CHAPTER 7 - CHINA'S FIRST EMPIRE (221 B.C.E.- 220 C.E.)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter stresses continuity, language and geography in the development of Chinese empires. One of the key turning points in Chinese history was the third century B.C.E., when the old, quasi-feudal Chou multi-state system gave way to a centralized bureaucratic government that built an empire from the steppe in the north to Vietnam in the south. This first empire was divided into three parts: Ch'in dynasty (256-206 B.C.E.), Former Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. - 8 C.E.), and the Later Han dynasty (24-220 C.E.).

The Ch'in dynasty established its control on the geopolitical advantages offered by the Wei River in northwest China. This state was brutal and tough, yet stable. Despite its harsh laws, it attracted farmers who welcomed the security and order of its society. It relied on Legalist Administrators who developed policies for enriching the country and strengthening the military. Under the control of the emperor, the Ch'in dynasty expanded its territorial holdings, instituted bureaucratic reforms and stressed uniformity of thought in establishing a centralized state. The Great Wall of China was extended some fourteen hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean to central Asia and is testament to the efficiency and control of this dynasty. However, too many changes in rapid succession caused the entire system to collapse under the harsh rule of the dynasty. Rebellion spread as the Ch'in government lost its popular support.
The first emperor of the Han dynasty, Kao Tzu of plebeian origin, established the capital in the Wei basin close to the former capitals of the Chou and Ch'in dynasties. Although it took many years to consolidate power, this action permitted a degree of continuity to exist in the political development of China. The second phase of the dynastic cycle began with the rule of the "martial emperor," Wu Ti, in 141 B.C.E. Old policies like government monopolies on salt, iron, liquor, etc. were established to maintain control of China. Wu Ti expanded the boundaries of China by sweeping south into North Vietnam and north to central Manchuria and North Korea. This aggressive leadership created a strong army and led to the policy of "using the barbarians to control the barbarians," thus making allies of border nomads against those more distant. This policy worked for the most part and brought about the establishment of the Silk Road that connected with the Roman Empire. During the course of the Han dynasty, the Legalist structure of government became partially Confucianized. The Confucian classics gradually were accepted as the standard for education and served as an ethical justification for dynastic rule. After a period of instability and civil war in which contending factions tried to establish hegemony, the Han dynasty was restored and ruled from 25-220 C.E. This "Later Han" period saw a return to strong central government and a laissez-faire economy. Their armies crossed the Gobi desert and defeated the northern Hsuing Nu who migrated to the west where they were known during the 5th century C.E. as the Huns of Attila. Until 88 C.E., the emperors of the Later Han were vigorous, but afterward they were ineffective and short-lived. Political instability caused by plotting empresses, eunuch conspiracies and religious rebellion plagued the dynasty until it was overthrown by the military in 220 C.E. For more than three and a half centuries after the fall of the Han, China was disunited and dominated by aristocratic landowning families. During this period, north and south China developed in different ways. In the south, a succession of six short-lived dynasties centered themselves around the capital of Nanking and prospered economically, although political chaos was the order of the day. In the north, state formation resulted from the interaction of nomadic tribes with the Chinese population. The short-lived states that were organized are usually referred to as the Sixteen Kingdoms. Amid endemic wars and differences in languages, Buddhism was a common denominator and served as a bridge between "barbarians" and Chinese.

The Han period was creative in many ways, but excelled in philosophy and history. Many Confucian texts were recovered during this time and scholars began writing commentaries on the classics. The Chinese were the greatest historians of the premodern world and emphasized primary source evaluation. As the Han waned in influence, some scholars abandoned Confucianism altogether in favor of Neo-Taoism or "mysterious learning;" this was a reaction
against the rigidity of Confucian doctrine and defined the natural as pleasurable. They sought immortality in dietary restrictions, meditation, sexual abstinence or orgies, and emphasized an amalgam of beliefs including an afterlife of innumerable heavens and hells where good and evil would be recompensed. The text goes on to discuss Buddhist doctrine and its spread into China. As the socio-political order collapsed in the third century C.E., Buddhism spread rapidly and was especially influential by the fifth century.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The Dynastic Cycle: Historians of China have seen a pattern in every dynasty of long duration. This dynastic cycle begins with internal wars that eventually lead to the military unification of China. The successful unifier then justifies his rule by emphasizing that he has a mandate from heaven. The emperor consolidates his power, restores peace and order to China and launches several energetic reforms and public works projects. During the peak of this phase, China expands militarily and appears invincible. But then the cycle turns downward because of the increased costs of empire and opulence at court, which require additional taxes on a burdened populace. The vigor of the monarch wanes, intrigues develop and central controls loosen as provincial governors and military commanders gain autonomy. Finally, public works fall into disrepair, rebellions break out and the dynasty collapses. In the view of Confucian historians, the last emperors were not only politically weak, but morally culpable as well.

2. Contenders for Imperial Power: The court during the Han dynasty exhibited features that would appear in later dynasties as well. The emperor was the "Son of Heaven," omniscient and omnipotent in his authority. Yet when he was weak or a child, others ruled in his name and they emerged from four distinct categories: 1) officials who staffed the apparatus of government 2) the empress dowager whose child had been named heir to the throne 3) court eunuchs who served in the emperor's harem and often cultivated influence as confidants, and 4) military commanders who became semi-independent rulers and occasionally even usurped the position of the emperor in the later phases of dynastic rule. Yet they were less powerful than commanders in the Roman Empire because their authority was limited to a single campaign and commanders were appointed in pairs so each would check the other.
3. **Education in Early Dynastic China**: Confucian classics formed the primary base of education in early dynastic China. The Ch'in dynasty, however, attempted to eliminate all traces of Confucian doctrine and replace it with Legalist concepts; this trend was reversed by the Han dynasty. During this time period, the study of philosophy and history were recognized as most important for the promotion of sound government.

4. **The Spread of Buddhism**: Central Asian missionaries brought Buddhism to China in the first century where it was first recognized as a new Taoist sect. As the Han socio-political order collapsed in the third century C.E., Buddhism spread rapidly until it was firmly entrenched by the fifth century. Though an alien religion in China, Buddhism had some advantages over Taoism: 1) It was a doctrine of personal salvation, 2) It contained high standards of personal ethics, 3) It continued to receive inspiration from the sophisticated meditative practices of the Indian tradition. The core of Buddhist teaching is the realization of simple truths: Life is suffering, the cause of suffering is desire; death does not end the endless cycle of birth and rebirth; only the attainment of nirvana releases one from the "wheel of Karma." Thus, all of the cosmic drama of salvation is centered in the figure of Buddha.

5. **China's First Empire in World Context**: The great empires in China, India and the Mediterranean all came after revolutions in thought where the conception of universal political authority derived from earlier philosophies. All three empires joined their Iron Age technologies with new organizational techniques to create superb military forces. Yet there were differences as well: 1) China was a much more homogeneous culture than was the polyglot empire of Rome, 2) government in Han China was more orderly, complex and competent; government officials controlled the military almost until the end, whereas Rome suffered from chaotic leadership in the third century C.E. and was in no sense a dynasty, 3) Roman power and unity was built gradually over centuries, whereas China remained a multistate system right up to 232 B.C.E. and then was unified by one state in eleven years.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**
*Chinese Bronze of Ancient Times.* Contemporary Films. 17 min.

*Chinese Brush Strokes.* Moyer Martin Productions. 17 min.

*Chinese History, No. 3 China: Hundred Schools.* Teaching Films Custodian. 19 min.

*Chinese History, No. 4 China: The First Empire.* Teaching Films Custodian. 19 min.

*Chinese History, No. 5 China: The Great Cultural Mix.* Teaching Films Custodian. 19 min.