

THE REIGN OF WU-DI, 140-87

The era of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty forms the terminus of this course. During the period of Wu-di's long reign, the political and intellectual structures that formed the foundation of the long-lived entity we refer to as Imperial China were essentially completed. Although any line that we draw to separate historical periods always represents an overstatement – complex societies do not change overnight – and it is also true that some eras of later Chinese history depart from the models suggested by the Han of 100 B.C., nevertheless, if we must select a date to mark the full formation of the patterns of China's imperial state, the closing years of Wu-di's reign is an excellent choice.

Another reason for considering Wu-di's reign to constitute the end of ancient Chinese history is that the greatest chronicler of that era, the historian Sima Qian, died in the closing years of Wu-di's reign, about 90 B.C. Our vision of ancient China has been overwhelmingly shaped by the perspective of this one man. We know that Sima Qian's failings as a historian, many of which he was the first to admit, have led later historians into many important errors, and surely continue to blind us to certain aspects of ancient China. However, most of us who work in the field of early China believe that Sima Qian's intellectual honesty and devotion to distinguishing between truth and fantasy as best he could make his history, the *Shi-ji*, an invaluable gift to us. In some ways, Sima Qian's own tragic relationship to Wu-di serves as a symbol for the greatness and failure of the Chinese imperial system. For all these reasons, we will close this course with the reign of Wu-di, and later close this coursepack with an account of Sima Qian himself.

Overview: The paradox of Wu-di's policies

Wu-di was the strongest of all Han emperors, and his power and accomplishments rank with those of the First Emperor of the Qin. Wu-di restructured the government and the economy of the Han and enormously expanded the territory of China. His resemblance to the First Emperor does not end with the magnitude of his political achievements. Like the First Emperor, he was also a superstitious and suspicious man, who, in the course of his long reign, made his own attainment of personal immortality a primary objective of state policy. At the close of his reign, the driving energy of his political and personal goals dissolved in terrible failure, as an exhausted state faced financial ruin and the imperial family lay devastated by bizarre witch hunts and murder.

The foremost historian of the early Han, Michael Loewe, of Cambridge University in England, has characterized Wu-di's reign as a battle between two opposing philosophies of government, which he calls Modernist and Reformist (in a rather conservative sense), but which have traditionally been referred to as Legalist and Confucian. Loewe is correct in seeking to evade the complex overtones of the traditional terminology in clarifying the nature of the political forces of Wu-di's time and the way in which they establish the future contours of Chinese politics. But for our purposes it makes sense to retain the older terms, which locate the tensions of Wu-di's reign in the context of the prior evolution of Chinese society.

On the largest scale, we may characterize Wu-di's reign as a period of outright contradiction. During this time, Confucianism became the state-sponsored orthodoxy of the Han and the sole form of acceptable discourse in government. Concurrently, the goals of the state returned to the ideals of Legalism, stressing economic policies designed to enlarge the state treasury, expanded centralized power and the size of the state, and exalt the person of the emperor. Wu-di himself energetically guided the development of *both* of these trends. He consciously selected Confucianism as the chosen ideology of his court and the blueprint for a new form of government. But he placed at the head of his government individuals who would employ this new form of government to pursue the goals of the Legalist state. Confucianism was, for him, a tool in the pursuit of Legalist ends.

Wu-di pursued his goals without restraint, and this led to the exhaustion of the country and a subsequent period of contraction, already underway at the time of his death. Nevertheless, the apparent contradiction of a Confucian government pursuing Legalist goals on behalf of an autocrat became the standard structure of imperial Chinese governments for two thousand years.

The establishment of Confucianism

The rise of Confucianism to state orthodoxy under Wu-di was most likely a direct reaction against the influence of Huang-Lao adherents at court. Wu-di's father, Jing-di, was dominated by his own mother, Empress Dou. The empress dowager was an active patron of Huang-Lao and a commanding personality. Under Jing-di, Huang-Lao and Legalist ministers enjoyed a near monopoly of power.

Jing-di died young and Wu-di came to the throne when he was only about sixteen. His grandmother continued to exert great influence at court, but certain ministers who were not part of her closest group of advisors began to look towards the new emperor as a possible counter-weight to the empress.

Judging by his later career, Wu-di came to the throne with a deep appreciation of his own magnificence. It must have been difficult for a person so convinced of his own abilities to contemplate the power of his grandmother.* In the initial years of his reign, proposals came from several sources suggesting the wisdom of enlarging the role of Confucian adherents at court, and these probably led Wu-di to ponder how such policies might over time provide him with an entirely new staff of ministers and administrators, beholden to none but the emperor himself. Even before his grandmother's death he went so far as to order the institutionalization of Confucian appointments among the court erudites (a policy we will discuss further in a subsequent section). After the Empress Dou died in 135, Wu-di acted swiftly.

*Michael Loewe maintains that there actually exists no evidence that Wu-di was a dynamic force at court at any period. He attributes all significant features of the emperor's reign to his ministers' initiative, since the historical accounts portray most policy discussion through ministerial memorials. This would, however, be equally applicable to the First Emperor, and the silence of the emperor seems likely to be a function of conventions of history writing.

The empress had only been dead a few months when Wu-di issued a proclamation that called for the large scale recruitment of new personnel for the government. The procedures developed for this recruitment drive specifically linked the requirements for candidates to virtues praised by Confucians and, more importantly, to training in Confucian classical studies. Shortly thereafter, the emperor adopted a further set of policies which banned from court service all those devoted to the teachings of Huang-Lao or Legalism, and made Confucianism the exclusive ideology of the bureaucracy. In so doing, the emperor completely freed himself from the influence of those whose true loyalties lay with his grandmother and brought to power a group of outsiders who owed their power, prestige, and wealth exclusively to Wu-di.

We will explore the nature of this Confucianization of the bureaucracy in more detail later on. At this point, it is only necessary to illustrate that the establishment of Confucianism as a state ideology was at the outset most likely tied to the politics of court, rather than to any ethical convictions on the part of Wu-di, or even any belief that Confucianism was, by nature, a well designed tool for governing the state.

Military activities

In terms of his goals for the Han state, territorial expansion and hegemony over all of mainland East Asia seems to have been the focus of Wu-di's reign. Wu-di was the first Han emperor to rule without significant threat from the feudal kingdoms established by the dynasty's founder, and he was looking for new worlds to conquer – this is why his posthumous title was Wu-di, “the Martial Emperor.” In particular, the policies of appeasement by means of which the Chinese had for decades tried to buy peace with the Xiong-nu did not suit Wu-di's vision of his own sovereignty.

In recruiting a new force of government personnel, Wu-di and his highest advisors made sure that many of those admitted to policy making posts were not overly tainted by any pacifist tendencies that Confucianism might have introduced to the process. While Confucian scholars were entrusted with the efficient administration of the empire, the men who shaped the basic policies of the state were active militarists. Their principal goal was the elimination of the Xiong-nu and the stretching of China's borders.

Western expansion. The first step in preparing for this expansion was taken as early as 139, when Wu-di authorized a reconnaissance expedition to the far west by a courtier named Zhang Qian. Chang journeyed for many years deep into Central Asia, increasing Chinese awareness of distant lands many fold. After Chang's return, by which time Wu-di had long become comfortable on the throne, it was determined that China would pursue an aggressive policy to subjugate the various kingdoms that lay along the route of Chang's travels. This policy naturally entailed the pacification of the Xiong-nu confederacy as well.

Over the course of Wu-di's reign, the Chinese launched a series of campaigns into Central Asia. To support these campaigns, garrisons were established in the northwestern corridor beyond the boundaries of early Han China which today constitutes western Gansu Province, as far as Dun-huang. The Great Wall was extended westward and a series of

watchtowers was constructed out into the desert. The Han armies marched through these regions and out into the Tarim Basin and the Tian-shan Mountains. The petty kingdoms encountered by the armies were usually conquered without much difficulty, although a few were able to mount a resistance firm enough to lead the Han generals to bypass them. Ultimately, Han armies executed successful operations as far west as modern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (go to Tajikistan and turn right).

The principal goals of the expedition were to extend the garrisoned outposts of China, to establish colonial posts of administration and reconnaissance in the far west, and to transform the peoples of Central Asia, who had previously been under the influence of the Xiong-nu, into tributary states of China, ready to serve as allies in China's struggle against the Xiong-nu.

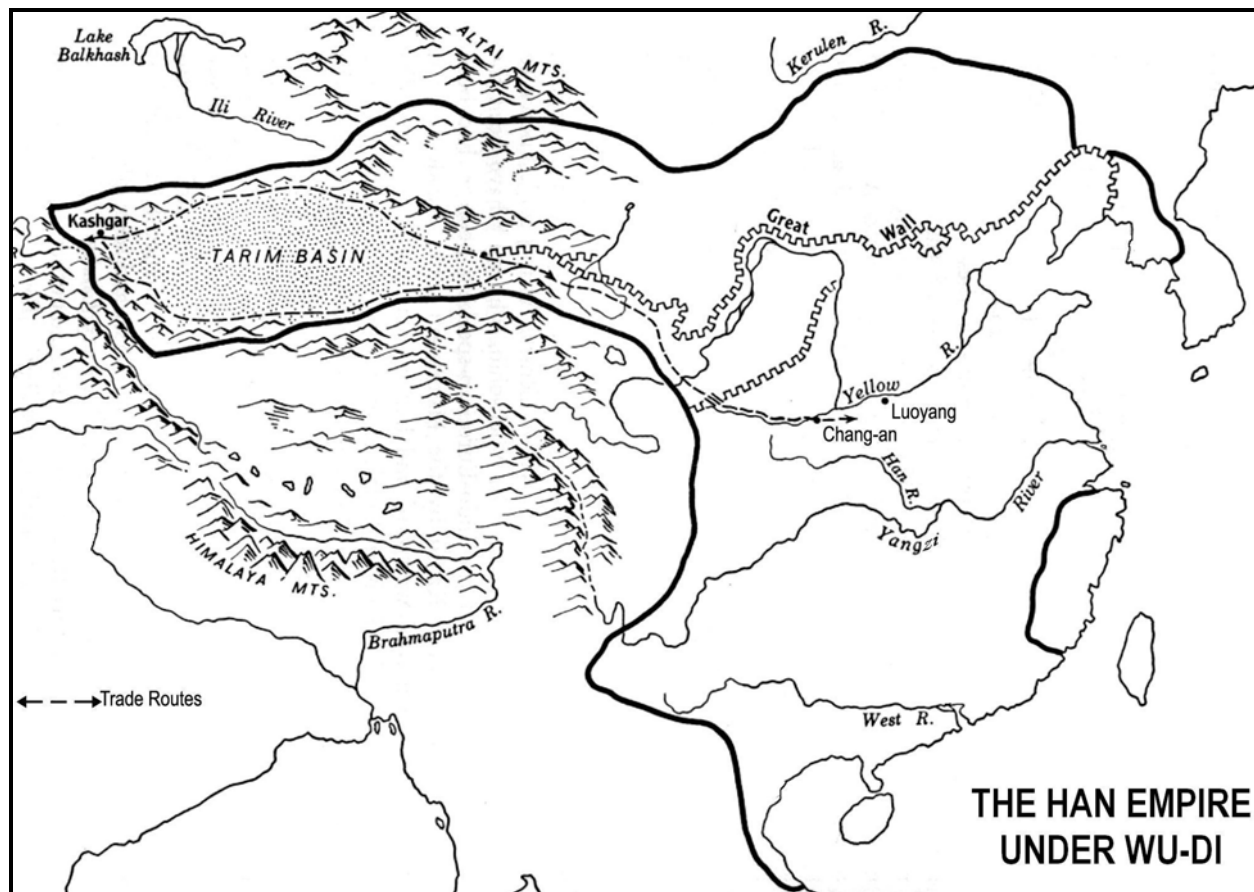
These western expeditions were coupled with direct attacks on the Xiong-nu. The success of these was not uniform, and some of the greatest of Han generals found themselves unable to prevail against large armies of nomads so far from their own bases of supply. However, the wars of Wu-di's reign seem to have begun the disintegration of the Xiong-nu confederacy, which never again exerted the sort of pressure on China that it previously had.

An indirect benefit of these military policies was the creation of what later became known as the "Silk Road" in Central Asia. This commercial route roughly paralleled the path of Zhang Qian's first expedition. Its military function gave way to a stream of merchant caravans that brought silk to the West and Western goods and peoples to China. While it was Wu-di's armies that first opened this route, its contributions to Chinese civilization are better studied in the context of post-Han civilization, by which time Western imports, which included such unanticipated commodities as Buddhism, came to have an enormous impact on Chinese culture.

Other expansion. Apart from the campaigns to the northwest, Wu-di also sent military forces to the southwest and south, northeast, and southeast, all followed by administrators and farmers sent to colonize the newly pacified regions.

In the southwest, Zhang Qian again played an important role, setting forth on a second set of expeditions. The result was the colonization of lands stretching from the Sichuan Basin to the middle reaches of the Mekong River Valley, along the eastern edge of the Himalayas.

In the south, Chinese forces pushed through the jungles of Vietnam well below present-day Hanoi. In the northeast, the greater portion of Korea was turned into a Han military colony, where recruits and their families were stationed as soldier-farmers to maintain a stable Chinese presence. In the southeast, the mountain fastnesses of the southeast coast were explored (with the exception of the area of modern Fujian Province) and outposts established in the river valleys.



Costs of expansion. Wu-di's accomplishments brought military security to China, and made a vast area of the world aware for the first time of the magnificence of Chinese civilization. Wu-di had the satisfaction of receiving as ambassadors and submissive tributaries representatives from all of North, East, and Central Asia. Chinese culture was much enriched by these contacts with non-Chinese civilizations. However, Wu-di stretched China's resources very thin, and during the latter years of his reign, the economic well being of the state was significantly weakened. The excessive scale of many of his armies' campaigns, and the occasions upon which they suffered humiliating defeats also spawned a significant pacifist movement within the government. After all, the Confucian-trained bureaucracy was able to detect little in Wu-di's foreign policies that reflected the values of its intellectual tradition, apart, perhaps, from the sacred principle that China was good and "barbarians" bad.

At the close of his reign, the direction of Chinese government was already turning inward towards reaction and retrenchment, and subsequent Han rulers paid a price for Wu-di's undertakings.

The burden that Wu-di's ventures placed upon the people was captured incomparably by a much later writer, the eighth century poet Du Fu, who had reason to see the shadow of Wu-di's influence in his own troubled times. In the following poem – included here with absolutely no

historiographical justification – Du Fu gave the common people of the Han a voice which goes unheard in the historical texts.

Song of the Army Carts

*Rattling carts and
Whinnying steeds,
Marching, bows slung by their sides;
Their fathers and mothers and children and wives
run by their ranks –
The Bridge of Xian-yang all lost in the dust –
And catch at their clothes and clutch at their feet,
and stand in the roadway and cry.
Their cries rise up and strike the clouds.*

*By the roadside, a passerby questions the
marching men,
Who can only reply, “They call us often now:
Some were called at fifteen to guard the River north,
At forty still they tilled the fortress fields,
Sent off so young the village headmen had to wrap
the cloths about the heads
That came home white, only to return again
to the garrison frontier.
At border posts the flowing blood is like the sea –
Yet the Martial Emperor does not cease
to press the borders back.*

*“Haven’t you heard of the two hundred counties
east of the mountains in Han
Where the thorns of the briars have overgrown
the ten thousand hamlets and towns?
Even where a sturdy wife may ply the hoe and plough,
The grain lies over patchwork fields
with borders overgrown.
Worse still it is for troops from Qin,
so able in bitter war,
Driven to and fro, no different than dogs
or flocks of farmyard fowl.*

*“You are so good as to ask us, sir,
Yet how dare we reply?
In a winter such as this
When western forces have no rest,
Desperate magistrates will demand their taxes,
And where will these come from?*

*Yes, we've learned that bearing sons is bad,
And bearing daughters good:
Your daughters can marry your neighbors,
But your sons will lie buried beneath the wild grasses.*

*"My lord, have you never been to the ends of Qing-hai,
Where none come to gather bleached bones long dead,
And the fresh spirits fret, and the old spirits weep,
And the dark rain is full of their twittering cries?"*

The economic policies of Wu-di

Wu-di's ambitious foreign ventures, along with extensive ritual expenditures that we will discuss below, required a well provided imperial treasury. Wu-di was fortunate that his father and grandfather had been thrifty rulers of an expanding state economy. Their efforts furnished Wu-di with ample funds to initiate his various schemes. As his reign progressed, however, this cushion was soon depleted and the government had to take new measures to raise funds, some of which were controversial. All of these initiatives were designed to increase the control of the state over the economic life of China.

The *History of the Former Han* assesses the economic trends of Wu-di's reign in the following terms:

Up to the beginning of the reign of Wu-di, the nation had passed seventy years without any general disturbance, and except in times of flood or drought, individuals were well supplied and family resources were sufficient. The government granaries of all kinds, in places large and small, were completely filled. The government treasuries and warehouses possessed surpluses of every kind of riches. In the capital, the stores of cash had accumulated hundreds of millions of strings for so long that the strings themselves had rotted and the coins lay in piles uncounted. The grain of the great central granary was piled with new layer upon old until it overflowed and spilled outside, becoming stale and spoiled and unfit to eat.

The great masses of common people who lived in the streets and lanes owned horses. They would ride out in groups to the fields or along the pathways by the fields. Gatekeepers in the villages and lanes ate fine grain and meat. Petty officers retained stable positions while their sons and grandsons grew to manhood, and higher officers remained in office so long that they took their titles as names or

surnames. People everywhere retained their self-respect, and felt the laws of the land to be difficult to break. They sought to be righteous before all else, and shameful deeds they condemned.

But later, the nets of the law were slackened and the people became affluent. By making wealth a standard many became overwhelmingly arrogant and even organized bands of adventurers who would settle disputes by force of arms in the smaller locations within the counties. Members of the imperial clan who possessed lands, great nobles of the realm, high ministers of state, high government officials and their subordinates, all strove to stand out in excesses and extravagance. Mansions, dwellings, carts, and costumes that were originally restricted to high rank came to be arrogated by any. What flourishes must decay – such is the law of mutable things!

As time passed, there were expeditions across the borders against the tribes in all four directions, while within the empire, men aimed at achievement with the goal of seeking credit and profit. Calls for labor service and government expenses mounted rapidly and the people departed from the fundamental tasks of agriculture.

New taxes and coinage. Wen-di had abolished the tax on production, retaining only poll, property, and labor taxes. Under Jing-di, the tax on production had been restored, but at the low rate of three percent. In order to finance his military expeditions, Wu-di raised the rate of the poll tax and instituted a series of new taxes, including a sales tax, a tax on vehicles, and new areas of property tax.

Prior to the reign of Wu-di, coinage was the product of a combination of government and private minting. Naturally, coinage was a potentially profitable way of financing government projects. By debasing coinage (through changing the alloys used or slightly reducing the size) the government could create more cash for itself. Wu-di ordered that all coinage henceforward be a government monopoly, thereby ensuring that there would be no competing mints that gave better value in their coins, or shared the profits of debasement.

The state monopolies. Apart from the monopoly on coinage, the Han government also imposed state monopolies on two lucrative and growing industries that had previously been largely under private control: salt and iron. Both salt and iron were extracted from mines and emperor Wu-di ordered that all such mines pass into the hands of the government.

From the late Warring States period on, salt and iron had become the most profitable manufacturing industries in China. By placing them under government monopoly, Wu-di was insuring for his court enormous revenues and influence on the economic life of China. The

monopoly policy, however, became a flashpoint of political controversy, as it violated several features of the Confucian view of proper government.

Confucians were consistent in their belief that the only truly healthy forms of economic activity were the cultivation of crops and the manufacture of silk. While Warring States thinkers such as Xun-zi had reconciled these ideas with much more complex views of economic life, there was during the early Han a substantial group of Confucian scholar-officials whose economic views were rooted in the Neolithic. They viewed Wu-di's endorsement of "legalistic" policies such as the monopolies as a form of apostasy.

These issues did not fully emerge into view until six years after Wu-di's reign, at which time a grand court debate was convened that pitted these Confucian conservatives against their technocratic enemies (all of whom were, by then, graduates of the Confucian academy!). These "Salt and Iron Debates" were recorded in summary transcripts that we possess today. They are excellent sources concerning the gradual dismantlement of many of Wu-di's policies, but since they fall beyond the close of this course, we will not consider them further. It is sufficient to note that the monopolies and associated economic policies were largely responsible for growing Confucian disaffection with Wu-di during the course of his long reign.

Wu-di's religious idiosyncrasies

Sima Qian did not write an annals of the reign of Wu-di, during whose time he flourished and died. There is such a section preserved in the *Shi-ji*, but after a few sentences it breaks off. There is plenty of information about Wu-di scattered throughout the book, however, and we can reconstruct a good picture of the emperor's achievements and of his personal qualities. The most complete portrait appears in the chapter entitled "Monograph on the *Feng-shan* Sacrifices," in which matters of religious practice are discussed. It is an odd place for Sima Qian to have lodged the greater portion of his own sovereign's portrait, but not as odd as the portrait itself.

The *Shi-ji* makes it plain that Wu-di was a superstitious fool. This is not a conclusion the reader reaches through subtle interpretation. It is plainly stated. Of course, as we will see later, towards the tortured end of his life, Sima Qian had good reason to wish to leave to posterity the ugliest possible picture of Wu-di. If that was his goal, he did not fail.

The failed *feng-shan* sacrifice. Sima Qian closes his annals of the reign of Wu-di's grandfather Wen-di by noting that despite Wen-di's many good works, he was too "modest" to take it upon himself to mount the *feng-shan* sacrifices, about which the First Emperor had made so great a fuss. This was a sign, Sima Qian remarks, that Wen-di was *ren*.

By contrast, the *Shi-ji* tells us that when Wu-di came to the throne, the very first thing he did was to appoint men to prepare to mount these most sacred sacrifices, which involved a massive procession to the east coast. But Wu-di's grandmother, Empress Dou, was still alive, and she summoned these men to court and charged them with various crimes. The men chose to commit suicide rather than undergo the dishonor they foresaw, and that was the end of

Wu-di's attempts at religious control during the lifetime of his grandmother. After her death, when Wu-di became master of his own actions, we see him engage in a series of bizarre religious escapades.

The affair of Li Shao-jun. Li Shao-jun was an immortalist who appeared at court early in Wu-di's reign. He preached a religious message centered on the god of the kitchen and associated dietary regimens. These, he said, could yield immortality. Claiming that he himself was an old man, despite his apparent youth, he charmed many members of the elite and was brought before the emperor for an audience.

The emperor quickly became convinced of Li's spiritual abilities. Li told him, "If you sacrifice to the kitchen god you can summon the spirits and transform cinnabar into gold. If you fashion eating vessels of this gold, you will prolong your life. Then you can visit the immortals who live on the island of Peng-lai in the middle of the sea. If you visit them and perform the *feng-shan* sacrifices, you will never die."

The emperor did as Li said and dispatched *fang-shi* practitioners to search out the immortals in Peng-lai. Li Shao-jun soon died, but the emperor believed that he was only transformed, and continued to have faith in his teachings, though none of the men he sent off to sea managed to get to Peng-lai.

The success of Li Shao-jun led many *fang-shi* to the Han court in search of imperial patronage, and the emperor became an easy mark.

The affair of Shao-weng. In 121, a *fang-shi* from Qi named Shao-weng (The Young Geezer) used shamanistic arts to gain the confidence of the emperor. He was able to summon the spirit of one of Wu-di's favorite consorts, recently deceased, as well as the kitchen god. The emperor, who was separated from them only by a curtain, was deeply moved. He made Shao-weng an honorary general and a very rich man.

Shao-weng convinced the emperor to construct large and expensive palace buildings dedicated to religious ceremonies. After a time, however, Shao-weng went too far. He fed to an ox a piece of silk on which he had written certain predictions, and then, in a trance, divined that the spirits had sent a message to the emperor by means of the ox's intestines. When these were explored, the writing was found. The emperor, however, recognized the handwriting. Because of the embarrassment of the entire affair, the emperor ordered that Shao-weng's execution be kept secret.

The Spiritual Princesses. The emperor's maternal grandmother had been a devotee of a particular cult that honored a shamaness of the capital regions. Soon after his grandmother's death, Wu-di built this shamaness a shrine on the imperial palace grounds. Later he installed another shamaness in the new religious precincts that Shao-weng had convinced him to build. These two women were known as the Spiritual Princesses.

In 118, the emperor fell gravely ill, and shamans were called to attend to him. He sent to the latter of the two Spiritual Princesses asking for her diagnosis. She sent to him a message that he should not be concerned about his sickness, but that when he felt up to it, he should visit her. The emperor did, in fact, improve shortly, and when he followed her request and went to see her, he was soon completely cured.

It turned out that the Spiritual Princess had excellent connections. Important deities frequently spoke to the emperor through her, and would even host him at meals, though they required the Spiritual Princess to do the actual serving. Occasionally, the Spiritual Princess summoned down these deities in their own form so that they could converse with the emperor directly, separated only by a curtain. Sima Qian concludes his account of this episode as follows.

Whenever the Spiritual Princess spoke, the emperor would order his secretaries to take down every word, calling these messages his “plan of laws.” There was nothing extraordinary in these words of the spirits, which were the sort of things that might be said by anyone. But the emperor took great delight in them. The whole affair was kept secret, and most people at the time knew nothing about it.

The affair of Luan Da. In 113, a queen of one of the feudal kingdoms recommended to the emperor a magician named Luan Da. Luan had studied with the same teacher as had Shao-weng, but, because the emperor now regretted having killed Shao-weng without first learning all his arts, he greeted the arrival of Luan Da with enthusiasm.

Luan Da confessed to the emperor that the fate of Shao-weng had discouraged him and kept him from coming to the capital to offer his own humble abilities. Apart from being able to turn cinnabar to gold and commune with the immortals (who he said had specifically declined to give him their secrets until he was in the service of the emperor), he also claimed the power to repair a break in the Yellow River dikes that was at the time plaguing the regions of the northern plain. Wu-di assured Luan Da that he had been misinformed about his predecessor. “Shao-weng happened to eat some poisoned liver,” said the emperor, “that’s all.”

Luan Da’s insistence that he had been unable to receive from the immortals their secret arts only because he had not appeared to them as a high ranking envoy of the Son of Heaven was convincing to Wu-di. Within a few months, Luan Da was wearing simultaneously the emblems of six different offices of high general. Wu-di issued a proclamation that spoke of the great flood-tamer Yu, and announced that Luan Da had been created a marquis and would soon be solving all problems of water conservancy concerning the Yellow River. At midnight ceremonies ritually designed to indicate that Luan Da was the equal rather than the subject of the emperor, he was invested with the most honored symbols of imperial trust. He was presented with a palace at the capital, a thousand servants, ten thousand catties of gold, and a daughter of the emperor to boot. In consequence, according to Sima Qian, “There was hardly a man on the

eastern seacoast who did not begin waving his arms about agitatedly, proclaiming that he possessed secret arts and could command spirits and immortals.”

Luan Da set forth on his journey to the immortals, traveling first to Shandong, where he was to embark on a voyage to the elusive isle of Peng-lai. After a period of time, however, Wu-di noticed that he had not got word from Luan Da, so he sent some officers of the court off to learn what had become of him. They reported that Luan was living near Mt. Tai, where he was often seen offering sacrifices to the spirits. He had not, however, been sighted in the company of any spiritual beings, and had, moreover, made no plans to set sail. Sima Qian reports, “Since it seemed that Luan Da’s magical powers were exhausted, the emperor had him executed.”

The *feng-shan* sacrifice of 110 B.C. Wu-di waited twenty-five years after his grandmother’s death before once again undertaking to perform the sacred *feng-shan* sacrifices at Mt. Tai. Once these had been mounted successfully, the emperor repeated the effort several times during his reign (Sima Qian was among the members of his entourage on at least one occasion). In preparation for his initial enactment of them, he planned a period of several months to ensure that all arrangements had been made according to the proper *li*.

Like his predecessor the First Emperor, who, so far as we know, was the only man who had actually performed these rites in the past, Wu-di called together the finest Confucian scholars of the land to advise him on the rituals. These men, led by the imperial erudites, were assembled before the emperor at court. However, Wu-di’s experience with these men was remarkably like that of the First Emperor. Instead of instructing him on the actions he should take, the Confucians began to bicker among themselves. One of them strongly objected to the personnel whom the emperor had assigned to supervise the sacrificial process. “Those scholars are not as skillful as the scholars of Lu!” he said. Another man began to lobby among the scholars to form an alternative group of supervisors, which he would head. The only moment of unanimity seemed to occur when the emperor ordered that the golden vessels that he had commissioned for the rite be brought out and shown to the scholars. “These are not at all like the ones used in ancient times!” they cried.

In the end, the emperor dismissed them and elected to devise the ceremonies himself. The grand procession that marched slowly across China towards Mt. Tai that summer stopped frequently to conduct great prefatory sacrifices. When the sacred mountain was finally reached, Wu-di ascended to the top with only a single assistant. At the summit, Wu-di communed with Heaven using ceremonies of his own invention. These were kept entirely secret and were never divulged.

Sima Qian’s account of Wu-di – a challenge to faith in our sources. The incidents recorded here represent only a portion of those recorded in the *Shi-ji*’s “Monograph on the *Feng-shan* Sacrifices.” The succession of such events makes it unmistakably plain that whatever Wu-di’s qualities may have been as a charismatic and visionary leader, he was a stupid man.

Our understanding of ancient China has been influenced more by Sima Qian than by any other single man, and it is very important to us to be alert to any possibility of bias that could make his accounts unreliable. Of course, it is possible that Wu-di was just as the “Monograph” portrays him. However, certain aspects of the chapter suggest a literary inspiration for its contents rather than a historical one. It will surely not have escaped any reader that the portrait of Wu-di depicted in the “Monograph” is strikingly similar to Sima Qian’s own portrait of the First Emperor. The implication is clearly that Wu-di was a second power-mad despot, worthy of opprobrium such as was generally reserved only for the Qin.

The possibility that the “Monograph” is actually a fictional account projecting the First Emperor’s character on to a skewed outline of Wu-di’s activities creates two problems for us. The lesser of these is that our portrait of Wu-di may be inaccurate in exaggerating the emperor’s personal failings. The greater is that we may be forced to conclude that Sima Qian was simply an unreliable historian, and that the *Shi-ji* is simply not to be trusted. If this were the case for the text as a whole, our entire account of early China would be seriously undermined.

The issues raised by the “Monograph on the *Feng-shan* Sacrifices” illustrates important problems of historiography and we need to suggest how we can handle them in this case. Briefly, three strategies are available that will allow us to limit the degree to which flaws in the “Monograph” undermine our faith in the *Shi-ji*. First, it is possible to explain how Sima Qian may have been motivated to violate his usual principles of care in the single case of composing a portrait of Wu-di, towards whom he harbored deep grievances. Second, a reasonable case may be made for considering the “Monograph” to be a later forged insertion in the *Shi-ji*. Both of these approaches preserve the integrity of the rest of the text. Finally, as you will see when we go on to discuss events in Wu-di’s reign that occurred *after* Sima Qian’s death and are recorded by other authors, the basic contours of Wu-di’s character do not seem wildly inconsistent with the “Monograph’s” projection onto him of the First Emperor’s failings.

We know that, in fact, Sima Qian had the greatest reason to wish to distort Wu-di’s image. After many years of service to the emperor, Sima Qian suffered the penalty of castration for sending to Wu-di a remonstrance protesting harsh treatment that had been meted out to one of the emperor’s general’s. Sima Qian’s disgrace was doubly painful. Though he wished to follow the honorable course and commit suicide rather than suffer the shame of castration, this would have meant leaving unfinished his life-long project of a universal history, which his father had sworn him to complete. Consequently, he had to endure the enormous shame of a “fate worse than death,” and it was under such conditions that his history was completed. It would be only human for Sima Qian to have taken his revenge on Wu-di in his portrait of the emperor’s personal qualities. Understanding this background allows us to doubt the “Monograph’s” accuracy without calling into question the reliability of the *Shi-ji* as a whole.

There exists a different line of reasoning that also allows us to remain skeptical about the degree of Wu-di’s foolishness while preserving our sense of the judiciousness of Sima Qian’s historiographical principles. It is possible that the “Monograph on the *Feng-shan* Sacrifices” was not written by Sima Qian at all. As noted earlier, it is puzzling that the *Shi-ji* text includes

no annals of Wu-di, but instead included a year by year account of his reign in the “Monograph,” which is, taken in its entirety, cast as the history of a sacrificial rite rather than as a chapter about Wu-di. Moreover, the chapter includes certain omenological phrases that depart from the very personal religious issues relating to the emperor in the “Monograph”: “The next year the army attacked Korea; that summer there was a drought”; “That year the armies marched west to attack Ferghana; swarms of locusts appeared.” These phrases clearly indicate disapproval of Wu-di’s *policies* rather than of his *person*, which would not necessarily reflect the type of personal vendetta that we have speculated may have colored Sima Qian’s account.

Is it possible that a later writer composed the sections of the “Monograph” that include the most outrageous depictions of the emperor’s gullibility and had them inserted into the text at a time when it was preserved in only one or two copies housed in the imperial archives? We know beyond doubt that certain other chapters of the text are indeed by later writers. Could this be true of the “Monograph” as well?

During the closing decades of the Former Han, Wu-di became a problematic precedent for the Han court. There was a strong division of opinion concerning the level at which his memory should be honored and his spirit served through sacrificial rites. The controversy divided ministers into opposing factions; those who wished to limit the honors bestowed upon Wu-di’s memory were those who were opposed to the revival of policies of military expansion, increased taxation, and economic centralization. A text such as the monograph would have been a strong weapon in their hands.

Moreover, we may well ask how any text that includes defamatory material such as the “Monograph” could have survived the reigns of Wu-di and of his son and successor? While we find oblique criticisms of Wu-di scattered elsewhere in the text, the “Monograph” stands alone in its lack of subtlety and in the crassness of the conduct that it depicts.

In short, we know that both Sima Qian and others who may have tampered with his text had axes to grind against Wu-di, and this should lead us to maintain a degree of caution when evaluating the *Shi-ji* account of his character and his religious obsessions. As for who may be responsible for any distortions in the text, while we cannot know the answer, the possibility the “Monograph” was a late forgery allows us to remain hopeful that Sima Qian was indeed restrained in the way in which he may have signaled his own personal judgments in his historical accounts, and to believe that the *Shi-ji* is, in general, as reliable as its author was able to make it.

The witchcraft scandal of 91-88 B.C. Even if the portrait of Wu-di presented in the *Shi-ji* is not accurate, we are able to confirm that the emperor was, indeed, highly superstitious. We can do so on the basis of records included in the *History of the Former Han* which describe a series of incidents that occurred after the completion of the *Shi-ji*, and in part after the death of Sima Qian. These events, known as the “witchcraft scandal,” reveal the same qualities of superstition and gullibility that we see in the “Monograph.” In this case, they determined that the close of Wu-di’s reign would be marked by devastating palace warfare, and that Wu-di himself would die in isolation, with no assurance of the stability of his policies or even of the

Han throne, echoing the fates of such earlier autocrats as Duke Huan of Qi and the First Emperor.

The witchcraft scandal was the product of a power struggle between the families of two of Wu-di's consorts. One of these consorts was the mother of the heir apparent, and her family looked forward to great favor under the successor of the old and ailing Wu-di. Members of her family held a number of high posts at court and were closely associated with the expansionist policies that Wu-di had pursued. In 91, the enormous cost of these policies had become evident, and the wisdom of pursuing them was an issue under debate at the highest levels. Given this political climate and the frailty of the emperor, the family of the second consort determined that this would be the best time to attempt to unseat the heir and establish their own candidate in his stead.

The weapon that was used was the charge of witchcraft employed against the person of the emperor, who was at the time attempting to recuperate from a series of illnesses in a summer palace outside the precincts of Chang-an. Voodoo dolls and secret spells were planted in the compounds of high ranking families by their political enemies, who then stage-managed searches and counter-searches to unearth the planted evidence. Old, separated from events, at the mercy of ministers whose factional interests dictated the reports they submitted to him, Wu-di was led to sanction witch-hunts and executions on a massive scale, while the streets of Chang-an were turned into a battleground. Tens of thousands of people were killed in the fighting, and every possible adult male heir to the throne was slaughtered.

Early in 87 B.C., Wu-di was informed that his throne was in danger and urged by high ministers to put in place procedures to be followed after his death to ensure the continuation of the Han. He elected to designate three ministers as a triumvirate empowered to rule as joint regents after his death. Two days before he died, Wu-di designated a young boy who was one of his few remaining sons – and who was the grandson of one of the regents – to succeed him.

At the death of Wu-di, effective power lay entirely outside the hands of the imperial clan. It was only the loyal leadership of the chief regent over the next decade that preserved the dynasty. But the Former Han never again regained the strength that it had possessed at the height of Wu-di's reign.

KEY NAMES AND TERMS

Wu-di
Zhang Qian

“Monograph on the *Feng-shan* Sacrifices”
Salt & iron monopolies

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *What factors seem to have influenced Wu-di’s decision to patronize Confucianism as state orthodoxy?*
2. *How did Wu-di plan and finance his expansionist policies?*
3. *Wu-di is one of the most famous emperors in Chinese history – what positive and negative qualities do you think would have most interested Confucian historians?*
4. *What does it say about Chinese culture that its members could invent a tale like the Young Gezeer’s? Do you think it relevant that hemp leaves were occasionally part of the diet?*