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The Qin and Han Dynasties: The Flexibility and Adaptability of Military Force and Expansion

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The course of human history has shown that there is no guaranteed method of conquest and expansion. Large scale armies can crush opponents, but they can also be outmaneuvered or rendered ineffective by terrain; yet more maneuverable forces can be beaten by superior force when constricted by terrain. Changes in tactics can make what was an advantage one day a liability the next. There are even situations in which the circumstances make a conventional military offensive an inefficient or ineffective way for an empire to spread its control and influence. Furthermore, growing empires are confronted with a wide variety of circumstances - geographical, tactical and strategic - from region to region and people to people. As a result, an essential feature for empires seeking significant expansion has been the ability to recognize and adapt, specifically the ability to recognize the specific requirements of the situation and adapt their course of action accordingly. In the history of imperial China, the Qin and Han dynasties both demonstrated this ability to utilize methods of warfare and expansion as dictated by circumstances in order to bring about success. The Qin built their military to exploit the weaknesses of the feudal armies of the Chinese states opposing them, while the Han utilized combinations of large-scale armies, maneuverability, colonization, military adventurers operating independently of the imperial court and small expeditions to expand their domain.

Before the ascension of the Qin and Han Dynasties, China was a land divided. The nearly two centuries prior to Qin unification are known to historians as the Warring States Period, and with good reason. The Zhou king, whose theoretical domain was much of China, was but a figurehead, powerless to intervene as leaders of numerous regional states intrigued and battled to extend the portions of China under their control. These leaders were frequently the feudal lords who were in principle vassals of the Zhou king. At the height of their power, the Zhou had used a feudal system to rule China. Noblemen of the landed aristocracy took oaths of loyalty to the Zhou king, and in return were responsible for ruling over their particular domain. All administrative and military positions were appointed by and responsible to the lord. Each region had such a system under its particular lord, encompassing officials high and low within the civil administration and military, from ministers and commanders down through the ranks to the serfs, who, bound to the land, formed the bottom

of the feudal hierarchy.[1] The result was the creation of political and military hierarchies that were highly decentralized. As the power of the Zhou waned, these feudal domains became de facto states unto themselves, with the lords becoming the leaders who struggled for supremacy. Such struggles continued until the rise of the Qin, whose conquest restored unity to China. In working to consolidate their power, the Qin established the centralized bureaucracy necessary to the direct rule of a large empire by an imperial court, and its successor dynasty, the Han, extended and solidified the work begun by the Qin. These two dynasties thus began the administrative system that would characterize imperial China for many dynasties to come, making the methods they used to expand to the position from which they were able to influence the development of bureaucratic rule throughout China an essential element of Chinese imperial history.

Prior to Qin expansion, the method of Chinese warfare matched the feudal nature of Chinese politics. Feudal lords raised their armies through levies of the peasants under their control. Such armies were limited by the nature of their composition. Farmers could only be called away from their fields at certain times of year. Not only did this limit the duration of feudal campaigns, but it also limited their range, as with less time to march out and return, an army cannot go as far afield. This range factor was further compounded by the fact that those peasants who composed feudal armies simply did not like campaigning a significant distance from their homes and fields.[2] Thus, feudal society yielded feudal armies that were hampered by their very feudal nature.

The political results of warfare between these feudal armies were as constricted as the forces themselves. As long as they became vassals of the victor, defeated lords retained control over their lands. They had to pay tribute to their new feudal master, but as they retained powers such as tax collection, their power base endured even in defeat.[3] As a result, allegiances and tributaries were ever shifting, "altering the grouping but not the structure of power."[4] So while this system did bring defeated regions under the control of the victorious power, the conquered states retained such autonomy that the political situation remained ever fluid.

It was amidst this backdrop that the Qin moved to conquer the rest of China. To do so, the Qin developed a military that would be able to exploit the inherent weaknesses of the feudal armies that opposed them. The most fundamental adaptation the Qin made was to create a professional army. Having no crops to tend or harvest, professional soldiers could be deployed year round, making their use a huge advantage over feudal powers. Furthermore, with these professional troops, the Qin emphasized sheer numbers and maneuverability.[5] In order to overwhelm the feudal armies, which were constantly gaining or losing detachments based on any number of local factors that could draw men away from the army for a portion or the duration of the campaign, the Qin developed their army "as the most massive striking force of the age."[6] But this army was built on more than just sheer numbers; in order to exploit the limited range of feudal armies, the Qin army deployed a strong cavalry force that had incorporated the most useful aspects of the non-Chinese peoples who lived on their borders.[7] Size and speed therefore gave the Qin army two major tactical advantages over the other Chinese states, and in utilizing them it was, in part, "this cavalry, trained in Frontier warfare, whose rapid maneuver and striking power won an empire for Ch'in [Qin]."[8]

But it was not just in tactics that the Qin differed from feudal China; they also pursued a different set of goals. The Qin fought for total victory and absolute conquest; not merely content to add the defeated lord and his territory to the realm as an additional feudal appendage, administered by the defeated lord's administrators, as was the prevailing practice, the Qin sought to bring the vanquished region under the direct control of the Qin emperor and his bureaucracy. The result was the first uniform implementation of a new set of strategies, vastly different from those of the feudal states. In order to obliterate the independent structure of a newly subjugated state, the victorious Qin wiped out the entirety of the vanquished royal house. Yet this was just the tip of the iceberg. Whenever the Qin won a battle as part of its conquest of China, the entirety of the defeated army was annihilated by decapitation. But this was never capricious slaughter; it was policy. In the face of such complete destruction, the feudal power structure of the defeated state could not remain intact, not with both lord and those who fought for him dead.[9] Thus, the brutality of Qin conquest existed for an explicit purpose, facilitating the consolidation of victory into conquest and conquest into empire.

While the Qin Dynasty was short-lived, the more lasting Han Dynasty would prove itself equally adept at adapting their military techniques to fit the particular circumstances of the campaign.

1. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 33.
2. Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: Capitol Publishing Co., Inc., and the American Geographical Society, 1951) 438.
3. Lattimore, 400.
4. Lattimore, 401.
5. Lattimore, 438-439.
6. Lattimore, 437.
7. Lattimore, 421.
8. Lattimore, 422.
9. Lattimore, 401.

In the second century BCE, the long-reigning Emperor Wudi engaged in a series of campaigns against the Xiongnu, the nomadic people of the Asia steppe along China's northern frontier. He sent out huge armies to fight the tribesmen, with one army reaching 300,000 men and several others of over 100,000 troops.[10] But numbers alone could not carry the day on the steppe, forcing China to adapt to the requirements of the terrain.

The grassland of the Asian steppe lends itself to cavalry warfare. Living in this region made the nomads expert horsemen, as mobility was vital to surviving on the sparse steppe. Additionally, the requirements of hunting on the steppe made its inhabitants highly skilled with the bow and arrow. That they learned, in part as a requirement of hunting on the steppe, to combine these two skills and shoot their bows while mounted made the Xiongnu all the more deadly a foe.[11] Xiongnu warfare was thus perfectly suited to the terrain in which they lived.

Thus, in order to defeat the Xiongnu in their own territory, the Chinese had to fight like the Xiongnu. The Han therefore incorporated Xiongnu tactics into their armies, relying heavily on cavalry forces to counter the mounted nomads.[12] As crucially, campaigning deep in the Asian steppe took the Chinese armies far from their frontier bases. This resulted in long supply lines that became ever longer as the Chinese drove back the Xiongnu.[13] Given the mobility of the Xiongnu as a result of their horsemanship, this left the Chinese in a precarious position, susceptible to being cutoff from supplies and encircled. Neutralizing this vulnerability involved learning to live off of the steppe as the Xiongnu did.[14] By thus achieving independence from their bases, the Chinese armies were able to extend their range even further and, unburdened by supply trains, become more mobile. Thus, that the Han were able to defeat the Xiongnu and move deep into the Asian steppe was a result of the fact that when Emperor Wudi deployed massive armies against the Xiongnu, he did so "with troops that matched the nomads in mobility and striking power."[15] But in the south, the Han could not effectively deploy massive armies of any kind. First of all, the terrain prevented it. Southward expansion brought the Han into a region of swamps, mountains and thick jungles entirely unsuited to the deployment, maneuver and use of armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Furthermore, the peoples native to this region did not typically fight in organized armies. They would resist incursion every step of the way, but the set-piece battle was not to be had.[16] Thus, the primary role of the imperial army was to maintain garrisons to protect Han gains after they were made.[17]

In light of this reduced role for Chinese armies, southern expansion took on two main forms, the first of which was colonization. Chinese settlers were sent south along the rivers to establish themselves in the new territory. These settlers brought with them Chinese goods, creating a trade relationship that marked the first stage of tying the people of the region to China. The settlers of course also brought with them their culture, exposure to which instigated the process of assimilation through which China would incorporate these southern regions. Once a region was possessed of a sufficiently high number of settlers, the imperial government was able to send south administrators to oversee the region and promote the process of assimilating the natives to its fullest.[18] In this way the Han were able to add territory to their empire with minimal conflict.

The second method for establishing control over the south was through adventurers. The most famous of these men to be active in the south was Chao Tuo, whose career spanned from the final years of the Qin to the reign of the Han emperor Wudi. After marrying into a clan of the Yue in what is now Guangdong province in south China, he was able to systematically build a powerbase for the creation of his own domain. As Chao continued to expand his territory as a self-proclaimed king, the first Han emperor enlisted him as a vassal. While Chao did not allow himself to be constricted by this relationship, continuing to campaign on his own accord and conquering part of present day Vietnam, after his death Emperor Wudi was able to assert control over those who succeed Chao to rule his domains.[19] Chao Tuo thus serves of an example of how, in terrain in which large Chinese armies could not operate efficiently, the military adventurer could use local forces to build a kingdom that could later be incorporated into the greater Chinese empire.

Meanwhile, in the west, expansion into Central Asia posed another set of problems for the Han Dynasty. Central Asia is a barren and often desert region, interspersed with a number of settled oases. As such, this landscape provided little opportunity for colonization. Additionally, as it lay far from the center of the Han Empire, distance and desert thus served to isolate the region and any Chinese presence there from the rest of the empire.[20] Furthermore, as at each oasis there was an established society that could provision a Chinese force, "war among the oases of Central

10. Ebrey, 69.
11. Ebrey, 68.
12. HarperCollins Atlas of World History, Geoffrey Barraclough, ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Borders Press, 1998) 81.
13. Lattimore, 484.
14. Lattimore, 499.
15. Lattimore, 484.
16. Lattimore, 439.
17. Ebrey, 82.
18. Ebrey, 82-83.
19. Ebrey, 83.
20. Lattimore, 503.

Asia required only that the field force not be too cumbrous to make long marches yet strong enough to overawe each oasis it entered."[21] The former requirement effectively ruled out the use of massive armies on the scale of Wudi's steppe campaigns. Combined, all of these factors severely curtailed the options available to the Han for expansion into Central Asia.

The result of these constraints was that individual commanders of small detachments were able to operate in Central Asia with almost complete autonomy. Among such leaders was Ban Chao, brother of the famous female scholar Ban Zhao. Ban Chao was sent to Central Asia in the first century CE with thirty-six men to promote and protect Chinese interests in the region. During his nearly three decades in Central Asia, despite rarely receiving any reinforcements or direction from the Han Empire, Ban Chao successfully spread Chinese influence at the expense of the Xiongnu.[22] Ban Chao accomplished this through what the Chinese came to call "containing barbarians with barbarians."[23] He made alliances with certain oasis powers and, exploiting long standing animosities among the peoples of the region, used them to fight against other groups that were potential threats to Chinese interests.[24] He was thereby able to shape the politics of Central Asia and draw the area into the Chinese orbit, placing China on the Xiongnu's western flank instead of having the Xiongnu on China's, all with a modicum of Chinese military presence.

Thus, the first two dynasties to rule over a unified China following the Warring States Period demonstrated skill in adapting to the particular attributes of a situation. The Qin did so by developing an army that would be able to exploit the inherent vulnerabilities of the feudal armies deployed by its rivals. In subsequent centuries, the Han made a number of adaptations as they expanded their empire on multiple fronts. In the north, they utilized large armies that learned how to maneuver, live and fight on the steppe as their enemy, the Xiongnu, did. To the south, where such methods would have been largely futile, the Han utilized policies of colonization and adventurers to bind the region to the empire. And in the west, it was the autonomous commander who advanced the cause of the Han by playing the various peoples of Central Asia off of each other in order to bring the region under the influence of China. In seeking to extend their realms, the Qin and Han Dynasties proved to be flexible in how they utilized military force to facilitate expansion and empire.

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21. Lattimore, 491-492.

22. John E. Wills, Jr., *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 93-94.

23. Bernard Martin and Shu Chien-Tung, *Makers of China: Confucius to Mao* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972) 39.

24. Wills, 94.

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