Proactive Peace in Early China: Mohist Strategies of Self-Defense and the Evolution of Chinese Peace Thought

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The Mohist doctrine of "non-offensive warfare" (*fei gong*) is fundamentally grounded in the principles of robust defense and the strategic use of strength to deter armed conflict. In contrast to the Confucian conception of "righteous war", the Mohist philosophy of peace exhibits a distinctly pragmatic orientation: it reconceptualizes the very nature of warfare by rejecting annexation and expansion motivated by avarice; it seeks the cessation of war not through moral exhortation but through the establishment of effective defensive capabilities; and it develops a systematic military thought that privileges defense over aggression. This intellectual shift is deeply rooted in the socio-political transformations of the Warring States period, during which the collapse of the old order rendered appeals to moral authority insufficient to counterbalance the pervasive drive for territorial consolidation. Departing from prior scholarship that has largely focused on the Confucian ideal of "harmony as the highest virtue", this study contends that Mohist *fei gong* embodies an active pacifism—a proactive paradigm of self-defense aimed at the prevention of war. This framework offers a more dynamic and agentive philosophical resource than models of "passive peace", thereby illuminating the historical lineage and civilizational foundations of China's peace-oriented thought.

Keywords: Mohism, non-offensive warfare, active pacifism

Introduction

Scholarship on early Chinese peace thought has traditionally centered on the Confucian emphasis on moral governance, ritual order (*li*), and the ideal that "harmony is the highest virtue". Fung Yu-lan argues that Confucianism privileges *wangdao* (the kingly way) over *badao* (hegemonic rule), regarding moral virtue as the highest means for resolving conflict and achieving peace (Fung, 1985). Chen Lai, in his analysis of early Western Zhou thought, highlights the pacifist orientation embedded in concepts such as "virtuous governance" (*de zheng*) and "revering virtue to protect the people" (*jing de bao min*), which emphasize moral responsibility as the foundation of political order (Chen, 2017). Daniel A. Bell likewise offers an in-depth discussion of the Confucian conception of just war, examining its ethical logic and contemporary implications within the broader framework of Confucian political philosophy (Bell, 2008). Within this framework, peace is understood as the outcome of ethical cultivation and normative restraint, sustained through the moral authority of rulers and the internalization of virtue.

While this moral-centered perspective captures an important strand of early Chinese political thought, it becomes increasingly inadequate when applied to the Warring States period. As ritual institutions collapsed and

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centralized moral authority disintegrated, ethical exhortation lost its capacity to restrain interstate violence. Persistent warfare driven by territorial consolidation and structural insecurity rendered peace unattainable through moral persuasion alone. It was under these conditions that Mohism articulated an alternative approach to peace. Existing interpretations often treat Mohist *fei gong* as a form of early pacifism, emphasizing its ethical opposition to war. Such readings, however, tend to overlook its proactive and strategic character. Unlike Confucianism, which consistently downplays military force, Mohism integrates defensive expertise, organizational discipline, and technical knowledge directly into its normative framework, especially in response to the vulnerabilities faced by smaller or weaker states.

This article argues that Mohist *fei gong* constitutes a form of active pacifism—a proactive paradigm of self-defense aimed at the prevention of war. Distinct from models of "passive peace", Mohist active pacifism emphasizes agency, preparedness, and deterrence, treating peace as a condition that must be actively produced and institutionally sustained under conditions of structural insecurity. By reexamining the theoretical substance of Mohist non-offensive warfare within its historical context, this study highlights an alternative peace paradigm in early Chinese thought and offers a historically grounded perspective on the relationship between ethics, power, and peace.

The Theoretical Substance of Mohist "Non-Offensive Warfare"

The doctrine of non-offensive warfare (*fei gong*) occupies a central position within Mohist thought and constitutes one of its most distinctive theoretical contributions. Rather than functioning as a simple moral injunction against war, *fei gong* articulates a comprehensive framework for preventing armed conflict through defensive capacity, ethical universalism, and strategic rationality. Emerging in direct response to the conditions of incessant interstate warfare during the Warring States period, this doctrine integrates moral principles with practical mechanisms aimed at restraining aggression. Its theoretical substance can be examined from three interrelated dimensions: a radical critique of war, a practice-oriented pathway to peace, and a defense-first military ethic.

A More Radical Critique of War

Confucian political thought permits warfare under certain moral conditions, encapsulated in the notion of "righteous war". Within this framework, war may be justified when it is undertaken to uphold ritual order, punish transgression, or restore moral governance. The legitimacy of violence is thus evaluated according to the identity of the initiator, the character of the target, and the ethical justification invoked (Confucius, 1979; Mencius, 2003). This approach seeks to regulate warfare rather than abolish it, embedding military action within a normative hierarchy grounded in ritual and moral authority.

Mohist thinkers initially appear to share this concern for moral judgment when evaluating historical conflicts. In discussing exemplary figures such as Yu, Tang, and King Wu, Mozi distinguishes punitive expeditions from aggressive warfare, arguing that acts of moral punishment should not be conflated with unjustified attacks (Mozi, 2010). However, this limited convergence masks a more profound divergence in the assessment of contemporary warfare. Whereas Confucianism preserves conceptual space for righteous war, Mohism advances a fundamentally different position: that war, as practiced in reality, is inherently unjust.

Mozi's critique proceeds from strict ethical universalism. If the killing of a single individual is deemed immoral, then warfare—which entails the mass killing of innocents—must represent a far greater moral

violation (Mozi, 2010). From this premise, Mohism rejects the possibility that wars motivated by self-interest, territorial expansion, or political advantage could ever be reconciled with ethical legitimacy. In this sense, *fei gong* does not merely oppose particular wars; it challenges the conceptual coherence of "righteous war" itself under conditions of competitive state violence.

This argument exposes what Mohist thinkers regarded as a fundamental inconsistency in prevailing moral discourse: the simultaneous condemnation of individual harm and the moral rationalization of collective violence. By identifying war as an extreme manifestation of self-serving behavior, Mohism reframes armed conflict not as a morally regulable instrument, but as a systemic injustice incompatible with universal ethical standards. The rejection of war is therefore not contingent upon circumstance or authority, but grounded in an absolute moral logic.

Peace through Practice: Defense as Ethical Action

Mohist thinkers were acutely aware that ethical condemnation alone could not halt the advance of militarized states. In a political environment characterized by relentless competition and territorial consolidation, appeals to moral authority were increasingly ineffective. Consequently, *fei gong* advances a practice-oriented pathway to peace, premised on the strategic use of strength to deter armed conflict.

This orientation represents one of the most distinctive features of Mohist thought. Rather than retreating from military affairs, Mohism systematically incorporated defensive technology, organizational discipline, and technical expertise into its ethical framework. Peace was not to be achieved by persuading aggressors of moral ideals, but by raising the material and strategic costs of aggression to an unacceptable level. Effective defense thus becomes a form of ethical action: a means of preventing war by denying its feasibility. According to *Records of the Grand Historian*, "Mo Di was a grand officer of the state of Song. He excelled in defensive warfare and advocated frugality in expenditure" (Sima Qian, 1993).

The organizational structure of the Mohist community reflects this practical orientation. Mohist followers were recruited across social strata and trained according to specialized roles, with particular emphasis placed on those capable of mastering defensive techniques. Through strict division of labor and professionalization, Mohism cultivated a corps of practitioners proficient in fortification, siege defense, and logistical coordination. According to the *Huainanzi*, "Mozi commanded a corps of one hundred and eighty followers, all of whom could be ordered to rush into fire or tread upon blades, facing death without turning back" (Liu An et al., 2010). These individuals formed the operational backbone of Mohist peace practice, translating ethical commitments into concrete defensive capability.

Historical accounts of Mohist intervention in interstate conflicts further illustrate this logic. The ability of Mohist defenders to neutralize sophisticated siege technologies and to organize effective urban defense served as a powerful deterrent to aggression. In this respect, Mohist peace practice functioned not through moral conversion, but through strategic calculation: aggressors were compelled to reconsider the costs of war in the face of credible resistance.

A Defense-First Military Ethic

The integration of military expertise into Mohist thought does not entail the endorsement of militarism. On the contrary, Mohist military ethics are defined by a strict prioritization of defense over offense. Technical knowledge and strategic capability are carefully circumscribed by normative constraints, ensuring that force is deployed exclusively for the purpose of preventing aggression (Mozi, 2010).

Mohist texts consistently emphasize preparedness against a wide range of offensive tactics, outlining detailed defensive measures tailored to specific forms of attack. The ultimate objective of this defense-first ethic is deterrence rather than victory. One of the Mohists' greatest inventions was the repeating crossbow, capable of firing dozens of bolts in rapid succession—some accounts describe up to sixty shots—making it an exceptionally advanced piece of military technology for its time. One could plausibly hypothesize that, had the Mohists deployed this weapon for offensive purposes, they would have been extremely difficult to defeat, as few contemporary forces possessed effective countermeasures against such firepower. However, the Mohists built their reputation primarily on defending cities on behalf of others, and they therefore consistently confined the use of this formidable technology to defensive contexts.

It should be noted that no physical examples of the Mohist repeating crossbow have survived. Nevertheless, historical military treatises provide indirect evidence of similar mechanisms. For instance, the Song-dynasty military manual *Wujing Zongyao* documents the *chuangnu* (bed crossbow), which was capable of launching multiple bolts in succession (see Figure 1). In terms of its mechanical principle and tactical function, this weapon bears notable similarities to the Mohist repeating crossbow cart (*Wujing Zongyao*, Zeng & Ding, 1044), further supporting the plausibility of Mohist accounts despite the absence of extant artifacts.
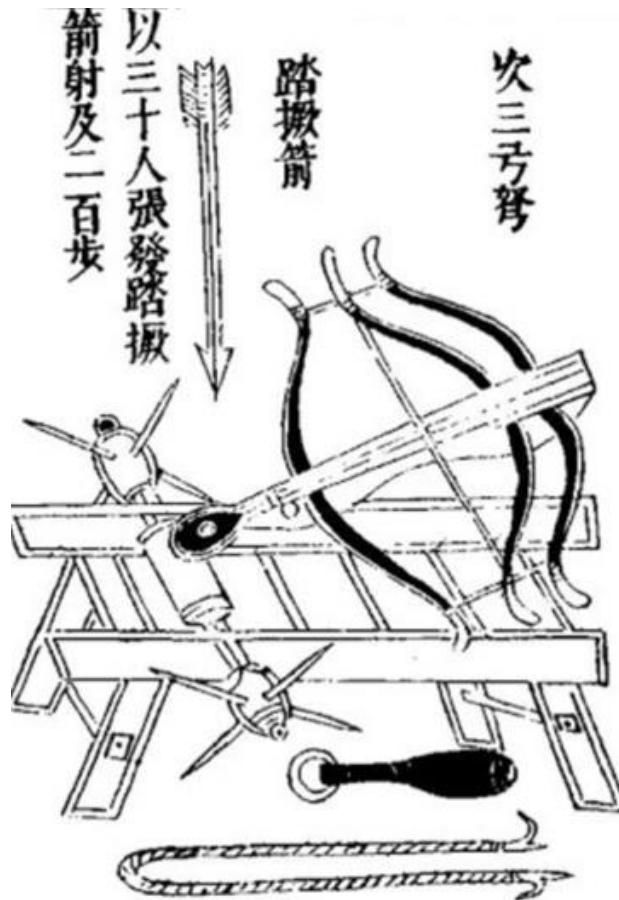

Figure 1. Chuangnu.

Taken together, these three dimensions reveal *fei gong* as a coherent and multi-layered theory of peace. Rooted in ethical universalism, operationalized through defensive practice, and constrained by a defense-first

military ethic, Mohist non-offensive warfare exemplifies a form of active pacifism—a proactive paradigm of self-defense aimed at the prevention of war.

The Rise of Proactive Peace in the Warring States Context

The emergence of Mohist proactive peace was neither accidental nor the result of individual moral idealism. It was a direct response to the structural transformations of the Warring States period, during which political authority fragmented, normative institutions eroded, and interstate relations became increasingly governed by force. As centralized moral authority collapsed, appeals to ethical norms lost their capacity to restrain violence, creating a political environment in which peace could no longer be sustained through moral exhortation alone.

The Collapse of the Old Order

During the Western Zhou and early Spring and Autumn periods, interstate relations were partially regulated by a ritual and feudal order centered on the authority of the Zhou king. Although conflicts occurred, warfare was nominally constrained by ritual norms and hierarchical legitimacy. Military campaigns were framed as punitive expeditions aimed at restoring moral and political order rather than as efforts at territorial annihilation.

By the Warring States period, this institutional framework had largely disintegrated. Political authority shifted decisively from the Zhou king to regional rulers and, in some cases, to powerful ministers. Ritual norms lost their binding force, and moral claims increasingly lacked an accepted arbiter. Appeals to moral authority, once embedded in shared institutions, were reduced to abstract exhortations with little capacity to influence state behavior. Violence no longer required justification beyond strategic necessity.

This transformation had profound implications for peace thought. In the absence of a shared moral or institutional order, peace could no longer be grounded in ethical consensus. Political theories that relied primarily on moral persuasion were structurally disadvantaged in an environment defined by fragmentation and competition. Mohism emerged precisely at this juncture, grounded in a sober assessment of the limits of moral authority under conditions of systemic instability.

The Drive for Territorial Consolidation

The collapse of the old order coincided with a fundamental transformation in the nature of warfare. Conflicts during the Warring States period were no longer episodic struggles for prestige or ritual supremacy; they increasingly became wars of territorial consolidation. Advances in military organization, the mass mobilization of infantry, and the development of centralized administrative systems enabled states to wage prolonged campaigns aimed at the permanent absorption of rival polities.

In this zero-sum environment, survival depended on expansion or effective resistance. States that failed to strengthen their military and administrative capacities faced the risk of annihilation. Legal and institutional reforms that prioritized agriculture and warfare reflected the extent to which political life became subordinated to the imperatives of security and conquest. Peace, under these conditions, was not a stable equilibrium but a temporary condition contingent upon relative strength.

This pervasive drive for territorial consolidation generated a structural dilemma for smaller or weaker states. Moral opposition to war offered no protection against predatory expansion, while offensive militarization risked provoking greater violence. Mohist non-offensive warfare addressed this dilemma by

rejecting expansionist logic altogether and focusing instead on defensive sufficiency. By emphasizing self-defense over conquest, Mohism sought to alter the strategic calculus of aggressors without reproducing the cycle of militarized expansion (Mozi, 2010).

The Limits of Confucian "Righteous War"

The Confucian doctrine of "righteous war" represents a sophisticated attempt to regulate violence by subjecting warfare to ethical evaluation. By distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate uses of force, Confucian thinkers sought to constrain war within the bounds of moral order (Confucius, 1979; Mencius, 2003). This framework presupposed the existence of a shared normative authority capable of adjudicating claims of righteousness.

In the Warring States context, this presupposition was no longer held. Competing rulers routinely appropriated moral language to legitimize expansionist ambitions, transforming "righteous war" into a flexible rhetorical instrument rather than a genuine constraint on violence. Ethical standards became fragmented and instrumentalized, undermining their capacity to limit armed conflict.

Mohist proactive peace emerged in response to this condition. Rather than attempting to refine moral criteria for legitimate warfare, Mohism rejected the premise that war could be morally regulated under prevailing circumstances. Non-offensive warfare was thus not an abstract moral ideal but a strategic and ethical adaptation to the erosion of shared norms. By shifting the focus from moral judgment to defensive capability, Mohism proposed a peace strategy compatible with a world in which moral authority could no longer be presumed (Mozi, 2010).

This approach represents a significant reorientation in early Chinese peace thought. It relocates the foundations of peace from moral intention to collective capacity and from idealized harmony to strategic deterrence grounded in self-defense. In doing so, Mohism offered a historically grounded response to the problem of maintaining peace in a fragmented and competitive political environment.

Implications of Mohist Proactive Peace for Contemporary Peace Thought

Although rooted in ancient history, Mohist proactive peace articulates a set of conceptual insights that extend beyond its immediate context. Without projecting modern theoretical frameworks onto early Chinese thought, Mohism nevertheless offers a distinctive perspective on how peace can be constructed, sustained, and defended under conditions of persistent insecurity. Its significance lies not in historical analogy, but in its capacity to illuminate peace as an active political condition shaped by agency, organization, and ethical constraint.

Peace, Agency, and Structural Insecurity

A central implication of Mohist proactive peace is its rejection of peace as a passive or self-sustaining state. Rather than treating peace as a natural equilibrium or the byproduct of moral harmony, Mohism conceptualizes peace as an outcome that must be actively produced and continuously maintained. In a political environment characterized by fragmentation, power asymmetry, and the constant threat of aggression, peace is understood as fragile and contingent, requiring deliberate preparation and disciplined restraint.

This perspective reframes peace as a social and political condition rather than a purely moral aspiration. Mohist thought does not assume the existence of shared ethical norms capable of regulating violence. Instead, it acknowledges structural insecurity as a persistent feature of political life and seeks to establish conditions under

which violence becomes strategically unattractive. Peace, in this sense, is not the absence of conflict guaranteed by consensus, but a condition actively constructed through collective capacity and strategic foresight.

Closely related to this understanding of peace is the Mohist emphasis on agency under conditions of inequality and vulnerability. Developed in an era when smaller states faced existential threats from more powerful rivals, Mohist proactive peace affirms that agency is not eliminated by power asymmetry. By prioritizing defensive sufficiency over offensive parity, Mohism demonstrates that resistance to aggression need not rely on escalation or domination. Instead, agency is exercised through organization, preparedness, and the ability to deny aggressors their objectives.

From this perspective, peace is inseparable from the capacity of political actors to act within, rather than transcend, structural constraints. Mohist thought thus challenges deterministic views that equate insecurity with inevitable violence. It suggests that even in the absence of centralized authority or moral consensus, peace can be sustained through practices that enable actors to manage insecurity without reproducing cycles of aggression.

Defensive Capacity, Deterrence, and the Normative Limits of Force

A second major implication of Mohist proactive peace lies in its distinctive treatment of defensive capacity and deterrence. Mohist non-offensive warfare presents a defense-oriented approach in which the use of strength is normatively constrained and strategically limited. Defensive capacity functions not as a means of domination or coercion, but as a mechanism for preventing violence by raising the costs of aggression.

This approach introduces an ethically bounded conception of deterrence. While deterrence is often associated with escalation or the threat of overwhelming force, Mohism articulates a variant grounded in denial rather than punishment. The legitimacy of defensive strength derives from its purpose: the prevention of war rather than the pursuit of victory. In this framework, preparedness and restraint are not opposites but complementary elements of peace maintenance.

Equally important is the emphasis Mohism places on the normative limits of force. Even under conditions of persistent threat, the deployment of military capability is strictly subordinated to ethical ends. Offensive expansion, coercive domination, and the instrumentalization of peace for power accumulation are categorically rejected. By confining the use of force to defensive contexts, Mohist proactive peace avoids the paradox in which the pursuit of peace legitimizes unlimited violence.

This insistence on limitation distinguishes Mohist thought from traditions that normalize perpetual militarization as a condition of security. Peace, in the Mohist view, requires not only strength but disciplined constraint. Defensive capacity must be sufficient to deter aggression, yet restrained enough to prevent the emergence of new forms of domination. In this balance between preparedness and ethical limitation, Mohist proactive peace offers a coherent alternative to both moral idealism and unrestrained realism.

Conclusions

This study has examined Mohist non-offensive warfare (*fei gong*) as a distinctive paradigm of proactive peace that emerged from the structural conditions of the Warring States period. Against a background of institutional collapse, territorial consolidation, and persistent insecurity, Mohism articulated an alternative to moral idealism and expansionist militarism alike.

Rather than functioning as a simple moral prohibition against war, Mohist *fei gong* constitutes a form of active pacifism grounded in defensive capacity, strategic deterrence, and ethical universalism. By relocating the

foundations of peace from moral intention to collective capacity, Mohism offered a historically grounded response to the problem of sustaining peace in a fragmented political environment.

Beyond its historical significance, Mohist proactive peace provides enduring conceptual insights for the study of peace as a social and political phenomenon. It demonstrates that peace can be actively constructed through preparedness and restraint, even in the absence of shared moral authority. In recovering Mohism as a neglected resource in the history of peace thought, this article contributes to a more pluralistic understanding of how societies have conceptualized and pursued peace under conditions of structural insecurity.

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