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CH' IN SHIH HUANG TI AND HIS TIMES AN EPISODE IN CHINESE HISTORY

The sixth in the series of lectures delivered at the Nippon Cultural Federation

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CHINESE history abounds in events the influences of which are still clearly visible in the life and culture of present day China. We see in present Chinese social life the operation of the social order of the past; there is a close relation between old and new China. The reason for this historical continuity throughout the ages can be found in the unchanging quality of the cultural element of the Middle Kingdom.

Usually in China, political changes are sudden and radical. Apart from the cultural and political development, which proceeds very slowly and often takes thousand of years, China has accepted the theory of Revolution rather than that of Evolution.

Japan, however, on the contrary, has in the course of its Empire's history become acquainted mainly with Evolution. The original Japanese conception of Tennō and Kōdō forbids the harbouring of any thoughts on the lines of Revolution, knowing well that such would cause the collapse of the whole structure of the State and its principles.

The changes of dynasties and Emperors in China 改朝易姓 are historical facts. Without sacrificing the idea of "The Son of Heaven" (天子 T'ien Tzu), one ruling house succeeded the other due to the philosophical and political conception of Confucianism. According to the idea of Wang Tao (王道; Jap. Ōdō), which differs entirely from that of Kōdō, the Chinese Emperor is obliged to follow the Will of Heaven. Should the "Son of Heaven" fail to fulfill the mission of Wang Tao, the Heaven, so to speak,

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would assume the right to dethrone the Emperor and a new ruler would be chosen through the people "in the name of Heaven."—In modern terms we call this "the Right of Revolution" (Das Recht auf Revolution). Already in the characters 天子 we can trace the basic idea of Emperor and of the State (Staatsanschauung!). The Emperor is the "Son" 子 of "Heaven" 天 and, therefore, not unconditionally free and sovereign. His actions are continually dependent on the heavenly order and its instructions. Thus he must follow Wang Tao.

The Japanese Emperor is called Tennō, which means the "Emperor of Heaven" 天皇. Combining the principles Heaven and Earth, he has no "mission" in the sense of the Chinese "Son of Heaven".

"The will of the Tennō is identical with the will of God". The present Emperor P'u Yi of Manchukuo, who accepted "K'ang Tê" (康德-Tranquillity and Benevolent Virtue) as the motto of his reign, rules under Wang Tao (Ōdō)—the Chinese conception; a rather interesting fact.

I am now going to deal in more detail with one of those changes of dynasty and ruler the consequences of which were of tremendous importance to the future of China, and which has proved to be a turning point in Chinese history: The Chou 周 dynasty, after 900 years of existence, came to an end, and a man of most powerful and interesting personality introduced a new era, stamping it with his individual character. In the year 221 B.C. he raised his dukedom Ch'in 秦 to the ruling house of China.

One event of this revolutionary and stormy epoch particularly remains imprinted in the minds of literay men and philosophers, namely, the so-called "burning of books" ("BUECHERVERBRENNUNG") by Huang Ti, which is known

1 Johannes Kraus: "Einige Ideal-und Realfaktoren der Kōdōbewegung", Cultural Nippon, Vol. II, No. 1, No. 1, p. 66.

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in East-Asiatic as well in the occidental literature as the "burning of books".

The reign of Shih Huang Ti, which lasted from 221-210 B.C., contains so many interesting problems—cultural, political and philosophical,—that I consider it well worth while to peruse the existing literature on that subject, and thus create a desire for deeper study. The Shih Chi 史記, Historical Notes, written by Szu Ma Ch'ien 司馬遷, still remain the standard work on this subject. The author is aptly called the "father of Chinese history." I myself venture to call him "the Chinese Thucydides"². Of course other literature has been written on the epoch of Shih Huang Ti, but so far little has been done in actual translation. However, for the one who is not an expert, the existing general works in languages will provide sufficient material for study.

The burning of books, generally called "a catastrophic event", was a novum in Chinese history, and its explanation and criticism needs an exposition of the political and cultural circumstances.

In the third century B.C. the Empire of Chou was declining and certainly approaching its downfall. At this time there were many little states fighting each other, and thus creating a state of utter disorder. Besides, Chou culture lacked initiative and activity. The feudal economic system (Lehns- und Frohnsordnung) collapsed. Neither the sacred authority of antiquity, nor the power of existing Confucianism was able to consolidate the Empire, and just at that time there appeared on the political horizon the rising state of Ch'in in the West. A new epoch then began. From the resources acquired in the home country by tenacious and untraditional state-practice, the rulers of the new Ch'in-dynasty were founded the Unitary State (Einheits-

² Thucydides for the first time in the occident used the critical and political-pragmatical method in his historical writings.

staat). The reforms of the efficient statesman, who raised himself to be Emperor, under the title "Ch'in Shih Huang Ti" (秦始皇帝=First Emperor of Ch'in) were so drastic and revolutionary, that they may be justly called the work of one of the greatest man in world-history. The old feudal State became a Unitary State. The division of China into provinces, prefectures and districts took place at this time³.

The result was a centralised and absolute state supported by the military and peasants. Naturally Huang Ti could not refrain from leaving untouched the cultural basis of the old Chou-system, and inaugurated a new mode of thinking, free from the chains of Confucianism and tradition. The restoration of antiquity with its sacred books—the annals, poems and works on Confucianism—seemed to be a great obstacle to the construction and political and cultural organisation of the new state. If we believe Chinese historians, the conviction would that Huang Ti burned the books as a radical measure to destroy tradition and the hated Confucianism. On the other hand we must consider the fact that the historians in question, headed by Szu Ma Ch'ien, actually stood on the side of Confucianism, strenuously opposing the dynasty of Ch'in. Thus we cannot expect an unbiassed exposition. Commonly Huang Ti is depicted as a despot, a destroyer of literature and an enemy of science. It is the general conviction that the burning of books was an act inspired *only* by his unfounded antipathy towards tradition and Confucianism.

Otto Franke⁴ in his valuable book on Chinese history has explained "*sine ira et studio*" the fact of the *legend*, which has been handed down and which says that Huang Ti was in principle against science and culture. Franke is convinced that Huang

3 In Japan the division into prefectures under governors is a system derived from China, which ultimately means from Huang Ti. China acted as example in "The Restoration of Taika" (A.D. 645-649), the great reform of the Japanese Empire. However the feudal system in Japan was not abolished at at this time.

4 O. Franke, *Geschichte des chinesischen Reiches*, I. Band.

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Ti was neither an enemy of culture, nor did he at the beginning attack the writings of Confucius. Franke writes (I, p. 247): "Only later the picture changed, when Confucianism began to use excessively its theories of the ideal state of antiquity as an open denial of the new state, thus seriously endangering the latter's existence".

The burning of books was ordered as a result of a petition by chancellor Li Si. Incidentally, the origin and cause of the petition was a dinner, given by Huang Ti at his residence Hien Yang. A member of the Imperial Academy in a speech, tried to re-introduce the old feudal system, strengthening his arguments with references to the authority of ancient times. In a masterly way the skilful chancellor Li Si replied, demanding, among other requests, that all books should be burned. Szu Ma Ch'ien (in Shih Chi 史記, chpt. 6) wrote this famous answer.

We read (according to Franke, Vol. I, pp. 248-249);

"Now the Empire is pacified; law and instructions emanate from the one source. The heads of families among the people turn towards rural and other occupations. The aristocrats study laws, regulations, rules and prohibitions. The literates, however, do not take the lead at the present time, but study antiquity, thus making the present appear inferior and so in turn create doubts and uneasiness among the masses Although Your Majesty has now united the Empire and secured uniformity by separating the black from the white, these literates follow their own system of teaching. They secretly engage in discussions, act against the laws, and incite others to do the same. The moment a new decree appears, each one begins to scrutinise it according to his own theory I therefore demand: Those in charge of archives must burn all the annals, except those of Ch'in. Whoever in this country possesses a copy of "Shih Ching" 詩經 or "Shu Ching" 書經 or of the doctrines of the various philosophical schools must hand these books over to the

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prefecture or police where they will be burned. Only those occupying the position of "Po Shih" 博士—a member of the Imperial Academy—are allowed to retain such works. Whoever does not comply with this order within 30 days of its publication, shall be convicted and branded and be sent to the "great wall", where he must serve in state-labour. Books which need not be destroyed are those dealing with medical science, the art of prophecy, and agriculture. Should anybody desire to study the law and regulations, he will have to choose the officials as his teachers."

Soon after this petition, the burning of books took place. The chancellor's speech made it quite evident that this action was really only a political measure to protect and secure the structure of the new state. The obstinate Confucians to some extent had only themselves to blame for this strong measure.

Already under the Chou-dynasty, which at this time was lacking in activity and vitality, Confucius with his teachings endeavoured hard to gain practical influence over the existing state-affairs. This wise man and teacher of the people abhorred the feudal system and party spirit so evident then; and it is only natural that it should take scores of years, before Confucianism became an established fact. Undoubtedly, through wrong interpretation or mere egoistic thought, Confucianism in later years exercised an unfavourable influence upon the affairs of the government, and thus wrought harm to the teachings of the great master. Shih Huang Ti, who created the Unitary State, was not really *an enemy of Confucius*, which is best proved by the fact that he distinctly allowed the members of the Imperial Academy (about 70 learned scholars) to own and study the books of "Shih Ching" and "Shu Ching". However, as one of the greatest statesmen of China, Huang Ti had to fight against these elements which, by secret as well as by open propaganda, tended to undermine his state. His burning of books was not so much

directed against the ideas of Confucius, as against the contemporaries of Confucianism, who misunderstood his political work. Later, historical developments confirmed the actions of Huang Ti. His Unitary State and his radical reform work remained throughout the succeeding dynasties, and even the revolution of 1912 could not destroy them. Despite all these events Confucianism and its principles survived a long period of history. During the period of restoration under the Han 漢—dynasty (206 B.C.—220 A.D.), all the lost literature was again collected and indexed. Shih Huang Ti and his chancellor Li Sī, with their superiority over the Confucian contemporaries, conducted political activities on the lines of Confucianism.—King Hui of Liang (梁惠王) once said during a conversation with Mengtse, who was visiting him “High and low argue with each other for personal advantages; therefore the country falls into danger”⁵.

The conditions and the situation in the time of Huang Ti were almost the same; and if the king desired order and strong government, he had to use drastic measures to teach the egoistical petty politicians a lesson. Confucius himself stated that only men of spirit and authority could work out a cultural and political program. Authority, however, is necessary to guarantee a good and real policy and to unite a great country.⁶ I do not consider it an exaggeration to say that Huang Ti realised unity and order on the principles expounded and outlined by Confucius.

The loss which Chinese literature suffered must certainly have been great, and in consequence many books were lost for ever. But the essential literature was not destroyed. We can presume that most of the works affected by the decree were also in the possession of the government and state-libraries, and thus were saved. Surely many books must have been kept in concealment and preserved from burning.

5) 上下交征利。而國危矣。

6) See: Richard Wilhem, “Geschichte der chinesischen Kultur”, pp. 167-168.

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O. Franke writes regarding the result of the burning of books:

"Be that as it may, there can be no doubt, that, if the famous burning of books was of any importance to the preservation of literature and to the possibility of handing down literary treasures to the future, that importance was but slight and temporary"