

8 The Messianic Emperor

A New Look at Qin's Place in China's History

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Among many controversies concerning the short-lived Qin dynasty, few appear so difficult to resolve as the thorny issue of the Qin's place in the general course of Chinese history. Generations of traditional and modern scholars beginning with Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 195–115) have tended to view it as a rupture or an aberration: an anti-“Confucian,” anti-Traditionalist entity, which behaved violently and erratically and was duly eliminated from China's historical landscape. Others, most notably scholars of China's institutional history, by contrast, tended to emphasize Qin's role as an inseparable part of a historical continuum; Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133–192 CE) succinctly summarized: “Qin inherited [the system] of the last years of the Zhou, and was the forerunner of the Han” (秦承周末，為漢驅除).¹

While current research—including the chapters in this volume—tends to confirm the correctness of the latter approach, and the continuities between the Qin and its predecessors and successors appear to be self-evident, I think that the idea of Qin's exceptionality cannot be entirely discarded. While this notion does reflect the ideological biases of Han and later *Ru* (儒, “Confucians”), it also may be related to certain peculiarities of the Qin regime and its self-image. In what follows, I show that amid overall continuities, the Qin adopted a peculiar ideological posture—what I dub here the “Messianic posture”—which crucially distinguishes it from its Warring States period (453–221) predecessors and from its Han (206 BCE–220 CE) successors. To illustrate this point, I focus on the Qin notion of emperorship as reflected in the self-image of the First Emperor 秦始皇帝 (r. 246–221–210). My choice is not incidental. The institution and concept of emperorship was the single most important Qin innovation and its most significant contribution to subsequent dynasties; as such it

serves as an ideal prism through which the Qin's place in Chinese history can be analyzed. Moreover, as we possess primary sources for the Qin emperor's self-image, namely the First Emperor's stele inscriptions, we can discuss this topic without being too dependent on potentially biased presentations in later historical sources.²

In the following discussion I demonstrate that the First Emperor's view of rulership is rooted in the monarchistic discourse of the preceding Warring States period, which he successfully appropriated, and that it had a lasting impact on his Han successors. Simultaneously, however, I argue that the First Emperor's presentation of his rule as "the end of history" distinguishes him critically from earlier and later monarchs, and may provide one explanation for the notion of the Qin's exceptionality in China's historical landscape. In addition, I hope that my discussion will contribute to a better understanding of the role of the monarchs in China's imperial polity and to the dialectical relationships between the Qin dynasty and its Han successor.

BACKGROUND: THE SEARCH FOR THE TRUE MONARCH

Qin's elimination of rival Warring States in 221 was a result of a series of brilliant military campaigns; but the empire established in its aftermath was not a purely military creature. Rather, the unification of the sub-celestial world was an idea envisioned and elaborated by generations of thinkers and statesmen long before it materialized under Qin rule. Two major concepts that emerged amid the ideological ferment of the Warring States era were particularly conducive to the future imperial enterprise: namely, that peace in All-under-Heaven would not prevail until the world was unified, and that political order in a single state and in the future unified realm was attainable only under the aegis of a powerful monarch. These ideas became the foundation upon which the Qin notion of emperorship was erected, and, more broadly, the basis of the imperial enterprise in general.

Elsewhere I have discussed in great detail the ideology of monarchism as it emerged in the preimperial period (Pines 2009, cf. Liu Zehua 1991; 2000); here, I only briefly outline its essential components. In the monarchistic discourse of the Warring States period we can identify three major threads: first, the idea of the ruler-centered universal polity as the only feasible way to ensure peace and stability; second, the concept of the sagacious True Monarch as the only person able to bring about perfect order in All-under-Heaven; and third, a subtle yet palpable bifurcation

between that ideal future ruler and current, mediocre sovereigns, who were to retain nominal power but should be persuaded to delegate many of their everyday tasks to meritorious aides. Of these three threads, the most significant in terms of its impact on the First Emperor was the second, namely the ideal of the True Monarch, and in what follows I focus primarily on that ideal.

The ideology of monarchism in the Warring States period was formed as a reaction to the perennial weakness of the rulers' power during the preceding aristocratic Springs-and-Autumns period (770–453). Having identified the decline of the sovereign's position with the general deterioration of the sociopolitical order, thinkers of various intellectual inclinations proposed multiple arguments in favor of restoring monarchic power. Some promoted the idea of the exclusiveness of the ruler's position at the head of the ritual—and *mutatis mutandis*—sociopolitical pyramid; others provided moral, political, and metaphysical stipulations for the elevation of the monarch. While thinkers widely diverged as regards the ruler's conduct in his private and public life, there was a consensus that monarchic rule was the only proper and feasible political arrangement: a single ruler should serve as the only final decision maker, and there should be no institutional—as distinct from moral—limitations on his power. The ruler could—and, in the eyes of many, should—be admonished and criticized if necessary, but neither ministers nor advisers had the right to overturn his decisions; no group was independent of his will, and he was the single source of political (and religious) authority. These ideas served as the foundation of China's monarchic system for millennia to come (see Pines 2009: 25–53 and Pines 2012a: 44–75 for further details).

The staunch monarchism of preimperial ideologues does not mean, however, that they were insensible to the dangers of a wicked or inept ruler, or to the possibility of the monarch abusing his enormous power. On the contrary, rival thinkers overwhelmingly considered themselves intellectually and morally superior to contemporary sovereigns, whom they relentlessly criticized and whose mediocrity they lamented. It is as a foil to these mediocrities that thinkers proposed the ideal of the True Monarch. The True Monarch (usually identified as “one who acts as a monarch” 王者, a “sage monarch” 聖王, or “Heavenly monarch” 天王) was a morally and intellectually impeccable leader who would be able to fulfill the centuries-long aspirations of the multitudes and bring about political unity and perfect order.

Several major features crucially distinguished the True Monarch from contemporary, mediocre sovereigns. First, he was identified as a sage—an

exceptional personality, whose morality and wisdom elevated him above the rest of humankind and, in the eyes of many thinkers, turned him into a semidivine (or fully divine) person (see more in Puett 2002). As such, the True Monarch was supposed to stand at the apex of the moral and intellectual—and not just sociopolitical—pyramid. Second, the True Monarch had to preside over the unified realm rather than over a single regional state. Third, his rule was to be marked by perfect sociopolitical order and by universal compliance. These were, in the eyes of most thinkers, the attainments of past paragons, such as the legendary Five Thearchs (*wu Di* 五帝) or the Three Monarchs (*san wang* 三王), that is, the founders of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. Yet most discussions of the True Monarch were directed not at the past but at the future: he was viewed as a savior-like figure, the one who arises “once in five hundred years” and whose arrival is long overdue.³ These quasi-Messianic expectations of the True Monarch were duly emphasized by widespread utopian depictions of universal peace, prosperity, good order, and compliance, all generated by his rule.

To illustrate views of the True Monarch in the political thought of the Warring States period I briefly focus here on Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310–230), arguably the single most profound and influential thinker of his age.⁴ Xunzi explains the essentials of the rule of the True Monarch as follows:

To preserve the Way and virtue complete, to be the highest and the most esteemed, to enhance the principles of refined culture, to unify All-under-Heaven, to put in order even the smallest things, to cause everyone under Heaven to comply and follow him—this is the task of the Heavenly Monarch. . . . If All-under-Heaven is not unified, and the regional lords customarily rebel—then the Son of Heaven is not the [appropriate] man.⁵

Political unity, perfect order and universal compliance are the first cluster of features that distinguish the True Monarch from ordinary rulers. The second peculiarity of the True Monarch is his ability to imbue his subjects with superb morality and to put an end to moral and political deviancy:

When the sage monarch is above, he apportions dutiful actions below. Then, *shi* 士 and the nobles do not behave wantonly; the hundred officials are not insolent in their affairs; the multitudes and the hundred clans are without odd and licentious habits; there are no crimes of theft and robbery; none dares to oppose his superiors.⁶

This perfect order in which every social group—from elite to commoners—is uniformly regulated by the True Monarch derives exclusively

from the superb moral and intellectual qualities of the latter. This moral and intellectual superiority is the third feature which distinguishes the True Monarch from other sovereigns:

The [True] Son of Heaven is the most respectable in terms of his power and position and has no rivals under Heaven. . . . His morality is pure; his knowledge and kindness are extremely clear. He faces southwards and makes All-under-Heaven obedient. Among all the people, there is none who does not politely hold his hands following him, thereby being compliantly transformed. There are no recluses under Heaven, the goodness of no one is neglected; the one who unites with him is right, the one who differs from him is wrong.⁷

The notion of unanimous obedience and absolute compliance with the True Monarch's will permeates the writings of Xunzi and of many of his contemporaries. Sometimes these panegyrics to the True Monarch are mistakenly interpreted as exemplifying Xunzi's "authoritarian" leanings, but this is not necessarily the case (Pines 2009: 82–97). Xunzi, like most contemporaneous thinkers, clearly distinguishes between the True Monarch and an average sovereign. The latter should enjoy absolute political and ritual authority, but in terms of morality and intellect he is tacitly understood to be inferior to his aides. It is the task of these aides, especially meritorious *Ru* such as Xunzi himself, to instruct the ruler and assist him in performing everyday tasks. In contrast, the True Monarch is perceived as morally and intellectually superior to his subjects and accordingly needs no consultations; rather, he simply "apportions dutiful actions below" and thereby orders every social stratum. Remarkably, even the intellectuals, the *shi*, whose abilities Xunzi frequently praises as being similar or even superior to those of the rulers, are expected to succumb to the will of the Sage Monarch. Insofar as the monarch's views are the sole criterion of goodness and badness, the intellectuals' moral autonomy appears significantly impaired.

These observations bring us to the last point. While the lionization of the True Monarch eventually contributed to bolstering the emperor's authority, in the short term it served a different goal. Many thinkers, Xunzi included, consistently employed the image of the True Monarch as a foil to contemporary rulers. By inflating the positive features of the True Monarch, thinkers emphasized his exceptionality. As long as reigning rulers fell short of that superhuman hero, they could not expect the same degree of obedience and submissiveness as the True Monarch should expect. Moreover, as their abilities could not match those of a

sage on the throne, rulers of the Warring States were strongly advised to limit their involvement in everyday political matters and to delegate their power to meritorious aides (Pines 2009: 82–107).

Taken from this perspective, we can understand anew why Xunzi and his like displayed a willingness to yield their proud autonomous stance to the True Monarch. While promising unwavering obedience to a future, impeccable ruler, the thinkers preserved the right to criticize and occasionally to defy contemporary, inadequate sovereigns whose mediocrity was self-evident in comparison with the idealized sage unifier. What Xunzi could not possibly have anticipated is that one of his younger contemporaries, King Zheng of Qin, would be able not just to appropriate the discourse of the True Monarch but also to utilize it for an unprecedented assault on the political power and intellectual autonomy of the educated elite.

THE FIRST EMPEROR AS THE TRUE MONARCH

In 221, having successfully concluded a series of brilliant military campaigns that swept away the competing Warring States, King Zheng of Qin proclaimed himself emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝, literally “August Thearch”; hereafter I shall use both titles interchangeably), thereby inaugurating a new era in Chinese history. His was an exceptionally eventful decade in office as emperor, full of both great attainments and awful atrocities, which make him one of the most controversial figures in China’s history. The complexity of this figure and the questionable reliability of many parts of the “Basic Annals of the First Emperor” in the *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記), our major source for Qin history (see van Ess, chapter 7 in this volume), turn the study of the First Emperor into a particularly challenging task. Luckily, the *Historical Records* and other sources preserved the texts of seven imperial stele inscriptions, which, as have been brilliantly shown by Martin Kern, may serve as a reliable source for the First Emperor’s self-image and propaganda activities. These inscriptions, in addition to a few other historical and paleographic sources, allow us to reconstruct the ideology of the First Emperor with considerable precision (see Kern 2000; Liu Zehua 2000: 128–137).

Our discussion of the First Emperor may conveniently begin with the following pronouncement made by his entourage and inscribed on the stele erected on Mt. Yi 嶧山 shortly after unification had been achieved (Figure 8.1):



Figure 8.1. Mt. Yi Stele (Tenth-Century CE Reproduction). From Xi'an, "Forest of Steles" Museum

追念亂世，分土建邦，以開爭理。攻戰日作，流血於野，自秦古始，世無萬數，
 虺及五帝，莫能禁止。迺今皇帝，壹家天下，兵不復起。災害滅除，黔首康定，
 利澤長久。

They [the Qin ministers] recall and contemplate the times of chaos:
 When [regional lords] apportioned the land, established their states,
 And thus unfolded the pattern of struggle.
 Attacks and campaigns were daily waged;
 They shed their blood in the open countryside—
 This had begun in highest antiquity.
 Through untold generations,
 One [rule] followed another down to the Five Thearchs,
 And no one could prohibit or stop them.

Now today, the August Thearch
 Has unified All-under-Heaven into one family—
 Warfare will not arise again!
 Disaster and harm are exterminated and erased,
 The black-headed people live in peace and stability,
 Benefits and blessings are lasting and enduring.⁸

This inscription is an excellent testimony to the mindset of Qin leaders in the aftermath of imperial unification. First, it identifies the past, including the age of the Five Thearchs, with persistent debilitating warfare. Second, it hails the First Emperor for bringing about unity, peace, and stability, dwarfing the achievements of his predecessors. Third, it promises that the emperor's achievements will be "lasting and enduring" and "warfare will never rise again." In a few sentences the inscription encapsulates the Qin vision of the past, present, and the future.

I analyze this particular concept of history expressed in the Mt. Yi inscription in the next section; here I focus on a single consequence of the Qin officials' bold proclamation that the achievements of their emperor dwarf those of the Five Thearchs. Insofar as these legendary sage rulers were routinely identified as "True Monarchs" of the past, by proclaiming his superiority over them the Qin Emperor clearly identified himself as the True Monarch of the present. This notion is duly present throughout the stele inscriptions. They consistently associate the reign of the First Emperor with each of the major features of the True Monarch: the universality of rule, his ability to attain perfect sociopolitical order, the emperor's moral and intellectual superiority, and, finally, his superhuman qualities. I now briefly survey these topoi which are ubiquitous in each of the seven inscriptions.

The first and most important theme that permeates the inscriptions is the notion of the universality of the emperor's rule and the peace and stability which results from it. Thus, in the Langye 瑯邪 inscription (219), the August Thearch proudly proclaims:

六合之內，皇帝之土。西涉流沙，南盡北戶。東有東海，北過大夏。人跡所至，
 無不臣者。功蓋五帝，澤及牛馬。

Within the six combined [directions],
 This is the land of the August Thearch:
 To the west it ranges to the flowing sands,
 To the south it completely takes in where the doors face north.
 To the east it enfolds the Eastern Sea,
 To the north, it goes beyond Daxia.

Wherever human traces reach,
 There is none who does not declare himself [the Thearch's] subject.
 His merits surpass those of the Five Thearchs,
 His favor extends to oxen and horses.⁹

This statement is unequivocal: the emperor's rule is truly universal. While many of the geographical terms employed above are borrowed from earlier texts, most specifically from the "Yu gong" 禹貢 chapter of the *Venerated Documents* 尚書, the emperor is anxious to stress that his territorial attainments overshadow those of the Five Thearchs. His achievements are buttressed by the rhetoric of the absolute inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of imperial rule, which repeatedly refers to the emperor's possession of "All-under-Heaven," "the six directions" (六合), "four extremities" (四極), and the like (Kern 2000: 151–152).

Territorial expansion is closely associated in the inscriptions with the motif of universal peace. This topos was exceptionally important to the emperor, who propagated it even throughout the marketplaces. An identical pronouncement, inscribed on a series of newly standardized weights and measures, begins with the following words: "In his twenty-sixth year, the emperor completely annexed all the regional lords under Heaven; the black-haired people are greatly at peace."¹⁰ This statement is further elaborated in stele inscriptions. The emperor repeatedly reminds his subjects that "warfare will never rise again," that he has "brought peace to All-under-Heaven," and that the "black-headed people are at peace, never needing to take up arms." "He has wiped out the powerful and unruly, rescuing the black-headed people, bringing stability to the four corners of the empire"; by "uniting All-under-Heaven, he put an end to harm and disaster, and then forever he put aside arms," the result of which is the "Great Peace" (*tai ping* 太平, a term which I discuss separately below).¹¹ By "unifying All-under-Heaven into one family," the emperor had fulfilled the imperative of the thinkers of the Warring States period, as summarized by Mengzi (孟子, c. 380–304): "stability is in unity."¹²

The second major topos of the inscriptions is the social and political order that the August Thearch brought. "The distinctions between noble and mean are clarified, men and women embody compliance"; the Thearch "unified and led in concord fathers and sons"; and henceforth "the honored and the humble, the noble and the mean will never exceed their position and rank." This social stability is matched by personal security: "six relatives guard each other, so that ultimately there are no bandits and robbers."¹³ Political order under the "clear laws" (*ming fa* 明法) of the Qin has ensued: "Office holders respect their divisions, and each knows what

to do"; "all respect measures and rules." The notion of universal compliance, which was so essential for the True Monarch in Xunzi's eyes, is duly emphasized: there is "none who is not respectful and submissive," "the hearts of the multitudes all became submissive," and "everybody is compliant with the orders."¹⁴

Universal peace and stability bring about universal prosperity. The latter ensues not automatically but due to the relentless efforts of the August Thearch, who emulates the sage thearch, Yu 禹, by ordering the terrestrial realm: he "tore down and destroyed inner and outer city walls; broke through and opened river embankments, leveled and removed dangerous obstacles, so that the topography is now fixed."¹⁵ These efforts result in unprecedented affluence: "Men find joy in their fields; women cultivate their work." The Thearch "enriches the black-headed people," so that "all live their full life and there is none who does not achieve his ambitions."¹⁶ As is noted in the Langye inscription cited above, even "horses and oxen" receive the emperor's favor.

It is useful to pause here for a moment and contextualize all these proud pronouncements within the intellectual discourse of the Warring States period. The emperor unmistakably indicates that the visions of a utopian future as presented in numerous texts of the Warring States are finally realized. This being so, the very magnitude of the First Emperor's merits qualifies him as True Monarch. Moreover, in the light of his achievements, the emperor is justified to proclaim himself a sage. It was, again, Xunzi who explained the intrinsic link between the monarch's sagacity and the scope of his success:

The Son of Heaven is only he who is [a truly appropriate] person. All-under-Heaven is extremely heavy: only the strongest can bear it; it is extremely large: only the smartest can divide it; it is extremely populous: only the wisest can harmonize it. Hence, one who is not the sage cannot become a [True] Monarch. When a sage has internalized the Way, accomplishing its beauty, he will hold the scale and the weights of All-under-Heaven.¹⁷

Xunzi implies here that only a self-cultivated ruler could acquire universal rule. The First Emperor justifiably reverses this order: it is the attainment of the universal rule which testifies to the exceptional personal qualities of the ruler. This understanding is duly present in the inscriptions which repeatedly laud the emperor's virtue, sagacity, and his role as a moral leader of the society. The August Thearch proudly proclaims himself as "sage, knowledgeable, benevolent, and righteous," declaring that he "radiates and glorifies his teachings and instructions, so

that his precepts and principles reach all around" and "prohibits and stops the lewd and licentious."¹⁸ The people have been transformed accordingly: "None is not committed to honesty and goodness"; "men and women are pure and sincere." The emperor's "greatly orderly rule cleansed the customs, and All-under-Heaven received his influence."¹⁹ The emperor leaves no doubt that he tops not just the sociopolitical pyramid, but the moral and intellectual pyramid as well.

Following Xunzi, and even exceeding his exaltation of the True Monarch, the First Emperor audaciously proclaims himself as immeasurably superior to other human beings, as a semidivine monarch. His "self-divinization" (Puett 2002) is expressed in a new title he adopted immediately upon the unification, the August Thearch, with its overt sacral connotation. Its second manifestation, fitting in with Xunzi's views cited above, is his self-proclamation as a sage, a title that had been applied in Warring States discourse to former paragons but never to a living ruler.²⁰ Thus, the emperor plainly declares that he "embodies sagehood" (*gong sheng* 躬聖),²¹ and he enjoys the new title so much that he mentions it no less than ten times in seven imperial inscriptions.²² As the first reigning sage, he adopts a series of measures to bolster his superhuman status: from reshaping the terrain of "All-under-Heaven" like the sage demiurge Yu, to a radical—and apparently entirely unprecedented—recasting of the imperial pantheon, and further to megalomaniacal construction projects, some of which are discussed by Shelach in chapter 3 of this volume. All of these dramatically distinguish the monarch from other mortals. Even the emperor's reported affronts to local deities, as in the case of Mt. Xiang 湘 mentioned in the *Historical Records*, may be indicative of his self-perception as a semidivine person.²³ While none of these provides unequivocal evidence to the effect that the August Thearch actually considered himself truly godlike, it is clear that at the very least he adopted a superhuman public status (cf. Yakobson, chapter 9, this volume).

One final observation with regard to the First Emperor's divine position is due here. It appears most remarkable that none of the imperial inscriptions, most of which were made on the holy sites of the conquered states, often after performing sacrifices to local deities, makes any reference to divine support for the First Emperor's political endeavor. In a marked distinction from all known rulers of China, preimperial and imperial alike, the First Emperor appears indifferent toward Heaven, the [Supreme] Thearch (Di 帝), or other deities, save the spirits of the former kings of Qin, whose support is duly recognized in the first inscription—that on Mt. Yi—and in a roughly simultaneous imperial declaration,

recorded in the *Historical Records*.²⁴ The First Emperor's shunning the title of Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) is yet another indication of his indifference toward Heaven. Is it possible that the Emperor believed—as his inscriptions repeatedly testify—that his achievements were due to his individual merits and had nothing to do with divine support? Did he fear that acknowledging the existence of a politically superior deity would endanger his—or his descendants'—position in the future? Or did he believe that as a true Sage Monarch he simply stood on an equal footing with (or above?) the divine forces and hence owed them no gratitude? We shall probably never have an answer to these questions. In any case, it is clear that the First Emperor's position vis-à-vis the divine powers was not of subservience but at the very least of equality, if not superiority. A man who saved humankind from centuries of warfare and turmoil was second to no one in either the mundane or celestial world.

A MESSIANIC MONARCH

In the above discussion, enough evidence had been marshaled to show that the First Emperor had firmly appropriated the posture of the True Monarch developed by the thinkers of the Warring States period. In what follows I analyze some of the peculiarities of this audacious appropriation of the centuries-old dream to show, first, that the First Emperor may well be identified as China's first and only quasi-Messianic ruler (prior to Mao Zedong, of course);²⁵ and, second, that his Messianic posture and the subsequent redefinition of the notion of rulership became a major source of tension between him and the intellectual elite—a tension which continued well after the First Emperor's death.

Describing the Qin as a "Messianic regime" may sound amiss: after all, there are clear distinctions between the intellectual atmosphere in China during the Warring States and Qin periods and that of the Messianic Middle East or Europe. Preimperial China witnessed neither millenarian movements nor prophecies about a forthcoming savior, and it lacked both apocalyptic literature and the idea of transcendent redemption. However, a brief look at the definition of Messianism in, for instance, the *Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought* shows numerous features which fit surprisingly well with the Chinese case. Among these, we may notice the perception of the current situation as unbearable, an active rather than contemplative attitude, a linear view of history (from current suffering to future redemption), and a visible and collective nature of redemption and its universal goals.²⁶ Some of these features are self-evident from the pre-

vious discussion (e.g., activism, the collective and universal nature of salvation) and I shall not address them here anew. What I focus on instead is the idea of a linear history going from the age of suffering into the final and irreversible redemption, an idea which is exemplified in Qin ideology and which is important for understanding both the First Emperor's perceived Messianism and Qin's place in Chinese history in general.

The Mt. Yi inscription cited at the beginning of the previous section is representative of the Qin view of its historical role as a savior of humankind from endless warfare. Qin propagandists did not invent the idea that the Warring States era caused unbearable suffering to the populace: this view was part and parcel of concurrent discourse. For instance, a passage from the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, composed in the state of Qin two decades before the final unification, states:

Our generation is extremely foul; nothing can be added to the misery of the black-headed people. The line of the Sons of Heaven has been exterminated, the worthies are cast to the ground; leaders of the age behave indulgently and have departed from the people. The black-headed people have nobody to whom they can complain.²⁷

That the violence of the Warring States was considered intolerable is a common point; what distinguishes the Qin statements, however, is that this negative view of the past was radically expanded backward, including to the age of the paragon Five Thearchs. This persistent derision of the former sage rulers is puzzling: after all, it would be much easier to legitimate the Qin Empire by saying that its leaders had simply restored the ideal state of affairs of the age of the Five Thearchs and of other former paragons; yet Qin leaders opted not to do so. I believe this rejection of an efficient legitimating device was a well calculated gamble: it allowed the First Emperor and his entourage to present the empire as an entirely new entity, the final redemption of humankind and "the end of history."

The Qin leaders were extremely anxious to highlight the newness of their regime. Many of the symbolical steps they undertook in the immediate aftermath of the unification—such as the empirewide feast, enhancing everybody's rank of merit, and, most spectacularly, collecting bronze weapons and recasting them into bells and huge human statues—convey a strong feeling of a break from the past and the beginning of a new era (cf. Sanft, forthcoming). No regime in China's long history prior to the Communist Revolution was so consciously derisive of the past (*gu* 古), which was rendered infinitely inferior to "the present" (*jin* 今).²⁸ The very language of the imperial inscriptions, which abounds with terms such as

zuo (作, to create, five times), *chu* (初, for the first time, four times) and *shi* (始, the beginning, four times), emphasizes the regime's determination to draw a clear line between what was and what is going to be.

The Qin leaders not only rejected the past but also firmly appropriated the future, boldly declaring that history had ended. Their propaganda lacks any reference to the possibility of their losing power in the future, a topos which figures so prominently in the supposedly early Zhou documents of the *Shang shu* and some of the *Shi jing* 詩經 odes.²⁹ Qin leaders perceived history not as a cyclical alteration of order and disorder as assumed by Mengzi ("Teng Wen Gong 滕文公 xia," 6.9: 154), but rather as a lengthy age of disorder under various dynasties, which ends with a new, eternal Qin era (Pines 2012c). This desire to conquer the future was expressed soon after the unification, when the emperor decided to abolish the tradition of giving posthumous names to the late monarchs, saying that henceforth his posterity would be numbered according to their generation: "the Second Generation [Emperor], the Third Generation [Emperor] and so on for myriad generations, being inherited endlessly" (*Shiji* 6: 236). This endlessness, eternity, and longevity is repeatedly mentioned in the Qin inscriptions, going much further than the traditional hopes of the lineage longevity expressed in the Zhou bronze texts.³⁰ For the Qin leaders, there could be no return to the past, with its fragmentation and disorder.

Some colleagues may contradict my assertion of the Qin's historical self-image by pointing at the Qin's adherence to the cyclical notion of historical development, as exemplified in its selection of water as its cosmic element, in accordance with the so-called five phases (*wu xing* 五行) theory associated with Zou Yan 鄒衍 (c. 305–240) and his followers (see more in van Ess, chapter 7 in this volume). This choice, however, does not mean that Qin expected to be replaced by a future ("earth") regime. Qin's acceptance of water should be considered in the context of the "Five Cycles" theory as presented in the "Ying tong" 應同 chapter of the *Lüshi chunqiu*. The "Ying tong" historical scheme might have been deliberately constructed so as to allow both cyclical and lineal explanation: by eliminating Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 from the list of the past rulers, the authors constructed the elements' changes of the past in such a way as to let the future element, water, become the final of the five, leaving a possibility that it would end the entire cycle once and forever. Michael Puett (2001: 143–144) may well be right, then, that by adopting water Qin leaders implied that the dynasty would never be replaced.

Finally, it is important to notice clear utopian motifs in the Qin's self-

presentation, which again associate this regime with the concept of complete and final salvation. As noted above, the Qin firmly incorporated the utopian expectations of the Warring States thinkers into its self-image, presenting itself as the regime that allows every individual "to live their full life and to achieve their ambitions," that expands its munificence to "oxen and horses," and that attains universal and absolute compliance. Qin was the first regime in China's history to turn the long-anticipated utopia (literally: "no-place") of preimperial thinkers into what Alexander Martynov aptly names the emperors' "entopia" (literally: "in this place").³¹ It is especially noteworthy that in his last inscription the emperor identified his reign as a manifestation of the Great Peace/Great Evenness (*tai ping* 太平). This term was marginal (or nonexistent) in the Warring States period, but became ubiquitous from the Han dynasty as the *terminus classicus* for utopia on earth.³² It is not impossible that the association of this term with absolute tranquility and perfect order began with the First Emperor; if so it may be one of his most curious and heretofore neglected intellectual legacies.

The quasi-Messianic discourse adopted by the First Emperor, with its open disparagement of the past, and the emphasis on the regime's novelty, and its "entopian" features might have contributed decisively toward the subsequent identification of the Qin as an "aberration" or "rupture" in Chinese history. At the end of this chapter I return to this point; but first I want to explore why the emperor adopted his peculiar "Messianic" stance. An immediate answer would be that the emperor's hubris reflected to a certain degree the real magnitude of his truly unprecedented success. Yet I believe that there were also serious political considerations behind Qin's peculiar self-presentation. Politically, presenting the Qin regime as completely novel might have been conducive for the successful integration of the newly conquered population. Recall that the occupiers radically changed the lives of their new subjects, imposing on them the legal and administrative regulations of Qin, its weights and measures, script and coins, rites and laws, and even its specific administrative vocabulary. Qin altered the social system of the occupied states by decapitating local elites and by imposing the Qin system of twenty ranks of merit.³³ It might have been more expedient to present these measures not as subjugation to Qin rule but as a radical renovation of the lives of the new subjects, a renovation that would bring peace, tranquility and orderly rule under the Sage August Thearch.

In addition, and more important in terms of China's political history, the emperor's "self-Messianization" (rather than mere self-divinization)

had immediate radical consequences for his political role. In any culture a Messiah is a charismatic leader, and Qin was no exception. Being a savior, a person who almost single-handedly changed history, the First Emperor buttressed his position as the True Monarch who had the right to rule and not just to reign. Practically, this meant introducing new rules to the political game, which bolstered the emperor's authority vis-à-vis his advisers and the intellectual elite in general.

As argued above, by inflating the image of the True Monarch, thinkers of the Warring States period did not intend to yield their intellectual autonomy or to hamper somehow their freedom of political action, which they enjoyed in the age of political division. Rather, by promising to acquiesce to the future sage ruler, they gained additional power against reigning sovereigns of average abilities, who were strongly encouraged not to meddle in routine administrative tasks, to delegate their everyday work to meritorious aides, and to remain satisfied with their unrivalled ritual prestige and position as the supreme arbiters in intrabureaucratic schisms. This arrangement allowed the thinkers to concentrate most government tasks in the hands of the qualified members of their stratum, while preserving the appearance of the ruler's omnipotence. This situation was supposed to change only in an unspecified future, under the sage True Monarch who would actively rule, while the officials would only "comply and follow him." Now, the First Emperor had proclaimed with the utmost clarity that the new age of the Sage Monarch had finally come.

Having asserted himself as the reigning sage, the First Emperor demanded—and acquired—effective administrative power that went far beyond what most statesmen would in all likelihood have wished to concede. While we should not accept uncritically accusations of senseless despotism of the August Thearch, as indicated in the *Historical Records*, there is little doubt that he did not accept the position of a ritual figurehead to which many preimperial thinkers would have eagerly relegated their sovereigns. Thus, his inscriptions proclaim that the August Thearch "is not remiss in rulership, rising early in the morning and resting late at night," that he "regulates and orders all within the universe, is not idle in inspecting and listening," and that he "uniformly listens to the myriad affairs."³⁴ We do not know whether the emperor was actually examining the documents he dealt with daily, not going to rest until a certain weight was reached, but the imperial proclamations and constant tours of inspection to the most remote corners of the new realm all present an image of an extraordinarily active ruler.³⁵ By skillfully appropriating the discourse of the Sage Monarch, the "Great Sage" of Qin created

an entirely novel political situation, implementing those recipes of the “Hundred Schools” which were probably never meant to be implemented in real time.

The new position of an emperor as the embodiment of the True Monarch became the single most important contribution of Qin’s August Thearch to posterity. Yet the First Emperor’s radical attempt to actualize a centuries-old ideal met with considerable resentment. While the history of the Qin is too marred by later biased interpretations and accusations to permit us a reliable reconstruction of the contemporary court atmosphere (Kern 2000: 155–163; van Ess, chapter 7 in this volume), the extant evidence overwhelmingly points to the intellectuals’ opposition to the emperor’s policy. This opposition might have triggered the most notorious of the First Emperor’s acts: the “biblioclasm” of 213 (for the discussion of which see Kern 2000: 188–191; cf. Pines 2009: 172–184), and it was not quelled thereafter. In particular, the decision of some eminent *Ru*—including Kong Jia 孔甲, a descendant of Confucius in the eighth generation—to join the rebellious peasant Chen She 陳涉 (d. 208), becoming Chen’s erudite (*Shiji* 121: 3116), is noteworthy. Members of the educated elite were clearly dissatisfied with the rule of “Qin’s Sage.”³⁶

The First Emperor’s activist posture eventually became one of his major faults in the eyes of future generations. Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168), the single most influential critic of the Qin, identified the emperor’s overreliance on his abilities and mistrust of meritorious ministers as one of the prime reasons for the malfunctioning of his dynasty.³⁷ Jia Yi and other thinkers have further interpreted the disastrous collapse of the empire within a few months under an inept and intemperate Second Emperor as a proof of the wrongness of monarchical hyperactivity. In retrospect, the Qin emperor’s creativity went too far. The Han rulers, faced with overwhelming criticism of their predecessor, had to modify the Qin model to meet the expectations of their courtiers for a more collegiate way of decision-making.

EPILOGUE: “TRUE MONARCHS” UNDER THE HAN

The collapse of the Qin endangered for a short while the imperial enterprise itself. In the wake of the disintegration of central authority, most of the extinguished Warring States were restored, and many other polities appeared on the map. The most powerful of rival potentates, Xiang Yu 項羽 (d. 202), even briefly abolished the imperial institution, choosing

instead to rule under the name “overlord-king” (*ba wang* 霸王). Yet if he intended thereby to dismiss the Qin model, the result was exactly opposite to his expectations. The upsurge of woeful turmoil due to the void of legitimate authority may have convinced the major political actors of the advantages of the imperial system for ensuring political stability. Thus, when Xiang Yu was defeated in 202, his conqueror Liu Bang 劉邦 (d. 195) resumed the title August Thearch, which remained the designation of China’s rulers for the next 2114 years.

As is well known, the Han adopted not just the Qin imperial title, but also most of the institutional and ritual arrangements of the preceding dynasty, its specific vocabulary and nomenclature, and many aspects of its imperial ideology and self-image (e.g., Loewe 1994: 124 ff). Certain topoi, characteristic of the Qin imperial inscriptions, became essential parts of the monarch’s proclamations from the early Han period and throughout the imperial millennia. Thus, most emperors, unless under extreme duress, continued to hail the peace, stability and affluence that they presumably brought to their subjects; they pretended to rule the entire realm “within the seas,” and also claimed the position of moral leaders of humankind (see, e.g., Kern 2000: 175–182). There are also obvious continuities in terms of the emperor’s sacredness and sagacity, although these are less straightforward, as I explain below. In general, the Han’s indebtedness to the Qin is undeniable.

Despite these continuities, a closer look at Han imperial rhetoric indicates significant departures from the Qin model. Most notably, the Messianic fervor is gone. Having internalized the lessons of their predecessors’ astounding collapse, the Han emperors dared not claim that they had created a brave new world and ended history (although these notions occasionally resurfaced at the margins of Han political discourse). This “de-Messianization” of the emperors had profound consequences on the functioning of the imperial institution. Most notably, it allowed a bifurcation between the institution as such, which remained absolutely sacrosanct, and the reigning emperor, whose sagacity was not necessarily taken for granted. As a result, in a most curious development, the Han emperors became more sacred but less sagacious than their proud Qin predecessor (cf. Loewe 1994: 85–111; 121–122).

The sacred status of the Han (and subsequent) emperors was built on a reaffirmation of the emperor’s links to the supreme deity, Heaven. The idea of Heaven’s Decree (or Mandate, *Tian ming* 天命) was resurrected under Liu Bang, whose ritual hymns repeatedly thank Heaven’s and

the [Supreme] Thearch's (帝) support for the Han endeavor (Kern 1996); and eventually, this idea became the cornerstone of dynastic legitimacy throughout the imperial millennia. In their renewed capacity as "Sons of Heaven," the emperors acted as sole mediators between the supreme deity and the mundane realm, presiding over human and divine affairs, repeatedly reshaping the pantheon and managing manifold sacrificial activities. Moreover, the emperors were perceived as connected to Heaven in an additional way: through a system of resonance, meaning that Heaven sends down omens and portents to approve or disapprove of its "son's" conduct (Loewe 1994: 121–141). This notion added an additional sacral dimension to the imperial rule, making the emperor's body, and *mutatis mutandis* his kin, aides, ritual utensils, seals and other paraphernalia, sacrosanct. This sacral status was emphasized by the increasing usage of the *lèse majesté* clauses of penal law: any crime against the emperor's person was thereafter treated with the utmost harshness (Pines 2012a: 44–75).

Being firmly incorporated into state ideology and ritual practice, the concept of the emperor's divine status had become part and parcel of imperial political culture. However, its implications were quite equivocal. Reaffirming the existence of the supreme deity above the emperor, and the belief that this deity may express dissatisfaction with its human counterpart and even replace him, served as a powerful check against the monarch's atrocities. Not incidentally, the Han emperors from Emperor Wen 漢文帝 (r. 180–157) repeatedly issued "mea culpa edicts" (罪己詔), blaming themselves for natural disasters or unfavorable omens and promising to improve their ways, specifically by promoting upright officials (Liu Zehua 1996: 239–247). It seems then that the redefinition of the emperor's divine status under the Han bolstered the prestige of the emperors in general, but somewhat reduced the power of individual monarchs.

The same bifurcation between the institutional and individual aspects of emperors is evident in the concept of imperial sagacity under the Han. Ostensibly, the Han emperors rejected the First Emperor's hubris, and repeatedly asserted their weakness and inadequacy. This change is most evident in their posture vis-à-vis the sage rulers of the past, especially the Five Thearchs. From the Han on, these paragons were depicted in superhuman terms as generators of cosmic and not just sociopolitical harmony and order, while reigning monarchs modestly acknowledged their inability to match this ideal. This modesty is vivid, for instance, in an edict of young Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141–87), in which he called

upon “the worthies” to arrive at court and help him in conducting government affairs:

I heard that during the times of Tang [唐, i.e., Yao 堯] and Yu [虞, i.e., Shun 舜], they drew images [on the people’s robes as the punishment], and the people did not transgress; wherever sun and moon shone everybody behaved humbly. At the times of Kings Cheng 成 and Kang 康 of the Zhou, mutilating punishments were not employed, virtue reached birds and beasts, instructions penetrated [all within] the four seas. Beyond the sea they expanded to Sujuan 肅眷; to the north developed Jusou 渠搜; Di 氐 and Qiang 羌 [tribesmen] came in submission. There were neither displacement of stars and constellations, nor eclipses of sun and moon; mountain ranges did not collapse, rivers and valleys were not blocked; unicorns and phoenixes lived in suburban marshes, the [Yellow] River and Luo River generated charts and documents. Wuhu, what should I do to approach this [state of affairs]?

Now, as it has become my duty to protect the ancestral temples, I seek this when I get up at sunrise, and contemplate this at bed at night. [I am fearful] as if passing above the abyss and not knowing how to cross. How magnificent! How great! What should I do to manifest the splendid enterprise and munificent virtue of the former emperors, above to stay in trinity with Yao and Shun, below to match the Three Dynasties? I am lacking perspicacity, and cannot sustain virtue for long. (*Hanshu* 6: 160–161)

Emperor Wu’s edict contrasts sharply with the First Emperor’s statements (and most possibly it was consciously designed to be so). The past is superb; the current ruler cannot match its attainments; it is only with the help of worthy aides that he may approach the splendor of the past. Yet we should not be misled by the humble rhetoric of the Han emperor: the rules of the game in the Han era were different, and it was the task of the ministers to flatter their ruler and to extol his supposed sagacity. Thus, while Emperor Wu did not claim to be a sage and used this epithet exclusively for his ancestors, his ministers, conversely, routinely identified him as a sage. A new court *bon ton* was for the emperor to humbly proclaim inadequacy and even blame himself for multiple malfunctions, while it was up to the ministers to hail the sovereign. Eventually, the ministerial voice prevailed; the term “sage” (*sheng* 聖) became firmly incorporated into the emperors’ image, becoming a synonym of the adjective “imperial” (Hsing 1988; Liu Zehua 1998).

So, does this mean that any Han emperor was supposed to be a sage just like the Qin First Emperor? Not necessarily. At a closer look, we may

notice that in the Han, sagacity became more a feature of the imperial office than of its occupant. Technically, the emperor had to be considered a sage, much like he had to be considered sacred: after all, in his capacity as the supreme administrator he had to make among others decisions on purely ideological issues, for example, approving or dismissing a certain exegetical tradition or canonical work as worthy of incorporation into the court education system. Since his judgments were final and supposedly infallible, it had to be assumed for preserving the dynasty's face that the monarch was intellectually superior to his subjects. Simultaneously, however, it was well known that the throne was more frequently than not occupied by mediocre persons, and even by child emperors manipulated by their kin or, most notoriously, by court eunuchs. To believe in the sagacity of these individuals required too great a leap of faith for most literati.

If my analysis is correct and the major impact of Qin's "Messianic revolution" was turning the emperor into a divine and sage person, then, again, echoing Martynov (1987: 29), we may notice that the Han retained the "yardstick" of the utopia and not its content. The imperial position was continuously regarded as divine and sagacious; its occupant—less so. Eventually, this dichotomy between image and reality proved to be a much more viable pattern than the Qin model of a charismatic "Messianic" monarch. The latter was unsustainable, especially due to the inevitability of the eventual accession of an incapable monarch under the principle of lineal succession, as the case of the notorious Second Emperor proves.³⁸ The Han system was much more flexible. The sacrosanct position of the imperial institution as such allowed it to retain the major function as the symbol of universal unity and of political order with the "single esteemed" at the top. Simultaneously, subtle reaffirmation of the possibility that an individual monarch might be mediocre and inept encouraged the formation of bureaucratic system of "checks and balances" which allowed for preserving the empire intact even under inadequate rulers, including, most remarkably, under a sequence of child monarchs in the Later Han. Although a few Han and later emperors took their sagacity literally and tried to impose their will on all imaginable spheres of human activity (Wang Mang 王莽 [45 BCE–23 CE] immediately comes to mind), most were coached to understand their personal limitations and to consult their aides, adopting a much more collegiate way of government than the Qin idea of imperial sagacity would allow (see Pines 2012a: 63–69, for further details).

Finally, allow me two concluding remarks. First, I believe that adding

the “Messianic” angle to an analysis of the Qin provides a possible solution to the riddle of its historical place. The Qin’s exceptional position in Chinese history derives neither from its culture nor from its institutions but from the very peculiar mindset of its leaders, most notably the First Emperor, who claimed to end history and demanded the literal realization of his theoretical omnipotence. This mindset, which is not attested to in either the preimperial or later imperial period, significantly distinguishes the Qin from its predecessors and successors. Qin’s exceptionality was in the final account a matter of its self-presentation; and this self-presentation, rather than the post-factum manipulation of Qin’s enemies, is largely responsible for the later view of Qin as a historical “aberration.”

Second, I believe that my interpretation sheds additional light on the problem of the Qin’s collapse, discussed by Shelach in chapter 3 of this volume. As is well known, Jia Yi in his seminal discussion on the reasons for the Qin’s collapse noticed its inability to change and modify its ways as the major malady of its rule (*Shiji* 6: 283). Yet this is exactly the common malady of Messianic regimes worldwide, most notably Communist regimes in the USSR and in Mao’s China among others. Having promised to bring utopia here and now and end history, these regimes find it difficult to deviate from the patterns established at the moment of their foundation, and are commonly very rigid in terms of their structure. Facing the difficulty of fulfilling their promises, they often radicalize and escalate their “Messianic” rhetoric to conceal the growing divergence between image and reality, and overburden the society with multiple unreasonable projects. This, apparently, was the case with the Qin which, as Shelach shows, entered into a spiral of ever escalating projects aimed, among other things, at projecting its unrivalled power amid increasing strains on its rule. Although it is not impossible that had the Qin continued for a longer period it would have adapted itself to a more “normal” mode of conduct, I believe that the quasi-Messianic mindset of its rulers substantially hindered this possibility. It was only after the utopia was abandoned that what Shelach aptly calls the “fuzzy” empire, modeled after the Han, acquired its true immortality—or, at least, the most remarkable longevity in the political history of humankind.