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The Prehistory and Early History of China

PREHISTORIC AND PROTOHISTORIC CHINA

The earliest evidence found in China of habitation by hominins, that is to say of creatures regarded as ancestral to human beings, was discovered in excavations which began in 2001 at Majuangou III, a site in the Nihewan Basin in Hebei province. Stone flaked tools were uncovered which have been dated at 1.6 million years old.¹

In 1927 remains of Beijing man, *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, now classified as *homo erectus*, were discovered at Zhoukoudian, 30 miles south-west of Beijing. Beijing man, who occupied the cave intermittently between 780,000 and 200,000 BCE, was a hunter-gatherer who made stone tools and may have used fire. Most of the Zhoukoudian finds were lost in transit in 1941, an event described as ‘the greatest palaeontological tragedy of the twentieth century’.² Fortunately good-quality casts had been made, and these were supplemented by other finds in post-war excavations. Further remains of *homo erectus* have been discovered at other sites, including Yuanmou in Yunnan.³

The archaeological evidence relating to the appearance of *homo sapiens* in China is still being interpreted. A skull found at Dali in 1978, which was dated *c.* 200,000 BCE, appears to display a mixture of *homo erectus* and *homo sapiens* features. In 2008 an almost complete skull dating back to between 100,000 and 80,000 years BCE was found in Hunan province and named Xuchang man. Chinese archaeologists have cited these finds as evidence of an evolutionary sequence from *homo erectus* to modern man, with early *homo sapiens* inhabiting sites between 200,000 and 50,000 BCE. Many

Western archaeologists, however, accept the evidence of recent genetic studies of mitochondrial DNA which indicate that all modern human beings derive from a small population of *homo sapiens* which evolved in eastern and southern Africa. One branch of this group, it is claimed, reached China between 67,000 and 42,000 years ago and was ancestral to the Chinese people.⁴

The best-documented find of early *homo sapiens* remains in China was made at the Middle Cave at Zhoukoudian. This find, which included three restorable skulls, was given an unconfirmed radiocarbon date of 16,922 BCE. Other sites, dating from this period and yielding large quantities of stone implements, have been found throughout the Ordos region in northern Shaanxi.

At the start of the Neolithic period, which in China dates approximately from 8000 to 2000 BCE, the climate of East Asia was warm and moist. North China was covered by dense forests and the fauna included crocodiles and elephants. At one time it was supposed that Chinese neolithic culture, marked by the cultivation of crops and the domestication of animals, had originated in one area of the North China Plain, but recent archaeological discoveries have revealed a more complex picture, and several regional cultures are now considered to have achieved the transition from food gathering to food production. These include the Yangshao culture of the middle Yellow river, the Dawenkou culture in Shandong, the Majiabang culture of the lower Yangzi river, and the Dapenkeng culture along the south coast and on Taiwan. The Majiabang culture, which emerged in the sixth millennium BCE, was characterized by the cultivation of rice and the use of pottery with incised motifs. In 1973 an early Neolithic settlement was found at Hemudu in south-east China. Finds included terracotta pottery, the remains of pigs and buffaloes, and articles made of wood and bone.

The Yangshao culture was named after a village in northern Henan, where in 1921 the Swedish archaeologist J. Gunnar Andersson had found a fragment of painted pottery. Its most famous site is at Banpo, near Xi'an, which was occupied from about 4500 BCE. Banpo was a village of some 45 houses. Its inhabitants cultivated millet and kept pigs and dogs. They produced pottery which was not only decorated but also occasionally bore incised markings. As similar markings have been found on pottery excavated at other sites within the region, it has been suggested that these are not simple potters' marks but an early stage in the development of Chinese characters, a suggestion which has been challenged.⁵

In 1928, not long after Andersson's discoveries at Yangshao, specimens of a different type of pottery, which became known as Longshan ware, were found at Chengziyai in north-west Shandong. Whereas Yangshao pottery was red and was sometimes painted with stylized renditions of birds and flowers, Longshan ware was unpainted, more finely made and usually elevated on a circular foot or on tripod legs. Because the first examples of Longshan ware had been found in Shandong, it was assumed to be the culture of eastern China, whereas Yangshao was regarded as the culture of the Central Plain, an interpretation which became known as the 'Neolithic hypothesis'. When the site at Miaodigou in Henan was excavated, Yangshao ware was found *below* Longshan finds, and this gave rise to a second theory, that Longshan culture was later than, and derived from, Yangshao culture. However, the evidence to support a developmental theory has not been forthcoming; it now seems probable that the two cultures developed separately and that Longshan culture, which was widely distributed in eastern China, gradually spread to the Central Plain, where the painted pottery tradition was already dying out.

THE XIA DYNASTY

According to Chinese legend, human beings had their origin in the parasites on the body of the creator, Pangu. After his death a succession of sage rulers introduced the key inventions and institutions of human society. The first sage ruler was Fuxi, who domesticated animals and instituted marriage. He was followed by Shennong, who introduced agriculture, medicine and trade. Then came Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor, to whom was credited the invention of writing, ceramics and the calendar. Some centuries later came the Emperor Yao, who ruled wisely and introduced flood controls, but whose particular claim to fame was that he decided his son was unworthy to be his successor and chose instead a humble sage named Shun. The reigns of Yao and Shun were later regarded as a golden age in Chinese history. Shun in turn awarded the succession to his faithful minister Yu. It is at this point that China's prehistory merged with history. Yu, whose reign according to tradition began in 2205 BCE, supposedly founded the Xia dynasty, the first of the three dynasties of ancient China, the Xia, the Shang and the Zhou.

When archaeological investigations began in the 1920s, the traditional view of the Xia dynasty was questioned and Yu was reduced to a mythical figure. More recently the place of the Xia dynasty in early Chinese history has been reasserted; not as the first of a sequence of dynasties, but as perhaps the most powerful of the very many small states to be found along the Yellow river valley, co-existing with the early Shang and Zhou states. The Xia dynasty state, which is thought to have existed between approximately 2070 and 1600 BCE, has been identified with Erlitou in Henan, where palace-like buildings and tombs have been excavated and the earliest known bronze vessels have been found. The genealogy of Xia rulers was preserved in the *Shiji* or *Historical Records* compiled by Sima Qian, and later corroborated by oracle-bone inscriptions. However, it should be added that there is still no archaeological evidence which links Erlitou culture with the existence of the Xia state.⁶

THE SHANG DYNASTY

The second of the ancient dynasties was the Shang, the traditional dates for which were 1766 to 1122 BCE. The modern consensus dates are 1600 to 1046 BCE. As mentioned above, it was once supposed that the three ancient dynasties were successive, but it is now understood that the Shang was already a powerful entity before it overthrew the Xia, and that the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties overlapped both in time and in territory. The early Shang period, 1600 to 1300 BCE, was characterized by the Erligang culture, which had its capital at Zhengzhou. The capital in the later period of the dynasty was Anyang, which was occupied c. 1300–1046 BCE.

Erligang sites, which were often walled settlements, have been found over much of north China. The largest of these was Zhengzhou, where a city wall some four miles long enclosed a large settlement. The wall and the buildings within were constructed using the ‘stamped earth’ technique. The houses and workshops which have been found there indicate that Erligang society was highly organized and socially stratified. This evidence confirms the impression of Shang society which was obtained from the finds made at the late Shang capital at Anyang, first excavated in the 1930s. Outside Anyang, at Xiaotun, the remains have been uncovered of what perhaps was the ceremonial and administrative centre of the late Shang state. At Xibeigang,

two miles north of Xiaotun, 11 very large cruciform graves have been found, which may belong to the 11 Shang monarchs who were recorded as having reigned at Anyang.

Much has been written about the Shang, but here the discussion will be limited to three themes: the character of the Shang state, the significance of the oracle bones, and the implications of the Shang bronzes. The Shang rulers performed an important ritual role, but they were also involved in the administration of the state and were served by officials who had specialized functions. They were supported by aristocratic clans with whom they had either kinship or marriage connections. Aristocratic society practised military skills and fought using horse chariots. The relationship between the Shang kings and the clan leaders was a personal one, but it was formalized through ceremonies of investiture which gave the king the right to demand services from the clans, which included labour services and military duties. The Shang kings, or their aristocratic supporters, waged aggressive campaigns against their neighbours, thereby obtaining prisoners and loot. The extension of Shang authority was also achieved by commissioning the establishment of new towns and the opening of new land for farming. Through these means the late Shang state extended from its core along the Yellow river to the Wei valley and to the north of present-day Shanxi.

However, the assumption that the Shang dynasty was the only significant early bronze age culture has been contradicted by recent archaeological finds. The Shang established relations with a state named Shu, which may refer to the culture that had developed independently in Sichuan. In 1986, at Sanxingdui, a settlement just north of Chengdu, two underground caches of bronzes were found which were quite different in character from those of the Shang. Among the bronze items unearthed were a life-sized statue on a pedestal and very large trees carrying peach-like fruits and inhabited by birds and a dragon. Three years after this discovery, a tomb was found at Xin'gan in Jiangxi which proved to be the second richest early bronze age burial find yet made; the richest being that of Fu Hao, described below. The bronzes it contained were of 'undeniable local character', and the remains were indicative of 'a local power, a city and the cemetery of its rulers'.⁷

The economic basis of the Shang state was agriculture, the most important cultivated crop being millet. The climate of the North China Plain was warmer and moister than it is at present, and the area

was well forested, thus requiring considerable amounts of labour to clear for planting. It has often been asserted, particularly by Marxist historians such as Guo Moruo, that the labour to perform this and many other tasks was slave labour, and that Shang society should be defined as the slave-society stage in China's social evolution. This view has been supported by the evidence of the human sacrifices which accompanied royal burials and by references in oracle inscriptions. Recently Li Xiaojun has suggested that the bulk of the population were not slaves, in that they were not bought or sold, nor were they deprived of their personal freedom. Nevertheless, they were subject to coercive work, building city walls and performing agricultural tasks, and they were conscripted for military duties.

Much of the information available on Shang society comes from inscriptions made on the shoulder-blades of oxen (scapulimancy), or less commonly on the shells of turtles (plastronomy). At one time such items were described as 'dragon bones' and were ground up for medicine. In the late nineteenth century the bones and their inscriptions were recognized for what they were. Oracle bone inscriptions appear first in the reign of Wu Ding, *c.* 1250–1192 BCE. Over 200,000 fragments of oracle bones have been found at Xiaotun and these provide a major source of evidence about the Shang state. Many of the inscriptions refer to future events and they have been translated as questions addressed to an oracle. Recently it has been argued that the inscriptions are not questions but statements or predictions, and that the divination process formed part of a sacrificial rite. Once the bones had been inscribed, a heated bronze tool was applied to them and the cracks which appeared were interpreted as a response to the question or prediction. Some of the inscriptions relate to the actions of the king and his allies and from these information may be gleaned about the organization of the Shang state. Others refer to the weather, to the planting and harvesting of crops, and to the siting of buildings. The inscriptions use a vocabulary of more than 3000 different graphs and they include a dating system based on a 10-day week and a 60-day cycle.

The most prized archaeological finds from the Shang period are the bronze vessels and implements, many of which were made for ceremonial purposes. Because the vessels are very sophisticated, and because evidence had not been found of an earlier and more primitive stage in bronze work, it was long assumed that the technology for their production had been imported into China. However, the evidence accumulated in recent years supports the hypothesis of the independent discovery of metallurgy in China and the rapid transfer

of skills from pottery to the manufacture of bronzes. The production and use of bronze were controlled by the king, and the quantity of bronze objects found indicates that the extraction of metal ore and the manufacture of bronze objects was a major industry, employing large numbers of skilled craftsmen. Early bronze technology in the West used the lost-wax technique, but early Shang vessels were cast in several moulds and the parts assembled later. The lost-wax technique was used later, in the Zhou period, and may have been introduced from the West. Small-scale industry producing bronze implements and ornaments appeared in Gansu *c.* 2000 BCE. This technology was the basis on which a large-scale bronze industry was developed.

The earliest bronze vessels have been found at Erlitou and important finds of bronze vessels were made at Zhengzhou and Anyang, the two Shang capitals. These vessels had a ritual function. An early bronze vessel found at Zhengzhou, which has a lobed body and a tripod of legs, a shape derived from a Longshan pottery prototype, was used for the preparation of sacrificial meats. Other ritual vessels were intended for the heating of wine. Many of these vessels are decorated with stylized surface decorations, the most famous motif being the *taotie*, a monster mask intended to avert evil. Jade was also used for ritual purposes, as it had been in the Longshan culture. Two jade forms were common: a pierced disc known as a *bi* and a tube of square cross-section known as a *cong*.

The Shang kings were buried in vast pits, which would have required the labour of many hundreds of men to excavate. Their corpses were placed in wooden coffins and these were surrounded by grave goods. On the ramps leading to the bottom of the pit lay human bodies and those of horses. The human victims, who may have been prisoners of war, had sometimes been beheaded. More than 10,000 human sacrifices have been found in these pits. The main royal tombs at Anyang were robbed long ago, but the tomb of Fu Hao, the consort of a Shang king who died *c.* 1250 BCE, was discovered intact in 1976. It contained over 200 bronze vessels, some in the shape of animals. The bronzes in Fu Hao's tomb are much larger than those found in other aristocratic graves, and the remains of 16 human sacrifices were also found in it. Her name appeared frequently in oracle-bone inscriptions, where she is referred to as raising forces to go into battle, and even going on campaigns herself.⁸

From the evidence of the oracle bones and bronze vessels, and from the burial practices that were followed, some understanding may be obtained of Shang religion. The Shang people worshipped many

deities, most of whom were royal ancestors, although some were nature spirits and others perhaps derived from popular myths or local cults. This veneration of ancestors was practised by much of the population, and it has remained an essential part of Chinese religious practice until modern times. It has long been assumed that Shang religion also had a single supreme deity, referred to as *Di*, who was part ancestral figure, part natural force, and who presided at the apex of a complex Shang pantheon. A recent study has rejected the idea of *Di* as a high god, claiming that in Shang religion *di* was the term used to refer collectively to 'the gods' and that it was only under the Zhou that the idea of a supreme god emerged. From the evidence of the tombs it is clear that the Shang believed in an afterlife, and that divination may have been addressed to departed ancestors. The Shang court may have been attended by shamans, and the king himself was perhaps a shaman. If these suggestions are correct, then the character of Shang religion was very different from the rational approach of the philosophical schools which were to gain influence during the Zhou period.

In a recent book, David N. Keightley has returned to the question of the relationship between the Shang and the Zhou, and more generally to the cultural legacy of the Shang. He accepts that the Shang cosmology was not the only cosmology of the time, but claims that knowledge of it survived because the diviners left extensive written records. He points out that little is known of the belief systems of individuals and of all those who did not belong to the elite. Nevertheless, he concludes that the cultural legacy of the worldview of the late Shang elite was profound. This legacy included a writing system which recorded divinatory contacts as well as the increasingly complex operations of the late Shang state; the development of religious and ancestral hierarchies; a protobureaucracy and systems of labour control by a central elite; and a pervasive concern with divination, timeliness and good or bad fortune.⁹

THE WESTERN ZHOU PERIOD

The Zhou dynasty is traditionally dated from 1122 to 256 BCE, and this immensely long period is divided into the Western Zhou, from 1122 to 771 BCE, and the Eastern Zhou, the latter age being further subdivided into the Spring and Autumn period, from 771 to 481 BCE, and the Warring States period, from 481 to 221 BCE.

Long before the fall of the Shang, the Zhou had emerged as a powerful state somewhat to the west of the main centre of Shang activities. The origin of the Zhou people is not clear. According to Mencius, a disciple of Confucius, 'King Wen was a Western barbarian',¹⁰ and some support in the past has been given to the theory that the Zhou were of proto-Turkish origin. However, there is no linguistic evidence to indicate that they came from far afield. A more plausible theory suggests that they originated in the Fen valley in Shanxi, and later migrated to the Wei valley in Shaanxi, to the west of Xi'an. There, in proximity to the Shang state, the Zhou people came to adopt many features of Shang culture, a process which enabled them to acquire administrative techniques and facilitated their seizure of power.

The establishment of the Zhou dynasty provides the first example of the right of a dynasty to rule being based on an ethical justification. According to the *Shujing* or *Book of Documents*, one of the earliest surviving Chinese historical sources, the fall of the Shang came about because of the shortcomings of the last Shang ruler. As a result, the protection or mandate of heaven was taken from him and awarded to the rulers of Zhou. Of these, King Wen was a paragon of virtue, and his son King Wu, who overthrew the Shang after a great battle at a place called Muye, was an outstanding warrior. It was recorded that the Zhou headed a coalition of eight nations which included Shu, and that the Zhou and their allies gained the victory because the Shang troops were driven to mutiny by the cruelty of their ruler. These events probably took place *c.* 1045 BCE; that is, nearly 80 years later than the traditional date for the overthrow of the Shang.

Shortly after the conquest, perhaps in 1043 BCE, King Wu died and was succeeded by his son. This arrangement was a break with the past, for under the Shang the succession had passed to surviving brothers. It established the important principle observed by later Chinese dynasties that the heir should come from the succeeding generation. However, the new King Zheng was a minor, and in the first part of his reign authority was wielded by the Duke of Zhou, one of the most famous figures in early Chinese history. The duke consolidated Zhou control over Shang territory and defeated a rebellion in the east led by survivors of the Shang royal family. Nevertheless, even after the rebellion had been defeated, the Zhou continued to appoint members of the deposed Shang lineage to be

in charge of territories in the east. The Duke of Zhou also waged campaigns against the Huai Yi, a people who lived in the Huai valley, who remained undefeated throughout the Western Zhou period. Expansion also took place by more peaceful means, through the transfer of groups of people to newly opened territory, where they intermarried with non-Zhou people, thus extending the influence of what may now be called Chinese culture.

Western Zhou society has been described as feudal. The use of the term was first proposed by the Marxist historian Guo Moruo in the 1930s, and its application to China is based on two assumptions. The first is that feudalism is a form of social organization which arises under certain conditions, namely the decline of a powerful centralized state and its replacement by a congeries of small states owing only nominal loyalty to a central ruler. This situation may have prevailed in China after the fall of the Shang (which Guo Moruo regarded as a slave society) and the occupation of the Shang territories by the Zhou. The transition also came about, it is claimed, because of technological improvement – the introduction of iron – and the general economic advance which that implied.

The second ground for describing the Western Zhou as feudal concerns the essential element of the feudal relationship, the granting of fiefs to vassals, who in return promise to provide their feudal lord with military support. Under the Zhou, according to the famous early Zhou text the *Shijing* or *Book of Songs*:

Everywhere under vast Heaven
 There is no land that is not the king's.
 To the borders of those lands
 There are none who are not the king's servants.¹¹

Under the Western Zhou, grants of territory were formalized at ceremonies at which the king gave presents that had a symbolic meaning, and which became increasingly lavish. The ceremonies and the gifts which had been presented were commemorated in inscriptions on bronze vessels. The wide distribution of these vessels, many of which date from early in the dynasty and in particular from the years following the Duke of Zhou's suppression of rebellion, indicate that this form of appointment played an important part in the establishment of the Western Zhou's political structure over its newly acquired eastern territories. Appointees were given graded titles of rank, which have

sometimes been equated with the aristocratic titles used in the West. Some of the bronzes recorded military activities, which confirm that the relationship involved military assistance, although they give the lie to the idealized picture of the Western Zhou period as a golden age of peace, a time when Chinese did not fight Chinese, although they might fight against the surrounding 'barbarians'.

Notwithstanding this evidence, the appropriateness of the term 'feudal' to describe the Western Zhou has been queried. The argument that the China of 3000 years ago was a very different society from mediaeval Europe needs no elaboration, and any close comparison between the two societies is difficult to sustain. Whereas in Europe the feudal relationship was typically impersonal and prescribed in detail, under the Zhou the dominant relationship was one of kinship and the contractual element in the relationship was not specified. In Europe feudal lordships were hereditary, and enfeoffments, providing that the vassal remained loyal, were irrevocable. However, under the Western Zhou appointments required reconfirmation and could be revoked. Appointments, which might be defined in terms of particular duties, have been described as 'protobureaucratic', the implication being that whereas in Europe bureaucracies emerged as a counter to feudal society, in China the beginnings of a bureaucracy existed alongside the supposed feudal order. In Europe the term feudalism has been used to describe a particular mode of economic organization, namely the binding of the peasant to the land and the compulsory provision of labour for the feudal lord, but such a system did not exist under the Western Zhou. In short, if the term feudalism implies merely a 'system of government in which a ruler personally delegates limited sovereignty over portions of his territory to vassals',¹² it may fit the Western Zhou, but the contemporary evidence does not justify the use of the term with its more precise definition.

THE SPRING AND AUTUMN PERIOD

The Western Zhou period was characterized by rapid but unstable expansion, which saw Zhou influence extend over much of north China and as far south as the Huai valley. At first the appointment of members of the ruling dynasty and its allies to semi-independent fiefs created a viable political structure, and the power of the Western

Zhou kings over them was considerable. During the reign of King Mu (*r.* 956–918 BCE), signs of ‘incipient bureaucracy’ emerged. Bronze inscriptions recorded the appointment of individuals, often without apparent relationship to the king, to positions of responsibility at court.¹³ King Yi, who reigned *c.* 865–858 BCE, wielded sufficient authority to have Duke Ai of Qi boiled to death for supposedly criticizing him, though this insubordinacy may indicate the diminishing authority of the Zhou king. By the end of the ninth century BCE the kings’ authority had declined, their appointees and their successors had become increasingly integrated into their local society, and the fiefs were assuming the character of independent states. The early Zhou rulers had mounted expeditions to the north west and west of their main centre in Shaanxi, but they now came under pressure from the Rong and the Di, non-Chinese peoples who inhabited the steppe regions and who may have used horses in warfare. In 771 BCE a Rong invasion forced the Zhou to move their capital eastwards to Luoyang, hence the use of the term Eastern Zhou to refer to the subsequent period.

The years 771–481 BCE are known as the Spring and Autumn period, after the annals which describe the events of those years in the small state of Lu. The key political development of the time was the rise of states which professed only symbolic allegiance to the Zhou kings, who in the end only ruled a small area around Luoyang. Up to 170 states are recorded as having existed in those years, of which about 15 were of significant size and importance. By the end of this period warfare and succession disputes had reduced the number of states to seven, of which four deserve particular mention. One was Qi, which occupied the area of modern Shandong. In the early seventh century BCE, Guan Zhong, the chief minister of the state, introduced a reform which transformed military service from the prerogative of the nobility into an obligation on the common people. The state of Jin, which was located in present-day Shanxi, also introduced reforms after a military disaster. Jin fought campaigns against the Di people and, finding that the mountainous terrain was unsuitable for chariots, developed infantry armies. Its leaders also intermarried with the Di people. To the south lay the expanding state of Chu, which occupied the middle Yangzi region, and which was regarded by the other states as semi-barbarous. Finally, to the west lay the state of Qin, which had emerged at the time of the fall of the Western Zhou, and which was considered by the other major states

to be non-Chinese. These states acted as sovereign bodies and have been described as 'seven different cultural spheres'.¹⁴

The Spring and Autumn period saw frequent wars between states and with the surrounding peoples. One calculation suggests that in the entire period only 38 years were peaceful. When Guan Zhong was first minister of Qi, an attempt was made to reduce conflict by claiming for the state of Qi the status of *ba*, the 'senior one'; that is, the state privileged to make war on behalf of the Zhou court. In 651 BCE, the *ba* system was institutionalized. To achieve stability and to counter a threat from the north, Duke Huan of Qi invited representatives of the central states to a conference and obtained their agreement to a set of principles concerning good government. He was chosen as hegemon of the 'five leaders of the feudal lords'. However, this system did not last and conflicts continued through the period.

These wars reflected the rapid political, social and economic changes which were occurring at the time. At the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period, the political elite was composed of the king, the feudal lords and their hereditary ministers, each of whom had a defined status, a prescribed role in ritual performances, and an obligation to fight to defend the honor of the lineage. Under the impact of constant war, this elite began to fragment. State governments became more centralized, administrative units were established, and junior members of the aristocracy were appointed to supervise them. A class of men known as *shi*, meaning knights or warriors, emerged in the seventh century BCE and by the fifth century BCE the *shi* had eclipsed the former elite in government.

At the same time, major technological and economic changes were taking place. The use of bronze became much more widespread, and recent discoveries have shown that by this time bronze agricultural tools were in common use in the lower Yangzi valley. By the middle and late Spring and Autumn period cast iron and steel were being produced. However, iron was not generally adopted for making weapons, implements and vessels until the Warring States period, considerably later than the same development in the West.

Up to this time Chinese farmers had probably practised a form of communal agriculture, which was later to be described in idealistic terms as the 'well-field' system. Under this arrangement plots of land were divided into nine holdings, eight of which were farmed by individual families, with the ninth farmed communally and the produce delivered to the lord. Communal agriculture began to decline during

the Spring and Autumn period, perhaps because of the spread of the iron plough, which increased productivity. In 594 BCE the state of Lu instituted a system of land taxation which required peasants to pay taxes rather than to provide labour service. Some evidence suggests that individual ownership and a free market in land began to appear at this time. Accompanying this change was a growth in commerce and the appearance of coinage. In the Shang period, cowrie shells had been used in transactions and cloth was also used as a medium of exchange. By the late Spring and Autumn period metallic currencies had been introduced, early coins being in the form of spades or knives.

THE WARRING STATES PERIOD

The transition from the Spring and Autumn period to the Warring States period was once represented as a change from an age of relative peace to one in which war was the dominant theme. It has been demonstrated, however, that wars were equally frequent in both periods, though the character of war did change, ceasing to be an aristocratic monopoly and becoming an activity which involved authoritarian leadership, standing armies and peasants performing military service. In this period military specialists appeared, the most famous being Sunzi, supposed author of the *Art of War*, which dates back to the fifth century BCE. In it he declared:

All war is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.¹⁵

New weapons were adopted, notably the crossbow and the improved iron sword, and armour was developed. From the middle of the sixth century, armies composed solely of infantry began to appear and the number of combatants rose sharply, with armies of 600,000 men being recorded.

In the Warring States period the economic and social changes which had begun in the Spring and Autumn period accelerated. In agriculture, the availability of iron tools, the application of fertilizer and the use of irrigation all became more common. The number

of walled towns increased and some of these developed commercial quarters. Occupational specialization and the development of trade were accompanied by the spread of the use of money. There is evidence for the existence of markets and of extensive inter-regional trade. The names of a few merchants have been preserved, including that of Lü Buwei, whose career in the state of Qin will be noted shortly. However, the implication of this evidence is disputed. Marxist historians have suggested that the most significant development was the disappearance of communal land ownership and the emergence of a private landlord class. Other writers have argued that the rise of trade indicated a change to a more individualistic society. The evidence for either interpretation is fragmentary, and the most that can be said with confidence is that this was a period of rapid development, which was reflected in the intellectual activity of the period.

* * *

Kong Fuzi, Master Kong, known in the West as Confucius, a latinized form of his name, lived approximately 551–479 BCE. He was born in the small north-eastern state of Lu. His parents probably belonged to the minor aristocracy and his search for an official position was perhaps typical of *shi* or common gentlemen of his day (the term was being redefined in the evolving social context). He became an expert on ceremony, genealogy and ancient lore and was appointed to a junior post in his own state until he was forced to go into exile. He visited a number of states and held office in Wei before returning to Lu for his last years. He acquired a number of followers, who recorded his sayings in a compilation made long after his death, known as the *Lunyu* or *Analects*.

Confucius's teachings were influenced by his perception that he lived in troubled times, and by his belief that in the early Zhou period China had experienced a golden age. He frequently cited the actions of Kings Wen and Wu, and those of the Duke of Zhou, as examples of appropriate behaviour. He believed that they had followed the *dao* or Way, which in this context meant 'the Way of running a state so that good order and harmony can prevail among men'.¹⁶

For centuries the written record was the sole basis for the analysis of Confucius's teaching and the reference to the early Zhou period remained unquestioned. However, new archaeological evidence indicates that twice in the Zhou period, in c. 850 BCE and c. 600 BCE,

ritual practices, for example those governing funerals, were transformed, which suggests that when Confucius and his contemporaries were talking about appropriate behaviour, they were reacting to recent changes in ritual.¹⁷

Confucius's concern for the promotion of good government led him to seek a position as minister to a king who would heed his advice and practise ethical government. In order to achieve this the ruler should select good officials, set a moral example and treat his people with benevolence.

A number of other themes were prominent in Confucius's teaching. He made frequent reference to standards of conduct and to the ideal of the *junzi* or princely man, a term often translated as 'gentleman'. Two quotations from the *Analects* illustrate this concept. In the first, Zi Lu, one of Confucius's disciples, asked about the gentleman. Confucius replied:

'He cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence.'

'Is that all?'

'He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his fellow men.'

'Is that all?'

'He cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people.'

In another passage Confucius distinguished between the gentleman, who is superior not because of breeding but because of superior moral accomplishments, and the small man. 'The gentleman', he said, 'understands what is moral. The small man understands what is profitable.'¹⁸ Confucius constantly emphasized the importance of education and of self-cultivation, and thus established a respect for book learning which was to last throughout the imperial period. Self-cultivation was not only a matter of scholarship, it was also a commitment to learning how to behave. The essential quality was *jen*, a term often translated as benevolence, but which also connoted dealing with other human beings as a man ideally should. One aspect of *jen* was reciprocity: 'Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.'

Confucius believed strongly in the importance of ritual and ceremony and in the value of politeness and good manners. The correct performance of ritual was an essential part of the government of a

state. Within the family it was important to observe the niceties of behaviour towards others and to apply restraint with regard to eating, drinking and dress. Confucius placed particular stress on the importance of filial piety, which implied obedience to one's parents during their lifetime and care for them as they grew old. After their death it was essential to provide them with a proper funeral and to observe mourning over a period of three years. There was also an obligation to make the correct sacrifices to the dead, in particular to male ancestors. Though referred to as 'ancestor worship', these ceremonies did not imply the deification of forebears. Confucius had little to say about religion, but he did define wisdom as keeping one's distance from gods and spirits while showing them reverence. In all his teaching Confucius was not announcing a new doctrine but expounding what he believed to be the principles which had been observed by rulers and families in the past.

Confucius's most famous opponent was Mozi, who lived approximately 470–391 BCE. Tradition has it that Mozi was initially a disciple of the Confucian school, but he later rejected its teachings. His family may have come from a class of prisoners or slaves, which may explain a degree of rancour in his attack on Confucianists as aristocrats. Whereas Confucius had stressed what was described as 'graded love', implying the reservation of a greater concern for one's family and ancestors than for other people, Mozi urged men to practise universal love. By this he meant in particular the satisfaction of the ordinary people's material needs, and he condemned elaborate funerals and prolonged mourning as inappropriate expenses. He regarded ritual as superfluous and had no time for music, which played an important part in Confucius's concept of how harmony could be achieved in human affairs. But like Confucius he condemned war, and his passionate denunciation of its effects was characteristic of his teaching.

Now among all the current calamities, which are the worst? I say that the attacking of small states by large states, the making of inroads on small houses by large houses, the plundering of the weak by the strong, the oppression of the few by the many, the deception of the simple by the cunning, the disdain of the noble towards the humble – these are some of the calamities in the world.¹⁹

Quite distinct from Confucius's and Mozi's concern with morality was the preoccupation with nature, which was the keynote of the

philosophical ideas known in the West as Daoism. The *dao* in this context was a metaphysical concept, sometimes referred to as the absolute. The impossibility of defining it was asserted in the opening lines of the oldest Daoist text, the *Laozi*:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.²⁰

This text, otherwise known as the *Daodejing* or *The Way and Power Classic*, was supposedly written by Laozi, a contemporary of Confucius. It is now generally accepted that there was no such person and that the text is a compilation dating from the fourth century BCE. Inevitably it reflected the troubled times in which it was composed. The ideal ruler was the sage, who had acquired enlightenment and who then applied it to the art of government. The most important principle was *wuwei*, which meant that the ruler should avoid interfering in people's lives:

Not to honour men of worth will keep the people from contention;
not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep them from theft;
not to display what is desirable will keep them from being unsettled of mind.

Therefore in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.

Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail.²¹

The other main Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*, is more reliably associated with a man of that name whose supposed dates are 369–286 BCE. A constant theme in the book was how man might free himself from his earthly constraints. Its most famous anecdote told how Zhuangzi once dreamed that he was

a butterfly fluttering about, enjoying itself. It did not know that it was Zhuangzi. Suddenly he awoke with a start and he was Zhuangzi again. But he did not know whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or whether he was a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi. Between Zhuangzi and the butterfly there must be some distinction. That is what is called the transformation of things.²²

In all this philosophical activity Confucius's teaching was not forgotten and its main themes were to be restated by Mengzi, known in the West as Mencius, who lived between 372 and 289 BCE. Mencius, like Confucius, gathered a group of disciples around him and their collection of his sayings is the basis of the text known as *Mencius*. Mencius made three important additions to Confucius's thought. The first concerned human nature, on which Confucius had merely observed: 'Men are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of repeated practice.'²³ Mencius believed that what set man apart from animals was the heart, by which he meant the essential moral nature of man. Gao Zi, a critic of Mencius, likened human nature to whirling water, and said that if you gave it an outlet to the east it would flow east, and if you gave it an outlet to the west it would flow west. Mencius responded by asking whether water showed the same indifference to high and low: 'Human nature is good, just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards.'²⁴

Like Confucius, Mencius had much to say on the subject of good government. He stressed that the economic welfare of the people was the basis of political stability, and advocated a return to the well-field system, the system of equal land-holding which he believed had existed early in the Zhou period. He added that if a ruler failed to rule benevolently then his people had the right to rebel.

Xunzi, who lived between 298 and 238 BCE, took exception to Mencius's view of the inherent goodness of human nature. He famously argued, 'The nature of man is evil; his goodness is acquired.' Man, he insisted, is born with desires and passions, which if not curbed will lead to disorder.

Crooked wood needs to undergo steaming and bending by the carpenter's tools; then only is it straight. Blunt metal needs to undergo grinding and whetting; then only is it sharp. Now the

original nature of man is evil, so he must submit himself to teachers and laws before he can be just; he must submit himself to the rules of decorum and righteousness before he can be orderly.²⁵

Xunzi therefore emphasized education and the study of those books which he regarded as classics. Although it is not clear to which books he referred, it was at about this time that the canon of Confucian literature began to be defined. Five books were designated as classics: the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*, a book of divination; the *Shujing* or *Book of Documents*, a collection of writings and speeches ascribed to the Shang and early Zhou periods; the *Shijing* or *Book of Songs*, an anthology of poetry and folksongs; the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; and the *Liji* or *Book of Rites*, a collection of ritual manuals and philosophical works to which Confucius was believed to have contributed. Many centuries later, in the Southern Song period (1127–1279), four works, to be known as the Four Books, became the basic texts for primary education. These were the *Analects* of Confucius and *Mencius*, which have already been mentioned, and two sections from the *Book of Rites*, the *Great Learning*, an essay on self-cultivation and the ordering of the family and society, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, which is concerned with how man and his actions may be brought into harmony with the universe.

While these philosophical issues were being debated, theories relating to the order of nature were formulated into two concepts, *yin* and *yang* dualism and the ‘five elements’. According to dualist theory, all matter may be classified as either *yin* – which is the negative, female and yielding principle of the universe – or *yang* – which is the positive, male and active principle. These two principles are regarded as complementary and their relationship is necessary for cosmic harmony. The theory of the ‘five elements’, which are wood, fire, earth, metal and water, asserts that these are the five permanently active principles of nature. The five elements are related to the five directions, the five seasons, the five metals, the five atmospheric influences and so on. They are also incorporated into the divination techniques of the *Book of Changes*.

THE RISE OF QIN

During the Warring States period the most dynamic of the seven principal states was Qin, situated on the Wei river. The other states

accused the inhabitants of Qin of having the same customs as the Rong and Di, non-Chinese groups living to the west and north of their territory. Qin expansion was at first achieved at the expense of the Rong, who were finally subdued in the fourth century BCE. Meanwhile Qin had modernized its government and had adopted practices from other parts of China, notably the introduction in 408 BCE of a land tax payable in kind rather than in labour. In its dealings with other states, Qin had often clashed with the state of Jin, its neighbour to the north east. However, in 403 BCE Jin was partitioned between its three most influential ministerial families. The successor states of Han, Zhao and Wei, although still powerful entities, became involved in interstate rivalry which was exploited by Qin.

Qin was reputedly willing to employ able men from other states. The ruler of Wei had been warned about a young man from his state named Yang Gongsun: '[he] has marvellous talents – if he is not employed in an official post, it would be better to put him to death, lest another kingdom obtain his services!' For a time Yang served as a minister in Wei, but in about 361 BCE he was attracted to Qin, where he was created Shang Yang and placed in control of a reform programme. Though unprecedented in its scope, the programme was not entirely novel, for it consolidated changes which were already under way in Qin and in other states.

Shang Yang was the first exponent of the ideas and practices later to be known as Legalism. Whereas the Confucianists had urged that rulers should rule through benevolence for the benefit of their people, and that ethical and moral issues should have primacy, Legalists argued that the interests of the state came first and that the state should be organized rationally to maximize its power against that of its rivals. To achieve this, Shang Yang supported the use of war and he himself led a campaign against his own state. He also implemented a wide range of reforms. One of his objectives was to abolish feudalism, implying ending the devolution of power to hereditary landowners in favour of direct state administration. It was at this time that the *xian*, or district, became the standard administrative subdivision. An agrarian reform abolished the 'well-field' system, in so far as it still existed, and replaced it with a free market in land. Farmers were honoured for increasing their productivity, whereas traders, whose activities were regarded as against the interests of the state, were liable to punishment.

Strict laws and punishments were instituted and fixed administrative procedures were introduced. The population was divided into groups of five or ten families and individuals were held responsible

for the wrongdoing of any member of the group. All adult males were registered and were liable to a capitation tax. A comprehensive law code was introduced which prescribed severe punishments for offences. A collection of bamboo slips, found in 1976 in the grave of a Qin official buried in Yunmeng *xian*, Hubei province, contains details of a legal code in existence before Qin united China, which may be the code established by Shang Yang. For his part in promoting these reforms Shang Yang has traditionally been condemned, although more recently he has been praised. To Confucianists he was a destroyer of tradition who coerced the people into submission. In the 1970s, at the time of the anti-Confucius campaign, he was cited as an example of how revolutionary violence might be used to suppress the aristocracy and to introduce radical reforms.

In 338 BCE, after the death of his patron, Shang Yang was accused of plotting rebellion and put to death. Nevertheless, the direction that he had given to Qin policy remained influential. In 316 BCE Qin began to dismember the state of Chu, first seizing the territory of Shu, centred on present-day Chengdu, and subsequently subjugating the neighbouring territory of Ba. There followed a series of campaigns against the other states, all marked by victories for Qin and reports of very heavy casualties. In 256 BCE the remaining territory of the Zhou was annexed and the dynasty extinguished. Qin was successful in each of these campaigns because of its location in the west which gave it a secure base, because of its strict social discipline which enabled it to mobilize its manpower, and because of its strong economy which provided ample resources. The theory that Qin won because it had better weapons, in particular iron swords, has not been supported by archaeological evidence.

By the middle of the third century BCE Qin appeared to be on the verge of becoming the dominant state, but its triumph was to be delayed for a generation. In those years a number of individuals emerged who were to play key roles in the final victory. The first was Han Fei, who had been born in the state of Han in about 280 BCE and had been a student of the philosopher Xunzi, who had taught that 'the original nature of man is evil'. Although a Confucianist by training, Han Fei turned against Confucianism. The *Hanfeizi*, which contains a number of his essays, is the most coherent expression of the ideas of Legalism. Han Fei rejected the Confucian idealization of the past, and accepted something of Mozi's utilitarian view of the function of the state. He also agreed with the idea of *wuwei* as expressed in the *Laozi*,

arguing that if a state has effective laws, laws which reward the people for good behaviour and punish them severely for transgressions, then there is no need for the ruler to play an active role in government.

The second individual was a wealthy merchant named Lü Buwei who, when trading in the state of Zhao, had befriended Zichu, a son of the ruler of Qin, who had been sent there as a hostage. As a mark of his friendship he gave the prince his favourite concubine. According to the account of Sima Qian, the Grand Historian, she was already pregnant by Lü Buwei. The latter then went to Qin and persuaded the heir to the Qin throne, who was childless, to accept Zichu as his heir. In quick succession the Qin ruler and his heir died, to be succeeded by Zichu, who himself died in 247 BCE after a reign of only three years. Zichu had appointed Lü Buwei as his chancellor and Lü continued in that post until 237 BCE, during the minority of King Zheng, who was supposedly his son. In that time Lü Buwei further strengthened Qin by encouraging the construction of canals and by sowing dissension between the other states. He was also a patron of the arts, commissioning a major literary compilation known as the *Lü shi chun jiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr Lü*, which summarized existing knowledge on a wide variety of matters. Ill advisedly, he continued his liaison with the concubine who was allegedly the king's mother. The scandal which this caused led to him being forced to commit suicide in 235 BCE.

By now a third important character had appeared on the scene. This was Li Si, who had studied under Xunzi and alongside Han Fei. Whereas Han Fei was a theoretician, Li Si was a practical politician, who had come to Qin because he considered that the career prospects in his native state of Chu were poor. He attached himself to Lü Buwei, and would probably have fallen with him, had he not presented to King Zheng a document entitled *Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States*, in which he argued the value to Qin of employing advisers from other states. He did not extend this tolerance to others, for he is reported to have engineered the death of Han Fei after the latter had been sent as envoy to Qin by the state of Han.

THE QIN DYNASTY, 221–206 BCE

In 230 BCE Qin started the series of campaigns which led to the unification of China. The other states tried to form alliances to oppose the advance of Qin and in 227 BCE Yan sent an assassin to murder

King Zheng. But this attempt failed, as did all other efforts at resistance, and in quick succession the surviving states were defeated. In 221 BCE the king of Qin assumed the title of Qin Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor of Qin. It was suggested to him that the newly acquired territories should be distributed to a feudal nobility, but in an outspoken memorial Li Si opposed the idea. Instead, the empire was divided into 36 commanderies and prefectures under officials appointed by central government. The emperor's and Li Si's distrust of those who served them was apparent in the arrangement in which military and civil authority was separated and a third supervisory official was appointed to each commandery, thus initiating a pattern of control through division of authority which survived through the imperial period. Many aristocratic families were required to move to the capital at Xianyang, near present-day Xi'an. Vast quantities of weapons belonging to these families were confiscated and melted down to make statues, and city fortifications were destroyed.

After the conquest Li Si embarked on a series of measures which applied Legalist principles to the new state. A major effort was made to standardize measurements, and examples have survived of inscribed weights and vessels. Other reforms provided for a network of roads radiating from the capital and fixed the axle width of carts using them. Standard gold and copper coins were circulated, and the form of the latter – a round coin pierced by a square hole – established the shape of future coinage. These measures encouraged commerce, although the emperor shared the prejudice of Legalists in favour of agriculture and against merchants, who on occasions were rounded up and settled in distant regions.

The *Shiji* or *Historical Records*, compiled by Sima Qian a century later, state that Li Si carried out a reform of the written language, that he 'equalized the written characters, and made these universal throughout the empire'. The probability is that a group of scholars under Li Si's direction developed a standard script known as the Small Seal, which was used in official communications. It was also used on seven stone stelae erected in various parts of the empire to commemorate the inauguration of a new age and to record the journeys made by the emperor. The emperor's relationship with scholars was a difficult one. In 213 BCE a scholar cited the historical record to criticize the emperor for having accepted Li Si's recommendation with regard to feudal fiefs. In response, Li Si presented a memorial to the emperor suggesting that scholars, other than those attached to the

court, should surrender all historical records other than those of Qin and that these should be burned. Copies of works such as the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents* were collected and destroyed, but the destruction was by no means complete and many books, in particular treatises on technical and literary subjects, survived the holocaust. If that incident were not enough to earn Qin Shi Huangdi the enduring disapproval of Confucian scholars, the action he allegedly took in the following year certainly was. Having heard that certain scholars were criticizing him, he ordered that more than 460 of them should be buried alive. Descriptions of both these events are given in the account written by Sima Qian a century later. The truth of the allegations is uncertain and the latter incident may never have happened.

After the unification, Qin Shi Huangdi continued the drive for territorial expansion. Expeditions were sent south to modern Guangdong and Guangxi and Chinese were sent or deported to colonize those regions. To support the military expeditions a canal, known as the 'magic transport canal', was dug to link the Yangzi and Xi (West) rivers. Meng Tian, the most famous general of the day, led a large force against the Xiongnu, the name now given to the northern nomads, and forced them to retreat beyond the Ordos region, thereby abandoning their pasture lands. Chinese settlers were sent to populate the area. This incident has been described as 'the first deep and massive conquest of nomadic territory by a Chinese state'. Meng Tian then used a vast army of convicts to construct a 'great wall' extending for more than ten thousand *li* (a *li* is approximately one third of a mile; the phrase 'ten thousand *li*' means 'extremely long') to protect the recently conquered nomadic territories.²⁶ This has long been taken as a reference to the building of *the* Great Wall. However, the Great Wall of today dates mainly from the Ming period, and Meng Tian's wall was a more modest construction, joining together earth walls which had been built in the Warring States period. Meng Tian also built the Straight Road, which ran northwards for some 500 miles from Xianyang to the Ordos desert, and which was intended to facilitate the supply of troops operating on the new frontier.

During his reign Qin Shi Huangdi had become increasingly preoccupied with the theory of the five elements and the secret of immortality. As the Zhou dynasty had been associated with the element of fire, the Qin dynasty was identified with the element which fire does not overcome, namely water, and also with the colour black and the

number six. In all garments black became the dominant colour and in measurements six was taken as the basis of calculation. On his tours the emperor despatched people to collect herbs believed to grant immortality and he sent an expedition to the island of Penglai, where immortals were believed to reside. In 210 BCE he travelled to the coast of modern Shandong, where in response to a dream he hunted and shot a large fish. Shortly afterwards he fell ill and died. In an attempt to manipulate the succession, Li Si and Zhao Gao, the eunuch chief minister of Qin, concealed the emperor's death by keeping his body in the sleeping-carriage and disguising the smell by surrounding it with carts loaded with salted fish. By this means they bought time to procure the succession of a younger son, who became the Second Emperor.

Even before he became emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi had started to plan his tomb. Construction began in 212 BCE or earlier at a site 30 miles east of Xianyang. The position of the tomb has long been known, but it was not excavated, as records showed that it had been rifled twice. However, in 1974 a chance discovery led to the uncovering of three vast pits to the east of the burial mound. In these pits were over 7000 life-size terracotta figures of soldiers. The mausoleum itself has yet to be excavated. According to the description left by Sima Qian, it contained a model of the empire which had rivers of quicksilver and a mechanism for operating the tides. The model was lit by candles made of whale fat. The tomb incorporated boobytraps which would shoot any intruders and to guard its secrets the workers who had constructed it were also entombed.

The Second Emperor set out to rule as his father had done. In a famous memorial Li Si advised him about 'supervising and holding responsible', a method of control advocated by the Legalists. However, very quickly things began to go wrong. Discontent had arisen over the heavy taxes levied to complete the Epang palace, which had been started by Qin Shi Huangdi. Before the new emperor had been on the throne a year a rebellion headed by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, two poor farmers, had broken out in the former state of Chu. Less than a year later other uprisings had occurred and Chen Sheng's forces were within 30 miles of the capital. At court Zhao Gao intrigued against Li Si, who was executed by being cut in two at the marketplace at Xianyang. Zhao Gao's political ascendancy increased to such an extent that in 207 BCE he forced the Second Emperor to go into retirement and then to commit suicide. Two months later the

new emperor had Zhao Gao killed, but by then the empire was lost and he was forced to submit to Liu Bang, one of the rebel leaders, who became the first emperor of the Former Han dynasty.

Early in the following century, a poet and statesman named Jia Yi wrote an essay entitled 'The Faults of Qin', an analysis of the reasons for the precipitous fall of the Qin dynasty. Jia Yi criticized Qin Shi Huangdi for his overweening ambition, his disregard for the ways of former kings, and in particular for his burning of the books. Having pacified and fortified the empire, he had supposed that it would last ten thousand generations. But the Qin empire had a fatal flaw: it was not ruled with humanity and righteousness and it was this which enabled Chen Sheng and others to overthrow it. Marxist historians have emphasized the role of poor peasants in the fall of the dynasty, describing their rebellion as the first great popular revolt in Chinese history. Western historians have suggested that the dynasty fell because of a combination of factors, including the moral shortcomings of its rulers, the discontent brought about by their policies and the magnitude of the task they attempted.

THE FORMER OR WESTERN HAN DYNASTY, 206 BCE–CE 9

The first of the rebellions against the Qin, that headed by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang in the north, collapsed in the face of Qin resistance and internal disputes, and both leaders were killed. In the meantime a second rebellion had broken out headed by Xiang Yu, whose family had previously been generals in the state of Chu. Xiang Yu resented the Qin centralization of power and, after gaining an important victory at Julu, he put himself forward as the supreme general of the feudal states. Among his supporters was Liu Bang, a peasant from the district of Pei in modern Jiangsu, of which he had proclaimed himself the feudal lord. In 206 BCE Liu Bang captured the Wu Pass, which left the Qin capital at Xianyang at his mercy, and he then negotiated the surrender of the third and last emperor of the Qin. He was said to have spared the inhabitants of the capital, to have prevented looting, and even to have rescinded the most severe of the Qin laws. However, when Xiang Yu arrived the city was looted and the last emperor was put to death. Xiang Yu then revived the feudal states, appointing 19 rulers with himself as hegemon. At this point he and Liu Bang fell out and over the next four years they fought a series of campaigns,

in which Liu Bang was often defeated, but nevertheless his reputation for moderation earned him the support of a number of the feudal lords. In 202 BCE, after Liu Bang had gained a decisive victory at Gaixia in modern Anhui, Xiang Yu was captured and killed.

Liu Bang, who had adopted the title of King of Han, now assumed the style of *huangdi* or sovereign emperor, and used the name of his state as the title of the new dynasty. From now on he will be referred to as Gaozu, his posthumous title. During his reign, which lasted until 195 BCE, and the reigns of his two sons and his grandson, that is until 141 BCE, a remarkable consolidation of political power took place and many of the features of the imperial system, which was to last initially for two centuries and subsequently for two millennia, took shape. Gaozu himself represented for all time the possibility that a man of peasant origins but of outstanding virtue might rise to become emperor. His supporters, three of whom became known as the Three Heroes of the Han dynasty, were all said to have known poverty and to have performed acts of charity on behalf of the poor and dispossessed.

Gaozu began his reign by announcing an amnesty and measures to restore the country to peace. Being aware of the limitations of his authority, he moved cautiously to assert central control. In the west of the country, and in the area around the new capital, which was established at Chang'an, he continued Qin practice and applied direct rule in the form of commanderies. But in the east and the south he accepted the existence of ten kingdoms, whose rulers professed allegiance to him. Later, in a piecemeal fashion, he and his successors replaced the rulers of these kingdoms with members of the imperial family. In the commanderies he rewarded senior officials, military leaders and leaders of non-Chinese groups who had submitted to the Han, by conferring on them the rank of *hou*, or marquis. These titles gave them the right to raise taxes, part of which they remitted to the state and part of which they were allowed to retain.

Gaozu introduced two other important measures to ensure the stability of the dynasty. The first was to formalize the system of bureaucratic government which had been introduced under the Qin. The emperor was assisted by three senior officials, known as the Three Excellencies, and they in turn were supported by nine ministers, each of whom had a defined area of responsibility. To restrict the power of the senior officials, the terms of their appointment made them mutually dependent. Likewise, ministers and military officials

were often appointed in pairs with overlapping responsibilities. The other measure was less specific, but nevertheless of great significance. Gaozu was notorious for his contempt for scholars, declaring that he had won the empire on horseback and had no time for the Confucian classics. However, a Confucian scholar named Lu Jia, who had been an early supporter of the emperor, compiled for him the *New Analects*, a collection of essays which identified the shortcomings of the Qin dynasty and recommended that the new emperor's government should observe ethical standards. This may have marked the beginning of the adoption of Confucian values as the basis of imperial government, a process which was advanced further in 196 BCE when an edict was issued regulating the recruitment of able persons – that is, men of merit – to the administration.

During Gaozu's reign steps were taken to stabilize the frontiers of the empire. To the north the main threat came the Xiongnu, who were once identified with the Huns, but are now described as a confederacy of steppe people originating in Mongolia. This confederacy had been established in 209 BCE by a charismatic leader named Maodun in response to the crisis caused by the Qin occupation of nomadic pasture lands. He defeated the main rivals of the Xiongnu on the steppe and established his capital at Longcheng in Outer Mongolia. He then began to raid into the Ordos region. Gaozu could not tolerate this challenge and in 200 BCE he led a large army against the Xiongnu, but was defeated at Pingcheng in modern Shanxi and he himself narrowly escaped capture. He then switched to diplomacy, initiating a policy known as 'harmonious kinship', which involved the marriage of a Chinese princess to the Xiongnu leader, the exchange of gifts tantamount to a yearly tribute, and the recognition of a frontier demarcating Xiongnu and Chinese territory.

When Gaozu died in 195 BCE the throne passed to his son, then a minor, and subsequently to two other descendants, both minors. During those years real power lay in the hands of Gaozu's widow, the Empress Lü. The empress herself, and the Lü family which came from the province of Shandong, later came to epitomize the danger to the imperial succession of usurpation by the family of the empress dowager. While Gaozu was still alive he was supposed to have required her to swear an oath not to elevate members of the Lü clan to the rank of king. But she manipulated the succession and killed off rivals, and from 188 BCE until her death eight years later she ruled as regent. She had hoped to assure the position of her family after

her death, but after the succession of another of Gaozu's sons, who became the Emperor Wendi, the Lü family was eliminated.

Under Wendi and his son, who reigned as Jingdi – that is, between 180 and 141 BCE – the Chinese Empire achieved new levels of stability and prosperity. It was during this period that the agricultural economy of China Proper first exhibited its characteristic features: intensive cultivation involving sophisticated techniques of irrigation and seed selection; an economic interdependence in which a free peasantry produced a marketable surplus of primary goods, and supplemented its income through domestic handicrafts; and an economic vulnerability to natural disasters and the encroachment of landlordism and state exactions. It was this last feature which encouraged migration, and in particular the drift of population to the southern provinces.

This period also saw a refinement of religious beliefs and practices concerning the dead. A vivid illustration of this was provided by the tomb of the Countess of Dai at Mawangdui in Hunan, which was discovered in 1972. The tomb, which dates from about 168 BCE, contained the mummified body of the countess and various talismans which would enable her to make the journey to paradise. These included a painting on silk which depicted the route her soul would take, first to the magical island of Penglai and then to the gates of paradise. An indication of the increased complexity of the belief in an afterlife can be found in the appearance, in tombs dating from the first century, of bronze TLV mirrors. These mirrors, which have markings like the letters T, L and V, may have been used for divination. They are ornamented with a design incorporating the twelve symbols which represent the divisions of time, and the five elements. These mirrors served to reassure the bearer, whether alive or dead, that he or she stood in the correct relationship with the cosmos.

The most glorious period of the Former Han dynasty was the reign of the Emperor Wudi between 141 and 87 BCE. During those years the frontiers of the empire were extended, important political reforms were instituted and major achievements were recorded in the fields of thought and culture. However, before the end of his exceptionally long reign a challenge on the frontier had appeared, financial problems had arisen and tensions had developed at court. These were a forewarning of the crisis that was to overwhelm the dynasty.

When Wudi came to the throne the gravest frontier threat was posed by the Xiongnu, who, despite the agreement made with

Gaozu, had continued to raid Chinese territory and in 166 BCE had penetrated to within 100 miles of the capital at Chang'an. Under Wudi the policy of appeasement on the frontier was replaced by one of divide and rule. The first step was for the Han to seek allies among the opponents of the Xiongnu. In 138 BCE Wudi sent Zhang Qian to contact the Yuezhi, known enemies of the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian failed to obtain their assistance, but his epic journey extended Chinese influence for the first time into the Western Regions; that is, modern Xinjiang. From 129 BCE Wudi launched a series of attacks against the Xiongnu. Although the Han forces won a number of victories, they were unable to campaign on the steppe for more than 100 days at a time, and so could not subjugate their opponents.

Meanwhile expansion had taken place in other directions. In 128 BCE an expedition was sent to Korea and 20 years later a longer campaign led to the establishment of four commanderies in the north of the peninsula. Nor was the south neglected, for in 111 BCE an expedition reached Guangzhou and subsequently commanderies were established to administer the territory of the modern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi as well as the northern part of Vietnam.

Wudi had received a good education from Confucian teachers, and during his reign he appeared to observe the teachings of the famous Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (*c.* 179–104 BCE), who had defined the 'threefold obligations of the ruler'. These were to serve the basis of heaven by making the appropriate sacrifices and setting the correct moral example; to serve the basis of earth by performing symbolic acts such as ploughing a furrow and feeding silkworms; and to serve the basis of man by establishing schools and enlightening the people by education.

The most significant of the reforms which fulfilled those obligations was to start recruiting to the bureaucracy men of talent who had been educated through the medium of the Confucian texts. In 141 BCE, and in subsequent years, senior officials were called on to nominate candidates for the civil service who exhibited the right qualities for appointment. Five years later official posts were established for academics who intended to specialize in the interpretation of the Confucian texts. This arrangement was formalized in 124 BCE with the establishment of an imperial academy where a quota of 50 students studied the classics in preparation for an examination. If they passed they became eligible for an official appointment. This reform did not immediately replace the qualification for office

through birth. The kingdoms which had been established at the start of the dynasty still remained in existence, as did the marquises, held by the second rank of nobility, which were likewise hereditary positions. In the early years of his reign Wudi had conferred a large number of new marquises on meritorious officials, military leaders and tribal leaders. However, by 112 BCE the civil service had become such an effective arm of imperial government that dependence on marquises was no longer necessary and the great majority of them were extinguished. In Wudi's reign the most celebrated example in Chinese history of social mobility occurred. This was the case of the Confucian scholar Gongsun Hong, who rose from the condition of swineherd to become chancellor in 124 BCE.

In Wudi's empire scholarly activity thrived. The ruler of Huainan, a kingdom in modern Anhui, commissioned a compilation known as the *Huainanzi*, which brought together a variety of explanations of the working of the universe as understood by Daoist scholars. This project indicated the popularity of Daoist thought at the time, and illustrated the tendency to adopt an eclectic approach which was to recur in the future. The Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu, author of the treatise on the obligations of the ruler which has already been mentioned, also wrote an influential work on portents, which he claimed were 'heaven's threats', a warning to the emperor of heaven's displeasure. This doctrine was to provide officials with a pretext for making indirect criticisms of the throne. Dong Zhongshu also synthesized the concepts of the five elements, the *yin* and *yang* forces and the principle of the *dao*, to form one cosmic system. At the same time Sima Qian, the Grand Historian, was working on the *Shiji*, the *Historical Records*, a comprehensive survey of the history of China, which had been begun by his father.

From what has been said it might be supposed that by Wudi's reign Confucian ideas dominated the practice of government. In reality, a complex struggle was taking place between two attitudes which Michael Loewe has termed 'modernist' and 'reformist'.²⁷ The modernist attitude looked back to the achievements of the Qin dynasty and the principles of Legalism for its inspiration. It conceived the task of the state to be the enrichment and strengthening of China, which implied intervention in the economy and the expansion of frontiers. The reformist attitude looked to the teachings of Confucius for guidance, and like him harked back to the traditional values of the kings of Zhou as the epitome of ethical rule. It emphasized

the interests of the people, which it believed were best served by allowing individual freedom and only intervening in the running of the economy to protect the poorest in society. It therefore advocated frugal government and a cautious foreign policy. According to Loewe, modernist policies dominated in the first century of the Former Han, whereas reformist policies gained the ascendancy in the latter half of the dynasty's span, the point of change occurring during the reign of Wudi.

The event which provides the best evidence of this conflict of attitudes, as expressed in economic terms, is the conference which was held shortly after Wudi's death to discuss the cause of the hardship suffered by the people. The record of the conference is known as the *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, a reference to the government monopolies which were at the heart of the debate. The modernist viewpoint was represented by government spokesmen, who argued that a state-planned economy was of benefit to the population as a whole. Their critics, the reformists, responded by saying that government should be based on principles rather than on material considerations. The debate ranged widely and included criticism of the over-ambitious foreign policy which had prompted the government to try to tap new sources of revenue. It is generally agreed that the reformists had the better of the argument and that thereafter Confucian principles played a larger role in determining government policy.

The contest between reformism and modernism also appears in a debate about how children should be raised. A key figure on the reformist side was Liu Xiang (c. 80–7 BCE), whose *Biographies of Exemplary Women* contains the earliest extant extended discussion on fostering the development of children. Mothers should play an important role in their moral development. They should begin with 'foetal instruction', by their behaviour influencing the development of the child in the womb. After the birth they should provide the child with gradual and persistent moral guidance. This emphasis on the acquisition of moral virtue, as opposed to claiming authority on the grounds of birth – an emphasis which was to apply to the ruler as much as to the subject – was to cast a long shadow over Chinese history.²⁸

Liu Xiang also emphasized the role of women in establishing, or re-establishing, patrilineal values; that is, values that strengthen the kinship group. A key issue was the remarriage of widows, with Liu Xiang extolling examples of women who had committed suicide

rather than remarry. Tributes to such women were to become a mainstay of female education. This theme and that of female obedience to the kinship hierarchy were to be the subject of *Admonitions for Women* by the Later Han writer Ban Zhao (c. 45–51 to c. 114–20 CE), who has been praised by Confucianists as China's greatest female scholar, and excoriated by feminist writers as a tool of reactionary misogynists. A recent view is that she tried to reconcile 'a "conservative" advocacy of chastity and submission to kinship hierarchies with a "progressive" advocacy of female literacy and cultivation'.²⁹

After Wudi's death the dynasty experienced a series of damaging succession disputes. Wudi's successor was a minor and power was held by a triumvirate headed by Huo Guang, the most famous kingmaker in Chinese history, who retained power throughout that reign and then played a key role in the selection of a grandson of Wudi to become the Emperor Xuandi in 74 BCE. The occurrence of a minority did not necessarily weaken the dynasty, for emperors rarely played an active part in the administration of the state. However, the excessive influence of a great family undoubtedly was a threat. Huo Guang was praised for his support of the interests of the common people, but his wife was reviled for having murdered the empress and then having her daughter nominated empress in her place. After Huo Guang's death in 68 BCE, the emperor ordered the elimination of the leading members of the Huo family.

During Xuandi's long reign, from 74 to 49 BCE, the dynasty recovered a measure of stability. The danger on the frontiers had declined, for in 60 BCE rivalry between the Xiongnu leaders fragmented their power and nullified their threat. In the meantime trade had developed along the Silk Road, which passed through the Western Regions.

However, after Xuandi's death the characteristic features of dynastic decline multiplied. His successors either suffered from ill health or came to the throne as minors. The court was criticized for its extravagance and for the excessive influence of the eunuchs. Economic problems emerged which were traced to government expenditure and some dramatic, if short-term, reforms were initiated, including the temporary abolition of the government monopolies. Ineffectual measures were taken to try to reverse the growing problem of the concentration of land-holding and the evasion of taxation by landlords. River defences were neglected and in 30–29 BCE the Yellow river burst its banks.

THE USURPATION OF WANG MANG, CE 9–23

It was in this atmosphere of dynastic decline that the famous usurpation of Wang Mang occurred. Few characters in Chinese history have been the subject of such contrasting assessments. He was at pains to present himself as a devout Confucian and friend of the people, and he fabricated evidence of portents to enable him to claim to have heaven's mandate. Nevertheless, Confucianists denounced him as a tyrant and a hypocrite. He was a reformer, and in 1928 the famous scholar Hu Shi described him as a pioneer of state socialism. More recently he has been described as one who tried to reconcile the conflicting attitudes of the modernists and reformists.

Wang Mang was born in 45 BCE. He was the nephew of the Empress Wang, who was the consort of Yuandi and the mother of Chengdi, the emperor who reigned from 33 to 7 BCE. The Wang family, and Wang Mang in particular, had at various times held positions of authority, including that of regent. Under Aidi, who was on the throne from 7 to 1 BCE, the Wang family lost influence, but under his successor, another minor, Wang again became regent. Wang had gained a reputation as an able administrator and as a paragon of Confucian virtues. This reputation enabled him in CE 9 to usurp the throne and declare himself emperor of the Xin; that is, the New dynasty.

After seizing power Wang Mang carried through a series of reforms, which he presented as an attempt to end abuses. He first attacked the increasing concentration of land-holding. In an edict dated CE 9 he 'nationalized' the land; that is to say he abolished private land ownership, prohibited the sale of land and slaves, and called for a return to the 'well-field' system of equal land-holding. The second reform reintroduced the monopolies in salt and iron which since Wudi's reign had fallen into disuse, and applied controls to the market in grain, cloth and silk. Through other measures the coinage was devalued, the nobility was required to surrender its holdings of gold in exchange for coin, and new taxes were imposed on merchants and craftsmen. During his reign Wang Mang suppressed a rebellion in the south-west province of Guizhou and negotiated a successful agreement with the Xiongnu. He was a patron of Confucian scholarship. He also encouraged scientific research and conducted an experiment to test the claims of a man who asserted that when coated in feathers he could fly thousands of *li* and spy out the movements of the Xiongnu.

Notwithstanding these achievements, in CE 23 Wang Mang was driven from the throne and then killed by rebels. Why did the Xin dynasty last for so short a time? According to Ban Gu, the compiler of the history of the Former Han, the reason was obvious. Wang Mang was an usurper whose radical and ill-judged reforms brought disaster on the people. This negative view has been echoed by modern writers, for example Nishijima Sadao has decried his anti-mercantile policies as both ineffective and a cause of his downfall.³⁰ Hans Bielenstein, however, has argued that Wang Mang was no innovator, but a pragmatist who governed much as his Former Han predecessors had done. The true cause of his downfall was a series of disasters which began in CE 11 with the shifting of the Yellow river to its southern course.³¹

This natural disaster, which had been preceded by prolonged neglect of the river defences, brought about a tremendous loss of life and precipitated a long-term migration from the north to the south. It also gave rise to a massive peasant rebellion in Shandong province. The rebels, who became known as the Red Eyebrows because they painted their foreheads red, professed no political objective other than a vague demand for a restoration of the Former Han. However, their activities created such disorder that gentry families became apprehensive. One of the migrant routes passed through Nanyang in southern Henan, which was the home of the Liu, a clan which claimed imperial descent. The Liu raised a rebellion against Wang Mang, and after three years of confused fighting, in which the imperial troops were defeated and the Red Eyebrows driven back, a member of the clan, Liu Xiu, proclaimed himself emperor of a restored Han dynasty. He is better known by his posthumous name, Guang Wudi.

THE LATER OR EASTERN HAN DYNASTY, CE 25–220

The restoration of the Han dynasty may be explained in the first instance by referring to the military skill and political sagacity of Guang Wudi. Despite his claim to the title of emperor, it took him ten years to defeat all opposition. His most dangerous opponent, Gongsun Shu, who had likewise declared himself emperor, came from a prominent Sichuan family. However, although the territory over which Gongsun Shu claimed to reign was very extensive, it was

sparsely populated. Guang Wudi had greater resources at his disposal and this enabled him to invade Sichuan and in CE 36 to capture Gongsun Shu's capital at Chengdu.

Marxist historians have defined the fall of the Xin dynasty and Guang Wudi's victory in class terms. Wudi has been described as a representative of the landlord class which had seized the fruits of the struggles of the peasant Red Eyebrows. Such a view was firmly rejected by Hans Bielenstein, who argued that the struggle between the Nanyang gentry and the Red Eyebrows was not a class struggle, for both sides accepted the existing social and political order. It was essentially a regional struggle, which was eventually won by the Nanyang faction supported by some other factions. Nevertheless, according to Bielenstein, an important social change did occur at this time. Under the Former Han, great clans had dominated the high offices of state. At first these clans had been the followers of Gaozu, the first Former Han emperor. Later other great families had risen to national prominence, the last example being the rise of the Wang clan, which was followed by the usurpation of Wang Mang. However, most of Guang Wudi's 35 chief supporters were not from the great clans but from the lesser gentry. The regional factionalism, which was apparent in the early years of Guang Wudi's reign, reflected the basis of his support and was to prove an underlying weakness of the dynasty.

The Later Han dynasty fixed its capital at Luoyang, 200 miles east of the Former Han capital at Chang'an, hence the dynasty's alternate title of the Eastern Han. Within the city walls were situated the royal palaces, government offices and the residences of nobles and officials. Outside were extensive suburbs which housed half a million people, making it the most populous city in the world at that time. Luoyang was an important centre of commerce, which the evidence suggests was as flourishing as under the Former Han. Money was widely used and part of the labour-service obligation was commuted into a monetary tax. Another sign of commercial activity was the construction of roads and bridges. This was a period of important agricultural improvements, with the widespread adoption of iron ploughshares, a greater use of draught animals and the extension of irrigation. It was also a bad time for poorer peasants, who may have been unable to afford these technological improvements.

During the reigns of Guang Wudi and his successors Mingdi (*r.* CE 57–75) and Zhangdi (*r.* CE 75–88), many of the administrative

practices of the Former Han were continued. At central government level the most senior official was the grand tutor, whose task was to give moral advice to the emperor. The three officials known as the Three Excellencies were placed in charge of finance, the military and public works. Nine ministers supervised other aspects of the administration. Of growing importance was the secretariat, which was responsible for the receipt and drafting of documents. A more sinister development, which can be traced back to the reign of Mingdi, was the increasing influence of the eunuchs, castrated males who had been placed in charge of the imperial harem and who also maintained the imperial palace. The country as a whole was divided into about 100 commanderies and kingdoms and these in turn were divided into counties. In CE 2 there had been 1577 counties, but by CE 140 this number had fallen to 1179, an indication of the extent to which the north had become depopulated. Each commandery and each county had appointed officials, while the kingdoms were headed by the sons of emperors.

Ever since the First Emperor had ordered the confiscation and melting down of weapons, a policy of gradual demilitarization of the peasant and urban populations had been pursued. Military service on the frontier was delegated to marginal elements of society, often to exiled convicts. Nomads were recruited to the Former Han army, and a policy of divide and rule was applied to the tribal groupings. Then, in CE 31, it was accepted that peasant conscripts were useless as frontier soldiers and universal military service was formally abolished.³²

Nevertheless, the first three Later Han emperors attempted to reassert Chinese influence on the periphery of the empire. The outcome was short-term success and longer-term problems. One of Guang Wudi's principal allies, Ma Yuan, led an expedition to Vietnam, where he suppressed a rising led by two sisters. In the north and west the main threat continued to come from the Xiongnu, who had taken advantage of the change of dynasty to regain control of the Western Regions. However, they now suffered an internal split. The southern Xiongnu were allowed to settle in the Ordos region. The northern Xiongnu remained hostile, but after a series of defeats their influence dwindled. This allowed the dispatch of the famous general Ban Chao to the Western Regions and led to contact with states as distant as Sogdiana. To the north east, relations had been established with the Wuhuan and Xianbei. The former had been allies of the Xiongnu, but

now accepted a tributary relationship with China and were encouraged to settle beyond the Great Wall. The Xianbei had been used by the Chinese as allies against the Xiongnu, but after the decline of the Xiongnu, they in turn became the main threat on China's north-eastern frontier.

The middle period of the Later Han dynasty – that is to say, from CE 88 to 168 – was marked by increased factionalism at court and the alienation of scholars. A succession of minors occupied the throne, and power often fell into the hands of the family of the empress. A notorious example of this was the case of Liang Ji, brother of Emperor Shundi's consort. Between CE 141 and 159 he held a series of important positions and gained an unenviable reputation for rapacity. The court eunuchs continued to grow in numbers and in influence. In CE 135 they gained the right to hand down noble titles to their adopted heirs. The eunuchs entered into the struggles at court, for example a group of eunuchs procured the murder of Liang Ji. While these intrigues dominated palace affairs the literati class felt excluded from influence and some of them became concerned about the changes which they believed were taking place in society. Foremost among the critics was the scholar Wang Fu, who raised the alarm about the growing unevenness of the distribution of wealth. He deplored the excessive luxury of the upper classes and the poverty of the peasants, the producers of the essentials.

From CE 168 the Later Han dynasty suffered a series of disasters from which it was never to recover fully. The crisis began with a succession dispute, which was eventually resolved by a coup which placed a eunuch faction in control of the court. The new emperor, Lingdi, could not stem the rapid deterioration in the authority of the dynasty. The selection of officials on the criterion of merit was replaced by the widespread sale of offices. On the north-east frontier the Xianbei, under Tanshihuai, formed a great steppe confederation which inflicted a series of defeats on Chinese forces until Tanshihuai's death in CE 180. In CE 184 the Yellow Turban and Five Pecks of Grain rebellions broke out. These movements were the work of impoverished peasants inspired by the prophecies of Daoist priests who predicted the coming of the Great Peace, a golden age marked by complete equality and common ownership of goods. The Yellow Turban movement was centred on the lower Yangzi; that of the Five Pecks began in Sichuan. Both rebellions spread extremely rapidly and the rebels attacked officials whom they blamed for their

misery. Both rebellions were repressed with a tremendous loss of life, but other popular movements arose in their place.

After the Emperor Lingdi died in CE 189 the dynasty subsided quickly. His death led to another succession crisis, this one notable for a massacre of the eunuchs. Thereafter, although Han emperors remained on the throne, the empire was divided between three contestants, all generals of the Later Han. The most famous of these was Cao Cao, later immortalized as the hero of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Until CE 220 the fiction of the survival of the dynasty was preserved, but after Cao Cao's death, which was followed shortly by the abdication of the emperor, it was clear that the dynasty had come to its end.

The record of the Han dynasty has sometimes been compared with that of the Roman Empire. The two empires were remarkably similar in area and population. Both extended to the limits of the known world; both recorded remarkable technological achievements; both developed sophisticated administrative and legal systems; and both enjoyed a similar span of power until their collapse. Similarities have also been found in the explanations for their fall: the rise of privileged families owning vast estates; the degeneracy of the imperial line and factionalism at court; and an ideological failure, precipitated in the Roman case by the rise of Christianity, in China by the attraction of popular Daoism. Both empires were threatened by 'barbarian' tribes on their frontiers and both made the fatal error of allowing these 'barbarians' to settle within their boundaries. Yet the collapse of the two civilizations led to very different outcomes, for the Chinese Empire rose again but the Roman Empire was never to be reconstituted.

This has prompted reflection on why the Chinese Empire had the resilience to survive. Maybe it was because it was a land empire, whereas the Roman Empire was both united and divided by the Mediterranean. Maybe it was the cultural homogeneity derived from a common Chinese written language and the persistent strength of Confucianism. Maybe it was the durability of the notion of ethical rule through the imperial institution. And maybe it was the strength of its institutions, which, according to Hans Bielenstein, 'formed the most impressive system of government in the world at the time, and for centuries to come'.³³

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