Chapter 4

Unification and the Consolidation of Civilization in China

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The breakdown of the Zhou empire permitted both the establishment of many small kingdoms ruled by former vassals and also incursions of nomadic peoples who lived on the borders of China. The period of internal warfare stimulated intellectual ferment and the formulation of new concepts of political and social organization. The establishment of the brief Qin empire in 221 B.C.E. seemed to promise a return to political order. Qin tyranny, however, produced resistance and the collapse of the dynasty in 207 B.C.E. The Han dynasty, which replaced the Qin, ruled for nearly four centuries. Political unity was achieved through the creation of a great civil bureaucracy. Under the Han, a large, effective and professional bureaucracy arose, which was pivotal in devising and maintaining a distinctive Chinese identity.

II. Philosophical Remedies for the Prolonged Crisis of the Later Zhou

A. Introduction

The political disorder of the later Zhou gave rise to much philosophical debate over the best means to restore order. Later scholars and bureaucrats blended these various propositions into a composite ideology that would be central to Chinese culture. The decline of the Zhou temporarily restored the power of the warlords at the expense of the shi and commoners. Many of the former bureaucrats found themselves without positions and were forced to find employment as teachers. War also took its toll on the dikes, bridges, and roads on which the Chinese agricultural economy depended. The various kingdoms became increasingly dependent on trade, and merchants actually benefited from the breakdown of public order. Despite the failure of centralized government, urbanization in China increased during the later Zhou period.

B. Confucius and the Restoration of the Shi

Confucius was born into a poor shi family in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. Failing to find a lucrative post in his home kingdom of Lu, Confucius took to the road in search of an ideal ruler. Although he never discovered a suitable ruler, Confucius achieved a reputation as a scholar and philosopher. His students and followers collected his sayings in what became known as the Analects. Confucius’ collected works represented his concept of an orderly society. Harmony, he believed, could only be achieved if rulers would accept the advice and administration of the shi. Superior men equipped to lead China were educated men. Such superior men were given power to rule in order to preserve harmony among all classes.
C. Confucian Thought and Social Ideals

The interests and welfare of the people were paramount to the decisions of emperors and their shi advisors. In return, commoners should respect and acknowledge the authority of their superiors. A hierarchy of deference was thus created: son to father, younger brother to older brother, wife to husband, subject to ruler, and friend to friend. These relationships became the foundation of social harmony.

D. The Confucian Gentleman

The superior man, invariably a member of the shi, was deferential to his ruler but not afraid to criticize erroneous decisions. He observed proper rituals and social decorum. The shi gentleman was equally gifted as an administrator, an engineer, a poet, and an artist. He exercised authority because of his demonstration of moral rectitude, cultural achievement, and knowledge.

E. The Heirs of Confucius

Two of Confucius’ most influential disciples were Mencius and Xunzi. They differed in their interpretation of Confucius’ teachings. Mencius assumed the innate goodness of humans and stressed the need for consent of the governed in the political system. He recognized the right of the governed to overthrow tyranny. Xunzi believed that humans were essentially lazy and evil. Authoritarian government was necessary to ensure social harmony. He believed that strong laws could produce social improvement, but gave no authority to the governed within the social system. Xunzi’s views were later modified and amplified by the Legalists.

F. Daoist Alternatives

Laozi offered a radically different approach to the problems of social disorder in the later Zhou. He proposed a retreat from society into oneness with nature. He urged contemplation of natural forces in opposition to political action. Although he advocated that rulers care for the governed, Laozi saw the political system as ephemeral and of little concern to the wise man seeking the hidden meanings of the natural world. Some of Laozi’s disciples stressed meditation and communion with nature, while others sought the eternal secrets that would reveal the mysteries of magic and eternal life. Laozi’s concepts on meditation were most acceptable to the shi, but the masses were drawn to magic and potions.

III. The Triumph of the Qin and Imperial Unity

A. Introduction

At the end of the third century B.C.E., the ruler of the state of Qin, Shi Huangdi, conquered the other kingdoms of the later Zhou and restored Chinese political unity. Once in power, Shi Huangdi attempted to create a strongly centralized state. The Qin were initially nomads who had set up a kingdom on the western frontiers of China. Like other formerly nomadic dynasties, the Qin were accused of cultural crudity.

B. The Transformation of a ‘Barbarian’ Land

The Qin improved their state through innovations in military technology and the freeing of the peasantry. These reforms increased the resource base on which the Qin depended. With funds, the Qin began to establish a shi bureaucracy, which helped to undermine the vassal warriors.
Conscription of the freed peasants increased the size of the Qin armies, while the bureaucracy provided for efficient supply. Improved military technology, efficient supply, and larger armies gave the Qin the advantages they needed to defeat other kingdoms.

C. The Legalist Sanction

A philosophical school, the Legalists, aided Qin attempts to establish an absolutist government. According to the Legalists, the major goal of rulers was to enhance the power and wealth of the state. The state was required to enact strict laws creating social harmony. The founder of the Legalist school was Shang Yang. He held that people existed to serve the state, but even the ruler was not above the law.

D. Shi Huangdi, Emperor of China

Shi Huangdi was a megalomaniac who tolerated no hindrance to his establishment of an absolutist state. He completed the unification of China in 221 B.C.E. Regional aristocracies and their fortifications were destroyed. In the place of former kingdoms, 36 provinces were created. The Qin bureaucracy took over the tasks of regional government. The Qin developed standardized scripts, coinage, weights, and measures. To prevent the incursions of northern nomads, Shi Huangdi ordered the construction of China’s Great Wall. The Qin ruler also began construction of many canals and roads, all built with conscripted labor.

E. The Collapse of a Tyrannical but Pivotal Regime

The harsh rule of the Legalist bureaucrats and overextension of the economy in grandiose construction schemes led to the downfall of the Qin. Legalist repression of other schools of shi and the emperor’s ruthless conscription of peasant labor led to rebellion. In 207 B.C.E., peasants conscripted for construction of the Great Wall and began a revolution against the Qin regime. The revolution led to the overthrow of the Qin dynasty. Despite its brevity, the Qin were critical to Chinese history. The Qin created a centralized government staffed by educated bureaucrats and one that was largely independent of the militarized aristocracy. Such a government depended on strengthening the shi as a class. The public works projects, although they led to the downfall of the dynasty, created the grid of roads and canals that provided the infrastructure for an integrated Chinese economy.

IV. The Han Dynasty and the Foundations of China’s Classical Age

A. Introduction

The Han dynasty rapidly replaced the Qin, so Chinese unity was not threatened. The long period of Han rule produced prosperity, technological innovation, commercial advance, and further consolidation of the chief elements of Chinese culture. In the rebellion that overthrew the Qin dynasty, the man who emerged as the next ruler of a unified China was Liu Bang, a former peasant and village headman. His ability to hold his coalition of forces together rather than the strength of his military skills allowed Liu Bang to proclaim himself emperor of China in 202 B.C.E.
B. The Restoration of Imperial Control

After attempts to restore feudal decentralization threatened his rule, the new emperor began to establish a more centralized government based on a shi bureaucracy. The first emperor’s successors strengthened his policies toward bureaucratic centralization. The imperial government broke the authority of the regional aristocracy and elevated the position of appointed regional governors and district magistrates. Under the emperor Han Wudi, the demise of the regional aristocracy was completed.

C. Han Expansion

Han Wudi and other Han emperors used their military superiority to secure their borders. Initially the emperors enjoyed success against the Hsiung-nu nomads who lived in the steppes north of the Great Wall. Han armies also expanded Chinese control eastward into Korea and southward to Vietnam.

D. The Revenge of the Shi

Under Liu Bang and later Han emperors, the Legalists were hounded from office. Confucian scholars took over the imperial bureaucracy. The complete supremacy of the Confucians was hampered by early Han rulers’ attraction to Daoism. By the end of the second century B.C.E., Confucian scholars were preeminent in the Chinese court. Knowledge of Confucian teachings became a qualification for entry into royal service. In 124 B.C.E., a state university for the education of bureaucrats was founded at the royal capital of Xian.

E. Education, Examinations, and Shi Dominance

Education in the Confucian classics became the primary feature of Chinese instruction, when exams were established at the end of the first century B.C.E. to enter imperial service. Although the exams were open to everyone, only the wealthy could afford the necessary education. Established shi, aristocrats, and wealthy landholders had obvious advantages within the system. Elite families tended to support the education of a family member in order to maintain their social status. In fact, only a small number of government jobs were awarded as a result of competitive examination. In most cases, appointment was the result of imperial favor.

F. The Emergence of the Scholar-Gentry

The dominance of the shi was reflected in the social hierarchy of Han China. There were three recognized groups: the literate shi, the ordinary but free subjects, and the underclass. During the Han, local landlord families tended to be allied with the shi through marriage or the education of their sons. This alliance gave rise to the scholar-gentry, who held positions in the bureaucracy and also held large amounts of land. Such families were remarkably durable. In both town and country, the scholar-gentry lived in walled compounds. Such households were often extended. The family’s wealth was demonstrated by clothing, the size and style of the family’s horse-drawn carriage, and the deference paid to family members by other residents.
G. Class and Gender Roles in Han Society

Women of elite families may have had a more prominent social position during the Han period than in later Chinese history. Women participated in family rituals, were often literate, and were permitted to remarry if their husband died. Despite these elements of freedom, Han women remained subordinate to men. Political positions were restricted to males. The most vital social function of women was the production of male children.

H. Peasant Life

Peasants who had enough land lived well under the Han, but most commoners labored for more wealthy landlords and made barely enough to subsist. Technological advances led to increasing yields during the Han period, but urban dwellers and the elite consumed much of the surplus. Under such pressures, some peasants opened up new lands in southern China, dispersing non-Chinese ethnic groups, while others turned to banditry or lived as vagabonds. Some peasants joined secret societies that provided a measure of security and some financial support.

I. The Han Capital at Xian

Urban growth continued from the Zhou into the Han period. The capital of Xian, laid out in a grid pattern and surrounded by walls, was typical of later imperial capitals. The city’s population may have been as high as 100,000 within the walls. The emperor resided in a royal compound, the forbidden city, with his family and entourage. Outside the forbidden city lay the bureaucratic compound that housed the scholar-gentry.

J. Towns and Traders

Xian was only one of many towns of great size in China. Most of the towns were walled, and many featured administrative compounds housing imperial bureaucrats. Some towns were devoted to mining, manufacturing, and trade. Han expansion in the west and south fostered the development of new and more extensive trade routes. Long-distance trade was established to the frontiers. Large mercantile companies controlled trade with distant regions. Many merchant families became increasingly wealthy under the Han, but they remained near the bottom of the Confucian social hierarchy. The scholar-gentry effectively limited the political influence of the merchants.

K. A Genius for Invention and Artisan Production

Under the Han, the Chinese were the most technologically innovative of all classical civilizations. Among their inventions were the brush pen and paper, watermills for grinding, rudders and compasses, new mining techniques, the refinement of silk making, and techniques for making laquerware and porcelain ceramics. Technological advances made possible the development of a large class of artisans, mostly located in Chinese cities. Some artisans must have had a higher living standard than peasants, although the Confucian social hierarchy placed them below agriculturalists.
L. The Arts and Sciences in the Han Era

Chinese art during the Han period was largely decorative. Calligraphy became an art form, and ceramics were of extremely high quality. Chinese science tended to concentrate on practical applications. Astronomers developed an accurate calendar, calculated the movements of Saturn and Jupiter, and observed sunspots. The Chinese were also advanced in their medical practices, including acupuncture. Applied mathematics made contributions to acoustics and accurate weights and measures.

M. Imperial Crisis and Han Restoration

By the end of the first century B.C.E., the quality of Han emperors declined. When the grasp of the emperors on the government weakened, powerful court families attempted to seize control. In 6 C.E., when the Han heir was a minor, the Wang family usurped the throne. Wang Mang proclaimed himself emperor in 9 C.E., but his attempts to issue reforms alienated his former supporters, including the shi. In 23 C.E., a rebellion replaced Wang Mang and restored the Han.

N. The Later Han and Imperial Collapse

The Later Han dynasty ruled China for nearly two centuries. Innovation and expansion slowed under the later Han emperors. The rulers transferred the capital from Xian to Loyang but continued to be plagued by intrigues at court. Eunuchs began to exert greater control over the imperial administration and represented a threat to the power of the emperor. A three-way struggle between families of rulers’ wives, eunuchs, and the emperors ensued. As the authority of the central government weakened, local administrators and landlords exerted greater influence throughout the empire. To combat the growing power of local lords, secret societies flourished among the peasantry. By 220 C.E., the Han dynasty was finally overthrown. The fall of the Han was followed by four centuries of internal strife in China.

V. Global Connections: Classical China and the World

The Qin and Han dynasties established basic elements of Chinese civilization that would last for thousands of years. The strength of their agriculture gave China sufficient surplus to support a large population, numerous large towns, and a highly educated and efficient bureaucracy. These led to numerous new technologies and new methods of artistic expression. Chinese merchants and Asian nomads carried these new ideas and technologies to as far away as India and the Mediterranean, while their impact on central and east Asia would be even greater.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

- restoration of Han
- rise of Han dynasty
- Shi Huangdi proclaimed emperor
- rise of Wang Mang
- fall of Zhou, Warring States period
- fall of Later Han

403 B.C.E.
221 B.C.E.
202 B.C.E.
9 C.E.
23 C.E.
220 C.E.

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

- Qin
- Confucius
- Laozi
- Shang Yang
- The Art of War
- Han
- silk road
- Shi Huangdi
- Mencius
- Daoism
- Great Wall
- Analects
- scholar-gentry
- Wang Mang
- Warring States
- Xunzi
- Legalists
- Sunzi
- Liu Bang
- secret societies
- eunuchs
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Great Wall  
boundaries of Qin empire  
Xian  
state of Qin  
boundaries of Han empire

What does the construction of the Great Wall tell you about the nature of expansion in classical China? What other geographical limitations were there on the extension of Chinese civilization?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What were the political, social, and economic consequences of the period of the Warring States?

2. Describe Confucius’ political philosophy. How did his disciples differ?

3. Describe the Daoist alternative to Confucian political and social philosophy.

4. What was the significance of the Qin dynasty?

5. Discuss the significance of Sunzi’s political philosophy. In what way was it dependent on the development of centralized administration?

6. How did the Han institutionalize Confucian political philosophy?

7. Discuss the social and political role of the following groups: scholar-gentry, women, and the peasantry.

8. How did the rise of towns and the development of new technologies change Han society?

9. What circumstances led to the overthrow of the Han in 9 C.E. and 220 C.E.?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. The process of political centralization began during the Qin dynasty and was completed during the Han dynasty. What are the critical elements associated with the creation of political unity in classical China?

2. Compare the social organization of Han China with that of Zhou China.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following was a result of the period of political confusion after the fall of the Zhou?

   a. Chinese civilization failed to produce another dynasty for centuries.
   b. The shi ceased to play a significant role in Chinese government.
   c. Feudalism became the dominant form of political organization in Chinese society.
   d. Philosophers sought to find ways to end the conflict and create more permanent and unified political systems.

2. Confucius believed that the superior men who should advise the rulers concerning government were the

   a. merchant class.
   b. shi.
   c. regional aristocrats.
   d. feudal vassals of the emperor.

3. Which of the following was NOT a teaching of Confucius?

   a. Superior men were created by education, not birth.
   b. Order and harmony were the result of good government.
   c. Social harmony depended on each person accepting his social position and performing his
   d. The interests and welfare of the common people were less significant than the maintenance of the emperor’s authority.

4. Which of the following best represents the thinking of Mencius?

   a. Humans were by nature inclined to goodness and ought to be ruled so that their goodness could develop.
   b. Humans were by nature evil and ought to be ruled by an authoritarian government.
   c. Humans should retreat from society and seek oneness with nature.
   d. Government should be rigorous and based on strict laws harshly executed.

5. Daoism was developed by the philosopher

   a. Confucius.
   b. Mencius.
   c. Xunzi.
   d. Laozi.

6. The founder of the Legalist school of political philosophy was

   a. Sunzi.
   b. Laozi.
   c. Shang Yang.
7. What emperor was responsible for the reunification of China after the collapse of the Zhou?
   a. Han Wudi
   b. Liu Bang
   c. Shi Huangdi
   d. Shang Yang

8. Which of the following represents the political philosophy of Sunzi?
   a. Government should be based on the authoritarian enforcement of rigorous laws.
   b. Government is inconsequential to finding satisfaction in nature.
   c. Warfare is merely an extension of statecraft and required scientific preparation and execution.
   d. Government should be exercised by superior men found among the educated elite.

9. What was the attitude of Han Wudi and subsequent emperors toward the regional aristocracy and the shi?
   a. They attempted to undercut the authority of the regional aristocracy and place power in the hands of appointed shi governors.
   b. They restored the strength of the regional states in the hands of feudal lords.
   c. The dynastic feudal lords were destroyed but replaced by members of the Han family in order to prevent the growing authority of the shi.
   d. Both feudal lords and shi were replaced in the Han administration by salaried military commanders from the army.

10. Which of the following groups had the lowest social status according to the Confucian social hierarchy?
    a. the imperial family
    b. merchants
    c. peasants
    d. shi