4.8: The Qin Dynasty and the Transition from Ancient to Imperial China

In 219 BCE, while touring his realm, the First Emperor of Qin [cheen] (259 – 210 BCE) erected a stone tablet atop a mountain with an inscription proclaiming:

They [the Qin ministers] recall and contemplate the times of chaos:

When [regional lords] apportioned the land, established their states,

And thus unfolded the pattern of struggle.

Attacks and campaigns were daily waged;

They shed their blood in the open countryside. . . .

Now today, the August Emperor has unified All-under-Heaven into one family—

Warfare will not arise again! Disaster and harm are exterminated and erased,

The black-headed people live in peace and stability, benefits and blessings are lasting and enduring.2

Indeed, just two years prior, in 221 BCE, the First Emperor had brought the Warring States Period to a close by defeating the last remaining state. Hence, he had realized the aspirations held by the many rulers he subjugated, that is, to unify the known world under one powerful monarch and, by so doing, to initiate an age of peace and prosperity, one rooted in obedience to a sagely ruler.
The title “First Emperor of Qin,” however, was assumed by this conqueror only in the wake of his final victory, and it made sense. Having crushed the many warring kingdoms, the First Emperor did indeed create something new and more significant: an immense territorial state centrally administered from his capital, by a monarch with unchallenged sovereignty (see Map 4.8). So how did his state—the Qin kingdom—prevail?

When the First Emperor inherited the Qin throne at the age of 13 in 246 BCE, he became King Zheng [jung], young ruler of the most powerful of the seven remaining Warring States. Looking back, he would understand that he had inherited a state whose origins dated back to the Western Zhou Period, when land to the west of the Zhou kings was granted as a fief to his chieftain forbears. The Qin star first rose when a Qin lord assisted King Ping in relocating to the eastern capital during the transition from the Western to the Eastern Zhou Period (c. 770 BCE). At that time, the old Zhou heartland was granted to him, and he was elevated to the status of a regional lord, the Duke of Qin.

The Dukes of Qin were important players throughout the centuries of warfare and alliances so characteristic of the Eastern Zhou, and especially after the reforms of Duke Xiao [she-ow] (r. 361 – 338). These reforms were based on the advice of his chancellor Shang Yang [shawng yawng], an individual famed for being one of the founders of another major intellectual tradition that developed during the Warring States Period: Legalism. The legalists were in tune with the efforts rulers were putting forth to strengthen their states. Their goal was to devise the best techniques for organizing a state’s territory and people so as to maximize a ruler’s power and control in times of both war and peace. Legalists believed that the best way to do so was to concentrate authority in one central administration governed by an absolute monarch.

To these ends, Shang Yang introduced many measures, laying the foundations for future Qin greatness. He believed that the basis for state power lay with an obedient and disciplined farming population, because that was the principal source of revenue and conscripts for the army. So he organized villages across the land into units of five families each, and made the members of each unit responsible for each other. Every member would be rewarded based on the
amount of grain the unit produced or the number of severed heads returned from the battlefield. For meritorious service to the state, a unit could advance along a system of ranks, each of which bestowed certain privileges. But should any member commit a crime, everyone would be severely punished. To make this more effective, the Qin state developed a legal code with clear lists of penalties for specific crimes, made it publicly available, and applied it uniformly to people regardless of their social status. Also, the Qin was among the most effective in establishing a civil service and county system to administer the law. Qin subjects lived under a regime with a transparent set of expectations, and also a system of rewards and punishments. Such rationality in matters of efficiently organizing a state through the uniform application of laws and regularizing administration, as implemented by Shang Yang, were a mark of legalist thinkers’ methods.

After Duke Xiao’s and Shang Yang’s time, Qin rulers assumed the title of king and engaged in numerous battles, destroying several neighboring states. Some of these were major engagements. According to one account, after the Qin kingdom defeated the state of Zhao, a Qin general ordered 400,000 captured soldiers buried alive. Also, the Qin put an end to the Zhou royal line after conquering their territory in 256 BCE. Hence, King Zheng was heir to a kingdom whose success in battle derived in part from legalist reforms. In line with that tradition, he too employed a legalist advisor.

As of 230 BCE, only six other Warring States remained (see Map \(\PageIndex{1}\)). Over the next decade, King Zheng led a series of massive campaigns each of which entailed both sides fielding over one hundred thousand soldiers. This was a bloody time, as one state after another fell. By 221 BCE, the Chinese realm was unified under Qin rule.

Although the Qin Dynasty (221 – 207 BCE) was brief-lived, it had a lasting effect on China because of the stable administrative foundation it laid. The First Emperor of Qin and his advisors invented the title used by all subsequent rulers. They made newly conquered territory a part of their centralized bureaucracy. From his royal court and central administration, the emperor governed a land organized into a hierarchical system of commanderies (provinces that began as military outposts) and counties. His regime standardized currency and the system of writing, and issued regulations for uniform weights and measures.

The emperor was also a great builder. Over 6800 kilometers of road were laid to connect the capital at Xianyang to each province and the northern border. Walls built by former northern states to protect against non-Chinese nomads to their north were linked together in an earlier version of the Great Wall. All of these measures served to facilitate...
communication and commerce across the land and, therefore, political stability and cultural unification. As a symbol of his power, the First Emperor also constructed an imposing palace (see Figure 1) and mausoleum (see Introduction). For all these reasons, historians mark Qin unification as the beginning of China’s imperial era.