

Chapter 8

THE HAN REACTION TO QIN ABSOLUTISM

Though China witnessed periods of imperial splendor under several dynasties, the Qin (221–207 B.C.E.) and Han (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) clearly represent the original “imperial age,” because in these years the basic pattern for succeeding empires was laid out. The rule of the Qin was short-lived but marked a great turning point in Chinese history. For the first time the country was brought under a single unified administration, a centralized state wielding unprecedented power, controlling vast resources, and displaying a magnificence that inspired both awe and dread among its subjects. Achieved after years of steady, systematic conquest, this empire nevertheless proved an unexpected graveyard for the grandiose ambitions of its masters.

Yet when the Qin suddenly collapsed, it left to the House of Han an important legacy: the idea of empire and the governmental structure to embody it. For almost four centuries under the Han the implications of this great fact were to work their way out in all aspects of Chinese life, not least in the intellectual sphere. It is with this long period of consolidation and coordination that we shall be chiefly concerned here. In several fundamental respects it shaped the intellectual and institutional traditions of China until modern times, and not of China only but of much of East Asia as well.

The downfall of the Qin, more dramatic and sudden even than its rise, had a profound effect upon the thinking of the Chinese. It proved to their satisfaction that terror and strength alone could never rule the world. But the men

who wrested from the Qin the vast empire it had created were not bent simply on restoring the old order of things.

The aristocratic families of the older feudal states of Zhou, which had bitterly resisted the expansion of Qin, had been seriously weakened by the steps the conqueror later took to prevent them from again threatening his power. The opposition that eventually proved fatal to the Qin dynasty, therefore, came not from the ranks of the old aristocracy but from the common people. Chen She, who led the first major revolt against Qin rule, was a day laborer in the fields. Liu Ji, the man who finally set up the Han dynasty after destroying both the Qin and rival rebel factions, was likewise of humble origin, as were most of his comrades who fought with him to victory.

As commoners under the Qin, these men knew firsthand the suffering that its harsh rule had brought to the people. They were quick to abolish its more offensive laws and institutions, while leaving intact much of the rest of its elaborate machinery of government. Under their leadership the new regime of the Han was marked by plebeian heartiness and vigor, simplicity and frugality in government, and abhorrence of the Legalist doctrines of the hated Qin.

The early years of the Han were marked by a long, slow struggle to recover for the empire the advantages of the harsh unification effected by the Qin and to establish them firmly in the pattern of Chinese society. The Qin had abolished the enfeoffment system in one sweeping stroke, yet it arose again among the followers and family of the founder of the Han, whose successors had to set about quietly and patiently whittling away at feudal rights and holdings until they were finally and for all time reduced to an empty formality. The great web of central government, held together by the terror of Qin's laws and the personal power of its First Emperor, had quickly disintegrated with the fall of the dynasty. The Han worked gradually to build it up again, unifying, organizing, and standardizing the vast area brought under its control. This effort at standardization extended even to the systematizing of thought in which, again, the Han succeeded in accomplishing, by gradual and peaceful means, what the violent proscriptions of the Qin had failed to secure.

JIA YI: "THE FAULTS OF QIN"

The following excerpt is from the celebrated essay "The Faults of Qin" ("Guo Qin lun"), by the Han poet and statesman Jia Yi (201–168? B.C.E.). Jia Yi, employing the florid style popular at this time, reviews the history of Qin and analyzes the causes of its precipitous downfall. Note, however, that he finds fault not with the Qin state itself but primarily with the failings of the founder of the empire and his heir, the Second Emperor, who squandered the magnificent achievements of their forebears.

Duke Xiao of Qin, sequestered in the natural stronghold of Yaohan and based in the land of Yongzhou,¹ with his ministers in proper array, eyed the House of Zhou with the thought of rolling up the empire like a mat, enveloping the entire universe, pocketing all within the Four Seas, and swallowing up everything in all Eight Directions. At the time he was counseled by Lord Shang,² who aided him in establishing laws, encouraging agriculture and weaving, preparing the tools of war for defense and offense, and negotiating alliances far and near so that the other feudal lords fell into strife with one another. Thus the Qin effortlessly acquired the territories just to the east of the upper reaches of the Yellow River.

After the death of Duke Xiao, King Huiwen, King Wu, and King Zhaoxiang inherited the legacy and continued his policies, acquiring Hanzhong in the south, Ba and Shu in the west, fertile lands in the east, and other strategic areas in the north. . . .

[Later] when the First Emperor ascended [the throne] he flourished and furthered the accomplishments of the six generations before him. Brandishing his long whip, he drove the world before him; destroying the feudal lords, he swallowed up the domains of the two Zhou dynasties. He reached the pinnacle of power and ordered all in the Six Directions, whipping the rest of the world into submission and thus spreading his might through the Four Seas. . . . He then abolished the ways of ancient sage kings and put to the torch the writings of the Hundred Schools in an attempt to keep the people in ignorance.³ He demolished the walls of major cities and put to death men of fame and talent,⁴ collected all the arms of the realm at Xianyang and had the spears and arrowheads melted down to form twelve huge statues in human form — all with the aim of weakening his people. Then he . . . posted capable generals and expert bowmen at important passes and placed trusted officials and well-trained soldiers in strategic array to challenge all who passed. With the empire thus pacified, the First Emperor believed that, with the capital secure within the pass and prosperous cities stretching for ten thousand *li*, he had indeed created an imperial structure to be enjoyed by his royal descendants for ten thousand generations to come.

Even after the death of the First Emperor, his reputation continued to sway the people. Chen She was a man who grew up in humble circumstances in a hut with broken pots for windows and ropes as door hinges and was a mere hired field hand and roving conscript of mediocre talent. He could neither

1. Yaohan refers to the mountain pass linking Mount Yao and the Hangu Pass in present-day He'nan, near Tongguan in Shaanxi province. Yongzhou was one of nine provinces occupied by the Qin, consisting of most of present-day Shaanxi and portions of Gansu and Qinghai.

2. See ch. 7, pp. 193–98.

3. See ch. 7, pp. 209–210.

4. See ch. 7, p. 210.

equal the worth of Confucius and Mozi nor match the wealth of Tao Zhu or Yi Dun, yet, even stumbling as he did amidst the ranks of common soldiers and shuffling through the fields, he called forth a tired motley crowd and led a mob of several hundred to turn upon the Qin. Cutting down trees to make weapons, and hoisting their flags on garden poles, they had the whole world come to them like gathering clouds, with people bringing their own food and following them like shadows. These men of courage from the East rose together, and in the end they defeated and extinguished the House of Qin.

Actually, the Qin empire was by no means small and weak, having always been secure within the pass in Yongzhou. Moreover, Chen She's position was far below the level of respect commanded by the rulers of Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Han, Wei, Song, Wei, and Zhongshan. His weapons made of farm implements and thorny tree branches were no match in battle against spears and halberds, his roving conscripts in no way compared to the armies of the nine states. In matters of strategy and tactics, and other military arts, Chen was no match for the men of the past. . . . Qin, from a tiny base, had become a great power, ruling the land and receiving homage from all quarters for a hundred-odd years. Yet after they had unified the land and secured themselves within the pass, a single common rustic could nevertheless challenge this empire and cause its ancestral temples to topple and its ruler to die at the hand of others, a laughingstock in the eyes of all. Why? Because the ruler lacked humaneness and rightness; because preserving power differs fundamentally from seizing power.

. . . Had the Second Emperor been even a mediocre ruler who knew how to employ loyal and capable persons, so that together they would care for the ills of the world and reform the ways of the previous emperor, even as he mourned; had he divided the land and appointed deserving officials, thus setting up proper rulers in proper states so that propriety governed the land; had he emptied the prisons and reduced harsh punishments, abolished group and family responsibilities for crimes and thus enabled people to return to their home areas; had he only reduced taxation and statutes to alleviate oppression, curtailed sumptuary laws, and, after all the above had been done, had he lightened punishments, thus enabling people under heaven to renew themselves and change their ways so as to conduct their lives properly, each respecting himself; had he indeed fulfilled the wishes of the multitudes and bestowed high virtue on them, he would have certainly brought peace and quiet to the world. Within the Four Seas, all would have been content with their lot, only fearing further change. Even if an occasional mean or calculating person had appeared, no desire to oppose the ruler would have been aroused, and unscrupulous officials would have had no excuse to give play to their ambitions. The villainy of violence and deceit would have been eliminated. . . .

During that time, the world saw many men of prescience and far-reaching vision. The reason for their not showing deep loyalty by helping to correct evils

[at court] lay in the Qin's excesses in proscribing contrary opinions. Often before upright words could even be uttered, the body had met death. Thoughtful people of the empire would only listen and incline their ears, standing with one foot on the other, not daring to offer their services while keeping their mouths shut in silence. The three sovereigns lost the proper way while loyal officials offered no remonstrance and advisers no plans. With the realm in chaos and unworthy officials not reporting troubles to their superiors, was this not a tragedy?

[*Xinshu*, "Guo Qin lun" (SBCK 1:1a-8b) — DWYK]

THE REBELLION OF CHEN SHE AND WU GUANG

This description of the beginning of the first major revolt against the Qin dynasty is taken from the biographies of its leaders, Chen She and Wu Guang, in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*) and the *History of the Former Han* (*Hanshu*). It illustrates how the severity of the Qin laws and institutions drove its people to such desperation that revolt became the only hope of survival.

When Chen 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?"

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

During the first year of the Second Emperor of Qin (209 B.C.E.), in the seventh month, an order came for a force of nine hundred men from the poor side of the town to be sent to garrison Yuyang. Chen She and Wu Guang were among those whose turn it was to go, and they were appointed heads of the levy of men. When the group had gone as far as Daze County, they encountered such heavy rain that the road became impassable. It was apparent that the men would be unable to reach the appointed place, an offense punishable by death. Chen She and Wu Guang accordingly began to plot together. "As things stand, we face death whether we stay or run away," they said, "while if we were to start a revolt we would likewise face death. Since we must die in any case, would it not be better to die fighting for the sake of a state?" . . .

Wu Guang had always been kind to others and many of the soldiers would do anything for him. When the officer in command was drunk, Wu Guang made a point of openly announcing several times that he was going to run away. In this way Wu Guang hoped to arouse the commander's anger, get him to punish him, and so stir up the men's ire and resentment. As Wu Guang had