THE QIN STATE'S conquests of its neighbors and the unified empire that emerged were built on a foundation of reforms that Shang Yang, a minister from the state of Wey, carried out in the years following 359 B.C. His radical, thoroughgoing transformations of Qin military and civil life grew out of practices that were first pioneered in Qi and in Jin and its successors. Intercine wars among the Zhou nobility following the monarchy's loss of power and the eastward shift of the capital in 770 B.C. had put pressure on Qi and Jin to increase the size of their armies. Gradually these states extended military service from the nobility and its followers to the entire population of the capital, and then on to certain segments of the rural population. Under Shang Yang's adaptation of these practices, Qin peasants who served in the army were rewarded with land that their individual households could hold and work and on which they paid taxes. But there were severe punishments as well as rewards.

The discovery of over a thousand Qin dynasty bamboo strips at Shuihudi in 1975 produced an abundance of new materials for the study of late Warring States Qin. These sources, however, have not changed the basic outlines of our understanding of Shang Yang's reforms as described around the turn of the first century B.C. in Sima Qian's Shi ji (Records of the Historical Astrologer).

He commanded that the people be divided into tens and fives and that they supervise each other and be mutually liable. Anyone who failed to report criminal activity would be chopped in two at the waist, while those who reported it would receive the same reward as that for obtaining the head of an enemy. Anyone who actively hid a criminal would be treated the same as one who surrendered to an enemy [he would be executed and all property confiscated]. Any family with more than two adult males who did not divide the household would pay a double military tax. Those who had achievements in the army would in proportion receive an increase in rank [in the twenty-rank hierarchy in which the entire populace was rated]. Those who engaged in private quarrels would be punished with a severity that accorded with the gravity of their quarrel. Those who devoted themselves to the fundamental enterprises and through their farming and weaving contributed much grain and cloth would be remitted [from tax and corvee], while those who worked for peripheral profits [in trade and crafts] and those who were idle or poor would be confiscated as slaves. Those in the royal family who had no military merit would not be listed in the registers of [royal] relatives . . . For the fields he opened up the qian and mo [horizontal and vertical pathways] and set up boundaries. He equalized the military levies and land tax and standardized the measures of capacity, weight, and length.¹

These reforms, and others, radically altered the nature of both the army and the state in several ways.

First, they made possible a substantial increase in the size of armies, which from the middle of the sixth century were increasingly composed primarily of infantry. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., Wu and Yue, located in the lower Yangzi valley, had introduced reliance on infantry to the Yellow River valley through their northward expansion. In the two centuries between the introduction of infantry and the reforms of Shang Yang, mass infantry armies composed of peasant levies, supplemented by cavalry in the fourth century B.C., supplanted the chariot armies of the aristocracy.

Soldiers on foot required fewer specialized military skills and far less expensive equipment than the chariot-based nobility. And with new sources of manpower made available by the extension of levies into the countryside, states and noble lineages could rapidly create armies of infantry that dwarfed the old chariot armies. Finally, technological innovations—the invention of the crossbow, the development of lamellar armor (composed of rows of leather plates, sometimes lacquered, sewn together), the improvement and general propagation of swords (again, introduced by Wu that...
and Yue), and the increasing use of iron weapons—made the infantry army a truly formidable force. In the internecine wars of the period, those states that developed mass infantry armies, equipped with the new weaponry, soon swallowed up rivals who failed to do so.

A seventh-century army would not have exceeded 10,000 men, and even greatly expanded forces in the late sixth century consisted of no more than 50,000 soldiers. Warring States armies, on the other hand, may have numbered in the hundreds of thousands, with the largest force mentioned numbering 600,000. Even if most armies in the field had only about 100,000 soldiers, the expansion in size was still considerable. Consequently, any state that hoped to survive was required to recruit soldiers from an ever-larger base. This was possible only if the state could expand military service to lower and lower levels of the population, and to wider ranges of the hinterland.

A second transformation growing out of Shang Yang's reforms was that city-states—the dominant political unit prior to the Warring States—became obsolete in the face of these enormous armies. Defeated city-states were absorbed by their conquerors, who redistributed the land to their own population in exchange for military service and taxes. Land gained through conquest was supplemented with territory cleared from forests or made farmable through irrigation. As city-states disappeared, the old city-based nobility lost its central place in the state order, just as it lost its prominence in the army. In place of the nobility, the state was increasingly dominated by a single autocratic ruler, whose agents registered the peasants and mobilized them into state service and collected taxes to support the ruler's military ambitions.3

Third, Shang Yang's policies established a uniform administration for the entire population, based on military service. His five-man squads were responsible for enforcement of laws within their own units and for the performance of their units in battle. Identification of the social order with the army was strengthened through a system of ranks imposed throughout the population. Other states had tried this, but nowhere as systematically as the Qin. Anyone who gained merit in battle by slaying enemies or commanding victorious units was rewarded with promotion in a twenty-rank hierarchy. Depending on their rank, people would receive stipulated amounts of land, numbers of dwellings, and quotas of slaves. These ranks could be used to remit penalties for violations of the law or to redeem relatives from penal bondage.

Ranks were not hereditary, but if a man died heroically in battle his dependents were entitled to receive additional land, numbers of dwellings, and servants of the nobility. However, in the late Spring-and-Autumn period (770-481 B.C.) these xian became the primary source of peasant recruits for the military, and lineages or states began to recognize their strategic importance. Eventually, the entire Qin state was divided into xian and ham (originally a subunit of the xian), thus making universal military service the foundation of the state's entire administrative apparatus.

Shang Yang's final major reform was the construction of a network of paths that formed a rectangular grid over agricultural fields and divided the countryside into equal-sized blocks of land (Fig. 1). According to one historic source, this grid covered the entire state of Qin. Supporting evidence comes from a modern study using large-scale topographical maps to examine the layout of fields in China. It has shown that throughout much of the north, particularly the areas of Qin and Jin, roads and footpaths form a striking rectilinear pattern, everywhere oriented north-south and east-west. Regularity on this scale would have been impossible without state intervention.

Reshaping the countryside into blocks was integral to the Qin's system of military service and civil control. Shang Yang argued that agriculture was the root of all wealth, and his ideal state was a land of small-scale peasant farmers guided by a detailed code of laws. Each family received land of a size that a single adult male could work. By distributing land in this way, the state kept the maximum acreage in cultivation and made the highest possible number of adult males eligible for military service and taxes. Since those who earned high rank on the twenty-point scale received additional land and servants, the systematic partition of the land provided a fixed unit for standardized rewards. In Shang Yang's view, non-peasants such as merchants and craftsmen were dangerous parasites. They were recorded on separate registers and were sometimes subject to servitude in state workshops or to military service in frontier garrisons.
A STATE ORGANIZED FOR WAR

political organization and kin structures had previously been merged, now they were separated into a state order under a single, absolute prince and a kin realm composed of individual households, each ruled by its own paterfamilias.  

Reshaped by Shang Yang's new institutions, the Qin state—hitherto a peripheral power that had figured only in historical narratives focused on more central states—made a dramatic entry onto the political stage. Shang Yang himself commanded the armies that defeated the state of Wei in the center of the Yellow River valley in 340 B.C. Winning battle after battle, Qin extended its control beyond the Hangu pass and ultimately forced Wei to accept a position as a subordinate "ally."

In 316 B.C. Qin completed its conquest, begun 130 years earlier, of the southwestern states of Shu and Ba in what is now the Sichuan basin and imposed its own law, landholding patterns, and military service on these non-Chinese neighbors. In 314 B.C. it defeated the last hostile Rong tribe and thus ended all threats to the west. In 312 B.C. Qin forces conquered the central Yangzi state of Chu at Danyang and secured the Hanzhong region. This linked the Qin heartland to Ba and Shu as a single territorial block. Combined with expansion at the expense of Wei into the central plain, these victories made Qin virtually impervious to attack. One integral state, ringed by mountains, now controlled the entire Guanzhong region.

Qin's expansion to the south opened up a new source of economic wealth that gradually made the state predominant among its rivals. In 310 B.C. Qin began construction of a new capital for Shu in Chengdu, a city modeled on the Qin capital of Xianyang. From this base Qin developed the Sichuan basin as a major agricultural center, most notably through the famous irrigation project at what is now Dujiangyan. This entailed dividing the flow of the Min River and routing the reduced flow in the new channel into a series of irrigation canals (Map 4). This irrigation system, which is still functioning today, turned the Min River basin into the major source of grain for Qin armies.  

The Rise of the Autocrat

While Shang Yang's policies transformed the old noble-based city-states into peasant-based warring macrostates, they did not secure the dominance of the individual ruler. Shang Yang himself was executed in 338 B.C. by a new leader who was angered when his own tutor fell victim to
Shang Yang's principle that the law applied even to members of the ruling house. A succession struggle in 307 B.C. left Qin's court at the mercy of a coalition of enfeoffed courtiers, who were all beneficiaries of a new version of fiefs that granted not political authority over towns or cities but the tax income extracted from a specified geographic area.

Weakened by these setbacks, Qin was defeated by the combined armies of the other Warring States in 295. After a brief recovery, Qin suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Zhao state, which used cavalry in combat. While part of the Qin forces were fighting a losing battle against Zhao, its other armies were dispatched to Qi in the Shandong peninsula, where Qin's chief minister Wei Ran expanded the enclave around his prize fief of Dingtao.

Here the history of Qin took a significant turn through the introduction of new policies to strengthen the position of the ruler. The rhetorician Fan Sui traveled to the Qin court, where he attacked the failings of Wei Ran and propounded the doctrine of "allying oneself with those who are distant [that is, the Qi state, which Wei Ran was invading] to attack those nearby [originally Han, ultimately Zhao]." The king of Qin accepted these arguments and appointed Fan Sui as a minister. Fan Sui then persuaded the king of the virtues of direct royal rule, targeting the queen dowager and Wei Ran, who had controlled the court since 307. In 266 the king dismissed the queen dowager (his mother) and banished Wei Ran and his allies. Fan Sui was then appointed chief minister.

This was a significant event, for Fan Sui was the first politician to articulate a policy of irrevocable expansionism for Qin. Abandoning the old practice of making and unmaking alliances to suit the needs of the moment and seizing territories scattered far and wide (for example, Dingtao in the east), he asserted that the way to expand was to wage war against one's neighbors through alliances with distant powers. This was, in his view, the only way to expand the state as an integrated territorial unit. To reinforce this policy of a unitary state, he insisted that "each inch or foot gained was the king's foot or inch."

This was a criticism not only of Wei Ran, enfeoffed as marquis of Rang, but also of the widespread practice of enfeoffing royal relatives and high officials. Such holders of fiefs often dominated the governments of their states, accumulated large personal fortunes, and assembled armies of personal followers, thereby challenging the monarch's authority. Fan Sui halted these practices in order to concentrate power in the person of the ruler and strengthen Qin state against its enemies.
The ruler's power was further enhanced by the introduction of elite military commands composed of full-time professionals. These men were granted a variety of legal privileges and were kept at the disposal of the ruler. The earliest recorded cases of such elite units come from the reign of King Heli of Wu (r. 510-496 B.C.), who had a personal retinue of 500 men and a corps of 3,000 runners celebrated for their endurance.

The philosophical text Master Xun describes the elite troops of the king of Wei, who were trained to wear heavy armor, carry a large crossbow with fifty arrows, strap halberds to their backs, brandish helmets to their heads and swords at their sides, pack a three-day supply of food, and then quick-march 100 li (just over twenty-five miles) in a single day. Those who met these standards earned an exemption from corvée labor and taxes for their entire household. Similar troops were adopted by Shang Yang in Qin, and they provided the early model for the soldiers depicted in the famous terracotta army of the first emperor. Because the emperor's personal guard defended his position as unchallenged autocrat in life, replicas of these soldiers were placed in his tomb to continue to defend him in the afterlife.

A final maxim of Fan Sui was to not only seize territory but also attack people. The aim was not merely territorial expansion but also the destruction of armies on such a scale that rival states could not recover and fight back. As a result of this new policy, several campaigns and battles in the third century B.C. produced slaughter on a scale previously unknown in Chinese history. The greatest bloodshed, according to sources of the period, occurred when Qin defeated Zhao in the campaign at Changping in 260 B.C., a battle that supposedly ended with the death of 400,000 Zhao soldiers. Although Qin's own massive losses in this campaign and a subsequent defeat at the hands of an allied army postponed for several decades the final conquests that created the first empire, the crushing defeat of Zhao left Qin with no serious rival. All that remained was the desolation of the remaining six Warring States.

In summary, the rise of Qin to dominance and its ultimate success in creating a unified empire depended on two major developments. First, under Shang Yang, it achieved the most systematic version of the reforms that characterized the Warring States. These reforms entailed the registration and mobilization of all adult males for military service and the payment of taxes. While all Warring States were organized for war, Qin was unique in the extension of this pattern to every level of society, and in the manner in which every aspect of administration was devoted to mobilizing and provisioning its forces for conquest. Second, through the policies introduced by Fan Sui, Qin alone successfully concentrated power in the person of the ruler. While other states were still dispersing authority and prestige among enfeoffed administrators and royal kin, Qin was largely able to make the ruler the single focus of undivided authority.

Qin Nationality and "All under Heaven" One major consequence of the reconstruction of the Qin state was the emergence of a distinctive national character. Qin increasingly defined itself, and was defined by others, as a land and a people apart. In the earlier Zhou state, Qin had been one state among others, linked to the rest by a shared elite culture of ritual vessels, music, and verse. Qin's elimination of the nobility and its incorporation of the lower strata of society into military and civil service meant that local or regional traditions became definitive of Qin nationality.

The clearest evidence of a distinctive Qin national culture is the fairly rapid emergence of a new discourse that associated Qin with non-Chinese barbarians and linked barbarian culture to Qin's political reforms. Prior to the middle of the Warring States period, texts such as the Transmission of Master Zuo (Zuo zhuan), the Words of the States (Guo yu), the Analects (Lun yu), the Master Mo (Mozi), and the Mozi (Mengzi) seldom mention Qin, and when they do they never indicate Qin's supposed cultural otherness. The archaeological record also shows that the Qin nobility shared a common culture with states of the central plain. In their graphs and bronze bells, the Qin conservatively clung to the older Zhou forms even when more popular revised forms of graphs and bells were introduced in other states. The Qin clearly did not consider themselves to be cultural outsiders associated with barbarians, as they would be described after 300 B.C., and especially under the Han.

In the late Warring States period several texts began to speak of Qin people as alien or backward in relation to the states of the central plain—a character derived from their intermingling with barbarians whose customs they presumably had absorbed. The Gongyuxiang Commentary to the Spring-and-Autumn Annals (Chun qiu Gongyuxiang zhuan), a Confucian text compiled sometime between 316 and 233 B.C., was one of the first to emphasize the opposition between "Chinese" and "barbarian," and it clearly identified Qin with the barbarians: "When the ruler of Qin died, the Annals did not record his name. Why is this? Because Qin are barbarians."
The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han

Texts from the very end of the Warring States period often refer to Qin's having barbarian customs, either as an original condition or through absorption. The *Strategies of the Warring States* (Zhanguoce), a collection of model speeches attributed to historical figures from the Warring States period, asserts: "Qin has the same customs as the [barbarians] Rong and Di. It has the heart of a tiger or wolf; greedy, loving profit, and untrustworthy, knowing nothing of ritual, duty or virtuous conduct." A speaker in the same text describes Qin as "a state of tigers and wolves" that greedily desires "to swallow the whole world," but he goes even further in stating that "Qin is the mortal enemy of 'All under Heaven,'" thus treating it not merely as barbaric but as the antithesis of civilization or humanity.11

In the Han empire, these remarks on Qin's savage nature were conflated with its topography into a general model that accounted for the origins of the coercive laws of Shang Yang, the cruelty of the first emperor, and the fall of Qin. The early Han philosophical compendium, the Master of Huainan (Huainanzi), said:

The customs of Qin consisted of wolf-like greed and violence. The people lacked a sense of duty and pursued profit. They could be intimidated through punishments, but could not be transformed through goodness. They could be encouraged with rewards, but could not be urged on with reputation. Enveloped in difficult terrain and belted by the Yellow River, they were cut off on all sides and thus secure. The land was profitable and the topography beneficial, so they accumulated great wealth. Lord Xiao wanted to use his tiger-like or wolf-like power to swallow up the feudal lords. The laws of Lord Shang were produced from this situation.12

The Han historian Sima Qian made a similar observation in the preface to his table on the comparative chronology of the Warring States: "Now Qin state mixed in the customs of the Rong and Di barbarians, so it placed violence and cruelty first and treated humanity and duty as secondary. Its position was that of frontier vassal, but it offered suburban sacrifices [like the Son of Heaven]. This terrified the true gentleman." Here, the cruelty of Qin laws and the martial tendencies of its people are explicitly attributed to Qin's being a frontier state located in a region inhabited by non-Chinese people.13

Sima Qian also echoes the Master of Huainan when he places the fol-

A State Organized for War

lowing remarks in Sheng Yang’s mouth: "Lord Shang said, 'Qin had the teachings of the Rong and Di. There was no distinction between fathers and sons, who dwelt together in the same room. Now I have reformed their teachings, and established for them the division between men and women. I have built the great Jique Palace, and set up a capital like that of Lu or Wei.'"14 The theme of Qin barbarism is the same, but here Shang Yang's policies are intended to correct them. The remarks about building a palace and capital like those of the eastern states Lu or Wei indicate Qin's status as a backward state that sought to imitate its cultural better.

The Han criticism of Qin as a creature of savage custom and of Qin law as an expression of barbaric local practices reached its apogee with the first great Han critic of Qin, Jia Yi, who wrote under Emperor Wen. His most celebrated discussion of Qin, "The Discursive Judgment Censuring Qin," connected Qin's terrain, its customs, and its rulers to one another and to its ultimate downfall. Its account of Qin history begins: "Qin's territory was enveloped by mountains and belted by the Yellow River, so that it was secure. It was a state cut off on all sides." Qin's excellent strategic position was the source of its security and also of its isolation.

This image of isolation reappears in Jia Yi's description of Qin's imperial rulers. "The king of Qin [the first emperor] thought he was sufficient to himself and never asked others, so he committed errors without being corrected. The second emperor inherited this, following his father without changing. Through violence and cruelty he doubled the calamity. Zifying [the third Qin ruler] was completely alone without intimates, imperilled and young he had no assistance."15 Jia Yi follows this account of the rulers' isolation with the explanation that the "customs of Qin" placed a taboo on all criticism, so that when the rulers committed errors, no officials remonstrated with them. In contrast with the Zhou dynasty, which had established feudal lords who allowed it to survive even after it lost real power, the Qin relied entirely on "numerous laws and stern punishments" and thus had no supporters at the end. The geographically induced isolation of Qin shaped its customs, which in turn led to the isolation of the rulers and their exclusive reliance on punishments. These alien customs were specifically contrasted with the Zhou practices that had defined the civilization of the Chinese heartland.

Other writings by Jia Yi made the link between custom, law, and the fate of Qin even more explicit. The chapter "The Changing of the Times"
in his Xin shu explains the decline of Qin customs in the following manner:

Lord Shang turned against ritual and duty, abandoned proper human relations, and put his whole heart and mind into expansion. After practicing this for two years, Qin’s customs grew worse by the day. Whenever Qin people had sons who grew to adulthood, if the family was rich they sent them out as separate households, and if they were poor they sent them out as indented laborers. If someone lent his father a rake, hoe, staff, or broom, then he put on airs of great generosity. If a mother took a gourd dipper, bowl, dustpan, or broom, then her offspring would immediately upbraid her. Women sulked their infants in the presence of their fathers-in-law, and if the wife and mother-in-law were not on good terms then they snarled and glared at one another. Loving their young children and material gain while holding their parents in contempt and having no proper relations, they were scarcely different from animals.16

Here Shang Yang’s reforms cause families to break up into individual nuclear households, which leads to devaluation of kin ties. The greed and the animal-like nature of the Qin people, which figured in earlier texts as inborn character, appear here as a consequence of culture, specifically Shang Yang’s reforms. Jia Yi laments that his own Han dynasty carried in these corrupted Qin customs.17

A version of many of these ideas occurs in the Guliang Commentary to the Spring-and-Autumn Annals (Chun qiu Guliang zhuang), a work probably written in the Han period and closely related to the Gongyang. This text treats Qin’s barbarism as something that developed in the span of recorded history, but it does not link barbarism to the reforms of Shang Yang. Instead, it traces to an unprincipled campaign waged by Lord Mu in 627 B.C. However, it also incorporates Jia Yi’s idea that the failure of Qin government manifested itself in the breakdown of proper family relations, particularly the instruction of children and the separation of men and women.18

These remarks on the barbaric, backward, and alien culture of Qin could be interpreted as simply the emergence of anti-Qin polemics from traditional texts, along with newly discovered materials, suggests that, in the same period, the Qin state itself adopted this persona of a state distinct from and hostile to the culture of the central plain. Thus, the accusation of the Strategems that Qin was the enemy of “All under Heaven” figures also in the opening chapter of the late Warring States philosophical text Master Han Fei (Han Feizi), but since this is presented as a speech from Han Fei to the king of Qin (later the first emperor), it is clear that the authors felt that Qin accepted and perhaps even prided itself on this adversarial relation.19

A better-known example of Qin’s sense of its own otherness is Li Si’s account of the music of Qin. Himself an alien statesman who became chief minister in Qin, Li Si, in arguing against a proposal to expel foreigners, offered as precedent a supposed Qin adoption of foreign music: “The true sounds of Qin are to delight the ear by singing woo-woo while striking a water jar and banging a pot, strumming the zither and slapping the thigh. The music of Zheng and Wei, the Sangqian, Zhao, Yu, Wu, and Xiang are the music of alien states. But now you have abandoned striking water jars and banging pots to adopt the music of Zheng and Wei; set aside strumming zithers and slapping thighs to take up the Zhao and Ya.” Since the comment quoted here was part of a persuasion addressed to the Qin court, this reference to “the music of alien states” was clearly not intended as an insult, as it is depicted in an anecdote from an earlier century. That Li Si and the Qin courtiers both accept the false argument that the music of the central states is a recent importation suggests that Qin had come to pride itself on its presumed cultural distinctiveness. The vulgar nature of the “true” Qin music might also suggest some pride in popular, regional practice, as opposed to the refined music of the court.20

The perceived separation between Qin culture and that of the other states is demonstrated in several Qin documents, both official and private, discovered in tombs. A text found at Shuihudi in the tomb of a local official serving in an area of Chu that had only recently been conquered by the Qin is a case in point:
by local custom do not cease, which means abandoning the ruler's enlightened laws.11

This contrast between the enlightened laws of the ruler and the brightened rule of custom indicates the difficulties faced by Qin's central government in imposing its will both on powerful local families and conquered territories.12 The argument presupposes a cultural gulf between the people of Qin and those of Chu (which was, admittedly, not one of the central states).

Further evidence comes from letters written by Qin conscripts found in another tomb from the same time and place. The author of one of the letters complains that the natives in this recently conquered territory do not obey the occupying forces. He warns the recipient of the letter not to travel to these "new territories" which are inhabited by "bandits." This reciprocal hostility is also indicated in the received literary sources, as in the prophetic saying that "even if only three households remain in Chu, it will be Chu that destroys Qin." Such feelings would be found in any case of military occupation, but they doubtless did much to increase the sense that the two sides represented foreign and hostile cultures.13

This split between Qin and the central states was written into Qin law, as shown in legal documents found at Yunneng.14 Thus, by the end of the Warring States period, the idea that Qin was culturally distinct from the other parts of the old Zhou realm, as well as from the southern state of Chu, was not merely conventionally accepted both inside and outside Qin but was even a formal principle in Qin government practice.

Such a development fits well with our current models of pre-imperial Chinese history. Under the Zhou a vast area—including most of the Yellow River valley, the central and lower Yangzi, and to a degree the area of present-day Sichuan—had been linked by a shared elite culture. During the Warring States period the gradual disappearance of the hereditary nobility eliminated the exponents and embodiments of this culture. At the same time, the incorporation of commoners into the state, primarily through universal military service, meant that local or regional traits became definitive of those who were active in state service. Since Qin introduced the most comprehensive forms of the new institutions, it may well have achieved the highest degree of regional integration and self-consciousness.

One important element in this model was an increase in social mobility in the period. With the disappearance of hereditary offices, people from the lower aristocracy and even commoners were able to rise through the ranks in the army and government, carrying with them their indigenous ideas about music, food, literature, religion, and other aspects of life. This new social mobility is reflected in texts found in tombs, notably the Almanacs ( Ri shu, literally Books of Days). Examples from Shuihudi and Fangmatan indicate that the life possibilities for a typical newborn child in Qin covered a wide range, from servant or concubine, to local bravo, to official, to a high minister or noble. Additional evidence from tombs is a fourth-century change in Qin mortuary practices which introduced, or re-introduced, catacomb burials (these had been a local feature many centuries before) and the flexing of the corpse rather than extending it in the Zhou manner. This suggests the incorporation of regional practices into elite culture.15

Shared military service and exposure to non-Qin people as enemies or hostile subjects would have facilitated the development of an "us-them" mentality in Qin. This took tangible form in the widespread practice in the period of building walls along the frontiers between states. Likewise a departure from Qin, according to the Almanacs, required a ritual of exorcism, similar to the ritual performed before departing from one's native town.16

This increasingly clear divide between states seems to have reached a crescendo in the decades immediately prior to unification. The chapter "Bringing People In [lai min"] of the late Warring States political text Book of Lord Shang (Shang Jun shu), probably written around 250 B.C.E., insists that only natives of Qin should be recruited into the army, while new immigrants should engage in agriculture. Somewhat later, Qin ministers proposed the expulsion of foreign officials and advisers, arguing that they were all spies in the service of their states of origin. The minister Li Si disputed and defeated this anti-foreigner policy, but when the philosopher Han Fei was brought to the Qin court at the behest of the first emperor, Li Si argued the opposite side: "Han Fei is a member of the Han royal lineage," he said. "Now Your Majesty wishes to unite all the states, but Fei to the end will work for Han, and not for Qin. This is basic human nature... It would be best to use some violation of the laws as a pretext to execute him." Li Si's argument, based on the assumption that loyalty to one's own state was a natural human sentiment, led to Han Fei's execution.17

This evidence, though admittedly sparse, challenges the claims of modern scholars in China that unification was a natural and inevitable result...
of increasing trade and cultural exchange among the Warring States. To the contrary, nationalist or regionalist sentiments seem to have been on an upswing throughout the Warring States period and to have grown even stronger at the very end. These tendencies were mitigated in part by the mobility of intellectuals, who moved from state to state in search of education, patronage, or office and thereby developed a commitment to a broader realm of “All under Heaven.” Indeed, the anti-foreign sentiment at the Qin court might have been in part a reaction to the increasing prominence of foreign “guest-ministers” who supplanted other parties at court.

The clear self-definition of Qin as a realm apart was also blurred by the constant shifting of its boundaries during the period. Even the solid interstate walls had to be rebuilt along new lines as the borders shifted. However, on balance I would argue that the predominant tendency of the late Warring States was toward sharper divisions between nations, and that countervailing tendencies were limited to a small segment of the intellectual elite.

The Book of Lord Shang and the Dilemma of Qin

We have thus far encountered Shang Yang as the creator of reforms that led to Qin dominance and as a semimythic figure who figured in later thought as the source or emblem of a distinctive Qin culture that blunted into barbarism. He also served as the eponym for a manual of political thought and methods known as the Book of Lord Shang (Shang Lun shu). This text was largely compiled after his death, some of it perhaps as late as the Han. However, the title is not arbitrary, for its key chapters present a theoretical systematization of the principles underlying the institutions of Shang Yang and hence of late Warring States Qin. Some of the chapters claim to present actual policies or laws of Qin state, but the most significant are those that elaborate the basic principles by which an ideal warring state should operate.

The overarching principle is the identity of the army with the peasant populace, which enables the entire state to be mobilized for war: “The means by which a ruler encourages his people are offices and rank; the means by which a state arises is agriculture and war.” This vision figures throughout the book, which constantly discusses how to encourage people to devote themselves to agriculture and warfare—the rewards that will result from doing so and the disasters that would flow from failure to

People’s desires being myriad and profit coming from a single source, if the people are not united there is no way to attain their desires. Therefore you unite them, and then their energy will be concentrated. Their energy being concentrated, you will be strong. If they are strong and you use their energy, you will be doubly strong. Therefore the state that can both create energy and destroy it is called “a state that attacks the enemy,” and it is inevitably strong. Block up all private means by which they can gratify their ambitions, open up a single gate for them to attain their desires, make it so that the people must first do what they hate and only then attain their desires, and then their energy will be great.

When agriculture is the sole source of energy (the “single gate”), and warfare its only outlet, the people will risk mutilation and death (“what they hate”) to serve the state. By concentrating all the people’s efforts on these two activities, the state produces the energy and manpower it needs to fight. The effective ruler gets the people to “forget their lives for the sake of their superiors” and makes them “delight in war” so that they “act like hungry wolves on seeing meat.” All other human values or activities become threats to the state order.

These threats are variously described as “lice” or “evils”: the “six lice” (longevity, good food, beauty, love, ambition, and virtuous conduct); the “ten evils” (rites, music, odes, history, virtue, moral culture, filial piety, brotherly love, integrity, and sophistry); or the “twelve lice” (rites, music, odes, history, moral culture, filial piety, brotherly love, sincerity, benevolence, duty, criticism of the army, and being ashamed of fighting). Most of these vices were virtues in philosophical texts, especially those studied by Confucian scholars. A repeated target in the Book of Lord Shang is the practice of granting office or patronage to scholars, which seduces people away from agriculture and war.

Although the Book of Lord Shang is sometimes described as a program for a totalitarian bureaucracy, officialdom itself is an object of suspicion and critique—yet another mode of escaping from agriculture and war. The second chapter of the book lists “deviant officials” being “idle in office,” as well as generosity in their salaries, as a threat to the state, worse than granting office for literary attainments, or allowing merchants to profit through sale of grain, or making luxuries available to those with money. A substantial bureaucracy threatens the ruler because it separates him from the facts about his realm: “In the institutions of a well-governed state, the people cannot name punishments just as the army can’t name the enemies. The state is divided into regions, and the officials are appointed and dismissed, just as the army has officers and detachments.”
not hide what they see from the mind. But chaotic states of the present day are not like this. They rely on a multitude of officials and a host of clerks. Even though these clerks are numerous they have the same tasks and form a single body. Consequently they cannot supervise one another."

The Qin laws found at Shuihudi show this same suspicion of officials, as does the late Warring States political treatise the Master Han Fei. Rather than relying on officials, who try to enhance their positions by deceiving the ruler and avoiding agriculture and war, the Book of Lord Shang advocates employing the five-man units of mutual surveillance established by Shang Yang. If the people can be made to supervise and report on one another, then the bureaucracy can be set aside and the state reduced to the ruler and his people:

In regulating the state, if legal judgments are made in the households then it attains the kingship; if they are made among the officials then it will be merely strong; if they are made by the ruler it will be weak... If a criminal is invariably denounced, then the people pass judgments in their minds. If the prince gives a command the people respond, so that the method of enforcing the law takes shape in the households and is simply carried out by officials, then the judgments over affairs are made in the households. Therefore, with a true king rewards and punishments are decided in the people's minds, and the means of enforcing the law are decided in the households.

In the well-governed state the people are the ruler's eyes and ears, and the instrument of his judgments. Merchants, scholars, and officials are at best a necessary evil, to be reduced to a bare minimum and kept rigorously in check.

However, if judgments are to be made in the households, then the ruler himself plays no active role in the administration of the state. Apart from the insistence that the ruler must make sure that the state is devoted to agriculture and war and must ward off assorted parasites, there is no discussion of the techniques or character of the ruler. This is in striking contrast to the Master Han Fei and works of political philosophy in most cultures. The only active role assigned to the ruler is as the source of law.

This is the theme of the first chapter of the text, in which Shang Yang persuades the lord of Qin that the changing state of the world requires new laws and institutions: "Ordinary people are at ease in their habits, and scholars are immersed in what they have learned. These two types are the sort to fill offices and preserve the law, but you cannot discuss with them that which lies beyond the law. The Three Dynasties became kings through different rites, and the Five Hegemons dominated the world with different laws. So the wise man creates laws, while the stupid man is controlled by them. The worthy change the rites, while the unworthy are constrained by them." The ruler acts only as the creator of laws, which are then distributed among the people who are to enforce them through mutual surveillance.

But this leads to a paradox. On the one hand, a complete set of laws is to be stored in a special sealed chamber in the ruler's palace, and anyone who without permission enters this chamber or tampers with one graph of the written law is to be put to death with no possibility of pardon. On the other hand, the ruler's charge is to promulgate the law to special officials who must answer any questions about the meaning of the laws put to them by other officials or by the common people. Failure to provide this information results in punishment: "Therefore all the clerks and commoners in the world without exception will know the laws. The clerks clearly knowing that the people know the laws, they will not dare to treat the people contrary to the law, nor will the people dare to violate the law... Therefore all the clerks and commoners in the world, no matter how worthy or clever in speech will be unable to speak a single word that would distort the law." This emphasis on officials and the people asking questions about the law is reflected in Qin legal documents, a substantial section of which consists of such questions and answers.

The law in the Book of Lord Shang was thus both hidden away in the palace with the ruler and distributed in entirety to every person in the world. In both cases it was immune to the altering or twisting of a single graph or word. This reinforced the identification of the ruler with the law, for both were simultaneously to be hidden in the palace and distributed throughout the empire in the bodies of the self-policing subjects.

Perhaps the most striking and significant idea in the Book of Lord Shang emerged directly from the notion that any surplus within the state would turn functioning elements into self-indulgent parasites. The "six lice" derive directly from the "three constant functions": farming, trade, and government office. If farmers have a surplus, they become concerned about living a long life and eating well; if merchants have a surplus, they...
become concerned about obtaining female beauty and affection; if officials have time to spare, they become concerned about personal ambitions and a reputation for virtue. Not only are functions outside agriculture and war to be discouraged, but any surplus available to the people becomes a threat or danger. War serves not only to conquer enemies and seize their resources but also to consume any internal surplus that would otherwise destroy the state. A truly strong state must know not only how to create energy but how to destroy it.

This argument recurs throughout the text, usually describing any accumulation of energy and resources as a form of "poison": "One who uses a strong people to attack the strong will perish; one who uses a weak people to attack the strong will become king. If a state is strong and does not engage in war, then the poison is shipped into the interior. Rituals, music, and parasitic officials arise, and the state will inevitably be whittled away. But if the country is strong and carries out war, then the poison is shipped to the enemy. The state will have no rituals, music, or parasitic officials, and it will inevitably be strong." Other versions of this doctrine state that one must destroy the people's energy by attacking the enemy, and that failure to do so will lead to villainy and the growth of parasites. For the state to be orderly, the people must be weak, and they can be kept weak only by the constant dispersal of their wealth and energies in war.9

Thus, the state organized for war, as analyzed in the Book of Lord Shang, requires not only that all the energies of the people be devoted to agriculture and war but that there must always be another war to fight, another enemy to defeat. Ultimately, war was fought not for gain but for loss, to expend energies and wealth that would otherwise accumulate in the hands of those who, by virtue of their growing prosperity, would come to serve their own interests rather than those of the state.

Such a state sucks in more and more resources to be consumed in wars that no longer serve any purpose save to keep the machine running. Sooner or later the energy and resources expended in the wars become too great for the state to bear, at which point it implodes. It is a "suicide state," "destined to self-destruct."10 As we shall see, this fate, which is implicit in the Book of Lord Shang, would work itself out explicitly in the fall of the Qin empire.

When the fall of his last rival left the king of Qin master of the civilized world, he and his court were fully aware of the unprecedented nature of their achievement. As one courtier remarked, they had surpassed the greatest feats of the legendary sages of antiquity. And now they would set about enacting visionary programs designed to institutionalize a new era in human history, the era of total unity.11

Yet as Jia Yi would later observe, the Qin dynasty collapsed within two decades because it did not change enough. Despite its proclamations of making a new start in a world utterly transformed, the Qin carried forward the fundamental institutions of the Warring State era, seeking to rule a unified realm with the techniques they had used to conquer it. The Qin's grandiose visions of transformation failed to confront the extensive changes that the end of permanent warfare had brought about. It fell to the Han, who took over the realm after the Qin dynasty's defeat, to carry out the major institutional programs and cultural innovations that gave form to the vision of world empire.

The scale of the problems that confronted the Qin in creating an imperial order can be seen in the changes they attempted to make during their brief rule.

Centralization under the First Emperor

The first change carried out by the Qin was to create a new title and model for the ruler. Unification required institutions and values that could transcend regional ties, and the ultimate authority for these institutions would have to be a single person. The Qin solved this problem by creating a new institution, the "First Emperor." This title was intended to signify the ruler's singular authority over the entire empire, and it was meant to be passed down to future rulers as well. The Qin also created a new model for the ruler, one that was intended to be a model of virtue and wisdom. The Qin's vision of the ruler was one of a benevolent father who governed with the advice of the people, and who was guided by the teachings of the Confucian classics. This new institution and model for the ruler was meant to serve as a foundation for a new era of unity and order, and it would be central to the Qin's efforts to institutionalize a new world order.
and values would be a semi-divinized monarch who ruled as the agent of celestial powers. Imposed from on high, the dynasty of such a ruler must be detached from the regions that made up his realm. To become servants of this celestial monarch, agents of the state would be required to forswear loyalties to family and home. The emperor’s officials, though raised above local society, would be servants of the monarch, drawing their authority from him.

The king of Qin claimed for himself the title of huangdi, which we inadequately translate as “emperor.” 璐 had been the high god of the Shang, the first historical state in China that ruled the central Yellow River valley in the second half of the first millennium B.C. However, by the Warring States period its meaning had changed. The mythic culture-hero sages who had supposedly created human civilization were called 璐, indicating their superhuman power. And the four high gods of Qin religion were known as 璐, corresponding to the points of the compass and River valley in the second half of the first millennium B.C. To transcend his human state and become an immortal, the First Emperor initiated the huang di, a dynasty that would reach to the end of time. just as his realm reached to the limits of space. To transcend his human state and become an immortal, the First Emperor initiated the feng and shan sacrifices in which he ascended Mount Tai to communicate with the highest god.

To ground the cosmic claims of his title, the First Emperor toured his new realm and inscribed his achievements in verse on the peaks of mountains. The texts of six of these inscriptions have been preserved, and in them the emperor spoke of how his blessings had been bestowed upon all within the four seas, “wherever sun and moon shine,” “wherever human tracks reach,” descending even to the beasts and the plants. The range of his power and beneficence was universal.

This new vision of the ruler was also articulated in a philosophical work sponsored by the king of Qin’s first chief minister, Lü Buwei. This text, the Springs and Autumns of Master Lü (Lü shi chun qiu), was structured according to the calendar, and it argued that the ruler followed the pattern of Heaven. In a closely associated move, the First Emperor claimed that a cosmic cycle, the so-called Five Phases cycle, brought about his rise to power and made it an inevitable part of the divine plan.

A major building program was undertaken to transform the capital city into a microcosm of the universe. The emperor’s new palace was patterned on the North Star and the Big Dipper, the fixed center of the sky. Great statues cast from the confiscated weapons of defeated states represented constellations, and replicas of all the palaces of the conquered states served as a microcosm of the Earth.

These ceremonial and architectural assertions of the emperor’s godhead were accompanied by institutional programs that aimed to centralize and unify all aspects of Chinese life. The most important of these lay in the intellectual sphere. Whereas each of the Warring States had its own writing system, the Qin government created a new, simplified non-alphabetic script to be used throughout the empire. It reduced the complex and variable Large Seal script with its curving lines—the kind of writing used on Zhou ritual vessels—into simples, more rectilinear forms. The Qin writing system may have suppressed as much as twenty-five percent of the pre-Qin graphs.

The new standardized script allowed swifter writing with brush and ink—essential for imperial record keeping. It was propagated across the empire through public displays of graphs on stone inscriptions, on objects manufactured in government workshops, and in official documents. The result was a graphic koine—a language shared by diverse peoples without being the first language of any of them. This artificial written language existed only in texts and was distinct from the mutually unintelligible languages spoken in different parts of the empire. It allowed written communication between people who would not have been able to communicate orally because they would have pronounced the graphs differently. Still in use through most of the Western Han period, this script was eventually replaced by an even simpler variant known as “secretarial” script, which could be written even more quickly.

The development of a pan-imperial writing system led to the founding of an imperial academy intended to control the dissemination of texts and the interpretation of their meanings. In Han and later accounts this event was described as the “burning of the books,” but it was actually a policy of unification rather than destruction. When a scholar argued that the First Emperor should imitate the Zhou founders by enfeoffing his relatives, the chief minister, Li Si, retorted that what the state should do was mute criticism of current institutions through reference to an idealized antiquity.

Acting on this principle, he removed all copies of the Canon of Odes...
THE EARLY CHINESE EMPIRES: QIN AND HAN

When Xiang Yu sacked the Qin capital and burned the imperial library, no systematic destruction of them. That damage was done in 206 B.C. when Xiang Yu sacked the Qin capital and burned the imperial library to the ground.

Essential to state control of political discourse was the appointment of scholars who would study the relevant texts and transmit their knowledge to students. While Han accounts depict the Qin as hostile to scholarship, particularly classical studies based in the Confucian tradition, this was clearly not the case. The First Emperor consulted classicist scholars regarding his performance of the feng and shan sacrifices, and his stone inscriptions are replete with classical citations, composed entirely in verse using the same rhyme groups as the Canon of Odes. The aforementioned Spring and Autumn of Master Li comprised all of the intellectual traditions, including the classicists. Contrary to the Han’s claims, their own intellectual policies in the early Han period followed the Qin precedent, and early Han scholars were either former Qin scholars or their intellectual heirs. The Han’s establishment of the classical Confucian canon as the state orthodoxy represented not a radical reversal of the Qin practice but simply a narrowing of scope.

Standardization was extended into administration and business by establishing a single scale of weights and measures throughout the realm. Even the widths of axles were supposed to be equalized, so that carts and chariots could all run in the same ruts in the roads. Cast bronze models for units of length, weight, and volume were distributed to local government offices and imposed on all merchants, thus facilitating trade. Examples of these official bronze measures have been found in excavations as distant as Manchuria. Government workshops were ordered to annually check and correct their weights, measures, and balances, and all vessels of a given type were to have identical lengths and widths. The mark of the office or shop and the responsible official were engraved or affixed to the bottom of all objects as a guarantee that they met regulations. Failure to meet these standards was punishable by law.

To create uniform measures of value, the Qin minted bronze coins that bore the characters “half of a liang” (equal to about eight grams), which was the actual weight of the coin. Warring States coins had inscribed values that were not related to their weight. The Book of Han reports that with the advent of bronze coins, “such things as pearls, jade, tortoise shells, cowry shells, silver and tin became objects only used for decoration or as precious treasures, and were no longer used as money.”

The standardization of script, the textual canon, measures, coinage, and law (as we will see in Chapter 10) seems conventional today, and it requires a leap of imagination to realize what innovations they were in the third century B.C. Many of these advances did not appear in Europe until the French Revolution, over two millennia later. A unified empire was an entirely new political form in China, and standardization was crucial to its efficient administration across vast distances, and to the daily lives of the realm’s inhabitants. Many of these innovations also gave a tangible form to the new office of emperor, and conveyed a sense that the ruler and his government must be obeyed.

To physically bind his domain together, and exclude those who lay outside it, the First Emperor initiated a network of roads that radiated out like a fan from the capital in Xianyang. It would be used to dispatch troops, officials, and messengers, as well as to facilitate commerce. One road, called the “Straight Road,” ran 600 miles from the capital to Inner Mongolia. Remnants of this road, over which materials for building the first Great Wall were transported, still survive today (Map 5). Qin’s imperial highways extended about 4,250 miles, and the Han enlarged the network even farther. These roads were not simply dirt paths. China’s varied terrain required stone bridges, trestles, reinforcements over or through mountains, and roadways suspended from wooden posts to run along cliffs. Illustrations of these appear on the walls of Han tombs (Fig. 2). Similarly, Han funerary inscriptions for local officials or worthies cite their efforts in creating road networks. The transportation system included rest houses where travelers could eat and sleep, as well as relay buildings and post stations where messengers exchanged exhausted horses for fresh ones.

From the Shuihudi legal documents we know that the Qin set up checkpoints along the roads where travelers had to pay a tax and show passports in order to continue. This institution lasted into the Han dynasty. Records show that passports were sometimes forged, and in times of famine passport restrictions for those transporting grain were waived. Several texts speak of passports for going into or out of the capital—

and post stations where messengers exchanged exhausted horses for fresh ones.

From the Shuihudi legal documents we know that the Qin set up checkpoints along the roads where travelers had to pay a tax and show passports in order to continue. This institution lasted into the Han dynasty. Records show that passports were sometimes forged, and in times of famine passport restrictions for those transporting grain were waived. Several texts speak of passports for going into or out of the capital—
Fig. 2: Official chariot crossing a bridge. The canopy and outrider are markers of status.

Roads allowed movement throughout China, but it was a highly controlled movement to serve the purposes of the state.

The network of roads facilitated a major ritual of unification known as the imperial progress, during which the emperor personally inspected the programs under way throughout his domain. The First Emperor made no fewer than five tours of his new eastern provinces in ten years (Map 5).

In addition to roadways, the Qin used rivers for transport in the north, and built several canals in the Guanzhong region. Travel by water was even more common in the south, where topography made road construction difficult and travel by boat more suitable.
THE PARADOXES OF EMPIRE

depending on the season. During the Warring States period, northern Chinese states had expanded into the grasslands being used by these northern peoples, and had built walls to secure their expansion. As they became increasingly aware of these people to the north and their distinctive mode of life, the Chinese people began to define their own state as “central,” in contrast with an “outer” world defined not merely in terms of geography but also of culture. Just as the Greeks defined themselves through a set of contrasts with their Persian enemies (free vs. slave, stern and hardy vs. effete and sensual), so an emerging sense of contrasts with the “barbarians” played a crucial role in the invention of the Chinese empire.

This sense of contrast was marked by wall building. It culminated in the Qin’s attempt to secure their realm by connecting the earlier walls at the northern frontier into a single defense system. After having driven the northern tribesmen completely out of the great bend in the Yellow River, the Qin put the road builder Meng Tian in charge of building a system of rammed-earth walls and watchtowers to protect this newly conquered territory, as well as the rest of the northern frontier. The wall’s purpose was to hold back the northern tribesmen, particularly the Xiongnu, so that they “no longer dared to come south to pasture their horses and their men dared not take up their bows to avenge their grudges.” Sima Qian’s Shi ji states that Meng Tian commanded 300,000 workers on this project, which was carried out in harsh terrain that was difficult to reach. For every man working at the actual sites of construction, dozens must have been needed to build service roads and transport supplies. Although this structure is often described as the Qin-Han Great Wall, there is no evidence that it ran continuously from Central Asia to the sea, in the manner of the later Ming wall.

The final aspect of centralization was to systematize the extraction of labor and service from the peasants. Taxes took two main forms: a harvest tax and a poll tax. The harvest tax in the early Han amounted to one-fifteenth of the harvest, later lowered to one-thirtieth. While this tax was officially levied on crops, the state lacked the capacity to measure individual harvests, so it was actually levied on the basis of the amount of land owned, multiplied by the expected yield per plot. Even though the tax represented a small percentage of an average harvest, in bad years when the yield was seriously reduced it could have proved a considerable burden.

The capitation (head) tax was usually paid in cash every year. Children
were taxed at half the figure for adults. The Qin used this tax on individuals to roodify behavior. For example, since fathers and adult sons living together were liable to a double tax, they had an incentive to set up separate households, thereby cultivating the maximum possible amount of land. Doubling the number of households, in turn, increased the number of men available for military service.

In addition to paying taxes, the peasants’ second obligation to the state was to provide annual labor service on public projects. Although the ages at which men were liable for such service varied over time, the basic principle was that all adult males had to work without pay for a stipulated period of time (one month per year under the Han) on construction projects and miscellaneous duties in the commanderies and counties. They transported goods such as grain or hemp cloth, built palaces and official quarters, mined or carried the salt and iron that was produced in state-sponsored monopolies, and repaired roads, bridges, and waterways. By the Eastern Han period, this obligation was routinely commuted into a cash payment which was used to hire full-time laborers, who could develop a higher level of skill than peasants serving on rota.

The Han as Qin’s Heir and Negation

When the Qin dynasty collapsed after only two decades, it was succeeded, after several years of civil war, by the Han dynasty. Since the Qin had been the first state to impose its rule on the whole Chinese world, it remained the unique model of how an empire should be administered. The Han dynasty thus inherited many Qin practices. However, the long-term survival of the Han depended on the alteration, usually groping and gradual, of these Qin practices, and the adoption, often unwilling, of new modes of control.

One generation of imperial Qin was not sufficient to eradicate local loyalties and secure universal acceptance of an absolute autocrat. The First Emperor’s Qin was in reality one regional state ruling others; and Qin’s insistence on its unique status blocked the creation of a unitary empire. The ruling houses and leading families of the old Warring States figured both as actors and as foci in the rebellion that toppled the dynasty, and the Han’s subsequent policy of enfeoffment acknowledged the enduring reality of the old Warring States. The emergence of a true emperorship would require considerable changes.

The humble background of the Han founder, Liu Bang, which at first appeared as a weakness, ultimately proved to be an asset. The Liu family originated in Chu, but Liu Bang (later known as Emperor Han Gaozu) set up his first capital in Luoyang and then moved, for strategic considerations, to Guanzhong. Thus, from the very beginning the Han dynasty was defined by the absence of ties to any locality. Its claims to rule were based entirely on the merit and potency of the founder and the transmission of these traits down through the generations of the Liu clan.

The beginnings of the re-invention of the ruler appear in a discussion in the Shi ji of how he triumphed over his chief rival, Xiang Yu:

Gaozu held a banquet in the Southern Palace of Luoyang. He said, “My lords and commanders, speak frankly to me and dare to hide nothing. Why did I gain the empire? Why did Xiang Yu lose it?” Gao Qi and Wang Ling replied, “Your majesty is kind and loving. But when you sent someone to attack a city or occupy territory, you gave them what they conquered, sharing your gains with the whole world. Xiang Yu was jealous of worth and ability. He harmed those who achieved merit and was suspicious of the worthy. When victorious in battle he gave others no credit, and when he obtained land he gave others no benefit. This is why he lost the empire.”

. . . Gaozu said, “You have recognized one point, but failed to recognize a second. As for calculating strategies within the commander’s tent and thereby assuring victory a thousand miles away, I am not as good as Zhang Liang. As for ordering a state, making the people content, providing rations for troops and assuring that supply lines are not cut, I am not as good as Xiao He. As for assembling a million-man army, winning every battle fought, and taking every city attacked, I am not as good as Han Xin. These three are great men, and I was able to employ them. That is why I gained the empire. Xiang Yu had only Fan Zeng and he could not use him. That is why he was slain by me.”

The hallmarks of the dynastic founder, and by extension the rules, were his defeat of the Qin and his willingness to share success with his followers. The ruler brought peace to the world, and gathered the most talented men of the realm. These ideas had been elaborated by Warring States political theorists, and some had already figured in Qin stone inscriptions. They justified rule through the monarch’s claims to the highest excel-
lence, as demonstrated by his achievement of universal order and by his generosity in sharing its fruits.

As with the First Emperor, appeals to worldly success were supplemented with claims to divine sanction, although in the Han dynasty these took the form of supernatural assistance more than cosmic process. Writing a century after the Han founding, Sima Qian related that Emperor Gaozu's mother had been impregnated by a dragon, the Red God (di). Consequently Gaozu had a remarkable physiognomy that presaged his rise to world rulership, and multi-colored clouds or dragons hovered above him. On his deathbed Gaozu attributed his miraculous rise to the support of Heaven. Finally, the Han court followed Qin's adoption of the Five Phases theory, claiming that their rise to power signaled the ascent of a new cosmic phase. This theory was prefigured in the story that when Gaozu, son of the Red God, first rebelled against Qin he slew a great serpent that turned out to be the son of the White God. The succession of the god of one color by another marked the conquest of one phase and the new birth of a new cosmic phase.

Consequently Gaozu had a remarkable physiognomy that presaged his rise to world rulership, and multi-colored clouds or dragons hovered above him. On his deathbed Gaozu attributed his miraculous rise to the support of Heaven. Finally, the Han court followed Qin's adoption of the Five Phases theory, claiming that their rise to power signaled the ascent of a new cosmic phase. This theory was prefigured in the story that when Gaozu, son of the Red God, first rebelled against Qin he slew a great serpent that turned out to be the son of the White God. The succession of the god of one color by another marked the conquest of one phase and the new birth of a new cosmic phase.

...
had no effective base of independent power. Far from developing the power to check the emperor or significantly affect policy, the bureaucrats of early imperial China sank into impotence, serving only to execute policies formulated by others.

As chief administrator, high judge, and chief priest, the emperor knew no limits to his authority except the not-inconsiderable ones imposed by biology. Since he was the descendant of earlier emperors, his proposals for major changes in law or cult could be criticized as unfilial. Yet, throughout the Han dynasty, whenever an emperor chose to alter the practices of his ancestors, he was able to do so. Nevertheless, emperors relied on other people to provide them with information, and they were thus constrained by their ignorance of the world outside the court. They also depended upon officials to carry out their commands in distant provinces. Similarly, many emperors, like other people, preferred leisure to work, and were happy to leave the governing to others.

And perhaps most importantly, as long as an emperor was young, power devolved to whoever could speak in his name. Since it was in the interest of the court to have a weak emperor in power, Han history is marked by an increasing tendency toward young emperors. Several early deaths of emperors or heirs even suggest the possibility of murder as a means of securing a pliable ruler. This reached a climax in the last century of the dynasty, when no adult ever acceded to the throne. But, even when the emperor was incapable of ruling in his own right, he remained the sole source of authority at court, so it was the eunuchs or affines controlling his person who dominated government policy. The emperor continued to be the sole locus of authority even at the very end of the Han, when competing warlords struggled to gain possession of the last boy emperor.

In addition to strengthening the institution of the emperor, the Han government carried forward virtually all the policies by which the Qin had sought to impose unity on its newly conquered realm. The unified Qin script was used for writing, though simplification continued. The Qin imperial academy, designed to make the capital the center of intellectual life, also endured, although its intellectual range and its links to office holding were modified. Similarly, the empire-wide legal code remained a central tool of imperial unification. Although the Han initially attempted to simplify Qin laws and make them less brutal, it soon reverted to largely following the Qin pattern.

The Han also pursued the Qin policies of standard measures and coinage. Models used to fix the state-sanctioned units of measure employed in the market have been found in several Han tombs. The Qin ban liang gave way to the smaller 'wu zhu' coin in the Han. This coin weighed five zhu (hence its name), about three grams, and it continued in use until the Tang dynasty (618-906 A.D.). The government monopolized coin production, and the quality of the coins was so good that forgeries eventually became unprofitable. Coins were also edged with a hard lip to prevent forgers from clipping bits off of coins, which could then be used to cast new ones.

In the last century of the Western Han, according to one report, twenty-eight billion coins were made. Such large-scale minting is surprising, although the mandatory payment in coins of capititation and other taxes may help explain it. Still, this vast amount of currency suggests a considerable monetization of the economy, which was only possible through the government's ability to impose a uniform, abstracted measure of value in the form of denominated pieces of metal. In the Eastern Han, gifts from the emperor and personal wealth were routinely measured in cash, and disaster relief—such as burying flood victims—was awarded in terms of so many coins per head. Coinage also facilitated the commutation of the one-month period of labor service and military duty into a cash payment that the government used to hire full-time professionals.

As in so many other things, the Han carried forward the Qin calendar. However, in 104 B.C. Emperor Wu declared a "Grand Beginning" for a new phase in the Five Phase cycle, and he had the calendar modified accordingly. He also initiated the use of reign periods named for a great event or achievement that the emperor wanted to immortalize. In addition to the "Grand Beginning," he declared an "Original Feng" (yuan feng) for his first performance of the feng and shan sacrifices, and so on. This inscribing of the emperor and his achievements into the structure of time was a significant element in the creation of a common imperial culture. Two further refinements to the calendar were made in the Xin and Eastern Han dynasties, as the measurement of time and the observation of natural cycles in the heavens became more and more precise.

We take accurate calendars for granted today, but they required millennia of careful astronomical observation and correction. Precise calendars were needed in the Han to control payment of salaries, timing of transfers or promotions, and granting of leaves from office. They were also necessary at the frontiers to track military duty and to co-ordinate actions across the northern border. Chinese calendars were based on the lunar...
narrow month, but since the lunar month varies between twenty-nine and thirty days, a formal calendar ensured that everyone in the empire knew which months were twenty-nine days and which ones were thirty. And since the solar year of approximately three hundred and sixty-five days, which controls the seasons, is not precisely twelve lunar months, every few years an extra "intercalary" month was added to synchronize the two. Failure to synchronize with what we today call a "leap year" would have meant, for example, that the first month of the year, which marked the beginning of spring, would arrive a few days earlier every year until eventually it would fall in mid-winter.

The Han inherited the Qin practice of levying a cash capitation tax, and of setting tax rates to influence people's behavior. To encourage marriage, the early Western Han imposed a poll tax on unmarried women between the ages of fifteen and thirty that was five times the normal tax. In the Eastern Han, women who had given birth received a three-year tax exemption and their husbands a one-year exemption—measures aimed at increasing the population. Double taxes on merchants sought to discourage that career, and tax exemptions for the elderly expressed filial piety. However, such taxes could modify behavior in unforeseen ways. When some parents started killing their babies in order to avoid paying taxes, the government eventually exempted children under six years of age from the capitation tax.11

The government probably collected taxes in cash because it was easier to transport than large amounts of grain. However, coming up with enough cash for taxes required that peasants either perform extra work for wages or sell their grain. Wage labor was sometimes available, but selling produce was the most common way to earn tax money. In good years, prices for grain went down, and peasants had to sell a larger proportion of their harvest to pay the tax. In bad years they risked starvation when they sold their meager harvest to meet their obligations. The cash tax eventually ruined the peasantry and was a major factor in the rise of landlordism. One unresolved question is how or where peasants sold their crop. Those living near a city or large town could have taken their produce to market, but those farther away probably sold their grain to wealthy local families or to mobile merchants, who exploited the poor farmers' need for cash to impose a low price.

Living in the shadow of Qin's fall and dependent on his own allies, the Han founder had enfeoffed his major followers as kings, reserving for himself only the key strategic area of Guanzhong. Although he devised pretexts to destroy his former allies and replace them with his own kin, for the first half-century of the Han dynasty semi-independent kings ruled more than half the empire. Only after the defeat of the feudal states in 154 B.C. did the Han recreate a truly unitary empire. Over the two and a half centuries that followed, the consequences of political unification forced them gradually to shift away from the Qin model in several basic ways.

The first shift was the abandonment of universal military service and the associated direct rule of the peasant population. The mass mobilization of peasants for military service—the organizing principle of the Warring States polity and the Qin state—remained useful until the defeat of the feudal states in 154 B.C. Subsequently, general war inside China ceased to be a real possibility. For the war that the Han did have to fight—against the nomadic Xiongnu at the northern frontier—an army of infantry was useless and impossible to provision. Moreover, short terms of duty could not maintain standing garrisons, and horsemanship and expertise with the crossbow—necessary military skills by this time—could not be gained under the old system of one or two years of active service followed by brief, annual training sessions. To man garrisons and mount long expeditions into the grasslands required a new form of army (Fig. 5).

Gradually the Han ceased mobilizing and training peasants, instead levying a tax to hire long-term professionals and to recruit non-Chinese cavalry. When rebellions against Wang Mang demonstrated that armed peasant levies within the interior of China could threaten the imperial court, the routine mobilization and training of peasants was abolished altogether, along with the offices associated with this practice. From then until the end of imperial China, no government restored the practice of imposing military service on the peasantry.12

A second major shift after 154 B.C. was in state-sponsored patronage of the arts and literature. The Warring States polity had been an engine of war, and the maxim that guided policies and justified authority was "enrich the state and make the army strong." With the disappearance of the feudal states in 154 B.C., the old justification through military power faded. Instead, the state increasingly claimed to rule as the patron of a Chinese civilization embodied in the canon, the imperial academy, and the classical virtues. Thus the devotion of the state and its agents to the defense and extension of the cultural patrimony became central to the imperial project. In the reign of Emperor Wu, the office of academicians was restricted to students of the Zhou classics—in practice, largely...
Confucians. By the end of the Western Han more than 30,000 students attended the imperial academy, and it had become one of the primary routes to court office. The canon was even more highly honored under Wang Mang, who claimed to rule as a Confucian sage and established the cult of Heaven. Under the Eastern Han, the texts inherited from Zhou became the crown of the imperial edifice.\(^{13}\)

The final major shift in the Han order was the rise of a new form of elite that combined a commitment to imperial service with local power based on land and social networks. Unlike the end of the peasant levy and the development of the imperial academy, this change had no basis in imperial policies and indeed was actively opposed by the Western Han court. However, in the long run it proved to be the most crucial change, the one that allowed the imperial system to survive the downfall of individual dynasties.

Qin had attempted to break the power of the Warring States elites by moving them to the capital region. Powerful local families had revived during the civil war and the early Han, but Emperor Wu appointed special legal agents charged with their destruction. However, at the same time that he was eliminating the vestiges of earlier elites, his policies were creating a new form of local power. His anti-merchant policies persuaded people to use wealth from trade to buy land. Likewise, any individual who was earning large sums of money from a high office at court or the command of a local prefecture or commandery had an incentive to turn this fleeting plenitude into lasting wealth through investment in real estate. Increased taxes pushed marginal peasants into the arms of money-lenders and ultimately into bankruptcy. Forced to sell their land cheaply to those with cash, they now had to work for these landlords as tenants.

In the last century B.C., the government made a series of laws to limit the concentration of landholding and prevent small-scale freeholders from becoming tenants. This was less out of compassion for the peasantry—whom the state squeezed mercilessly—than out of a desire to maintain its source of taxes and service. Wang Mang tried to nationalize all land and abolish slavery in an attempt to halt the development of landed estates and the rise of locally powerful families. His failure ended the government’s resistance to the rise of landlordism.

Several developments help to explain why landlordism triumphed. Perhaps most important is the fact that the Eastern Han had been established by a coalition of large landowners that included the founding emperor. The eastern-dominated court rejected the military traditions of
Guanzhong, which were closely linked to the state’s reliance on free smallholders. With the abolition of universal military service, control of the individual peasant household ceased to be the basis of state power, and the court’s concern for the free peasantry largely vanished.

Whereas earlier local elites had been detached from and often hostile to the imperial state, many of the new landlords had risen to wealth and eminence through state service. Their newfound family traditions of study and conspicuous morality gave them every hope of maintaining access to office. Entry to the imperial academy or other avenues to office came through periodic recommendations solicited from eminent local families known to the central court or local officials, so powerful landlord families assured themselves of continued access to office through their control of these recommendations. The income from imperial offices allowed them to restore their estates after the partition that followed the death of the head of the family. Since the disappearance of the nobility, only the ruling house practiced primogeniture, while commoner families used partible inheritance, that is, the division of the father’s property among the sons.

Merchants who had shifted their wealth into land followed the same course of action. Consequently, often the same family would run an estate, market the products of that estate or engage in money lending, and educate its sons in the classical texts, with the expectation of securing state service. Their newfound family traditions of conspicuous morality gave them every hope of maintaining access to office. Entry to the imperial academy or other avenues to office came through periodic recommendations solicited from eminent local families known to the central court or local officials, so powerful landlord families assured themselves of continued access to office through their control of these recommendations. The income from imperial offices allowed them to restore their estates after the partition that followed the death of the head of the family. Since the disappearance of the nobility, only the ruling house practiced primogeniture, while commoner families used partible inheritance, that is, the division of the father’s property among the sons.

The Failure of Qin and Its Later Mythology

Qin’s twin role as both the model of empire and a target of criticism was reflected in the historical mythology that grew up around it. Its rapid rise and fall left a mark on all later Chinese thought about Qin and the nature of empire.

Within four years of the First Emperor’s death in 210 B.C., the newly established empire collapsed in general rebellion. Its once invincible armies suffered defeat after defeat, its newly built capital was burned to the ground, and the last Qin ruler was slain. The reasons for this catastrophe were a constant topic of discussion in the early decades of the Han. While these musings often focused on supposed moral or intellectual deficiencies, such as overly cruel laws and the rejection of the wisdom of the ancients, the archaeological and textual evidence exposes these criticisms as self-serving Han propaganda with little relation to Qin policy or its failures. In fact, the Han incorporated Qin practice virtually intact at first, and the few modifications such as simplification of the laws and establishment of fiefs were soon abandoned.

So why did the Qin dynasty fail? The most insightful discussion of this catastrophe is also the earliest. Writing only a couple of decades after the Qin collapse, the early Han scholar Jia Yi argued: “One who conquers the lands of others places priority on deceit and force, but one who brings peace and stability honors obedience to authority. This means that seizing and guarding what you have seized, do not use the same techniques. Qin separated from the Warring States period and became ruler of the whole world, but it did not change its ways or alter its government. Thus, there was no difference in the means by which they conquered and the means by which they tried to hold it.”

For all the ambition of the Qin reforms, with their vision of a new world where measures, laws, and truths flowed from a single source, the implementers of these reforms carried the basic institutions and practices of the Warring States unchanged into the empire. The direct administration of peasant households who were mobilized for military service continued as the organizing principle of the state, with a large servile labor pool formed from those who voted any of the numerous laws. No longer necessary for inter-state warfare, this giant machine for extracting service had become a tool in search of a use.

To occupy these conscripts, the Qin state engaged in an orgy of expansion and building that had little logic except employing Warring States institutions that had been rendered obsolete by their own success. Armies were launched on massive, pointless expeditions to the south, north, and northeast. Colossal projects to construct roads, a new capital, and the First Emperor’s tomb were initiated. Laborers were dispatched to the northern frontier to link old defenses into the first Great Wall. A state created for warfare and expansion, Qin wasted its strength—and alienated its newly conquered people—by fighting and expanding when there were no useful worlds left to conquer. Mutinies by labor gangs led to a general rebellion of Qin officers and people against their rulers, and the first Chinese empire went down in flames only fifteen years after it was created.

The Han, though the heirs of the Qin, needed to dissociate themselves
from the disaster of the first imperial dynasty’s collapse. However, adopting Qin’s practices even while condemning them produced a fundamental contradiction. The Han finally resolved it by dropping their critique of Qin’s institutions and instead demonizing the First Emperor. The failures of Qin were explained by the brutality and megalomania of its founder and the barbarism of the Qin dynasty’s political tradition. The result was a myth about cruel Qin laws that savagely attacked China’s intellectual and political heritage. The Han portrayed themselves as patrons of the classical intellectual traditions and moral government that the First Emperor had tried to destroy.

This myth, however, simply masked the contradictions in the Han position. In painting the First Emperor as a monster, Han writers, along with those of later dynasties, developed literary tropes in which policies that provided the model for imperial practice and ideology figured as evidence of megalomania and villainy. As a result, throughout the history of imperial China the actual characteristics of the political system defined by the First Emperor were condemned as criminal. In their place was erected a moralizing façade, which some have described as the “hypocritization” of Chinese political culture. The remaining history of imperial China thus fell under the sway of a false consciousness of denunciation, focused on making a monster of the man who had provided the very model of imperial rule.

To take one example, the earliest accounts describe the Qin conquest as an attempt to impose the First Emperor’s will upon Heaven and Earth, in a war against nature. Jia Yi describes how the First Emperor “cracked his long whip to drive the universe before him,” “flogged the entire world,” and “shook the four seas”: “He toppled famous walls, killed local leaders, gathered the weapons of the world into Xianyang where he melted them down into bells and to cast twelve statues of giant men, in order to weaken the common people. Then he trod upon Mount Hua as his city wall and used the Yellow River as his moat. Based on this towering wall he gazed down into the fathomless depths and thought that he was secure.”

Sima Qian extended this pattern by describing how the First Emperor desecrated Mount Xiang of trees because a storm caused by the goddess of a local shrine blocked his river passage. He cut through mountains and filled up valleys in order to run a road straight from Jiuyuan in the northwest to Yuyang, near the old Qin capital. When seeking the isles of the immortals, he dreamed that he was wrestling with a sea god, who blocked him. He armed himself and the boats he dispatched with repeating crossbows to kill the whales that threatened his search, and at one point shot and killed one. His practice of ascending numerous peaks and placing stone inscriptions there to recount his merits is yet another form of attempting to impose, or literally inscribe, his will upon the natural world.

Several of these inscriptions contain lines on the theme of commanding nature. One inscription states that the First Emperor’s laws and standards “extend wherever sun and moon shine,” as though these astral bodies were his agents, and that “his blessings reach the oxen and horses.” Another inscription describes how the emperor’s power “shakes the four extremities of the Earth” and “regulates the universe.” A third inscription narrates how the emperor destroyed walls, cut through embankments to open up the courses of rivers, and leveled steep and dangerous defiles to eliminate obstructions. This whole process is described as “fixing the shape of the land.”

The idea that the First Emperor in his hubris sought to control the universe became a standard theme in later Chinese literature. When Nanjing became a capital in the fourth century A.D., accounts told how in his travels the First Emperor had passed through the Nanjing region and learned that it had the topography of a future capital. In order to thwart this prophecy, which entailed the fall of his dynasty, the emperor commanded that the top of a mountain be lopped off. Other accounts describe his attempts to construct a bridge across the eastern sea in order to reach the isles of the immortals. Jiang Yan’s sixth-century A.D. “Rhapsody on Re sentiment” repeats much of Jia Yi and Sima Qian’s criticism, and then tells how the First Emperor constructed a bridge from sea turtles. A century later the poet Li Bo (Li Bai) employed a version in which a sorcerer brought stones to life, and the First Emperor whipped them in order to make them march into the sea to form his bridge. In this account he also tried to shoot a whale that blocked his passage to the isles.

The early stories treat the First Emperor as a megalomaniac. The later poems employ him as an Ozymandias figure, ending with reflections on his death and the collapse of his works. Nevertheless, they highlight unacknowledged aspects of emperorship. First, the idea that the emperor’s rule included the entire natural world, including trees and rocks, was generally accepted in imperial China. Second, the vision of the emperor commanding powerful spirits and making war on deities was not limited to the First Emperor. For example, the greatest poet of the Western Han,
Sima Xiangru, wrote a “Great Man Rhapsody” in which he depicted Emperor Wu commanding a retinue of gods to storm the gates of Heaven and carry off a jade maiden. Emperor Wu’s own poem on sealing up the breach in the Yellow River’s dike portrays him commanding the god of the river. Finally, the building of a canonical imperial capital—with its rectangular walls, grids, and towers—entails the imposition of imperial will upon the landscape. The practices of the First Emperor in imperial city design, such as the building of palaces on celestial patterns and the incorporation of replica palaces or their stylistic elements from around the empire, were carried forward in the Han and later dynasties.

While the First Emperor’s actions were a topic for censure, they also provided an unacknowledged pattern for later imperial power, a pure case or ideal type at the origin which later rulers emulated in muted, disguised versions. This role of the First Emperor as unacknowledged model embodies in a single mythic figure the hidden role of Qin as prototype for a permanent Chinese empire.

**THE CITY**

The city is one of the largest structures on earth and the realm of artifice par excellence, the place where people can model their visions of the ideal society and the cosmos. With its walls designed to separate people from their surroundings, the city represents a uniquely human space, filled with the products and practices that make up a civilization. Major loci of political power, urban centers provide both the gathering place for rulers and administrators and the stage on which they display their authority. And in the realm of trade, cities are focal points of circulation and exchange, drawing in people and precious objects and in turn producing new goods that will flow outward to other cities or to lesser clusters of human habitation.

Prior to the Warring States period, Chinese cities were cultic and political entities inhabited by the nobility and their followers. They were, for the most part, lineage centers, with a population of at most a few tens of thousands and a single city wall. With the collapse of Zhou royal power, most of these cultic centers became independent city-states ruled by a ducal house and its noble followers who controlled the subject populations of their immediate hinterlands. Only gradually were these city-states incorporated into the large territories of the fifth-century B.C. Warring States.

**Recent archaeological excavations show that the number and complexity of cities increased during the Warring States period, as urban population,**