

China in Time and Space

What do we mean by China? Who are the Chinese? At first sight, you may think these are somewhat superfluous questions (like asking Socrates if Athens is located in Greece). But the issue merits some consideration. The history of China, like that of Europe, is not a linear story of one static, everlasting and stubbornly uniform continent. An oft-repeated line in history books, travel and museum guides and in television documentaries runs: ‘What sets China apart from the rest of the world is the fact that it boasts a continuous civilization running through at least two and a half millennia’ (and preferably longer). It is no surprise to see such cultural pride invoked on occasions by Chinese politicians, diplomats and other public figures. And, yes, many things have an admirably long history in China. But, as the social historian Wolfram Eberhard once pointed out, the greatness of a civilization is established by its achievements, not by claims to the longest history. To be sure, China has achieved a great deal. But claims to being the ‘oldest living civilization’ on the basis of a ‘longest continuous history’ can also offer a licence for veiled or misplaced cultural exceptionalism.

We could, and probably should, be open to alternative views. One would be to point out that the history of China

consists of moments of political and geographical union interspersed by centuries of division. In the period from the early third to the mid tenth century CE alone, more than forty-five dynasties ruled over parts or all of its territory. Further back in time, more than ten centuries had already elapsed before China would emerge for the first time as an empire in 221 BCE. China's historical continuity, therefore, is marked by a striking measure of discontinuity. For large swathes of time, China has been ruled by regimes whose leading elites and officials were not ethnically Chinese. On that account, the Mongols and Manchus alone already take up nearly four centuries on China's historical chronology (the Yuan and Qing dynasties).

To counter this image of China as a uniform giant – either sleeping, restless or rising – it is more useful to think of its history as a history of regions, to imagine its people as regionally and often ethnically diverse, and to look at those in power as agents charged with the challenging task of keeping the regions in line with the demands of the political centre. The last has been the single most pressing mission of any ruling house that has governed China, be it the imperial courts of the past or the Communist Party and those at the helm today. Throughout China's long history, a pronounced regional consciousness has never really disappeared. The division between north and south is one of its constants. The gradual southward expansion of the Han Chinese from their place of origin in the Yellow River basin was of key importance. In the north, political, social and economic developments were shaped against the threat of invasions by non-Chinese nomads. The much more scarcely populated western regions

were a corridor to Central Asia. At certain stages, these outlying edges of the Chinese empire ranked among the most multi-ethnic and multilingual areas anywhere in the pre-modern world. In today's China, regionalism continues to be high on the political agenda, reflected, for instance, in renewed interest in local heritage and state-sponsored approaches to the study of local cultures. In short, when we speak of 'China', or of people and things as 'Chinese', these are to some extent terms of convenience we use to refer to the peoples and geography within the evolving political borders of what has come to correspond roughly to the People's Republic of China today.

The origins of the term 'China' itself remain disputed. One widely held view has been that it is related to Qin, the name of the state that founded the first unified empire. But a Sanskrit term, *Cīna*, already appears in Indian sources that may go back two centuries earlier. Before the unification of the Chinese empire in 221 BCE and the first long-lasting Han dynasty, few would have identified themselves as 'Chinese'. If you hailed from the region corresponding to present-day Shandong, for instance, you would have introduced yourself as a person from Qi, or, in the case of Confucius, a person from Lu. As a southerner you would be known as coming from Chu, Ba or Yue. If you were born in the region around today's Beijing, you came from Yan (the name still figures in the brand name of a popular Beijing beer). As in China today, there is plenty of evidence in ancient texts that people were aware of linguistic diversity. Sources mention the peculiar nature of different dialects and the use of translators. Anecdotes survive that turn multilingualism and speech confusion into a source of entertainment or moral counsel. One

story tells of a man from Zhou who tried to sell some freshly dressed rats to a merchant from Zheng. The latter politely declined the offer once he realized that he had mistaken the Zhou word for ‘rats’ for the similar-sounding Zheng word for ‘unpolished jade’ (*Zhanguo ce*, Qin 100). What you hear is not always what you get. You cannot eat jade (unless you are an immortal), and a rat would make an odd addition to the jewellery box. At the time when China’s major thinkers began to formulate their ideas, the state of Zhou and some of its immediate neighbours in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River came to be identified as *Zhongguo*, translated in the plural as the ‘Central Kingdoms’. The use of the same toponym to refer to China as the ‘Middle Kingdom’ or nation state would have to wait until Ming, Qing and modern times. More often, the known civilized world that was within reach of the monarch was known as ‘All under Heaven’ (*Tianxia*). So while philosophers and statesmen often spoke of human nature and human behaviour in a more or less universal manner, there was a sense in ancient China that the region, its soil and local climate influenced not only the way people looked, but also their character. To be born in the Central Kingdoms, according to some at least, came with temperamental advantages:

People who live in regions of hard soil are hard and unyielding; people who live on easily worked soil are fat. People who live on lumpy soil are large; people who live on sandy soil are small. People who live on fertile soil are beautiful; people who live on barren soil are ugly. People who live on level ground are clever ... People in

the east are tall and large, they become knowledgeable early but are not long-lived ... People in the south mature early but die young ... People in the west are daring but not humane ... People in the north are stupid as birds or beasts but are long-lived ... People in the centre are clever and sage-like and are good at government.

(*Huainanzi* 4.9, 4.13)

With these caveats in mind, I refer to the plurality of peoples and the protagonists in this book as Chinese and to the continent on which they lived and live as geographical China.

Historical setting

Chinese civilization began in the loess highlands around the great bend of the Yellow River and the Wei river valley. The Shang dynasty (c.1600–c.1045 BCE), which produced the oldest forms of writing in the shape of oracle bone inscriptions on turtle shells and animal bones, marks the point where history departs from prehistory. The formative phase for the development of Chinese thought starts slightly later, during the Zhou period (c.1045–256 BCE). It culminated in the six or so centuries traditionally referred to as the Warring States and early imperial periods (fifth century BCE to second century CE).

Throughout this book I refer to ‘ancient China’ using a broad brush to cover the period extending from about the ninth century BCE to the second century CE. This thousand-year stretch of history was marked by various stages of state formation. It was a time when China gradually evolved from a confederacy of feudal states into a unified empire, a shape

it retained until 1911 (and which, in some spheres of political life, arguably still holds sway over China today). In accounts of Chinese history, this period is also referred to as the ‘classical’ age, because scholars who first studied China compared its influence on Chinese civilization to that of the Graeco-Roman period in the history of the West. In the world of ideas, the Warring States and early imperial period runs parallel to the classical age of Plato, Aristotle and Alexander the Great in ancient Greece. It ends at the time of the Late Republic and the dawn of the Augustan period in Rome.

China’s classical age has exerted a lasting influence on the socio-political and intellectual development of the Chinese world. It witnessed the birth of popular and anecdotal literature, the development of historiography and the growth of administrative record-keeping. It was the time when China produced some of its greatest philosophers, and when a canon of texts came together that would directly, or indirectly, shape the thinking of every person of influence in China for centuries to come. This was also the age when a number of renowned political figures took centre stage to instigate policies and inaugurate institutions that would leave an indelible mark on Chinese history. Another label that has been used to describe the centuries during which these ideas emerged is the Axial Age, a term coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) to refer to a period of four or five centuries during which philosophical ideas exploded simultaneously, and without direct contact, from the Graeco-Roman world, across Eurasia, to India and China.

Ancient China produced a chain of ideas that was to inform the way in which the Chinese have viewed the world ever

since. Some of the individuals we will encounter survive as enduring figures in China's intellectual and cultural heritage. But to present Chinese thought simply as a history of significant figures, their works and their influence upon the world of ideas would not do justice to its richness. Nor would we be able to account for its diversity and productivity if we relied only on those texts later generations and scholars have dubbed 'philosophical' (a term even philosophers fight over!). Much is to be found between the cracks of scholastic philosophy.

When, during the late second century BCE, the historian Sima Tan (d. c.110 BCE) looked back at ancient China's philosophical landscape, he divided it up into six schools or lineages: the School of Yin-Yang, the Confucians, Mohists, Legalists, the 'School of Names' (sophists or logicians) and the Daoists. Together with other masters and specialists, including military strategists, the world of thought in ancient China came to be known as that of 'One Hundred Schools' (*bai jia*) of thought ('one hundred' being a common term for 'many'). Most textbooks, in both the East and West, remain deeply influenced by this paradigm. As a term, the 'One Hundred Schools' took on a life of its own. Mao Zedong drew on the image of ancient China's roaming debaters to launch his Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956 ('let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend'), only to abort the short-lived movement when he concluded that the criticism offered was unhealthy and damaging to his authority.

Mao aside, the 'one hundred' label acknowledges the wide variety of thinkers that were dotted across China during the classical period. And it is correct to identify Confucianists, Daoists and Legalists as the most influential among them.

Yet reducing ancient Chinese thought into a neatly defined world of 'schools' is problematic. It suggests that ideas are appropriated by one individual or can be attributed exclusively to one particular thinker or text. In recent years, scholars have questioned the very concept of a 'philosophical school' as a useful means of understanding how ideas were spread and made part of the canon in ancient China. Ideas tended to be transmitted through lineages of masters and disciples who gathered together around the study of certain texts and commentaries. But, as we shall see, in reality both the ideas and the texts in which they are preserved are messier and, at times, even a hybrid mixture of different concepts. Ideas can bounce off and back into each other in an innovative and unpredictable way. Attributing them to one school rather than another often does little to help us appreciate what they mean. We also need to keep in mind that the historical information we have on the lives and deeds of many, if not most, of ancient China's key thinkers is very limited. Explaining ideas as direct accounts from the mouth or brush of one particular person often proves problematic.

Nevertheless, some thinkers and strands of thought were clearly reacting to opposing views. In that sense, it is fine to think of a 'school' as a retrospective way of grouping together people who have a common stance on certain issues or who draw on the same figures, concepts or texts. The dialogue was one of the main formats in which ideas were transmitted. These could be real or imaginary interchanges between a master and a disciple, a ruler and a minister, a court official and his superior, or between a commentary and a prior version of a text. Dialogues were also choreographed between

fictional characters, culture heroes, or figures from the distant and legendary past. Thus ideas in ancient China seem to move like oil patches on the surface of water: they appear cohesive at one moment, only to be pulled in different directions, forming new outlines, until they are scattered around, or bubble up and reconnect to form a new patch. To understand the social and political background that shaped much of this intellectual landscape, a brief review of certain key facts, individuals and events may help by way of historical context.

THE SHANG

The oldest written records available in China today are divination inscriptions (formulas seeking to predict the outcome of events) incised onto cattle bone and turtle shell. These brief inscriptions date mostly from the twelfth to the mid eleventh century BCE. Well over two hundred thousand fragments have been attested since they came to the attention of scholars in the late nineteenth century. Oracle bone inscriptions are very short and not reflective in nature, but they do tell us something about the religion of the Shang people and their view of the world. The Shang kings revered as their supreme power a spirit named Di, who presided over a host of nature spirits. The Shang pantheon included spirits that would come to occupy an important role in Chinese religion in later times, such as powers linked to the soil, mountains or rivers. The topics of the oracle bone inscriptions are wide-ranging. They show how the Shang kings sought guidance on all sorts of issues, from the weather, war, hunting and the health of the king and his consorts to the timing of

sacrifices to ancestors, the issuing of commands and the offering and receipt of gifts. Priests would crack the turtle shells and cattle scapulae using a hot poker and interpret these cracks, while answers to the questions they posed were written down on the bone.

The Shang people had a ten-day week. Large amounts of livestock (including prisoners of war who were counted by the heads or ears) were set apart to maintain ritual sacrifices to the spirits and the royal ancestors. These meats were offered together with ale. Royal ancestors carried much weight in the scheduling of sacrifices to which their spirits were invited. Tablets that represented their souls were used to receive offerings during rituals. These spirit tablets were housed in temples. The Shang conceived of the world as a central square around which lay four areas or 'lands' (east, south, west and north). By the time of the oracle bones, Shang society was primarily agricultural with people living in small settlements surrounded by fields. The Shang could mobilize troops of around three to five thousand warriors, commanded by officers that travelled the battlefield in light horse-drawn chariots. Chariots, along with ceremonial bronzes – vessels that held offerings – and oracle bone inscriptions, continue to be found today.

Several elements that would become important in Chinese thought in the following centuries are already evident in the Shang world. One is the notion that nature is inhabited by spirit powers that need to be placated or beseeched to secure a good outcome for future events. Another is the vital role of ancestors in bridging the gap between the human world and a seemingly distant and whimsical supreme spirit

force. Then there is the key role played by the offering of sacrifices to forge relationships with ancestral and other spirits. Shang religion already illustrates that the economic resources needed to sustain such rituals were substantial: soothing the spirits did not come cheap. The need for rituals, paired with calls to justify or moderate ritual expenditure, would become one of the threads that run through ethical discussions of many thinkers in the classical period. At some point during the ninth century BCE, there were already calls for greater austerity on sacrificial occasions. (We must assume that some turned into extravagant feasts.) Bronze ceremonial vessels made to hold alcohol become less prominent in the archaeological record. We can be grateful to the Shang for keeping archives of their inscribed bones. Indeed, Shang diviners may have been China's first bureaucrats. Record-keeping would emerge as a central activity in China's courts of power, as would the manipulation of records. After all, by the end of the dynasty the Shang king appears as virtually the sole diviner to consult the spirits. Those who commanded mantic powers in order to solicit the spirits in a way that might elicit the disapproval of the king were unlikely to have a long career.

THE ZHOU

Around 1045 BCE, the Shang kings were overthrown by their western neighbours, the Zhou, who established their power base along the Yellow River in north-west China (present-day Gansu) but soon moved east towards the fertile lower Wei river valley (in present-day Shaanxi). They developed agricultural skills and made advances in irrigation technology.

The Zhou identified Heaven (*Tian*), the powers of the sky, as their supreme authority. Heaven was not a transcendent or personified deity but an overawing force that governed all. Trying to gauge the mood and follow the will and powers of Heaven would become a major theme in Chinese political thought. Being abandoned by Heaven became a euphemism for meeting one's political demise.

The first three centuries following the fall of the Shang are known in Chinese historiography as the Western Zhou period. The Zhou realm was a network of city states and the term feudalism is often mooted to describe Zhou society on the basis of parallels that can be drawn with medieval Europe, such as the central role of a hereditary warrior nobility, and a system of patronage and protection in return for labour and service. Crucially, the Zhou king acted as the nominal and ritual head of the entire polity and kinship determined succession. The Zhou nobility, together with the king, topped the social hierarchy. Members of the Zhou royal family received fiefs. Great noble families supplied warriors drawn from domains they had been granted and where they kept vassals and retainers. It was a world governed by alliances between aristocratic lords and overlords, based on a duty of allegiance to the Zhou house, and sealed by means of rituals.

In addition to retrospective accounts written during later periods, our main sources for the early Zhou period are its inscriptions cast in bronze vessels. The earliest parts of what later became known as the Five 'Confucian' Classics (parts of *The Book of Changes* and *The Book of Documents*, and most of the *The Book of Odes*) can also be dated to the

earliest centuries of the Zhou dynasty. The Shang people produced magnificent bronze vessels (I recommend a visit to the Shanghai Museum or the Palace Museum in Taipei), but only a few of these bronzes are inscribed. The Zhou, however, produced thousands of vessels with commemorative inscriptions on the inside. These record the investiture of kings, sacrificial ceremonies and royal donations, or they commemorate significant events. The vessels vary in size and shape depending on their intended use (the largest known vessel weighs over eight hundred kilograms). Unsurprisingly, most inscriptions end with a wish that the Zhou king and his offspring will be blessed and will reign for many more generations. The volume of surviving bronzes is staggering, with some twelve thousand Zhou-period vessels still in existence today. Every year, vessels hidden from view in China's soil for over two millennia keep turning up.

Politically, the early Zhou period is known for three figures who would become the subject of countless historical analogies, and the focus in equal measure of praise or blame in later times. King Wen (*fl.* 1056–1050 BCE), the 'civil' king, ruled Zhou during the last days of the Shang. He is regarded as a ruler of high moral calibre for having made the case that the last drunk and debauched kings of the Shang could be rightfully unseated. King Wen would become known as a paragon of wisdom and benign administration. The second figure was the founding King Wu (*fl.* 1045–1043 BCE), the 'martial' king, who conquered the Shang at the Battle of Muye and built a new capital. The third figure, and the one that gained the widest renown as a wise statesman, was King Wu's brother, the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong; *fl.* 1046–1036 BCE). The Duke

of Zhou epitomizes the height of enlightened statecraft. As regent over the inexperienced crown prince, King Cheng, he developed Zhou institutions and would become known in later times as the model of the sage-ruler, adviser, overseer and trusted confidant. His decision to step aside when his young nephew came of age played to an ideal that was much discussed in later Chinese political history, namely the notion that ceding power to a more legitimate, and hence more virtuous, ruler was the right thing to do. The early Zhou period would be invoked, most notably by Confucius (551–479 BCE), as a golden age during which the world (‘All under Heaven’) was united under the governance of an enlightened ruler (the ‘Son of Heaven’): ‘The Zhou dynasty modelled itself on the example of two preceding dynasties. What a splendid civilization; I am a follower of Zhou!’ (*An.* 3.14).

The year 771 BCE is usually presented as a second phase in the history of the Zhou. This is when the royal capital was moved from west to east, from Hao (near present-day Xi’an) to the area of present-day Luoyang in Henan province. Traditional historiography divides the Eastern Zhou period into the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu) period and the era of the Warring States (Zhanguo). The Zhou world continued to be a delicately balanced confederacy of local powers, a world of multiple interests and at times conflicting identities, as the following anecdote drives home:

Once there was a man from Wen who migrated to Zhou, but Zhou would not let him in. ‘Are you a foreigner [literally, a guest],’ they asked him. ‘No, I am a native [literally, a host],’ he replied. Then he was asked what

lane he lived in, but he appeared not to know. So an official took him off to prison. The ruler sent someone to question him: ‘Why did you call yourself a native when you are in fact a foreigner?’ The man replied: ‘When I was young and studied *The Book of Odes*, I chanted the following verses from it: “All land underneath Heaven is the king’s land. To the far shores of the Earth every person is the king’s servant.” Since Zhou today rules All under Heaven and I am a servant of the Son of Heaven, how then can I be considered a foreigner? That’s why I said that I was a native.’ The ruler of Zhou thereupon ordered his officer to set the man free. (*Zhanguo ce*, Zhou 42)

This Zhou version of ‘all men are brethren’ did not last, however. Increasingly, the Zhou kings held on to their position as overlords only nominally. As they failed to control local rulers, Zhou territory disintegrated into a patchwork of hundreds of territorial units and mini-states. For nearly five centuries, contending states and their professional armies engaged in a relentless and endlessly complex sequence of rivalries, annexations, battles, treaties and alliances. It is therefore fitting that the two and a half centuries (481–221 BCE) during which seven major states (Yan, Qi, Wei, Zhao, Hann, Qin and Chu) contended for supremacy should be known as the Warring States period.

As cohesion between the Zhou city states and their networks of allied vassal states broke down, in its place emerged the warring state: ‘warring’ because warfare and gaining military supremacy became a core mission; ‘state’ because new rulers proclaimed the territorial state as their ambition. Thus

the warring state's goal was to gain supremacy over its rivals by any means – strategic, military or otherwise. The opening lines of the most famous military classic from the period, *Master Sun's Art of Warfare* (*Sunzi bing fa*), sum it up with chilling conviction: 'Warfare is the greatest affair of state, it is the basis of life and death, and the way to survival or extinction. Therefore it is a subject of inquiry that cannot be left un-investigated.' China's masters of philosophy were a product of this age of profound political and military turbulence. The chaos around them must have felt like the end of the world. Many thinkers were descended from the now jobless ranks of lower-level aristocratic families. As travelling scholar-knights and men of service, they roamed from court to court to sell their ideas to whoever would grant them sustenance and patronage. 'Surely, old man,' a king in the opening passage of the *Mencius* states, 'you haven't come all this way without wanting to tell me how I can benefit my state?' (*Mencius* 1A.1).

Instead of a feudal confederation of city states and hegemons bound together through kinship and ritual obligations, China had now become a conglomerate of states that each had their own army, institutions, borders and registered population. Power came to be concentrated in the hands of a single monarch who surrounded himself with advisers and ministers. Even more than during the preceding aristocratic age, the state and its politics were entirely ruler-centred. Society was thought to fare best under monarchic rule: a single and unique ruler. Virtually all statesmen and philosophers of the time brooded over what would become a central tenet in Chinese political thought: political regimes operate most efficiently when power is concentrated in the hands of a single ruler and



Map 1.1

Map of pre-imperial China during the Warring States period.

- Defensive Walls
- Warring State territories
- Today's borders



his court, and when this ruler is assisted by a salaried officialdom that implements the will of the centre across the land.

This notion that ultimate power should issue from and reside in one individual or institution reverberates up until today. The Chinese language of the time had a rich assortment of words touching on the idea of unity (terms such as oneness, harmony, uniting, bringing together, regarding as one, making similar, unify, etc.). Whatever the differences in emphasis or rhetoric that successive Chinese ruling elites have been keen to promote, underpinning them all is an unwavering conviction that institutions ought to support one strong and sole leader. From its inception the state in China conceived itself as autocratic, one in which strong rulers, assisted by professional armies and a bureaucracy of administrators, held sway over the populace.

Warring States political thought centred on a desire to break up the interests of great families whose power base derived from the control of local human and economic resources. Qin, a state on the western edges of the Zhou polity, had undertaken to restrain hereditary landholders by dividing parts of its territory into counties that were administered by a magistrate appointed directly by the central government. Several other states had started to curb the powers of their internal fief holders. Yet despite these measures, throughout the Warring States period and into the early empires, the central government never managed to eradicate hereditary landownership completely. Ancient China remained a patchwork of centrally controlled territory coexisting with hereditary land.

After a gruelling series of military campaigns that lasted two decades, the state of Qin emerged as the dominant player. In

221 BCE, it brought to an end centuries of division and warfare by turning a multi-state world into a unified empire for the first time. Just as states and cities had built defensive walls around them to guard against attacks by rival armies, so China's most formative thinkers had carved out their own philosophies and theories of government. An age of unrelenting political upheaval and rampant warlordism had concentrated minds in a way that the comforts of peace and tranquillity might never have done. The philosophers of ancient China had little time to dabble with abstract theories or toy with questions to which there was no immediate answer. They had to address a pressing demand of their time: how does one cultivate and educate people and organize a state to gain advantage over its rivals? These historical circumstances explain why so much of Chinese thought is focused on the social and political, on ethics and etiquette. By the time the state of Qin had joined up large sections of its rival states' defensive walls into the Great Wall of imperial China, the battle of ideas on how human beings should conduct themselves and how to run society had largely been waged. Its core ideas would remain in place, to be tested for centuries to come.

THE QIN

When in 221 BCE King Zheng of Qin proclaimed himself the 'First August Emperor of Qin [Qin Shihuangdi]', he adopted the title of the superior deity of the Shang people (Di). The First Emperor saw himself as semi-divine, a ruler who acted not just as a link between higher powers and the human world, but who embodied the highest powers in person. As the sovereign over all rulers and kings that had come before, Qin

Shihuang aspired to join the ranks of the legendary and immortal gods. The historian Sima Qian (c.145–c.86 BCE) portrays him as a physically imposing figure, with a prominent nose, a chest like a bird of prey and the voice of a jackal. The man who unified China is depicted as a character of little compassion, with the heart of a tiger or a wolf.

The First Emperor rolled out a series of reforms for which he would be both admired and despised by posterity. They were inspired by the ideas of Shang Yang (c.390–338 BCE), the foundational figure of a philosophical tradition later known as Legalism. (We will return to Lord Shang in more detail in Chapter 3.) The names of the entire population would be recorded in household registers to facilitate efficient taxation. This would also allow the state to draw on forced labour for massive building projects. Its subjects would be deployed as peasant-warriors; farming was singled out as the backbone of the economy, but in times of expansionist warfare, the state would mobilize the people into a highly effective military machine. All hereditary titles were to be abolished and personal achievement was to replace hereditary privilege. A draconian criminal justice system that meted out harsh punishments was put in place.

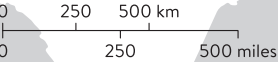
The Qin unified weights and measures and introduced a standard currency. This circular bronze coin with a square hole through the middle (known as the *banliang* or ‘half of sixteen grams’) replaced different currencies that had been in use in other states (coins in the shape of shells, knives and spades, among other things). The new coins could be strung together for easier accounting. The emperor introduced new standards for carts and chariots, including specific axle widths, to ensure



Map 1.2

China during the Qin dynasty.

- Great Wall
- Qin territory
- ⋯ Today's borders



access to roads throughout the empire. A network of imperial highways ran across the empire, believed to have covered as much as six thousand eight hundred kilometres – rivalling the Roman road system. One of these highways, constructed by the general in charge of building the Great Wall, was known as the ‘Straight Road’. It extended eight hundred kilometres north of the Qin capital Xianyang into Inner Mongolia; parts of it can still be seen today. Roads, however, did not mean free movement of people or goods. All travel and migration was subject to police control. Checkpoints were in place, tolls were levied and travellers (including their horses!) needed permits or passports. The new road system allowed Qin Shihuang and later emperors to embark on tours of the empire. These gigantic processions, combined with ritual mountain ascents, were a symbolic way for an emperor to assert his power and vitality to both the population and the spirits. Imperial tours might require years of preparation. During a series of such excursions, the First Emperor left a record to posterity in the form of inscriptions cut into stone stelae (columns or slabs with commemorative inscriptions) which he had placed on mountains in the eastern part of his empire. They leave a telling imprint of how he wanted future generations to remember him: as a tirelessly dedicated and devoted monarch who broke with the past and whose influence extended everywhere and to everyone, ‘even to the oxen and horses’ (*Shiji* 6).

One of the most significant measures initiated by Qin Shihuang was the unification of the Chinese character script. This reform, overseen by prime minister Li Si, created the basis of a universal Chinese writing system (in existence up until 1949), which would become one of the most important tools

in running an efficient bureaucracy. Prior to the Qin's effort to regularize the form, meaning and sound of Chinese characters, the different states each had their own standards of orthography. These regional variants were the main target of the reforms. Known as the Small Seal script as it simplified the older, variable Large Seal script, the new script allowed for faster and easier writing with brush and ink, which led in turn to more efficient record-keeping. But we should not imagine the script reforms as a process in which new characters were devised from scratch. In reality, 'unifying' the script involved suppressing the use of a significant number of previously used and local characters. Many pre-Qin characters may have been censored. Alongside the ban on the use of certain characters, complex writing forms such as those found on the Zhou ritual vessels were simplified.

Like most events associated with the First Emperor, his reform of the Chinese character script has been idealized. There is no evidence that the script of an empire was unified overnight. The standardization was a gradual process that continued for several centuries after Qin Shihuang. Yet, as for many learners today, mastering Chinese characters must have seemed a daunting task. To work as an official clerk at the Han court, you had to memorize at least five to six thousand characters and master several calligraphic styles (a comprehensive Chinese dictionary that includes all variants contains between fifty and sixty thousand characters). Strict accuracy was required as writing characters in an irregular way was not tolerated. Orthography purportedly reflected the moral character of an official (much in the way that graphologists today claim to be able to assess your personality from your

style of handwriting). One mistake with the brush could potentially be costly, as the following story illustrates:

Once when Shi Jian was chief of palace attendants, he had the occasion to submit a report to the emperor. Later, after the report had been returned to him, he was reading it over, when he exclaimed in great alarm, ‘A mistake in writing! The character for “horse” should have five lines for the feet and tail, but this has only four lines. One of the feet is missing! The emperor could have had me put to death for such an error!’ He was very frightened. He was just as cautious and meticulous as this in whatever he did. (*Shiji* 103)

Nevertheless a degree of variability never disappeared from Chinese writing. It hardly ever does in any language. If Shakespeare can be forgiven for spelling his own name in different ways, the relative continuity of the Chinese character script over the course of nearly three millennia stands out as nothing short of remarkable. Without the reform of the character script instigated by Qin Shihuang, efficient official communication would have been severely hampered and political unity may never have lasted.

Two public works initiated by the First Emperor still catch the eye today: the Long or Great Wall and the emperor’s tomb complex known for its terracotta army. Walls were constructed to protect the imperial heartland from incursions by nomadic tribes, most notably the Xiongnu, who operated from the northern and north-western steppes. While the Great Wall as it can be seen today dates from the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Qin had set an important



Figure 1.1
The First Emperor
Facsimile reprint from
Sancai tuhui, 1609.

precedent by connecting several existing walls together into a continuous structure (of around three thousand kilometres). The works lasted over five years and involved moving several hundred million cubic metres of stone and earth, and a labour force of perhaps as many as three hundred thousand men. The reputation of the Great Wall as an imposing, uninterrupted structure is not free from suspicion, however. Historical records make less of its actual grandeur than many past and contemporary Chinese historians have led us to believe. As the American historian Arthur Waldron points out, one should not conceive of the Great Wall as a single age-old structure that can be documented continuously and coherently through the sources. Qin Shihuang's wall may be more myth than historical reality, not because it did not exist, but

because the image of a continuous Great Wall has been invoked throughout history as an ideological tool to praise the achievements of Chinese civilization against those of its neighbouring peoples ('us versus them'). Perhaps history has accorded the First Emperor's wall building a greater reputation than its original brickwork could have hoped for. Nevertheless, it does illustrate the megalomaniac ambitions of a man who was not to know that astronauts today still dispute whether the wall is visible from the moon.

Since excavation works began in 1974 in Lintong county (Shaanxi province; some thirty kilometres outside the city of Xi'an), millions of people have visited or seen selections of the First Emperor's mausoleum and its terracotta warriors. Fearing death and obsessed with assuring his own immortality, he ordered its construction as soon as he came to power as king (in 246 BCE). Circumnavigating today's hill of rammed earth takes a brisk walk just short of one and a half kilometres. The original mound may have been over one hundred metres high. All childless concubines followed the emperor into his grave. To keep things secret, those who had worked on the tomb were imprisoned and sealed within it too. Trees and grass were then planted over the mausoleum to make it look like a natural hill. Today the tomb at Mount Li remains clad with evergreen cypresses and pines, symbolizing long life. Archaeologists have yet to excavate the tomb itself. Perhaps they never will. Who would want to release the unpredictable spirit of the First Emperor? And what lies beneath may not live up to the description of the tomb by Sima Qian: a coffin of molten copper; a burial chamber filled with models of palaces, towers and official buildings; the

waterways of the empire recreated using mercury and made to flow mechanically. Above, in the vault, heavenly constellations lit by whale-oil lamps. The First Emperor intended his tomb to be a microcosm of the entire world. The area around the actual tomb was surrounded by buildings and by several pits containing an entire terracotta army of thousands of life-size figurines aligned in battle array. These were the henchmen of the warring state that had chewed through the map of pre-imperial China like an army of caterpillars.

Another story concerning the First Emperor lives on with some persistence. In 213 BCE, he allegedly commanded that all books be burnt except those on medicine, divination and tree-planting. A year later, he ordered the death of four hundred and sixty Confucian scholars (all buried alive, according to his detractors). Those who failed to burn their privately owned books within thirty days – books that praised models of the past that could be used to criticize him – were tattooed as convicts and sentenced to hard labour. But scholars have questioned this perception of the First Emperor. Throwing political opponents in a pit, and destroying texts that can be used to slate your regime, is precisely the sort of propaganda those who succeeded Qin Shihuang might have used to demonize him as a one-sided brute and uncultured despot. Indeed, it was in the Han's interest to depict their immediate predecessors in a bad light. Vilifying those who have come before you provided succeeding dynasties with a highly effective means of justifying their own ascent to power. The burning of the books may have some historical basis, but its impact was minimal, possibly limited to books within the capital. There is no evidence to suggest that the First Emperor ever

undertook a purge of culture and tradition on the scale of Mao's Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. On the contrary, Qin literati appeared to master the language and style of past writings. This is clear from the very few surviving texts closely associated with the emperor himself, such as the stone inscriptions erected on sacred mountains during his imperial processions.

Throughout history, China's First Emperor has carried a dual legacy: praised as an empire builder, but denounced for being a harsh despot; hailed as a great reformer of the Chinese script, but blamed as culturally ignorant; admired for imposing efficiency and a sense of meritocracy, but condemned for the human suffering his policies caused; applauded for his Legalist determination, but reviled for stamping on Confucian sensibilities. As the historian Yuri Pines puts it: 'The ongoing debate over the Qin Empire concerns not just the past, but, primarily, the present: it is the debate about how China is to be governed, how much autonomy is to be accorded to each of its parts, what role intellectuals should have in society, and what means are legitimate in restoring China's glorious position as a powerful and awe-inspiring nation.' The Qin dynasty did not last. It is known as much for its rapid collapse as it is for its impressive rise. The First Emperor died only eleven years after the foundation of his remarkable empire.

THE HAN

In 206 BCE Liu Bang, born into a peasant family, established the Han dynasty following a series of battles against aristocratic factions seeking to restore some of their old noble privileges. He served as its first emperor, Gaozu. After an initial

period of internal strife, the Han would endure for nearly four centuries, marking the first long-lasting and relatively stable chapter in the history of imperial China. Politically, Han rulers continued to implement many of the reforms set in place by the Qin. The unification of currency, weights and measures, and of the Chinese character script, was carried on and consolidated. The Han devised a smaller coin (known as a *wuzhu*) that weighed just over three grams. To avoid forgeries, the Han government tried hard to monopolize the minting of coins.

The figure of the emperor as the ultimate model of sovereignty became firmly established over the course of the Han period. New rituals and symbols, along with new religious cults, were established at state level to back up imperial authority and legitimacy. Henceforth, the emperor became a cosmological figure. As the ‘Son of Heaven’, he no longer ruled primarily by military force and awe alone. Instead, he was the link between Heaven and Earth and acted as the symbolical pivot on which hinged the stability of the world at large. Han thinkers insisted that the cosmos, the human world and the human body were intimately linked and that everything operated according to similar moral and physical laws. I will discuss this form of correlative thinking (in Chapter 2) and explore how it influenced Chinese views of nature (in Chapter 7).

The Han expanded and consolidated the bureaucratic state that had developed under its predecessor. It set up institutions run by a hierarchy of officials and it mapped out the empire in administrative units known as provinces and commanderies, some of which still exist in name today. Parts of the territory were granted to members of the imperial family as royal domains. The Han also expanded the

empire's territory. For the first time, mechanisms were put in place to handle foreign policy. Neighbouring states and local chieftains symbolically submitted to the Han court by exchanging tribute (gifts to show one's obedience or dependence on another ruler). Han princesses were married off to barbarian rivals.

Keeping the peace, however, came at a cost. In the north and north-west, constant battles waged against the nomadic Xiongnu confederation exhausted the treasury coffers of Emperor Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE). Nevertheless, significant inroads were made into Central Asia through a corridor corresponding to present-day Gansu and Xinjiang provinces. It stretched as far as Ferghana in eastern Uzbekistan, the land of swift and blood-sweating 'heavenly horses'. In the north-east, the Han pushed up as far as the area surrounding present-day Pyongyang in North Korea. In the south, they annexed the region of Yue, corresponding to present-day Fujian and Guangdong, and the Han's influence extended all the way to the kingdom of Champa in Vietnam.

In the Han expansion of the Chinese empire, was there any interaction with the Romans? There is no evidence of direct contact with Rome, but both civilizations sat at opposite ends of the Silk Road and were indirectly aware of each other's existence. The Romans spoke of a country where silk was produced. The Chinese spoke of a mythical place known as 'Great Qin'. Somewhere around the first century CE, the first vestiges of Buddhism, a philosophy and religion that originated in India, reached the Han empire, mostly via central Asian merchants. But we must wait until 166 CE for the first recorded instance of an imperial sacrifice to the Buddha. The story of



Map 1.3

China during the Han.

— Great Wall

■ Han territory

..... Today's borders



the entrance and adaptation of Buddhism in China would largely take place during the centuries following the period that forms the background to this book.

For a brief period (between 9 and 23 CE), Wang Mang, who had seized power from the Liu family, established an interregnum known as the New or Xin dynasty. Wang initiated a series of reforms, mostly focused on the equal redistribution of land, and he modelled his reign on *The Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), a text that portrayed the ideal state as resembling that of the golden age of Zhou. His utopian reforms proved to be short-lived, however, as did his reign. Great landed families took back control and, like the Roman Empire, Han became increasingly dominated by powerful aristocratic families that undermined the authority of the court and the capital. A combination of natural disasters and millenarian peasant rebellions finally brought the dynasty to its knees in 220 CE. China was about to undergo nearly four centuries of disunion before a second great moment of imperial unity would arrive in the form of the great Tang dynasty in the early seventh century CE.

The Han dynasty heralded a golden age of Chinese culture. For the first time, the court and state sponsored a literary canon and actively encouraged the study of classical texts. While it would be incorrect to label this new wave of state-supported classicism as 'Confucianism', Confucius himself was the main focus in the transmission of, editing of and commentaries on several classical works. A set of five canonical texts were categorized collectively as 'classics' (*jing*). They became part of the curriculum at the Imperial Academy established in 124 BCE. Within one century, more than thirty thousand students attended the academy to study with master interpreters of