

CHAPTER FOUR – THE FOUNDING OF EMPIRE: THE QIN AND HAN DYNASTIES

QIN UNIFICATION: 256-202 BCE

The year 221 BCE marks the beginning of the Chinese empire. That year, the state of Qin, which had adopted a Legalist policy of governance, succeeded in defeating the last of its rivals, thereby creating a unified China. Following the counsel of Legalist advisers, the Qin state had restructured itself in the fourth century BCE. The power of the old noble families was curtailed to create a direct relationship between the ruler and his subjects, based on uniformly enforced laws and punishments administered by bureaucratic officials. As the Qin state took over its neighbouring territories, so too did its Legalist policies extend throughout China. By 230 BCE, the tide of war had shifted in Qin's favour, and the final six states – Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan, and Qi – were defeated in rapid succession. The Legalist ruler of Qin was now the lord of many millions of people throughout China.

QIN SHI HUANGDI: THE FIRST EMPEROR

The man responsible for Qin's rise to power was born as Yang Zheng. He came to the throne in 247 BCE, at the young age of thirteen. By the time he was 39, he had become the king of a unified China. As the title 'king' was not grand enough for his lordship over such a vast domain, he invented a new title for himself, Huangdi, which can be translated as 'emperor' in English. This new title linked him to the sage rulers of the mythical past, and he called himself the First Emperor in anticipation of a long line of successors.

The First Emperor initiated a sweeping program of centralization that touched the life of nearly everyone in China. To cripple the nobility of the defunct states, he ordered nobles to leave their lands and move to the capital, Xianyang, near modern Xian. To administer the territories that had been seized, he dispatched officials whom he controlled through a mass of regulations, men who owed their power entirely to the favour of the emperor and had no hereditary rights to their offices. Most especially, to make it easier to administer all regions uniformly, writing systems were standardized through all the former states – the precursor to modern day Chinese writing. In addition, thousands of miles of roads were built to enable Qin armies to move rapidly, as well as many canals to link rivers, making it possible to travel long distances by boat. Most of the labour on these projects came from farmers performing required labour service, or from convict labourers.

In 1975, 625 bamboo strips inscribed with Qin law and legal texts were found in a tomb in Hubei province. The tomb was for a man who had served the Qin government as a prefectural official. This discovery revealed for the first time the exact provisions of Qin law. The penalties imposed by Qin law included hard labour, physical mutilation, banishment, slavery and capital punishment. Labour could last from one to six years. Mutilation ranged from shaving of the beard to castration. Capital punishment also came in several forms, the most severe of which was being torn apart by four horse-drawn chariots. Under the Qin system, one's family could be held responsible for one's actions, and therefore punished in accordance. For particularly serious crimes, even distant relatives of the offender could be enslaved.

The First Emperor inherited a suspicion of intellectual diversity from his Legalist advisors. In 213 BCE, he ordered the collection and burning of all 'useless' books. The only works exempted from this were manuals on topics such as agriculture, medicine and divination. As a result of this massive book burning, many ancient texts were lost forever. Some historians have glorified the First Emperor as a bold conqueror and ruthlessly efficient administrator, who let no obstacle impede him, but the traditional evaluation of him has been almost entirely negative. For centuries, Chinese historians have castigated him as a monster: arbitrary, suspicious and cruel.

THE FIRST EMPEROR'S TOMB

Qin Shi Huang started work on his tomb soon after he came to the throne. Thirty-thousand families were resettled to the district, responsible for the construction and maintenance of the imperial tomb. In 1974, about a kilometre from the tomb itself, a pit was discovered filled with life-sized terracotta figures of soldiers. Since then, as archaeologists have probed the region around the First Emperor's tomb, they have found many pits filled with various burial goods, including bronze chariots, and rare birds and animals that were buried with the emperor. There is also a pit where more than a hundred human skeletons have been found – according to inscribed shards, these were conscripted and penal labourers who died on the job. By the far the most spectacular of Qin Shi Huang's burial goods, however, are in the three pits which contain his terracotta army. The first pit contains more than six thousand foot soldiers arrayed in columns, as well as some chariots. The second has terracotta cavalry and more chariots, and may have represented the emperor's personal guard on the battlefield. The third pit has the fewest soldiers, and may represent a command post. While these soldiers were made of simple clay formed with molds, they carried real weapons, such as spears, halberds, and bows. Some of these blades are still razor sharp today. Why did the First Emperor want so many replicas of soldiers buried near him? It is said that on three separate occasions, assassins tried to kill him, and as such he became obsessed with finding ways to avoid death. He sent a group of men to search for solutions to immortality, and also sought the advice of seers and alchemists. At the end of the day, however, it seems that Qin Shi Huang realized that he could not escape from mortality, and therefore conscripted an army of soldiers for his personal protection in the afterlife.

THE HAN DYNASTY 206 BCE – 202 CE

The First Emperor died in 210 BCE, while traveling. He trusted no one, and at this juncture no one proved trustworthy. His chief eunuch plotted with a younger son to send orders to the heir apparent to commit suicide. The younger son became the Second Emperor and had several of his brothers executed, while the eunuch was elevated to chancellor. By this time, however, the Qin state was unravelling. The Legalist institutions designed to concentrate power in the hands of the ruler made the stability of the government dependent on the strength and character of a single person. In the ensuing uprisings, many of the rebels called for the restoration of the old states, but this would not happen. The eventual victor was a man known as Liu Bang, known in history as Emperor Gao, the founder of the Han Dynasty, who reigned from 202 to 195 BCE. Liu Bang was from a modest family of commoners, so his elevation to emperor is evidence of how thoroughly the Qin Dynasty had destroyed the old order.

Emperor Gao did not disband the centralized government created by Qin, but he did remove its most unpopular features. He set up his capital at Chang'An, not far from the old Qin capital. He eliminated some laws, cut taxes, and otherwise lessened the burdens on the people. Responding to the desire to restore the old order, Emperor Gao gave out large and nearly autonomous fiefs to his relatives and chief generals. After his death, however, the fiefs of imperial relatives were gradually reduced in size to check the revival of aristocratic power. The Han Emperor in theory was all powerful but in actuality depended on his chancellor and court for information and advice. Nine ministries were established to handle matters ranging from state ritual to public works. Officials, graded by rank and salary, were appointed by the central government based on merit, not birth. Their responsibilities ranged from tax collection, judging lawsuits, commanding troops to suppress uprisings and undertaking public works such as building dams for flood control. When Emperor Gao died, his heir was a child, and the empress dowager took control until her death, fifteen years later. This Empress Lu is portrayed in history as a vicious, spiteful person, and after her death her entire family was wiped out. For centuries to come, she would provide an example of the dangers of letting a woman take power, even if she was the mother of the emperor.

CONFUCIANISM AND LEARNING UNDER THE HAN DYNASTY

The Han emperor who had the greatest impact of Chinese culture and society was Emperor Wu, who came to the throne as a teenager in 141 BCE and reigned for fifty-four years. Unafraid of innovation, Emperor Wu initiated many of the most significant developments in Han culture and government. He took an interest in the arts and patronized both music and poetry. Most importantly, he pioneered the study of Confucian texts for all government officials, and established a national university to train officials in the Confucian classics. The Han government's decision to recruit men trained in the Confucian classics marks the beginning of the Confucian scholar-official system, one of the most distinctive features of imperial China.

Perhaps stimulated by the Qin destruction of books, learning and literature of all sorts flourished in Han times. At the end of the Western Han period, the imperial library had some 596 titles, divided into six categories: classics, philosophy, military treatises, mathematics, medicine and natural sciences (such as astronomy and divination). The writing of history especially took a major step forward in the Han period. The most important classical Chinese historian was Sima Qian, whose major work is entitled Records of the Grand Historian, composed of 130 chapters of history beginning with the legendary Yellow Emperor, down to his own day. The Records contains both political narratives, as well as chronological charts with genealogical data and information on the organization of governments. Key institutions are given their own histories in topical chapters such as state ritual, court music and finance. Biographies of individuals also play prominently in the work. Although many of those portrayed are military men, Sima Qian also singled out other notable men, including poets, musicians and philosophers. Before Sima Qian was able to complete his history, he angered Emperor Wu by defending a general who had surrendered to the Xiongnu, a tribal peoples who lived on China's North-western Frontier. As a consequence, he was sentenced to serve as a palace eunuch. This punishment was so humiliating that it was expected that he

would choose the honourable alternative of suicide. However, Sima Qian chose to accept his humiliating sentence, for the purpose of completing his history.

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE SILK ROAD

It was during the Han period that the Chinese first learned that theirs was not the only civilization with cities and writing, and also that these distant civilizations had been obtaining silk from China from merchants who crossed over Eurasia. This discovery was made when Emperor Wu decided to send an envoy, led by Zhang Qian, westwards to look for the Yuezhi, a nomadic group that he hoped would aid him in fighting against the Xiongnu tribal confederacy. Several decades earlier, the Yuezhi had been driven westwards by the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian travelled as far as the kingdoms of Bactria, Parthia and Ferghana in the modern region of Afghanistan. Although the Yuezhi were in compliance with his requests, the reports he made of his travels enabled the Chinese to learn firsthand of the countries of Central Asia and hear about the trade in silk with even more distant places, such as Rome. In 102 BCE, a Han general led Chinese armies across the Pamir Mountains to subdue Ferghana. Recognition of Chinese overlordship followed, giving China control over the network of trade routes across Central Asia, collectively known as the Silk Road. The city-states along this route did not resist the Chinese presence, since they could carry out the trade on which they depended on more conveniently with Chinese garrisons to protect them. Much of this trade was carried by Persian and Indian merchants who carried silk and other goods by caravans, all the way to Rome. There was a market for both skeins of silk thread and for silk cloth. Caravans returning to China carried gold, horses, and crafts of West Asian origin. Through the trade along the Silk Road, the Chinese incorporated new foodstuffs into their diet, including sesame and coriander, which are vital to Chinese cuisine to this day.

BORDER SETTLEMENT AND DIPLOMACY

Maintaining the Han Empire's extended borders required a huge military investment. To man the northern defence stations along the Great Wall took some ten thousand men, while more than fifty thousand soldier-farmers were moved to settle in the frontiers to reduce the cost of transporting provisions to such distant outposts. In the middle of the first century CE, a succession struggle among the Xiongnu brought one of the rival claimants and his followers to the Chinese border seeking protection. These 'Southern Xiongnu' were permitted to live in Chinese territory, primarily in the Ordos region along the bend of the Yellow River. In 90 CE, Chinese officials counted 237,300 Xiongnu living in China, of whom over fifty thousand were adult males, able to serve in the military, as well as substantial numbers of other non-Han groups. With the collapse of the Xiongnu confederation, a group of Manchuria known as the Xianbei rose to prominence in the Northern steppes, absorbing many Xiongnu into their tribal structure. The expeditionary armies of the Eastern Han included soldiers from all of these groups. In some campaigns, Han Chinese formed a tiny minority of the soldiers.

During the Han period, China developed a system of diplomacy to regulate contact with foreign powers. States and tribes beyond its borders sent envoys bearing gifts, which the Han emperor responded to with even more lavish gifts for them to bring back. Over the course of the dynasty, the Han

government's outlay on these gifts was huge, perhaps as much as ten percent of state revenue. In 25 BCE, for instance, the government gave tributary states twenty thousand rolls of silk cloth and twenty thousand pounds of unprocessed silk. But although this diplomacy stem was a financial burden to the Chinese, it reduced the cost of defence and offered the Han imperial court confirmation that it was the center of the civilized world.

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