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SUI WEN TI

541 - 604

The Chinese emperor Sui Wen Ti (original name: Yang Chien) succeeded in reunifying China after it had been badly divided for hundreds of years. The political unity that he established has persisted throughout most of the intervening centuries. As a result, China has usually been one of the most powerful countries in the world. Another important result of the political unity is that the population of China—which comprises roughly one-fifth of the total world population—has suffered far less frequently from the horrors of war than have the inhabitants of Europe, the Middle East, or most other parts of the world.

An earlier emperor, Shih Huang Ti, had unified China in the third century B.C. His dynasty, the Ch'in, was destroyed soon after his death; however, it was succeeded fairly promptly by the Han dynasty, which ruled all of China from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D. After the Han dynasty fell, China underwent a long period of internal disunity, roughly analogous to the Dark Ages in Europe, which followed the fall of the Roman Empire.

Yang Chien was born in 541 into one of the powerful families of northern China. He received his first military appointment when he was only fourteen years old. Yang Chien was very capable and rose rapidly in the service of his ruler, the emperor

of the northern Chou dynasty. His assistance in helping that ruler gain control of most of northern China did not go unrewarded, and in 573, Yang Chien's daughter was married to the crown prince. Five years later the emperor died. The crown prince appears to have been mentally unbalanced, and a struggle for power soon ensued. Yang Chien was the ultimate winner of that struggle, and in 581, at the age of forty, he became recognized as the new emperor. He was not, however, content to be the emperor of northern China only. After making careful preparations, he invaded southern China in 588. The invasion was rapidly successful, and in 589, he became the ruler of all of China.

During his reign, Sui Wen Ti built a spacious new capital city for the reunited empire. He also started construction of the Grand Canal, which connects China's two greatest rivers: the Yangtze in central China and the Hwang Ho (or Yellow River) in the north. This canal, which was completed during his son's reign, helped to unify northern and southern China.

One of the emperor's most important reforms was the institution of the system of selecting government officials by means of civil service examinations. For many centuries, that system provided China with a highly capable corps of administrators by constantly bringing highly talented men—from all over the country and from all social classes—into government service. (The system had first been introduced during the Han dynasty, however, in the long interval following the fall of the Han, many government posts had become hereditary.)

Sui Wen Ti also enforced the so-called "rule of avoidance": the principle that provincial governors could not serve in the province in which they had been born. This was a precautionary measure, preventing favoritism and at the same time preventing any provincial governor from acquiring too strong a power base.

Though capable of bold action when that was necessary, Sui Wen Ti was generally a cautious man. He avoided extravagance, and he appears to have lightened the tax burden on his subjects. His foreign policy was, on the whole, successful.

Sui Wen Ti seems to have had far less self-confidence than

most rulers or conquerors of comparable success. Though a powerful and successful ruler of millions of people, he seems to have been unusually henpecked. His able wife, although domineering, was of great assistance to him, both in his rise to power and during his reign. Sui Wen Ti died in 604, at the age of sixty-three. It is widely suspected that he was the victim of foul play by his second son (the empress's favorite), who succeeded him.

The new emperor suffered reverses in foreign policy, and eventually revolts against his rule broke out in China. He was killed in 618, and with his death the Sui dynasty came to an end. It was not, however, the end of Chinese unity. The Sui was promptly followed by the T'ang dynasty, which lasted from 618 to 907. The T'ang emperors retained the general governmental structure of the Sui rulers, and under them, China remained united. (The T'ang dynasty is often considered to be China's most glorious period, partly because of its military strength, but even more because of the great flowering of art and literature that occurred then.)

Just how important a figure was Sui Wen Ti? To form a judgment on that question, one might try comparing him with the celebrated European monarch Charlemagne. There is a distinct parallel between the careers of the two men: roughly three centuries after the fall of Rome, Charlemagne succeeded in reuniting a large part of western Europe; similarly, about three and one-half centuries after the fall of the Han dynasty, Sui Wen Ti succeeded in reuniting China. Charlemagne, of course, is far more famous in the West; however, it appears that Sui Wen Ti was the more influential of the two rulers. In the first place, he succeeded in reuniting all of China, whereas many significant areas of western Europe (such as England, Spain, and southern Italy) were never conquered by Charlemagne. In the second place, the reunification accomplished by Sui Wen Ti endured, whereas Charlemagne's empire was soon divided and never regained its unity.

In the third place, the cultural achievements of the T'ang

dynasty resulted, at least in part, from the economic prosperity which followed the political unification of China. By contrast, the short-lived Carolingian Renaissance ended with the death of Charlemagne and the dissolution of his empire. Finally, Sui's institution of the civil service examinations had profound long-term effects. For all these reasons—even taking into account that on the whole Europe has played a more important role in world history than China has—Sui Wen Ti had more effect on history than Charlemagne did. Indeed, few monarchs, either in China or in Europe, have had as enduring an impact as did Sui Wen Ti.