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Art of War and Legalism

Primary Source Reading

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Sun-Tzu (544-496 BCE) wrote his legendary treatise *The Art of War* in the 6th century BCE. One of the oldest books on military tactics in the world, the book's 13 chapters tackle various aspects of warfare and military strategy. The book has been required reading for the Chinese army since the Song Dynasty (920-1279), and it has become increasingly popular outside of China over the last century. Sun-Tzu's ideas have influenced a wide-range of people, including military strategists, business professionals, rappers and video game players.

Sun-Tzu was a landless Chinese aristocrat. Instead of devoting his life to academics like many aristocrats, he worked as a military consultant, a kind of general-for-hire. According to some accounts, he once trained a battalion of all-female troops who eventually became talented soldiers. After a series of victories on the battlefield, Sun-Tzu disappeared into the mountains. As his book makes clear, he knew a lot about war, but he ultimately preferred peace.

Notes

2. Han Fei-tzu (also Han Fei, 280-233 BCE) developed the philosophy of Legalism. This philosophy formed the hard-line, totalitarian governing policy of the Qin dynasty. Legalism argued that people should be controlled by a single ruler. The ideology has three main beliefs:

1. Laws must punish those who do wrong and reward those who do right.
2. A ruler must employ tactics and secrets to make sure his people do not understand his motives, which will allow him to stay in power longer.
3. A ruler must understand that the title of "ruler" is more important than the ruler himself.

Under Legalism, Qin rulers cracked down on those who opposed them and tried to keep their movements secret from the public. Some would argue that similar tactics are still used in modern-day China, where, for example, the government seriously limits free speech.

After many years in the Qin court, Han Fei-tzu was eventually persecuted by his colleagues and forced to commit suicide by drinking poison in prison.