

CHIA I

The Faults of Ch'in

The following excerpt is from the celebrated essay, "The Faults of Ch'in" (*Kuo-Ch'in lun*), by the Han poet and statesman Chia I (201-169 B.C.). Chia I, employing the florid style popular at this time, reviews the history of Ch'in, and analyses the causes which led to its precipitous downfall. His essay, admired as a masterpiece of rhetoric and reasoning, was copied into the two great Han histories, the *Shih chi* and *Han shu*, and has had a far-reaching influence on Chinese political thought.

[From *Shih chi*, 6:41a; *Han shu* 31; *Wen hsüan* 51]

Duke Hsiao of Ch'in, relying upon the strength of the Han-ku Pass¹ and basing himself in the area of Yung-chou, with his ministers held fast to his land and eyed the House of Chou, for he cherished a desire to roll up the empire like a mat, to bind into one the whole world, to bag all the land within the four seas; he had it in his heart to swallow up everything in the eight directions. At this time he was aided by [the Legalist] Lord Shang who set up laws for him, encouraged agriculture and weaving, built up the instruments of war, contracted military alliances and attacked the other feudal lords. Thus the men of Ch'in were able with ease to acquire territory east of the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

After the death of Duke Hsiao, kings Hui-wen, Wu, and Chao-hsiang carried on the undertaking and, following the plans he had laid, seized Han-chung in the south and Pa and Shu in the west, acquired rich land in the east and strategic areas in the north. The other feudal lords in alarm came together in council to devise some plan to weaken Ch'in, sparing nothing in gifts of precious objects and rich lands to induce men from all over the empire to come and join with them in the Vertical Alliance . . . which united all the peoples of the states of Han, Wei, Yen, Ch'u, Ch'i, Chao, Sung, Wei, and Chung-shan. . . . With ten times the area of Ch'in and a force of a million soldiers they beat upon the Pass and pressed forward to Ch'in. But the men of Ch'in opened the Pass and went out to meet the enemy, and the armies of the nine states were blocked and

¹The strategic pass separating the home territory of Ch'in (later the metropolitan area of Ch'ang-an) from eastern China.

did not dare to advance. Ch'in, without wasting a single arrow or losing a single arrowhead, at one stroke made trouble for the whole empire.

With this the Vertical Alliance collapsed, its treaties came to naught and the various states hastened to present Ch'in with parts of their territories as bribes for peace. With its superior strength Ch'in pressed the crumbling forces of its rivals, pursued those who had fled in defeat, and overwhelmed the army of a million until their shields floated upon a river of blood. Following up the advantages of its victory, Ch'in gained mastery over the empire and divided up the land as it saw fit. The powerful states begged to submit to its sovereignty and the weak ones paid homage at its court.

Then followed kings Hsiao-wen and Chuang-hsiang whose reigns were short and uneventful. After this the First Emperor arose to carry on the glorious achievements of six generations. Cracking his long whip, he drove the universe before him, swallowing up the eastern and western Chou and overthrowing the feudal lords. He ascended to the highest position and ruled the six directions, scourging the world with his rod, and his might shook the four seas. In the south he seized the land of Yüeh and made of it the Cassia Forest and Elephant commanderies, and the hundred lords of Yüeh bowed their heads, hung halters from their necks, and pleaded for their lives with the lowest officials of Ch'in. Then he caused Meng T'ien to build the Great Wall and defend the borders, driving back the Hsiung-nu over seven hundred *li* so that the barbarians no longer dared to come south to pasture their horses and their men dared not take up their bows to avenge their hatred.

Thereupon he discarded the ways of the former kings and burned the writings of the hundred schools in order to make the people ignorant. He destroyed the major fortifications of the states, assassinated their powerful leaders, collected all the arms of the empire, and had them brought to his capital at Hsien-yang where the spears and arrowheads were melted down to make twelve human statues, all in order to weaken the people of the empire. After this he ascended and fortified Mount Hua and set up fords along the Yellow River, strengthening the heights and precipices overlooking the deep valleys. He garrisoned the strategic points with skilled generals and expert bowmen and stationed trusted ministers and well-trained soldiers to guard the land with arms and ques-

tion all who passed back and forth. When he had thus pacified the empire, the First Emperor believed in his heart that with the strength of his capital within the Pass and his walls of metal extending a thousand miles, he had established a rule that would be enjoyed by his descendants for ten thousand generations.

For a while after the death of the First Emperor the memory of his might continued to awe the common people. Yet Ch'en She, born in a humble hut with tiny windows and wattle door, a day laborer in the fields and a garrison conscript, whose abilities could not match even the average, who had neither the worth of Confucius and Mo Tzu nor the wealth of T'ao Chu or I Tun, stepped from the ranks of the common soldiers, rose up from the paths of the fields and led a band of some hundred poor, weary troops in revolt against the Ch'in. They cut down trees to make their weapons, raised their flags on garden poles, and the whole world in answer gathered about them like a great cloud, brought them provisions, and followed after them as shadows follow a form. In the end the leaders of the entire east rose up together and destroyed the House of Ch'in.

Now the empire of Ch'in at this time was by no means small or feeble. Its base in Yung-chou, its stronghold within the Pass, was the same as before. The position of Ch'en She could not compare in dignity with the lords of Ch'i, Yen, Chao, Han, Wei, Sung, and Chung-shan. The weapons which he improvised of hoes and tree branches could not match the sharpness of spears and battle pikes; his little band of garrison conscripts was nothing beside the armies of the nine states; his plots and stratagems, his methods of warfare were far inferior to those of the men of earlier times. And yet Ch'en She succeeded in his undertaking where they had failed. Why was this, when in ability, size, power and strength his forces came nowhere near those of the states of the east that had formerly opposed Ch'in? Ch'in, beginning with an insignificant amount of territory, reached the power of a great state and for a hundred years made all the other great lords pay homage to it. Yet after it had become master of the whole empire and established itself within the fastness of the Pass, a single commoner opposed it and its ancestral temples toppled, its ruler died by the hands of men, and it became the laughing stock of the world. Why? Because it failed to rule with humanity and righteousness and to realize that the power to attack and the power to retain what one has thereby won are not the same.

The Rebellion of Ch'en She and Wu Kuang

This description of the beginning of the first major revolt against the Ch'in dynasty is taken from the biographies of its leaders, Ch'en She and Wu Kuang, in the *Shih chi* and *Han shu*. It clearly illustrates how the severity of the Ch'in laws and institutions drove its people to such desperation that revolt became the only hope of survival.

[From *Han shu*, 31:11a-2b]

When Ch'en She was young he was one day working in the fields with the other hired men. Suddenly he stopped his plowing and went and stood on a hillock, wearing a look of profound discontent. After a long while he announced: "If I become rich and famous, I will not forget the rest of you!"

The other farm hands laughed and answered: "You are nothing but a hired laborer. How could you ever become rich and famous?"

Ch'en She gave a great sigh. "Oh well," he said, "how could you little sparrows be expected to understand the ambitions of a swan!"

In the 7th month of the first year of the reign of the Second Emperor [209 B.C.] the poor people of the village were sent to garrison Yü-yang, a force of nine hundred men. But when they got as far as the district of the Great Swamp in Ch'i, they encountered heavy rain and the road became impassable so that it was evident that they would not reach their destination on time. According to the law, men who failed to arrive at the appointed time were executed. Ch'en She and Wu Kuang plotted together, saying, "If we try to run away we will die, and if we start a revolt we will likewise die. Since we die in either case, would it not be better to die fighting for a kingdom?" . . . When the officer in command of the group was drunk, Wu Kuang made a point of openly announcing several times that he was going to run away. In this way Wu Kuang hoped to arouse the commander's anger, get him to punish him, and so stir up the men's ire and resentment. As Wu Kuang had expected, the commander began to beat him, when his sword slipped out of its scabbard. Wu Kuang sprang up, seized the sword, and killed the commander. Ch'en She rushed to his assistance and they proceeded to kill the other two commanding officers as well. Then they called together all the men of the group and announced: "Because of the rain which we encountered, we cannot reach our rendezvous on time. And anyone who misses a rendez-

vous has his head cut off! Even if you should somehow escape with your heads, six or seven out of every ten of you are bound to die in the course of garrison duty. Now, my brave fellows, if you are unwilling to die, we have nothing more to say. But if you would risk death, then let us risk it for the sake of fame and glory! Kings and nobles, generals and ministers—such men are made, not born!” The men all answered, “We are with you!”

The Rise of Liu Chi, Founder of the Han

Liu Chi, like Ch'en She, was a man of humble birth who formed a small band of adventurers and opposed Ch'in rule. When his forces grew to a sizeable army, he entered into an agreement with other rebel groups that whoever reached the capital area of Ch'in, Kuan-chung or the land “within the Pass,” should become its ruler. In 207 B.C. Liu Chi succeeded in fighting his way to the capital city of Hsien-yang and the Ch'in dynasty came to an end. At this time he issued his famous three-article code (ten characters in Chinese) to replace the elaborate legal code of Ch'in. Though when the dynasty got on its feet a more elaborate set of laws had to be worked out, this three-article code has often been held up as an example of the simplicity and leniency of early Han government. The translations are from the biography of Liu Chi, the “Annals of Emperor Kao-tsu” (his posthumous title) in the *Shih chi*. Liu Chi's various titles have been omitted for the sake of clarity.

[From *Shih chi*, 8:15a-16b]

The army of Liu Chi finally reached Pa-shang [near the capital] ahead of the other lords. The King of Ch'in, Tzu-ying [third ruler of the Ch'in dynasty who had abandoned the title of Emperor] came in a plain carriage drawn by a white horse² with a rope about his neck and surrendered the imperial seals and credentials by the side of Brier Road. Some of the generals asked that he be executed, but Liu Chi replied: . . . “It is bad luck to kill those who have already surrendered,” and with this he turned the King of Ch'in over to the officials. Then he proceeded west and entered Hsien-yang . . . where he sealed up the storehouses containing Ch'in's treasures and wealth and returned to his encampment at Pa-shang. There he summoned all the distinguished and powerful men of the prefectures and addressed them:

“Gentlemen, for a long time you have suffered beneath the harsh laws

² White is the color of mourning.

of Ch'in. Those who criticized the government were wiped out along with their families; those who gathered to talk in private were executed in the market place. I and the other lords have made an agreement that he who first enters the Pass shall rule over the area within. Accordingly I am now king of this territory of Kuan-chung. I hereby promise you a code of laws consisting of three articles only: 1) he who kills anyone shall suffer death; 2) he who wounds another or steals shall be punished according to the gravity of the offense; 3) for the rest I abolish all the laws of Ch'in. Let the officials and people remain undisturbed as before. I have come only to save you from injury, not to exploit or oppress you. Therefore do not be afraid! The reason I have returned to Pa-shang is simply to wait for the other lords so that when they arrive we may settle the agreement.” He sent men to go with the Ch'in officials and publish this proclamation in the prefectural villages and towns. The people of Ch'in were overjoyed and hastened with cattle, sheep, wine, and food to present to the soldiers, but Liu Chi declined all such gifts, saying: “There is plenty of grain in the granaries. I do not wish to be a burden to the people.” With this the people were more joyful than ever and their only fear was that Liu Chi would not become the King of Ch'in.

Liu Chi Becomes the First Emperor of the Han Dynasty

To insure the loyalty of his comrades and supporters, Liu Chi was obliged to hand out titles and fiefs to them as his conquests advanced. In 202 B.C., when his final success seemed assured, they in turn urged him to assume the old Ch'in title of Exalted Emperor, arguing that if he failed to do so their own titles would lack authority. Like Caesar he modestly declined three times before accepting.

[From *Shih chi*, 8:28b]

The lords and generals all joined in begging Liu Chi to take the title of Exalted Emperor but he said: “I have heard that the position of emperor may go only to a worthy man; it cannot be claimed by empty words and vain talk. I do not dare to accept such a position.” Then the courtiers all replied: “Our great king has risen from the humblest beginnings to punish the wicked and violent and bring peace to all within the four seas. To those who have achieved merit he has accordingly parcelled out land and enfeoffed them as kings and peers. If our king does not assume