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Chinese states and barbarian regions. By about 290 BC an extensive system of walls existed, largely along the northern borders of the Chinese culture area. After the unification of China only the threat from the north remained, and intensified as the steppe peoples became increasingly organized. Qin Shi Huangdi therefore decided to link and extend the existing walls on the northern frontier, and thus created the first Great Wall of China, completed in 214. This wall was of rammed earth construction, built by the forced labour of many thousands of peasants.

THE DECLINE OF QIN

The First Emperor believed that he had founded a dynasty which would last for 10,000 generations. He himself died in 210 BC when he was only fifty. The strains of the centralized totalitarian system which had been established under his rule no doubt contributed to his early death. He intended his eldest son to succeed him, but Li Si and another minister, Zhao Gao, preferred one of his other sons (there were twenty in all). They concealed the emperor's death until they were able to ensure that their own candidate took the throne. But disputes over the succession and the widespread unrest caused by exactions of forced labour completely destabilized the empire, and within a few years the Qin dynasty had crumbled.

Despite all efforts to unite the empire, dissent had continued throughout the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi. Arguments about political philosophy had been so widespread that the First Emperor, at the suggestion of Li Si, had banned all such discussions and ordered the destruction of all books outside the imperial collection except for those on purely practical subjects, such as medicine and agriculture. Many scholars opposed to Legalist ideas were executed. But even these draconian measures, which earned the First Emperor the lasting opprobrium of the Confucian scholars, failed to extinguish dissent. After the downfall of the Qin dynasty, Legalism was thoroughly discredited.

Qin Shi Huangdi was given a burial in keeping with his exalted status. The historical sources record that his tomb was filled with rare and precious objects, that it had representations of the heavens on its ceiling and of the earth, with rivers and seas of mercury, on its floor, and that it was guarded by automatic crossbow mechanisms, set to shoot anyone who



The Terracotta Army: the head of an officer (Qin dynasty, c. 215 BC)

tried to break into it. The site of the tomb has always been known, but it was only recently that some of the grave goods were accidentally uncovered by peasants digging a well. Subsequent archaeological excavations revealed the now-famous Terracotta Army, an astonishing assemblage of life-size clay statues. Nothing else comparable of similar age is known from China, and their quality is outstanding by any standards. Thus, although Qin Shi Huangdi's dynasty only just outlasted his own life, two of China's most renowned historical remains, the Terracotta Army and the Great Wall, are monuments to his achievements.

The Han Dynasty

After a couple of years of confusion, with several different rebel groups contending against the Qin government and each other, the empire was finally brought together again under the leadership of one man. Liu

Bang was of humble origins, but became the first emperor of a new dynasty, the Han. Founded in 206 BC, this was to prove much more durable than its short-lived predecessor and must be considered one of the great dynasties of Chinese history.

THE CONFUCIAN TRIUMPH

The first Han emperor inherited a fundamentally sound administrative system from the preceding Qin dynasty, but the Legalist ideology that had created it had to be rejected. It was too unpopular. To some extent there was a return to old ways, with fiefs being conferred on some of the relatives and close adherents of Liu Bang, but much of the empire continued to be ruled by officials in the same way as under the Qin. This mixed administration persisted for about a century, but gradually the new class from which the administrative officials were almost exclusively drawn asserted itself, and the rights and powers of the feudatories were reduced to little more than nominal. The old feudal nobility disappeared, displaced by a class of gentry which maintained itself in power through land-ownership and the holding of government posts. This class was descended from the similar class which had evolved during the Eastern Zhou period from impoverished branches of noble families, the class to which Confucius had belonged. Its ideology was largely Confucian. Legalism necessarily remained influential, as many of the Legalist laws and practices continued in use from the Qin dynasty into the Han, but Legalism had become so unacceptable that it could not be openly advocated. Though in the process it absorbed many Legalist ideas which Confucius himself would never have countenanced, Confucianism was able to establish itself as the essential ideology of government in China. It was to maintain itself in this position more or less continuously until the downfall of the last imperial dynasty, a period of more than 2,000 years.

At first Liu Bang was not much inclined to accept Confucian ideas. His chamberlain Lu Jia is said often to have quoted to him the Books of Poetry and Documents, old texts important to the Confucians. 'I won the empire on horseback,' Liu Bang eventually exclaimed, 'what use are the Poetry and Documents?' Lu Jia answered that though the empire could be won on horseback, it could not be governed on

horseback. Qin had conquered the empire, but had failed to hold it long because of the unpopularity of its government. Had Qin employed the Confucian principles of benevolence and righteousness, things would have been different. Liu Bang apparently had very little concept of how to govern his empire, and of necessity allowed scholars to instruct him.

In 141 BC a system of recommendation of talented persons for government posts by provincial administrators was begun. This is considered the beginnings of the later system of examination for official positions. Those who had principally studied writings of schools other than the Confucian were excluded from government, for knowledge of the Confucian texts was established as the prime requisite for appointment to government office. During the first century of the Han period, all the major schools of philosophy apart from Confucianism and Daoism faded into insignificance. Daoism probably survived because it did not compete with Confucianism as a philosophy of government.

CULTURAL CONTACTS

The period of the Han dynasty saw a gradual synthesis between the various parts of the empire. Regions in the south and west which had originally been outside the Chinese culture area were administered by Chinese officials, and many of the local people absorbed Chinese culture. There was also some settlement of Chinese in the south. But away from the major towns and the valleys where Chinese forms of agriculture could easily be practised, the inhabitants retained their distinct local cultures. Even today remnants of these indigenous peoples still live in mountainous areas as far north as Zhejiang and southern Anhui provinces (the She minority) and south-west Hubei province (the Tujia minority). During the Han dynastic period, much of China south of the Yangtze valley was only patchily assimilated into Chinese culture. Some of the more remote mountainous areas were not even under Han government control.

In this connection it is interesting to relate a story from the official history of the first half of the Han dynasty (compiled in about AD 100). It is recorded that in about 145 BC a man called Wen Weng was appointed governor of Shu (roughly within the area of modern Sichuan). He found the area to be uncivilized, with barbarian customs,



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