

8: The Qin-Han Universal State¹

a. What factors, some peculiar to Qin itself, some reflecting the nature of ancient China's civilization as a whole, enabled Qin to slowly put together the first Chinese universal state? Why did that universal state go to pieces so quickly?

b. What enabled Han to put the universal state back together so quickly? Why did the Han version last so long? What eventually killed it, and why did it take so long for another universal state to be put together again?

A. Qin's Long Rise and Quick Fall

1. Ubiquity of ancient universal states

There is a peculiar symmetry between all of the ancient high civilizations of Eurasia. All three of them—those located in the Eastern Mediterranean, Northern India, and the Central Zone of East Asia—not only turned high civilized at about the same time, they also evolved into universal states within a few centuries of each other. This suggests that they shared some trait which, despite their many profound differences, led all of them along the same historical path.

Perhaps we can explain this as the ideational determinists do. We can surmise that once the state appears, the rulers' ability to ward off envy in principle allows states to keep growing unless some other internal or external factor stop them.

High civilizations have visions of Heaven capable of re-presentation as bigger states than the preceding early civilizations possess. Should any one of the states within a high civilization gain some slight initial advantage over the others, its initial advantage might allow that state to quickly swallow up its competitors. It could conquer all there is up to or just beyond the edge of its civilization's cultural boundaries.

That initial advantage can be geographic (as in China), or involve the absence of strong competitors nearby (as in North India's Mauryan Empire), or the accident of the appearance of a political genius (as in the case of Alexander of Macedon appearing at just the right moment in the Eastern Mediterranean).

During the first stage of high civilization, such a universal state can arise almost by default. Even the closest of the other two high civilizations are too far away to interfere. Any initial advantage a favored state enjoys could quickly lead to total dominance.

Similar conditions are no longer automatically present at the next stage of high civilization (the second stage, in which we now live). Better communications assure that any initial advantage held by one second stage high civilized state will normally be quickly taken up by equally sophisticated neighboring states. Even states on the periphery of a second stage high civilization are likely to be at least first stage high civilizations by then. That, combined with their distance from the civilization's center, renders them too tough to conquer.

With the strength of the major states equalized, the normal rules of balance of power interstate politics will usually overcome any initial tendency for a universal state to form or to hold together for long if it does form during the second stage of high civilization.

As it happened, China proved to be atypical, at least transiently, since it managed to restore a universal state during the early phase of its second stage of high civilization.

But within a few centuries, even the Chinese universal state proved more nominal than real. By the middle of the current millennium, all three of the high civilizations of the Old World were in contact with each other. Once they realized no one of them could permanently swallow the other two, the very idea of a universal state began to fade away.²

²The 20th century dream of world-wide unity is just that—a dream. The nations are too culturally diverse for a world federation. National separatism—nationalism—is a far more potent force. Fortunately, economic exchange, which also becomes a powerful force during the second stage, allows alien people to interact without swallowing each other up politically.

2. Qin's long rise (769-221)

a. geographic & balance of power factors

Qin put its universal state together so quickly during the last decade and a half before 221 BC that there is a tendency to think of it as an overnight success. In fact, however, it took a long time to set up the basis for that overnight success.

Qin only came into existence in 769 BC as a small and vulnerable state. King Ping, the first ruler of E. Zhou, gave the first Qin ruler the ruins of the Western Zhou capital near modern Xi'an, which Zhou itself had just abandoned. Warding off local rebels and periodically marauding pastoral-nomad cavalymen was Qin's first and ongoing problem.

The early rulers of Qin needed centuries to expand that small fief far enough to achieve defensible frontiers against Chinese rivals to the east and south. These boundaries were the Yellow and Wei Rivers, flanked by the Taihang and Qinling mountains, respectively. Qin also had to conquer enough territory to the north and west to put a buffer between themselves and the regular raids of the rising Xiongnu pastoral-nomad coalition.

Only by Warring States times did Qin establish common frontiers with the more powerful of the Chinese states to their east in Zone B.

Qin reached these supposedly natural frontiers through a complex series of what we could characterize as geopolitically unnatural acts. Thereafter, they could easily defend themselves against the other great powers to their east because they only had to defend a limited number of mountain passes and river crossings.

These frontiers also turned out to offer a tremendous offensive advantage. Qin's own armies could debouch through these passes and down into the plains to the east and south.

That geographic advantage alone ultimately unbalanced the Warring States balance of power among the seven great states.

By comparison, the European balance of power since late medieval times has kept having its balance restored because no one power has ever had the same combination of defensive and offensive capabilities that Qin enjoyed.

A state with good defensive positions, like England, found it awkward to project

¹ 1st draft, 9/94; 3rd rev. 4/99, by Edward Kaplan.

its power across the narrow salt water onto the continent. In succession, the Spanish, French, Germans and Russians enjoyed good offensive potential by land, but even at the peak of their power all the other powers could easily reach and threaten their home territories. As a consequence, the weaker European powers have always found it relatively easy to launch a countervailing coalition against the currently dominant power.

Even such powerful conquerors as Bonaparte, Hitler and Stalin were not able to permanently unbalance the balance of power, and this failure ultimately checked their rise toward control of all Europe.

Qin's use of subzone B1's geomilitary superiority to irreversibly unbalance the Chinese balance of power was not unique to Qin in Chinese history. Until the 10th century AD, every unifying dynasty either started in B1 or moved there prior to establishing its dominance.

Only thereafter, when the drying out of B1 during the postpluvial phase of the interglacial rendered it impossible to maintain a large political and military establishment in B1, did the capitals of strong dynasties shift out of B1 to the fulcrum subzone and then to northern B2.

b. the first fully articulated bureaucracy

You may recall (cf. Chapter 5A) that because China had the only feudal process in ancient times, the most successful of its defeudalizing principalities became centralized bureaucracies run by housemen-courtiers in the principalities' capitals. These housemen-courtier subvassals soon mutated into full-blown meritocrats.

By the 5th century BC Confucius and his successors were defining the template of merit for such officials in a way which linked them to a rethought version of the old Zhou vision of Heaven. This rendered them both more rational and more reliable.

As these men became ever more fully conscious of themselves as men of merit, they created new bureaucratic institutions and carried them to new places as they searched for jobs in newly bureaucratizing states. Given the lay of the land, these men and their ideas tended to drift along the vertical and horizontal axes from B2 west into B and turned up in Qin.

Qin had never had much feudal decentralization. It had started, after all,

while everyone else had been defeudalizing. Constant military challenges by the pastoral-nomad Xiongnu from the 5th century on kept its frontiers dependent on its center and discouraged decentralization.

So Qin not only took over the *jun* from Jin and the *xian* from Chu, but invented the coordinating branch on its own. It thereby created the world's first fully articulated bureaucracy.

By the 4th century BC, separate hierarchies of civilian, military and coordinative bureaucrats of the expanding Qin state reported to their superiors through separate chains of command. These led up from localities (the township, *xiang* 鄉, being the most local unit controlled by the Qin hierarchy), via a *xian* to one of the *jun* and finally to the central administration in the capital. There the King of Qin, advised by a small circle of ministers, coordinated the activities of all three branches.

At least over the short run, for one reason or another (Jin disintegrating into three states, Chu becoming too large and culturally diverse to share a common bureaucracy, the other powers being more backward or more isolated even than Qin had once been), no other Chinese state could match Qin's achievement.

Qin lacked only a coherent vision of Heaven sophisticated and large enough to embrace the visions of Heaven of *all* the regions of Zone B. Nevertheless, its bureaucracy was efficient enough to compensate for the lack, at least through the first generation after unification.

c. a charismatic unifying figure

As successful politicians must do, King Zheng of Qin, the founding ruler of China's first universal state cobbled together a successful imperial political platform. Parts of it contradicted each other, but the power of his personality and the sheer momentum of Qin's expansion papered over the contradictions so long as he lived.

King Zheng of Qin encouraged his mostly Confucian bureaucracy to think well of him by using the old title of Son of Heaven (*Tian zi* 天子). But to make sure no one took him for a mere supreme feudal overlord, like the kings of Zhou, he also adopted a new title.

This new title, usually translated as "emperor," was actually a hybrid of the

title for a frontier region fertility god (*huang* 皇) and the old term applied to dead Shang kings by their descendants (*di* 帝). The combination, *huangdi*, might best be translated by the analogous term in Latin for the title taken by the first Roman emperor, Octavian Caesar: *Divus Augustus*, "Divine August One."

Unlike *Tian Zi*, the title *Huang di* tried to attract the barbarous frontiers, the southern believers in the alien gods of Chu, apostles of modernity in all regions and fertility-worshipping commoners.

King Zheng called himself *Shi Huang di*, First Divine August One, and decreed that his successors should be labeled Second Divine August One, Third . . . etc. and should retain these names even after their deaths. This modern numbering system would replace the ancient practice of assigning religiously auspicious temple names to dead rulers.

This placed First Emperor openly within the ranks of the Modernists, who explicitly distanced themselves from the ancient Zhou vision of Heaven. He could only hope that his Confucian meritocrat officials would not notice. They did, but First Emperor faced them down.

In fact, the First Divinity asserted that he would not die at all, that he was actually an immortal. He used hard Daoist spiritual exercises and ate dangerous chemicals containing heavy metal ions that hard Daoist alchemists assured him would make him live on indefinitely in the body here on Earth.

This mixing of visions of Heaven worked during First Emperor's lifetime, especially when he was touring the empire, worshipping each locality's gods at their most sacred locations. It also helped that his bureaucrats were buying the loyalty of local people by recruiting local commoners as new bureaucrats, especially for all the townships formerly ruled by aristocratic subvassals.

3. Qin's quick fall

a. the crisis of the first succession

Sooner or later, the lack of a coherent vision of Heaven, or at least the absence of a metaphysical hierarchy detailing which vision was to be dominant, would have caused trouble for Qin.

Well before that effect could take hold, however, Qin ran afoul of another phenomenon which only showed up

clearly for the first time in Chinese history during the two years after the death of the First Emperor in 210.

This was the crisis of the first succession.

Weak versions of this crisis showed up regionally from time to time during the Warring States period when a new dynasty usurped power in one of the states. If such a dynasty was to fail, it would most likely do so during a succession struggle following the death of the dynastic founder.

So the first succession crisis was not altogether new. It is just that its destabilizing effects were much more dramatically evident at the level of the universal state.

Thoughtful modern students of political theory also realize that this was just the Chinese variant of a phenomenon always encountered in the course of stabilizing a fundamental political revolution.

Even for modern revolutions, trouble most frequently occurs as the founding generation of leaders passes from the scene. The habit of obedience is broken by any truly revolutionary change, and only the charisma of those who were present at the creation of the new order can hold a revolutionary new regime together until time and practice establish new habits of obedience.

b. First Emperor makes his revolution

Something terrible went wrong during the first succession in the Qin Dynasty. King Zheng, the First Emperor, was an instinctive genius of autocracy. He could play the game of bureaucratic politics with the best of his hired meritocrats. Though no soldier himself (unlike Alexander or Julius Caesar), he understood how to back the best generals until they won him victories, and overawe them into remaining loyal afterward. That made him charismatic in the modern secular sense of having a personality which evokes obedience.

His flirtation with claims of immortality also gave First Emperor a kind of theological claim to charisma.³ Immortality would make him a kind of earthly god, what the hard Daoists called a *xiah* 尸, the character combining the pictographs for man and mountain. Such immortals were

still men. They still lived on earth, but they floated through the air to their mountain fastnesses, where they lived forever off the dew on the mountain trees.

His propagandists promoted First Emperor's visits to the sacred mountains of the empire as one earthly immortal god visiting his subordinate gods at their local mountain homes.

His Confucian meritocrats objected to such hard Daoist practices. They insisted that he abandon his central control over districts and townships and instead enfeeble his relatives and friends in imitation of the Duke of Zhou. On such occasions, First Emperor fixed them with his eyes, described as resembling those of a bird of prey, and told them to shut up.

When the Confucian meritocrats kept complaining, he had Li Si bury alive some 400 of them to set an example for the rest. He then ordered the rest of them to turn over their copies of the Confucian classics, put a copy of each work into the imperial library, and then ceremonially burned the rest. (This was symbolic. Plenty of other copies of all the major Confucian and other philosophical works survived.)

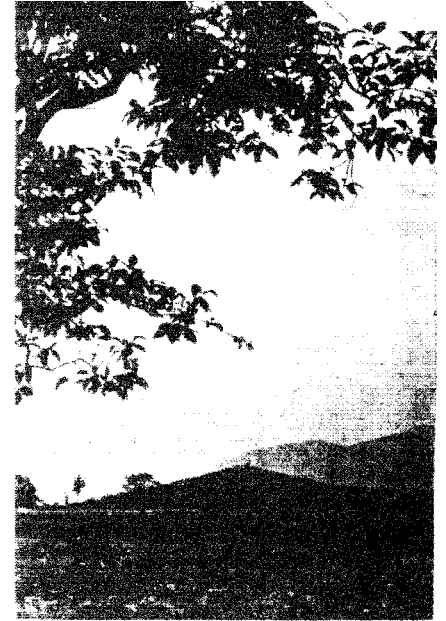
First Emperor got his way. Li Si and his subordinates quickly extended bureaucratization right down to the township level everywhere in the new empire.

Next, First Emperor had the bureaucrats collect all the old coins, melted them down and replaced them with square-holed round coins from his own mints. He also standardized the units of weight and measure. The archaeologists have dug up such measures from several widely separate locations datable to Qin times, and they actually are uniform, something that did not hold before or soon after Qin. Apparently people did not yet realize they could get away with disobeying the new bureaucracy in such matters.

The First Emperor also knew how to pace himself. Though he did much, he tried not to do more than one new and expensive thing at a time. Soon after the conquest was complete he rebuilt the capital near Xi'an.

This was expensive, since he built copies of the palaces of the other six great powers next to each other and linked them with a network of covered passages. He could then symbolically make the circuit of his universal state by sleeping in a different palace every night, and assure his

security against assassins by moving unobserved along the covered passages to do so.



First Emperor's tomb mound silhouetted against Mount Li. It is as tall as Sehome Hill. (*Smithsonian*, November 1979)

Only when the palace was finished did he go to work on his tomb, piling a mound of dirt atop it the size of a big hill or a small mountain. Supposedly it has inside it an enormous three-dimensional model of the whole empire, with its rivers and lakes filled with mercury.⁴

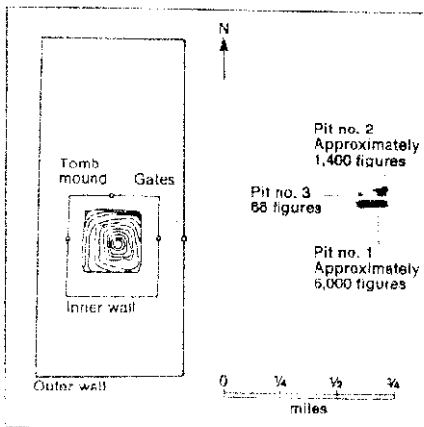
The First Emperor's next project was to extend and connect up some key parts of the Great Wall, actually more properly described by the Chinese term, Long Wall (*chang cheng* 長城). Unfortunately, he died before this task was completed. Perhaps, as Arthur Waldron has recently suggested, it was never intended to link all the long walls together, but merely to extend some of them to more fully block some of the main routes into China taken by the Xiongnu pastoral-nomad cavalry.

In fact, much of the Wall seems to have been more like a raked sand ramp which would indicate passage of a large cavalry force. These signs would be de-

⁴That is probably true because chemists have found abnormal amounts of mercury in the soil of the burial mound. The tomb was broken into almost immediately after Qin's fall and the marauders probably spilled much of the mercury in the map. The archaeologists are waiting to excavate the tomb proper, but they have discovered several sets of life-sized terra cotta sculptures of whole regiments of infantry and cavalry buried on two sides of the tomb. Cf. map on next page.

³A Greek word which literally means to have a god speak through the mouth of the charismatic person.

tected by patrols sent from watchtowers within line of site of each other.



Map of First Emperor's funerary city. (Smithsonian, November 1979)



A section of the Qin period Great Wall. [Li Xueqin, *Eastern Zhou and Qin Civilizations* (Yale, 1950), p. 250.]

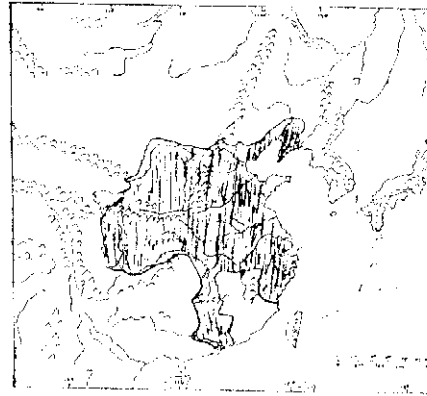
We should not exaggerate the size of the Qin universal state. Though significantly bigger than the Western Zhou feudal empire at its greatest extent, it was considerably smaller than the modern Chinese territorial nation-state, and controlled less of South China and of Zone A than did the Han Dynasty a bit later.

c. Qin's first succession crisis

Though his health had already started to decline, First Emperor died suddenly and unexpectedly in 210 while on one of his interminable tours. His death was probably hastened by the mercury compounds he was eating as immortality medicines.

At the time of his death, the regime's best general, Meng Tian, and the heir apparent, Prince Fusu, were in exile in the north working on the Great Wall. Egged on by chief minister Li Si, who feared having able rivals at court, the Emperor had sent them north to get them out of his

sight. Though he was only in his early fifties, First Emperor apparently could sense the impending failure of his attempt to live long on Earth, and could not endure the presence of a son who resembled him in his prime.



The Qin universal state's territory

The normal generational envy evoked by these first intimations of mortality was likely reinforced by mental illness from eating mercury compounds and other heavy metal chemical elixirs of immortality. If you eat just enough but not too much mercury, like the Mat Hatter, you may well feel like an immortal with an attitude. In fact, however, these are actually early symptoms of heavy metal ion poisoning.

Despite First Emperor's obvious physical decline, his death was nevertheless unexpected. Since it occurred on the road, Prime Minister Li Si and Chief Eunuch Zhao Gao kept the death secret until they could rush the corpse back to the capital and assert their control there.

Either while he lay dying, or posthumously (i.e. with the deed done by Li and Zhao, who controlled the imperial seal), the First Emperor sent orders to the northern frontier for General Meng and Prince Fusu to commit suicide. Their obedience to this order eliminated the two men of the next generation most likely to have been able to keep the empire together.

Now, 2,200 years after the event, we will never know who sent the order to commit suicide. First Emperor might have been so envious of his vigorous young son and his still middle-aged general that he could not stand to think of them living on after him.

It could equally likely have been Li Si and Zhao Gao who did it. Li was afraid that if General Meng survived, he would become the chief minister to Fusu as Sec-

ond Emperor. Zhao coveted the throne for himself. Li and Zhao fixed on a younger son as heir. This son was a far weaker character than Fusu, whom they figured they could control.

Within a year, however, the situation spun out of control. The eunuch Zhao Gao double crossed the double-crosser Li Si, got him thrown into jail, cut in half at the waist and had his family members executed to the fifth degree of relationship.

Then, to attract support, Zhao Gao began to desperately spend on all kinds of projects simultaneously. When people complained about higher taxes, he bullied the new Second Emperor off the throne and prepared to take it himself, thereby avenging Qin's destruction of Zhao, to whose royal family he belonged. He had all along believed that Zhao, which had been one of the big powers of the north, should have been the one to unify All Under Heaven.

B. Han's Quick Rise (208-202/196) and Long Tenure (202 BC-AD 220)

1. The civil war

Clearly, Qin had failed the crisis of the first succession. By 208, as rebellions multiplied, the dynasty's territory had disintegrated back into the independent states of Warring States times.

From 208 to 202, the war of each against all settled down to one between a new state establishing itself in the old B1 Qin territory, and a reconstituted Chu in subzone B4.. From 202 to 196 the conflict was within the ranks of the victors working for the new Han Dynasty.

These conflicts recapitulated the balance of power wars and then the great world war of the Warring States epoch from the 5th through the 3rd century, but did so in less than two decades. The result constituted a true revolution, virtually wiping out the Warring States aristocracy, rather than just humbling it as Qin had done.

a. the first rebels

The earliest rebel was Chen She, who arose in what had been the territory of Eastern Chu. Chen was a township official whose job had been created by Qin.

New township posts had been filled with a host of newcomers to the ruling class during the decade following 221.

After First Emperor's death, Chen She violated one of the regime's numerous regulations. This called for capital punishment. Concluding he might as well be hung for the sheep as for the lamb, Chen launched a rebellion, and much to everyone's surprise, including his own, he got away with it.

Within a few months, rebellions just like Chen's were breaking out all over China, starting in the south and east, but inexorably working their way toward the center and then the northwest.

General Xiang Yu and his uncle, sons of an old Chu military family, allied with and then took over Chen She's rebellion. They soon got rid of Chen and several other rebels in Chu territory.

The Xiangs found the surviving heir to the Chu kingship working as a farmer plowing his fields. They all but physically hoisted him back onto the throne to serve as a puppet for the Xiang family acting as *bawang*. They then proceeded to march north to reunify All Under Heaven, this time under Chu control. After the death in battle of his uncle, Xiang Yu ruled alone as *bawang*.

b. Liu Bang recapitulates Qin's rise

Another, as it turned out, much more auspicious rebellion broke out at the northern extremity of Chu's former sphere of control, in the southeastern corner of B2 not long after Chen She's. It was also led by a township official, an undersheriff named Liu Bang (pr. Bahng). Liu failed to deliver some prisoners to carry out labor service at a distance because several of them had escaped from him on the road. When Liu offered to let the rest run off, they suggested he rebel and offered to join him if he did. Though not conspicuously strong or courageous, Liu tended to attract such confidence.

Liu Bang was at least a much cleverer man than Chen She, though of equally humble birth. Whether he won a battle or lost against one of the local rebels (and he lost almost as many as he won), he would move toward the west. He understood that subzone B1 was the strategically superior position, and was determined to move his base there no matter what.

In fact he got to Xi'an shortly before Xiang Yu did. Xiang had let himself be

distracted by a side campaign against a revived Zhao state just to the east of B1. By the time Xiang's forces entered the passes leading to the Qin capital, Liu Bang had already taken the city, and rescued the hapless Third Emperor of Qin. This last Qin ruler had been deposed by a local rebellion which had also overthrown Zhao Gao. Liu promised the people of the capital that he would not let his soldiers loot or rape, and he kept his promise. All were exceedingly grateful to him.

When Xiang Yu showed up, Liu knew he could not beat the Chu general, and was shrewd enough to quickly yield the capital to him, pretending he had been acting on Xiang's behalf all along.

Xiang, who thought of himself as a chivalrous aristocrat, tried (but not too energetically) to purge Liu, who ran away. Xiang then offered Liu the fief of Han in northeast B3, just over the Qinling Mountains border to the southeast of the Qin capital. Liu quickly withdrew his army to his new fief, which was within easy striking distance of B1.

Liu knew his opponent lacked staying power. With the first chill of autumn, Xiang and his army grew nostalgic for the warm south. They looted and raped their way through the human and material resources of the capital district, set fire to what remained, broke open the tomb of First Emperor, and stole everything transportable from it. They even killed the harmless Third Emperor, along with many of the inhabitants of the capital, then returned home to Chu to enjoy the fruits of victory in a mild southern climate.

Once the Chu army was well on its way home, Liu Bang crept up out of Han and reoccupied the smoking ruins of the capital and (more important) the passes leading into B1 from the east. If anything, the survivors were even more grateful to Liu now that they could compare him with the alternative. In any event, the people of B1 were now too weak to oppose Liu's second takeover even if they had been inclined that way.

Thereafter, between 206 and 202 Liu Bang embarked on a series of campaigns from his new base in B1, recapitulating in his characteristically bumbling way what Qin had done between 235 and 221. Though he still suffered almost as many defeats as he enjoyed victories during these constant campaigns (including the capture of his own family), he retained the

great defensive advantages of B1, to which he could retreat when defeated.

Whenever the situation was ripe, Liu would debouch back out of the passes. He eventually defeated Xiang Yu's allies in the north, and then moved against Xiang Yu himself in Xiang's home territory of Eastern Chu.

Right to the end, Liu still lost as many battles as he won, but his home base's protection allowed him to survive the defeats and exploit the victories.

By 202 he had knocked off Xiang Yu. One of the great passages in Chinese literature is Sima Qian's dramatic description of Xiang Yu's farewell to his lady love before going off to his last battle.⁵

c. Liu's military consolidation of Han

Between 202 and 196 Liu Bang solved his last problem. To help defeat all the other re-risen warring states, he had made his own best generals nominal vassals over large chunks of north and central China. He also thereby appeased the Confucians, who wanted the structure of power to at least look like that of the old Zhou feudal empire.

Liu, however, did not trust any of these men. The only non-relatives he trusted were those who had been with him since he had first launched his rebellion and who had remained on his personal staff ever since.

Very carefully, he goaded each of his generals to rebel against him one at a time. He used the remainder of the generals to wipe out each rebel in turn.

By 196 he had either chased across the northern borders or killed off the last of his former generals, thereby setting the stage for the stabilization of his state.

He then moved to appease the Confucians who had begun to flock to his court by putting one of his own relatives in the place of each downed warlord. He did not defer too much to the Confucians, but did not persecute them either. The worst thing he ever did to a Confucian bureaucrat was to snatch the tall conical hat of one of his ministers off the man's head and urinate

⁵This is in Sima Qian's biographical chapter on the general in his great secular history of China composed a century after the event. Schoolboys still read that passage, and opera-goers enjoy it as the source for the libretto of the Peking Opera, *The Bawang Bids Farewell To His Concubine*. The opera has been built into a recent movie, *Farewell My Concubine*, which links the 20th century's equally turbulent history to the ancient story.

into it as a practical joke.

Then, still only in his early 50s, Liu appears to have developed a heart condition. After a final party in his old home town in southeastern B2, during which he said good-bye to all the friends of his youth, he headed back to the northwest, and dropped dead.

2. The first succession crisis

a. Empress Lü postpones it

Liu Bang left behind a widow, the Empress Lü, as regent for a young and not very able heir. The crisis of the first succession of the Han Dynasty was under way. However, the crisis was postponed by the simple expedient of Empress Lü grabbing all the power for herself and holding onto it for another fifteen years.

Empress Lü was an exceedingly tough cookie. She was the daughter of a local merchant back in Liu's home town. She had apparently made a love match with Liu Bang, at least on her side. It was likely more a politically expedient act on Liu Bang's side. Her father was one of the town's wealthy men and Liu Bang was a pauper before he got his bureaucratic cop's job with the Qin state.

According to Sima Qian's account, just before he died, Liu Bang gave the empress some shrewd advice. She should keep Liu's chief civilian advisers in office. These had been with him from the beginning of his first rebellion. What should I do when they die, she asked. By that time, her husband replied, there will be no problem. You will be dead too.

Empress Lü was often terminally nasty to her own and to her step-children (the sons of secondary wives and concubines), either driving them crazy or killing them outright. Nevertheless, she was loyal to her late husband's interests, as she perceived them. She even kept her own brothers and nephews at arm's length, preventing them from putting together a successful cabal of usurpers.

b. Liu Heng (Emperor Wen) finesses it

The only one of Liu Bang's sons to escape this black widow was Liu Heng, the fourth eldest of Liu's sons by a secondary wife. Luckily, Liu Heng's tutor was the leading current disciple of the shrewd Warring States era political technologist, Shen Buhai. We cannot be absolutely sure

Liu Heng read Shen's book, since Shen had advised rulers to deny they had read his writings, but Liu Heng behaved as though he had read it.

Liu Heng did a fine job of playing dumb and fooled step-mama by looking at all times as though he was about to start drooling out of the corner of his mouth. She did not think he was worth killing, but could not stand to have him around either. Finally she sent him off as far north as she could to the fief of Dai, one of the more remote pseudo-fiefs Liu Bang had set up for his own relatives. Liu Heng took some of Liu Bang's old advisors with him, and as quickly as he could, got out of the deadly traffic at court.

Then, in 180 BC the old lady at last died, of natural causes, with the empire after all still intact. Her decade and a half as regent had finessed the crisis by continually postponing it, and by inadvertently leaving alive the man who was destined to resolve the crisis.

The chief advisers of Liu Bang had (as Liu had hinted they might when advising Empress Lü) mostly survived her. Immediately after her death, through their colleagues in his service, they invited Liu Heng to return to court from Dai.

Liu Heng stalled and professed his lack of ability. He expressed his fear of the many remaining members of the Lü clan who held so many influential posts. The advisors took the hint, and assured him they could handle things. They purged the Lües, and took all the blame for doing so. This certainly sounds like the way Shen Buhai would have had his ruler handle such a problem.

While this dirty work was afoot, Liu Heng returned by slow stages from Dai. By the time he reached the capital, the purge of the Lües was complete. He commiserated with the men who had Lü blood on their hands, and rewarded them for their long service to his parents by gratefully pensioning them all off. In their place, he slipped in his own new men, and only then reluctantly ascended the throne.

Liu Heng was celebrated posthumously under the temple name Emperor Wen 文. He spent the next 25-odd years until 156 BC *seeming* to do nothing in particular, both at home and abroad. And yet almost everything he wanted done somehow got done.

c. the golden age of Emperor Wen

The Xiongnu attacks, which had stopped during the world wars and the civil war of the late 3rd and early 2nd century, had slowly resumed during Empress Lü's reign. By Emperor Wen's time they were becoming a serious problem.

Nevertheless, Emperor Wen judged that it would be cheaper to bribe the Xiongnu than to build an army and transportation system leading up into Zone A to fight them. He was even willing to send their ruler, the *Shanyu*, a Han princess from time to time. Though earning no glory, this appeasement policy worked well enough all through his reign. Though the cost of bribes gradually increased, the expense remained less than wars might have cost.

Emperor Wen also cut expenses at home. He cut them so ruthlessly that the palace looked positively shabby and the ruler himself even shabbier, which made it awkward for the courtiers to overtly lead the good life themselves.

At first, the land tax was set at one-fifteenth of the crop, collected in kind. A supply-side tax cut (my label, not the emperor's) soon halved actual collections to one-thirtieth of the crop.

Despite these tax cuts, the coins piled up in the treasury in such amounts and for so long that the strings dividing them into sets of a thousand were rotting away, making it difficult for the accountants to keep an accurate count of the cash balance.

The generation of profound peace abroad and the resulting tranquillity at home allowed the country to recover from the preceding civil war and the strains of reassembling All Under Heaven after Han's victory. Farmers grew crops. Artisans made goods and merchants distributed them unhindered by intervention. The state got more than enough, but the Emperor was too prudent to spend much of it.

When he died in 156, the courtiers assigned him the posthumous temple name Emperor Wen (*Wendi* 文帝) — the Cultured, the Civil Divine August One—harkening back to King Wen of Zhou, who also bore the same temple name.

Ever since, the Confucian historians have described Wendi's reign as a golden age. Whether because of his Confucian virtues, or his application of Shen Buhai's

techniques, or his respecting Mencius's anti-interventionist economics, or for all three reasons intertwined, his reign surmounted the crisis of the first succession and created a golden age still celebrated.

The succession to Wendi's son, Emperor Jing (Jingdi) was without incident.

d. Emperor Jing breaks the pseudo-fiefs' political power

The new ruler had his own set of advisers. Most of them were Xun Zi-style hard Confucians who had chafed under the non-action policies of Wendi.

They found it humiliating that the state should have to put up with the extortions of the Xiongnu, degrading that the state did not get enough in taxes to finance a more forward policy against them, and a disgrace that the making of coins should be delegated by default to merchants who purchased licenses to coin from the emperor's uncles and cousins ruling in the pseudo-fiefs. Naturally these crass merchants made the coins as small and as light as they could get away with doing and still call them Half-ouncers, the type of coin Han had inherited from Qin.

No proper ruler should have to put up with such indignities. The first thing to do was to impose discipline on the pseudo-fiefs. Fortunately, neither the founder, nor Empress Lü nor even Emperor Wen had ever gotten around to replacing the Qin administrative code, so that returning to a more centralized policy would not require proclaiming new laws.

Emperor Jing was increasingly inclined to agree with his advisers. Slowly and then more rapidly he tightened the vise of centralized supervision over the lords of the pseudo-fiefs.

Unfortunately, the result of this was resentment which soon tripped off a rebellion of the seven most powerful of them—The Revolt of the Seven Princes—at the beginning of the 140s. Ironically, some of the chief advocates of cracking down on the princes were killed in this conflict and the central authorities just barely managed to put the rebellion down.

To prevail, Jingdi's men had to make some compromises. In effect, they had to agree to do no worse than kill the surviving lords of the pseudo-fiefs with kindness. All of the male children of each lord were henceforth to share *equally* in the inheritance of their parent's territory. Though this made the younger sons of the

imperial clan happy, over a few generations the pseudo-fiefs would become so small as to be of negligible power.

Under Jingdi's successor, Emperor Wu, the custom arose of sending men of merit from the center to help these now petty pseudo-feudal lords administer their territories. These bureaucrats would make sure that the proper proportion of tax revenues was forwarded to the center.

If Emperor Wen solved the crisis of the first succession, his son Emperor Jing started to exploit the resulting stability to aggrandize the power of the central authority.

3. High Han: Emperor Wu (140-86 BC)

Jingdi's son, Emperor Wu (*Wudi* 武帝), enjoyed one of the longest reigns in Chinese history, some fifty-six years. Thanks to his predecessors, he had an effectively centralized government which could raise the resources to support expansion abroad from a rested and prosperous society. The Emperor's hard Confucian advisers assumed the necessity for such expansion. Though soft Confucians took a contrary position, a case for intervention abroad can be made.

a. the evolving Xiongnu threat

To be fair to Emperor Wu, the Xiongnu threat was worse in his time than it had been in his grandfather's, in part precisely because of Emperor Wen's appeasement policy.

Recent work on pastoral-nomad history by Thomas Barfield has plausibly suggested that the rulers of a pastoral-nomad state are utterly dependent on the tribute and loot they can collect or steal from the sedentary peoples whom they threaten. If that loot is cut off, the pastoral-nomad state goes unstable and shrinks back to the much more modest size that can be supported by tribute from the herders themselves.

A steady, reliable flow of gifts from China, such as was provided by Emperors Wen and Jing, allowed the appetite of the Xiongnu rulers to grow as it was fed. And so by Emperor Wu's time, the Chinese were spending much more for appeasement than they were two generations earlier.

Supporting this thesis is the fact that during times when the Chinese state was

going to pieces—during the world wars and civil war of the 3rd century BC—the Xiongnu found it too dangerous to raid China lest they be caught in the crossfire.

As a consequence, the Xiongnu state all but disintegrated during such periods and its ruling class members fought among themselves for the declining amount of loot. No *shanyu* remained on the Xiongnu throne for any great period of time during those years. Few attacks could be launched against China. It was only as prosperity returned to China, particularly by the middle years of Emperor Wen's reign that it was safe for the Xiongnu to threaten China again.

So it is plausible to justify Wudi's policy of going on the offensive and ending the Xiongnu depredations once and for all as cheaper over the long run.

The young Emperor's hard Confucian advisers inherited from his predecessor set in motion a series of policies which would by the end of the 130s permit the forward policy to be put into effect.

Before the young emperor could risk sending an army out into the Northern Periphery, he had to find actual and potential allies in Zone A for such a campaign.

He sent one of his courtiers, Zhang Qian, out into the frontier to seek out a Caucasian people, the Yuezhi. The Yuezhi once lived close to the western boundaries of B1, but had recently been driven much further west by Xiongnu raids. Zhang sought them out west of A1 and (after spending years as a captive of the Xiongnu, marrying a Xiongnu lady and fathering a child with her) finally found them in what is now Afghanistan.

There he also found information about the existence of India, and of a land beyond the Persians, which he called Da Qin (Great Qin)—perhaps the beginnings of the Roman Empire.

The Yuezhi, who were doing well as merchants where they were, proved unwilling to move back east, but Zhang found other potential allies elsewhere in A1. He obtained as gifts from the Yuezhi the first Arabian horses any East Asian had ever seen. The Chinese called them Heavenly Horses (Tian Ma 天馬) or "blood-sweating horses" (their sweat was sometimes tainted by some fungus). They appear to beautiful effect in sculpture during Han and in both sculpture and paintings after Han times.

After building up their own armies, the Chinese fought and defeated the Xiongnu during the generation after 130, but were unable to completely destroy them. By the turn of the century, the Chinese found that it was costing them as much to stay out on the frontier each year as it took to get them there in the first place.

The Chinese had reached the end of their communications technology tether and the limits imposed by their own early iron age weapons and of the cavalry tactics they could borrow from the Xiongnu themselves. They could move far enough into Zone A to keep the Xiongnu from invading Zone B, but for the next two centuries they could not quite wipe them out. And all this had to be paid for.

b. domestic interventionism

Essentially, Han paid for its foreign policy by using the economic and political technology that had been elaborated during the Warring States period by the Men of Methods.

Han ministers read and applied the *Guan Zi* and its notions of licensing monopolies in salt, iron and alcoholic beverages. They also took over the manufacture of coins from the pseudo-fiefs and issued a coin that remained the standard coin in the markets of China until the early 7th century AD, long surviving the Han Dynasty itself.



1-3. Early Han elm-pod Half-ouncers. 4. A Five-grainer. Peng, pp. 118-119.

This was the Five-grainer (Wu zhu 五銖) coin. Like the Half-ounce (ban liang 半兩) of Qin and early Han, it was round on the outside and with a square hole on the inside. Unlike its predecessor, it had raised inner and outer rims so that it would show if some unscrupulous person shaved the edges to acquire enough metal to make additional coins.

During the reigns of Empress Lü, Wendi and Jingdi, merchants in the pseudo-fiefs acquired monopoly licenses to turn out Half-ouncers. To maximize their profits they reduced the size and weight of these coins to a fourth of their original

levels. Some of the coins were so light they floated, so flimsy that they broke into four segments, each looking like an elm seed pod.

The new Five-grainer was just heavy enough to attract respect (the Half-ouncers which circulated most widely weighed four grains), but were light enough to discourage private coiners from melting them down and recoining them into a larger number of lighter coins. The Five-grainer remained the standard coin design, though it was issued under different names and at varying weights and diameters until the 1870s.

Some things the new men did not do. Emperor Wu was shrewd enough to bully only the bullyable. He gathered up all the rich men, and made them move to the four tomb cities which had been set up next to the great tombs built for the emperors. There his agents could keep an eye on them, tax them, and mobilize them to help administer the licensed monopolies in salt, iron and alcoholic beverages.

c. aristocratizing the meritocracy

But the Emperor and his men did not get in the way of an interesting new social development within the ruling class. The men of merit who had taken over the ruling class during Qin and solidified their positions during Han, took advantage of that position to gradually engross (and sometimes to steal) land and to use their possession of this land to in a sense impersonate an aristocracy.

Thereafter, in those generations when they were not lucky or able enough to turn out someone capable of holding a high meritocratic position with the government, they could go to ground in their home territory, live off of their rents or the profits from marketing the products of their land and imitate the ancient and now extinct Zhou aristocracy.

It was relatively easy to do this because virtually all of the ancient Zhou aristocratic families had been disestablished and reduced to commoner status by the Qin conquest. Many whole families disappeared when they attempted to make a comeback during the civil war that followed the fall of Qin. This left virtually no aristocrats at all in the Chinese ruling class. That left an empty niche for these meritocrats to move into in the course of the 2nd century BC.

It was not in the interest of the central

government to take on the hard task of attempting to stop this development once it was well under way. Anyway, the revenues the new aristocrats earned from their land allowed the government to keep their official salaries low.⁶

As time went on it grew ever harder for the emperors to control these aristocratized meritocrats at all. That was not yet a problem during Emperor Wu's time, which was probably why he did not attempt to do anything about it.

The Emperor was what the French call a *politique*—a shrewd politician who only bullies those whom he has to bully and can get away with bullying. For Wudi, that was primarily the rich merchants and artisan manufacturers. Even then, he took care not to kill the geese laying the golden eggs of commercial taxes, advice on how to run a money-manufacturing bureau, and above all advice on how to run the licensed monopolies that were providing the revenues to fight the Xiongnu and allow the rulers to live high on the hog.

Over the longest run, however, this aristocratization of the meritocracy made it very difficult for the central authorities to have their way.

d. Dong Zhongshu fails to synthesize the ancient Chinese Heavens

Still more important was the failure of Emperor Wu's house philosopher, Dong Zhongshu (190-104 BC), to create a single vision of Heaven out of the two rival Heavens of ancient China—the northern Heaven of the Zhou states and the southern Heaven of ancient Chu and its coterie of states.

Dong was a soft Confucian in the tradition of Mencius. He hoped to tame Emperor Wu, who seemed to him and the soft Confucians he spoke for, to be becoming as powerful and as arbitrary as First Emperor of Qin had ever been.

The best way to tame Wudi was to show the dominance of the Confucian philosophers in principle over any secular ruler, no matter how powerful or ambitious. If they could establish a single vision of Heaven, they might be able to use it to establish limits on the behavior of the emperor. To do this they would have in some philosophically principled way to swallow the other Heavens whose believ-

⁶Note that this development provides justification for the Marxist characterization of this as a Centralized Feudal Society run by bureaucrat-landlords.

ers' territories the universal state had swallowed.

Dong wrote a book, but since his synthesis of the two Heavens did not succeed, it was not considered important enough to keep making copies of it down through the centuries. Hence we no longer have a complete copy of it and the intellectual historians cannot tell us for sure what went wrong with his system.

It may be, however, that it was not Dong's fault. Perhaps there were built-in limits to the Confucian Heaven determining how far it could expand. It may have belonged too much to north China and to the ethnic group—the Zhou people—who gave rise to it.

The southern Heaven may have suffered from a similar limitation. As late as the middle of the 2nd century BC we find in the tomb of a remote relative of the imperial Liu clan, the Marquis of Dai, in the old Chu territory, not far from modern Changsha, evidence for practice of the southern religion in burial practices.⁷ Han princes in the north were buried in body suits made of small pieces of jade held together by gold thread.⁸

These long-abiding regional funerary differences suggest that something must have tied the southern Heaven to the south and the northern Heaven to the north of China. Neither was like Buddhism in East and Central Asia, or messianic Judaism and its Christian and Muslim offshoots in the west. These religions, in the show business phrase *Variety* likes to use, "have legs," allowing them to travel far beyond the place where they were born, and spread almost without limit. Of course very few of the ancient visions of Heaven outside China could do that.

⁷When the wife of the Marquis died in her 50s (apparently of a heart attack aggravated by chronic arthritis) her body was preserved well enough for 20th century Chinese pathologists to make the foregoing diagnosis. The 2nd century BC doctors treating her used prescriptions from the Daoist alchemists, and the heavy metal ions in the poor woman's body which may have contributed to her death also kept the anaerobic bacteria from decaying her flesh. The magi also virtually canned her, surrounding her coffin with a dense layer of white clay which sealed it off from air and water like a human tunafish can. The tomb actually hissed like a can of beer being popped when they broke the seal. The pathologists said she looked only a few weeks dead. The ancient physicians used Daoist alchemy on her even though she was the wife of an aristocrat linked to the northern ruling class.

⁸This characteristically northern device worked much less well in preserving the body. Surviving such jade suits contain only dust.

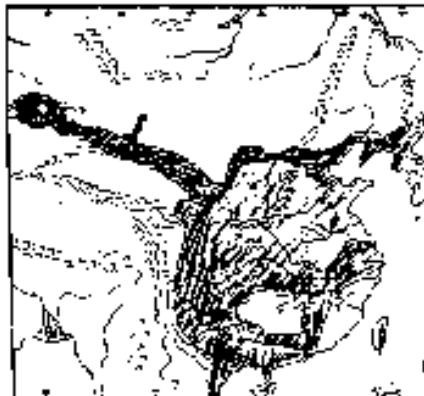
Dong Zhongshu failed even when he tried using portents—eclipses and other Heavenly events or earthquakes and the appearance of strange animals—as intimations of Heaven's displeasure with the Emperor for not listening to him. The Emperor could hire as many astronomers as he needed. He could, therefore, mobilize more portents than could Dong, thereby trumping the poor Confucian.

That Dong's attempt at synthesis had failed seems to have been widely accepted even before his death. When his 1st century BC successors tried to intimate that Confucius could exercise the powers of a Daoist immortal, Dong's posthumous discrediting was complete.

The result was that by the turn of the 1st century BC China was on the edge of entering a crisis of civilization.

By the end of Emperor Wu's reign, China was bigger than it had ever before been. Late Western Han had extended its power well into Zone A. Not only had Han extended a line of watchtowers all the way west into subzone A1, but Han armies moved north and east to take over parts of A3, perhaps extending Chinese power at least part way into the Korean peninsula. Neither the proto-Koreans nor the increasingly stressed members of the Xiongnu confederation could push back Chinese power.

Han also took over a larger proportion of the south than Qin had, including parts of the far south that now constitute Canton and northernmost Vietnam. There too Han power was unchallenged.



China at the peak of Han's expansion

The Han Chinese had, however, physically outgrown the ability of their old visions of Heaven to re-present themselves onto Earth as a state that large. They were unable to synthesize their two main Heavens into a new one big enough to be reflected onto Earth in the form of

that big and complex a state and society.

C. The First Crisis of High Civilization

1. Han holds on

a. Wang Mang's usurpation

By late Western Han, the emperors realized they had to get around the growing aristocratization of their meritocracy, lest the aristocrats escape central control altogether. One way to tame the great aristocratic houses whose heads expected to marry their daughters to emperors, was for the emperors to marry low—to marry into the lower levels of the aristocracy, or to wed the pretty daughter of some meritocrat, or even some commoner's daughter, and create a new class of relatives of the empress at court wholly dependent on the Emperor's favor.

Emperor Wu had started this practice. He married a pretty lady née Wei who he found in Zhao during one of his trips around the country. According to Sima Qian's account, she performed some sort of hoochy-koochy dance for him. The teen-aged emperor became so enamored of her that he swept her off her feet, and brought her and her not very high class relatives into his court. Luckily for her, after producing several girls, she finally gave birth to a boy, the emperor's first son.

The Emperor named her chief consort when, by default, he made her son heir-apparent to the throne. Her nephews and brothers and cousins subsequently got a lot of influence at court. Of course they were always very nice to the emperor because he could ruin the lot of them instantly by throwing Lady Wei out of her job as chief consort.

This pattern gradually became institutionalized. Toward the end of the 1st century BC, Wang Mang, another nephew of an empress, used his position to ingratiate himself with the men of merit at court. He then used their support to usurp the throne for himself.

One of the other things Emperor Wu had done in order to improve his ability to counterbalance the aristocrats, was to set up a state university at court for advanced training of men of merit.

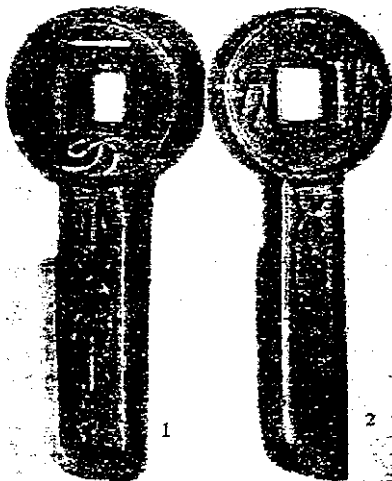
Wang Mang generously patronized

this university. He increased its size from several thousand to nearly 30,000 adult students. That was a faster rate of growth than our state universities enjoyed during the post-World War II period. Both expansions had similar motives. Our central and state governments were buying supporters by pumping more money into state universities. Wang Mang was doing the same sort of thing.

Wang got some of his bought and paid for intellectuals to claim that they had discovered some authentic old text versions of the Confucian classics. They claimed some of these books had come out of a wall of Confucius's house when it was being restored during Emperor Wu's time. These scholars had supposedly been working to transliterate these old style calligraphy texts from the style of the pre-Qin writing system into the new script of Qin and Han times. This had required much time and effort. Thanks to Wang Mang's patronage, these fellows had finally succeeded in transliterating them into the new text.

This great project had supposedly finally revealed the hitherto covered over real truths of Confucianism. These books preached what we might call a fundamentalist Confucianism.

Among other things, they explicitly called for removal of the influence of the new aristocrats. The state should take all land above a certain amount and redistribute it, as Mencius had implied the rulers should do under the well-field system. Taxes should be raised and a new money system created whose outer forms would imitate the money systems of late Spring-Autumn and Warring States times:



Wang Mang's fundamentalist Confucian version of knife coins. (Peng, p. 120)

Wang's designs for spade-coins and knife-coins had weird new variant shapes. The knife-coins looked more like modern keys than ancient Chinese knives. More important, all the coins were drastically devalued, though by kiting up their face values rather than by reducing their weights. A knife-coin might weigh as much as a dozen Five-grainers, but have a face value of 5,000 of them.

In effect this was paper money "printed" on bronze. As with the paper of paper money, the value of the bronze was trivial compared to the coin's face value.

The short-run added revenue from issue of such coins would provide the wherewithal to launch a series of expeditions not just north and northwest against the Xiongnu, but also against the more benign barbarians of the southwest.

None of this worked out. After a short while, people would not use the first new monetary instruments Wang Mang had created. Rejection of each of the next five similar systems came even faster and more completely, and destabilized the markets in the process.

As a result Wang Mang lacked enough money to invade either the northwest or southwest, or enough moral clout to bully the aristocrats out of their excess land. All he succeeded in doing was to alienate them.

His weird Confucian fundamentalism also undermined the legitimacy of the Confucian world-view among the men of merit, and completed the discrediting of Confucianism in general.

It also turned out that his "old texts" of the classics were mostly inauthentic, though scholars did not fully establish this until the 17th century.

We will never know how sincere Wang Mang was either as a reformer or as a practical philosopher. Before he could try yet again, his enemies overthrew and killed him, and within a few years their historians had forever blackened his memory.⁹

From time to time historical revisionists backing similar interventionist reforms have tried to resuscitate Wang Mang's reputation.

⁹The first historian to write an account of Wang's Xin (New) Dynasty was Ban Gu, himself one of the court aristocrats who had suffered under Wang Mang. He was lucky enough to enjoy the historian's sweetest form of vengeance; he wrote the only history of Wang Man's reign based on the primary sources that survives.

A hard Confucian meritocrat named Wang Anshi (no relation to Wang Mang) aiming at similar reforms did so in the 11th century, but the failure of his own program did not help Wang Mang's reputation to recover.

When modern socialism was becoming popular during the 1920s, Hu Shi subtitled his book about him "China's First Socialist." This work somewhat approved of Wang, and that view prevailed until recently in China, but with the recent demise of socialism in China, Wang Mang's reputation among Chinese historians has declined again.

b. Eastern Han restoration

In the end, Wang Mang alienated even the hard Confucians because he made Confucianism itself into a laughingstock.

This emboldened the successors of the Agrarian Daoists to try to create a Heaven on earth via a series of Daoist sectarian rural rebellions against him. But all that did was to undermine state power in general.

As always, both ruling class and most of the ruled feared anarchy more than a bad state. The aristocrats dug up a fellow from a minor branch of the Liu family, propped him up on the throne and restored the dynasty. The rebellions had so ruined Xi'an that the restored dynasty had to move to Loyang. Hence it is known as Eastern Han. This happened in 25 AD.

But, as symbolized by its inability to return to its old western capital, the dynasty never fully recovered its former glory. Eastern Han managed to maintain itself on the frontier until the Xiongnu finally disintegrated on their own during the 2nd century AD. By then, however, the Han emperors had lost most of their power to the landlord aristocracy and then to a series of military adventurers at court.

2. The old Heaven gives way

a. the southern Heaven fades

During Eastern Han, the proponents of the philosophical wing of the Daoist movement tried to create an overarching Heaven which could swallow the Confucian northern Heaven.

Like Dong Zhongshu's soft Confucians earlier, they failed too. Both of China's indigenous Heavens had now been discredited. By the beginning of the

2nd century AD, the Chinese were fresh out of visions of Heaven. Han still had an enormous and complex earthly organization, but had no vision of Heaven from which it could be re-presented and hence justified.

Note that this failure was the consequence of success: At the sheer physical level, it was the result of an enormous geographic expansion and prodigious technological innovation (cf. chapter 11). At the intellectual level, it was the result of equally prodigious intellectual innovation by the Chinese philosophers going back to Confucius and the early Daoists. These men had rationalized and perforce ultimately secularized the two visions of Heaven they had inherited from early civilization. Their very success had brought these visions to the limits of their potential.

Something new was needed. That turned out to be Buddhism.

b. and merges with Buddhism

As the failure of its visions of Heaven became more widely perceived, at first amongst the rulers, but ultimately among the ruled as well, China's civilizational crisis deepened.

Eventually, Buddhism, which had been around in China since late Western Han times, became much more popular. Its sects at first pretended to be (or were mistaken for) northern versions of the southern Daoist vision of Heaven. Eventually, the Buddhists incorporated the northern Confucian vision of Heaven as well.

Neither the Confucians nor the Daoists liked being swallowed by the Buddhists, but it took them centuries of absorbing Buddhist influences before they were again vigorous enough to break away from Buddhist intellectual control.

c. renewed divergence of north from south

But Buddhism did not become dominant until the 6th century. A new Heaven is not fully established in a day. The Confucian north and the Daoist south were already far apart. When Buddhism came in, they moved even further apart.

Buddhism initially entered China by way of the north (at first carried by Central Asian merchants, but after the fall of Han by Zone A pastoral-nomads). The south filled up with Confucians running

away from the pastoral-nomads in the north.

Instead of the old pattern of a Confucian north alienated from a Daoist south, there quickly evolved a Buddhist north and a Confucian south, with Daoism still popular among some southern commoners and hermit magi.

As a consequence it became impossible to put a new universal state together. Only when Buddhism spread into the south, where it grafted itself onto Confucianism, and northerners began to bring back Confucianism from the south to add to their Buddhism was this possible. A common Buddho-Confucian vision of Heaven made it possible to put the universal state back together again.

3. The Academic Consensus view

If you consult any standard textbook's treatment of the reasons for the fall of the Han Dynasty and the great length of the age of disunion which followed its fall, you will get some variant of the academic consensus view.

a. secularized dynastic cycle theory

Most commonly, the academic consensus blames the mischief on an out of control landlord class which acted corruptly, exploited the masses and goaded them into hopeless rebellions led by Daoist magi. These rebellions aimed at achieving complete equality through equal sharing of all property, an admirable but hopeless goal.

This explanation turns out to be based on a secularized Confucian version of the ancient Zhou dynastic cycle theory. According to the original sacred version of this theory, you may recall, when the five planets come together every 550 years, Tian changes who He favors as the ruling house on Earth.

Many Warring States regional dynasties and the Qin universal state went belly up a lot quicker than 500 years. Once people began to lose faith in the old Zhou Heaven, they stopped talking of conjunctions of the planets. Even before that, the Confucian philosophers had said that the five century intervals between sages now pertained only to some aspects of the succession of philosophers, and not to dynasties.

Why then, Confucian historians and moralists wondered, did dynasties fall? Perhaps, the intellectuals speculated, there was only so much virtue in any ruling house, and it somehow got used up over the generations. The Confucians lacked a theory of genetics, but they were vaguely heading in the direction of developing one. If, in the old days, Heaven would suck the virtue out of a ruling family every 550 years, now the ruling family decayed spontaneously rather more rapidly as part of a natural process.

b. landlords out of control

Once they had used up all their virtue, the rulers could no longer control the worthies—the men of merit. Turned loose, the men of merit would gradually turn corrupt, and their corruption inevitably involved exploitation of the people, leading the people to rebel, and so to overthrow the dynasty. Mencius could be read as supporting such an analysis. Even hard Confucians like Wang Mang worried about Han's new aristocracy of meritocrats exploiting their tenants.

Hard Daoists echoed such an interpretation since it justified their approval of millennialist Daoist-led rebellions against such landlord exploitation. Modern Marxists in China and their academic consensus fellow-travelers in the West echo the Chinese intellectual tradition. The Western academic consensus echoes the Marxists of countries like China to appease their feelings of guilt for Western imperialist bullying of these countries.

c. but landlords are normally out of control

And yet, all this talk of exploitative landlordism may be a kind of red herring. Material determinists, who label China since Eastern Zhou times as a Feudal Society tend to blame landlords (by definition for them the dominant class in a Feudal Society) for everything that happens, especially anything bad.

How valid is this? Landlordism had been around in China since the 7th century BC. Why did it take until 220 AD for it to destroy Han? Wasn't it easier with the broadly monetized Han economy for farmers to escape such exploitation?

There was no Earthly reason for the Han Dynasty to go to pieces then rather than earlier. The central rulers still got enough revenue to run their government

and to maintain the watch on the frontiers until the Xiongnu finally disintegrated on their own by the middle of the 2nd century AD.¹⁰

Not only did the Han solve the Xiongnu problem, a century and a half previously they had put down the Daoist popular rebellions of Wang Mang's time. The similar rebellions two centuries later which accompanied Han's fall were also put down by Han's short-lived successors. So the landlords won all the key battles.

So it seems questionable that landlordism could have been responsible for the Han Dynasty's fall. It is even less plausible that the onset and quickening of what even contemporaries of Eastern Han perceived as a crisis of civilization should have been the result of landlordism.

d. a crisis of civilization

By default, the ideational determinist explanation seems to hold. Han fell only after both of the old visions of Heaven had discredited themselves. After the Confucian vision failed during the last two centuries BC, the Daoists took their turn and failed even faster.

The members of the ruling class perceived that this had happened. During the 3rd century AD, the best of the men of merit (like the notorious "Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove") stopped coming in to the office. Instead they stayed home drinking, wenching and engaging in other interesting perversions like coining cynical aphorisms about the vanity of all civilized political life.

If anything, this demoralized Han establishment was held upright longer than it deserved by the necessity to meet the Xiongnu threat and to periodically put down Daoist rebels trying to create Heaven on Earth. Once such threats disappeared, Han China resembled a drunk who had been held up by another drunk leaning the opposite way as both staggered down the street in the same direction. The first drunk only collapses him-

self when the other drunk falls down or turns away down some side street.

A new wave of barbarians soon appeared, but they merely filled the vacuum caused by the previous fall of the Han. They took over north China, carrying Buddhism in with them.

Refugees from the north, including many Han aristocrats, fled south, and for the first time filled up south China with lots of Han Dynasty-style Confucians. As is the wont of émigrés, their descendants were more Han-like than the Han Dynasty itself had been, much as are Englishmen who migrate to Victoria, British Columbia.

For several centuries, an increasingly Confucian South China became even more alien from a Buddhist North China than before. The earlier Confucians of the north and the Daoists of the south had had centuries to rub up against each other during Eastern Zhou, Qin and Han times, and yet had not ever merged. Buddhism was an alien foreign faith, made still more alien by having been carried in by a conquering ruling class of pastoral-nomads.

So it is no wonder that the two regions had to move further apart before they could reconverge. The miraculous new development is that it only took three centuries for Buddhism to swallow both Daoism and Confucianism, and to do so on essentially Buddhist terms.

It was not until the late 6th century that a rough synthesis of Buddhism and Confucianism had occurred in both regions, allowing China to finally transcend (though not end) its north-south dichotomy.

The landlords were still there when this happened, and had had three and a half more centuries to build a still more lucrative web of privileges around themselves. They were, if anything, *more* exploitative by then than their ancestors of Han times had ever been.

And yet this did not stop them from using their new and larger Buddhist vision of Heaven to put All Under Heaven, the Chinese ecumene, together again.

This suggests that it was the vision of Heaven issue, not landlordism, that caused the crisis of China's first stage of high civilization. The same ideational factor might also have resolved the crisis, and carried China into the second stage of its high civilization.

¹⁰Some of the Xiongnu moved inside Han's borders and became Chinese farmers in B2, much as the defeated ancient Germans moved into Gaul and became provincial Romans. The rest of the Xiongnu headed out of East Asia altogether, migrating to the west, perhaps to become the Huns, or more likely tripping off a set of folk-wanderings which ultimately pushed the Huns into SE Europe to bedevil the Eastern Roman Empire after the 4th century AD. Whatever they did, they were no further trouble to the Han rulers.