

The Transformation of China during the Early Imperial period

Qin through Tang

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Successive Chinese dynasties dreamed of transforming China into a better empire, starting by the first centralized feudal empire set up by Emperor Qin, to the death of the last feudal empire ruled by Qing dynasty. Throughout the imperial period, China has seen the Qin, Han, Sui and Tang empires, all of which achieved prosperity and transformed. Although there were split period during the Southern and Northern Dynasties, it lasted for a relatively short period. There were some of the internal and external forces that served the Chinese transformation. This paper is going to discuss specifically the Qin and Tang dynasties on the aspects of political, economic, and social issues which influenced China in various ways, in addition to external and internal forces that led China to remain as a unified country in the early imperial period.

In 221 B.C., the Warring States period came to a sudden end. After that, the kingdom of Qin defeated all its rivalries and unified the empire for the first time. However, the legalist extended the earlier attempts of Warring States-period rulers to establish a direct link between subject and ruler. These internal forces had profoundly influenced the Qin, that the states found a new way of organizing the empire, such as the systematic organization held by central government. The government “applied unbending standard to judge the officials and the people, so the kingdom would become stronger than its rivals” (Hansen, p100), however, the Qin also advocated reward and punishment system. According to the writing of Lord Shang, “if, rewards are manifold and authority strict, the people then see the many rewards of fighting, and thus will be heedless of death; if they see the disgrace of not fighting, they will be content with a bitter

life” (Han Fei Zi, p139). In this case, rewarding would motivate the army to achieve accomplishments that would lead to more strength and unity.

The Qin, on the other hand, was emphasizing an equal society, which omitted some social class groups, such as slaves and doctors. Society was ranked into four groups: scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants. “This ranking reflected Legalist prejudices in favor of produces, namely peasants and artisans, over merchants” (Hansen, p99). In the exemplification of a husband money and hides a partial in wife’s quarters, “If the wife had knowing... the [punishment] is for having stolen [cash]. If she did not know, she was sentenced for receiving” (The Laws of Qing, p148). In this case, legalists believed “human nature is bad... that people are born with a love profit” thus not knowing would receive heavier punishment in order to prevent the “human nature” (Confucius Teaching, p25).

The Qin’s economy was fundamentally based on agriculture. Among the inner affairs of the people, farming was the hardest and painful job that “agricultural sector provided lifeblood of the state” (Hansen, p102). “Thus farmers expend energy most bitterly, but the profit that they earn is slight and cannot be compared to that of merchants” (Han Fei, p139). In addition, establishing private ownership of the land, land continued to be viewed as the property of the ruler, but the link between land ownership and military service provided people with a stronger claim to the land that farmers would work harder than before. For instance, “the value of food is high and dealing in food not profitable... adds heavy taxes... people cannot but abandon their mercantile activities... Thus the people’s energies will be entirely occupied by the profits of the earth” (Han Fei, p140). In this case, it rigid blueprint of the economy minimized the importance of merchants and clever people.

The Tang was not just an age of cultural openness, but of political strength that ruled nearly for three centuries. In fact, the Tang represented China's most glorious dynasty, partially because of the enormous territory the dynasty succeeded in conquering and ruling. However, the dynasty had an inglorious start, plainly demonstrated in Xuanwu Gate's incidence, when Li Shimin slaughtered his brothers and forced his father to step down. The Tang code was so influential that it focused on two sections; "the first enunciates general principles of criminal law; the second lists specific offenses and punishments" (Hansen, 198). Although, Tang was more of a Confucian state, the law reflected the Qin's legal code in its insistence on the appropriate punishment for the crime. In addition, the Tang code "embodied a blend of Legalist concern for universality, with a Confucian disposition to take into account particular statuses" (The Tang Code, p546). The code was heavily reinforced by the Confucius practice that it believed social order would normally be maintained through the family system without recourse to law or the intervention of state power. The en abominations were the most serious offenses that were against traditional norms and conveyed great irreverence; lack of filially, depravity...etc (The Tang Code, p551). For instance, the first is called plotting rebellion that "there are those who harbor rebellious hearts that would harm the ruler or father, her must then put them to death (The Tang Code, p549). This indicated that the codes were primarily concerned with family relationships, which society would maintain through family educations.

The Tang society divided into three social groups: the privileged, commoners and inferior people. The vast majority of people were commoners with low living standards. "They ate simply, often only two meals a day. Families shared one or two rooms" (Hansen, p210-211). However, the commoners had its compensations that they could get medicine from Buddhist clinics, which was also an indication of interaction of Buddhism into Chinese society.

Moreover, Karma was one of the central ideas of Buddhism that people believed in doing good or bad actions would affect their lives in the current world or accumulate in the underworld. In exemplar of karma, the story of “Chong” that Chong received a boy and a golden bowl four years after Miss Cui’s death and the child was resembled Miss Cui (Tales of Ghosts and Demons, p107). This demonstrated how commoners started to concern life cycle and dharma in order to achieve liberation. The examination, on the other hand, was supposedly able to recruit men of good characters, and the examiners had to know the candidates. Later on the examinations would become a means of men with suitable backgrounds rather than recruiting talent due family connections with the examiners.

The merchant was the dominant driving force of the Tang’s economy. “Their riches made Changan bustle. They brought goods all the way from Persia and Indian to the east and Japan to the west” (Hansen, p209). There were two markets at Changan that they lay at the centre of two systems of transportation. The eastern market specialized in locally produced goods, whereas the western market dealt with foreign products. Brothels were located in eastern market that had great contributed into Tang’s economy. Many rich men had spent all their money on patronized women and abandoned their wives and spent day and nights here. Many Tang tales recorded males, prodigals or merchants, splashed great amount of fortunes on certain woman.

In conclusion, China transformed during the Qin and the Tang period, however, some aspects were remained constant. For example, the legal code was first founded in the Qin, and the Tang has embraced with Confucius thoughts. The Qin emphasized on equal society and prejudiced favor producers over merchants and scholars. The Tang, on the other hand, had transformed into favoring merchants and scholars due to the external factors. In addition, the

Tang merchants increased employment rate for commoners in the city. The Tang people believed in karma and cultivated their own culture due to the influence of Buddhism from India. We can conclude that the Chinese history was more dynamic in nature rather than static, however, the Qin was a feudal empire and later transformed into the globalized Tang Dynasty.