Considering what to do with the prisoners of war, Bo noted that the war was caused by a double cross and decided, “Zhou soldiers are treacherous. If we do not kill them all, they may rebel.” This was a mass slaughter, but it was issued from the field general’s expedient decision. Bo later took personal responsibility for it, regarding it a crime for which he deserved the death sentence.¹⁰

That the Changping slaughter was not a state policy can be seen from its aftermath. Following the military logic of exploiting victories, Bo Qi begged the permission to march immediately on Zhao’s capital Handan to finish off Zhao before it had chance to recover from the devastating blow. Fan Ju opposed him and convinced King Zhao to let the Qin people and the conscription army to rest for ten months. When Qin finally invested Handan, Zhao recovered to foil its siege.¹¹ Qin’s post-Changping decision contradicted the rationale of “policy of mass slaughter” that Lewis attributed to it. Expediency on the ground is different from state policy as manslaughter is different from murder. Perhaps the intent for routine violence, like beauty, may reside in the eye of the beholder.

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1. M. E. Lewis, Warring States political history, in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origin of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, eds. M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy. Cambridge (1999), pp. 639-640; *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*. Harvard (2007), p. 38.
 2. V. T. Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge (2005), p. 86.
 3. Yang Kuan 楊寬. *Zhanguo Shi 戰國史 (History of the Warring States)*. Shanghai Renmin (2003). Pp. 129-31, 420-1.

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4. *Zhanguo* 5, 《戰國策·秦策三》 范雎至秦. *Shiji* 79: 2409, 《史記》 卷 79 范雎列傳.
 5. *Shiji* 79: 2410, 《史記》 卷 79 范雎列傳.
 6. *Zhanguo* 5, 《戰國策·秦策三》 秦攻韓圍陘.
 7. *Shiji* 73: 2331. 《史記》 卷 73, 白起列傳.
 8. J. I. Crump, translator, *Chan-kuo Ts'e*, [*Zhanguo* 戰國策, *Stratagems of the Warring States*] Michigan (1996), p. 130.
 9. *Shiji* 79: 2417, 《史記》 卷 79, 范雎列傳.
 10. *Shiji* 73: 2333-2335, 2337. 《史記》 卷 73, 白起列傳..
 11. *Shiji* 73: 2335-2337. 《史記》 卷卷 73, 白起列傳.