

INTRODUCTION

In the initial sections of this course, we adopted the perspective of the Classical period. We explored how the people of that long era saw their times as the outcome of the past – a particular vision of the past, which explained for them the divine nature of their culture and its potential and confirmed the desperation of their own corrupt age. Now we have become familiar not only with Classical culture and its vision of the past, but also, as best we are able, with the historical past that truly did shape Classical China: the past of neolithic ruins, Shang oracle texts, and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions.

The entire force of Classical thinking was directed towards the certainty that the future would replicate the past, that the utopia of the past would guide China through crisis to the utopia of the future.

This was not only a part of the elite intellectual tradition. It was an essential feature of a culture keenly aware of its distinct role in the world, as it was known, deeply mired in incessant warfare, and bereft of religious traditions of another world where one might escape entirely the cares and sorrows of the world of people and needful ghosts. The only path of escape lay in the future.

The readings for this section of the course describe the future that awaited the last generation of the Warring States and the first generations of its children. This future was *not* what the Classical age had hoped for, but it was one to which their descendants could adapt without consciously discarding their ancestors' vision of the past. The era of the Qin, so feared as its advent neared, became with its arrival a new object of hope. There is good reason to believe that many in China were prepared to see in the Qin the will of Heaven in which they had long had faith. But the leaders of the Qin failed to make room for the visions that had shaped the expectations of the future so that they could gradually evolve along with the changes of the times. They declared the Classical vision of the future unlawful, an implicit indictment of the present, and they made a famous effort to wipe it away outright and realize the Dao de jing's ideal of a people with empty minds and full stomachs. This was a key aspect of the Qin failure.

The ultimate success of the Han lay in the patience of its rulers. The Han was, as a species of rule, not very different from the Qin. But its early rulers, in some cases consciously, in others not, allowed the complex processes of intellectual adaptation to run their course while the dynasty grafted naturally to China over time. By the time that the last era we will examine, the reign of Wu-di (140-87), had taken full shape, those who championed the Classical hopes for the future could no longer see how that vision differed from the real shape of the Han present. The present seemed good enough--about what the sages had hoped for. The revolutionary hopes of the Classical era had been tamed, and despite a persistent awareness of some disparity between the Classical vision and the imperial reality, over the following two thousand years few understood the depth of that disparity, and even fewer were willing to risk the comfortable benefits of bureaucratic autocracy in order to pursue the utopian ideals of the Classical age.