Chapter 2
Chi During the Ch’in-Han Period
(221 B.C.–A.D. 220): A Phase
of Commercial Expansion

2.1 Political Status and Geographical Position

The glorious days of the state of Yen since the beginning of the third century B.C. did not last very long. From the middle of the third century B.C., another frontier power among the seven Martial States, the Ch’in State (秦), had become stronger and stronger. It started a systematic conquest from the Wei Ho Valley where the Chou dynasty had first risen to power. Within 30 years all the feudal states including the royal domain of the Chou emperor then centred on Lo-yang (洛阳) fell before its advance one after another. The city Chi was taken by the Ch’in army in 226 B.C. and the whole state of Yen was subjugated in 222 B.C. One year later (221 B.C.) the Ch’in ruler successfully unified the whole country and assumed the title Ch’in Shih Huang Ti (秦始皇帝, first emperor of Ch’in) in his capital Hsien-yang (咸阳). The imperial form of government thus established lasted in China until the beginning of the present century, but the Ch’in dynasty itself had only a short life of 15 years (221 B.C.–207 B.C.). After a brief chaotic period following the downfall of the Ch’in dynasty, order was restored again by the newly founded Han (汉) dynasty which ruled the empire more than 400 years with only a short break from

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1 E. Bretschneider wrote in his famous work, *Archaeological and Historical Researches on Peking*, that the city Chi ‘was destroyed by Shih Huang Ti’, The Chinese Recorder, vol. 1, 1875, no. 3, p. 165. The same statement was given by later authors such as Samuel Coulling [1, p. 427] and G. Bouillard [2, p. 41]. However, this is not found in any Chinese record. The original text of *Shih Chi* (《史记》, Historical Records, by Ssu-ma Ch’ien 司马迁), the most important work on this period, simply reads: ‘In the twenty first year of Shih Huang Ti... (the city of) Chi (of the state of) Yen was taken’ (Shih Huang Pen Chi, or the Chronicle of Shih Huang). The original Chinese word used here for ‘taken’ is ‘拔’, which can be literally translated as ‘uproot’, but not in this case.

2 Yen was the last of the Martial States conquered because it was at the frontier extremity most remote from the Wei Ho Valley. This also reflects the fact that the general strategy of Ch’in was ‘to attack first those are near’.

3 The original site of Hsien-yang is about 4 miles northeast of the present Hsien-yang and 18 miles northwest of Hsi-an (西安).
A.D. 9 to A.D. 25 when the throne was usurped by a powerful official. The first half of this new dynasty is generally known as the Former or Western Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 8) with its capital at Ch’ang-an (长安), only a few miles southeast of the Ch’in capital Hsien-yang, while the second half is known as the Later or Eastern Han (A.D. 25–A.D. 220), because its capital was shifted eastward to Lo-yang (洛阳), the royal domain of the Later Chou dynasty.

Under the absolute power of the centralized government of Ch’in and Han, some important developments in the empire deserve special attention with regard to the status and development of Chi. First of all, there was the abolition of feudalism by Ch’in Shih Huang Ti. Instead of entrusting local administration to the members of the royal family, he created an elaborate bureaucracy under the direct control of the emperor. The empire was divided into a number of administrative units called Chün (郡), or commanderies, and each Chün in turn into Hsien (县), or districts. Over every Chün and Hsien was placed a member of the bureaucracy. Though both Chün and Hsien as local administrative units were by no means entirely new, it was Shih Huang Ti who first made these units into an organized system and applied it uniformly to the whole empire. The city Chi then became the chief city of a small Chün named Kuang-yang (广阳) which lay immediately in the Bay of Peiping and part of the adjacent plain, a territory which may have represented the original nucleus of the former state of Yen. The five Chün, Shang-ku, Yü-yang, Yu-pei-ping, Liao-hsi and Liao-tung, formerly under the jurisdiction of Yen, were (in Ch’in) of equal status with Kuang-yang as Chün of the central government. Chün was thus a different kind of administrative unit from the feudal states which had preceded it.

During the Han dynasty, however, there was a partial revival of the old practice of establishing feudal states or principalities which was followed also by later dynasties, but it never again held full sway as it had under the Chou dynasty. The city Chi then was for three times made the seat of the government of a principality. This principality retained the old name Yen at first (202–127 B.C. and 117–80 B.C.) and then changed into the new name Kuang-yang (73 B.C.–A.D. 37). Its geographical extent differed very little from Kuang-yang of Ch’in, and its real political status was no more than that of an ordinary Chün. Though it was called in Chinese a ‘Kuo’ (國, meaning state), it could not be compared with the former state of Yen. Yet it is different from Chün, because its head is not an ordinary official but usually a member of the royal family.

Another change during this time was the grouping of the Chün (commanderies) and Kuo (principalities) into a number of Chou (州) which is definitely the earliest form of what is known as ‘Sheng’ (省) or province of today. The principality of

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4 For detailed discussion, see Ku Yen-wu, Jih-chih Lu (顾炎武《日知录》, Critical Notes on the Reading of Classics and History). Ssu-pu Pei-yao edition (四部备要本), 17/15a.
5 Ch’üan Tsu-wang, Han-shu Ti-li-chih Chi-I (全祖望《汉书地理志稽疑》, Commentary of the Book of Geography in the Dynastic History of Han), Ts’ung Shu Chi-ch’eng (丛书集成) edition, 1/6b–7a.
6 See Appendix I, Historical Chart of Peiping.
7 See Ku Chieh-kang and Shih Nien-hai [3, pp. 80–86, 90–102].
Yen, or Yen Kuo, and nine other Chün constituted the Province of Yu, or Yu Chou (幽州), the geographical extent of which was almost identical with the former feudal state of Yen in its prime, except a further addition of the newly conquered territories in North Korea. At the same time, the city Chi became the provincial capital. The chief official of the province acted, however, only as an inspector without any executive power, and the status of a provincial capital did not add very much political importance to the city of Chi at that time.

Unification was not political alone. Soon after Shih Huang Ti became emperor, immediate steps were taken to make uniform the weights and measures of the whole empire. Implements and the gauges of wagons were standardized, and a new style of script aiming at unified writing was promoted. These were done with the double purpose of insuring unity and prosperity. Finally, as in the Roman Empire, wide roads were constructed for the emperor’s travel, the movements of troops and the development of commerce. On one occasion, it was recorded: ‘The imperial highway constructed by the Ch’in reached Yen (燕) and Ch’i (齐) in the far east, and Wu (吴) and Yüeh (越) in the remote south. The road was fifty pu (步, i.e. pace) wide. Trees were planted along it in every three chang (i.e. roughly thirty feet)’. Land communication was further developed during the Han dynasty. The city Chi occupied definitely an important position in the network of the imperial highways of Ch’in and Han, but it still remained a frontier city as implied in the above quotation.

Moreover, both Ch’in and Han had made territorial conquests in many directions. But our chief concern here is with the territories adjacent to the former feudal state of Yen. As stated in the previous chapter, the state of Yen had already included the lower Liao valley within its boundary. The Ch’in dynasty made little advance in this direction, though it is alleged that the eastern section of the Great Wall, which was first built by Yen, was further extended by Ch’in as far as the mouth of Ya-lu River (鸭绿江). During the early Han dynasty, a state called Ch’ao-hsien had arisen east of the lower Liao valley. For certain political and strategic reasons, it was conquered by the army of the Han emperor Wu Ti (武帝) in 108 B.C. and its territory was divided into four Chün: Lo-lang (乐浪), Hsüan-tu (玄菟), Chen-fan (真番) and Lin-t’un (临屯). The conquest was, naturally, followed by the infiltration of Chinese immigrants and culture. The original capital of Ch’ao-hsien became the chief city of Lo-lang Chün near the present city Ping-yang (平阳), where a wealthy Chinese colony was established. The rich remains of civilization, including some beautiful
The northeastern frontier of the Western Han dynasty

Fig. 2.1 The northeastern frontier of the Western Han dynasty
lacquer objects produced under state inspection, which have been discovered in the tombs of the colony, bear witness of the glorious days of this outpost of Chinese imperial power [4, p. 132].

2.2 A Frontier Emporium

The Ch’ in-Han period of unification was a great era which favoured commerce, and the breakdown of the ancient feudalism gave rise to an ever-increasing merchant class. The early development of Chinese commerce can be traced to the Later Chou dynasty, or the period of the Contending States, when the prevailing feudalism showed its first sign of decaying, but it was not until the Han dynasty that the domestic trade had developed on a nationwide scale. This was summed up by the contemporary historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien who began to write his Shih Chi in 104 B.C. in the following words:

After the rising of the Han, the whole country has been unified. All the turn-pikes and toll-bridges are opened, and the ban on (the development of natural resources in) mountains, rivers and lakes is lifted. Hence rich merchants and great traders travel around in the whole empire. There are only little commodities which cannot be supplied where they are needed.12

A geographical phenomenon of this new development was, naturally, the rise of a number of mercantile cities scattered all over the empire. This is particularly mentioned in another contemporary work Yen Tiek Lun:

From the imperial capital towards east, west, south and north, over mountains and rivers, through commanderies and principalties, there are wealthy and prosperous cities with streets leading to all directions. (These are the places where) the merchants and traders are gathered and all sorts of commodities are concentrated.13

The most important of these mercantile cities are listed by Ssu-ma Ch’ien in his Shih Chi. Their distribution is shown in the following map (Fig. 2.2). Some of these cities had become famous for their commerce during the Later Chou dynasty such as Lin-tzu (临淄), Han-tan (邯郸), Ying (郢) and T’ao (陶), but the majority of them were newly developed emporia, among which the city Chi was a very important one. It was alleged in the same work Yen Tiek Lun that ‘the riches of the city Chi of Yen are without rival in the empire14 and it is a city of renown all over the country’.15 A more detailed account in this connection is found


13 Huan K’uan, Yen Tiek Lun (桓宽,《盐铁论》，Records of the Discussion on the Policy of Salt and Iron), Ssu-pu Pei-yao edition, 1/6a. The discussion took place in the 6th year of Shih-yüan (始元, reign title of Chao-ti 昭帝, i.e. 81 B.C.).

14 This is probably a little exaggerated.

again in the *Shih Chi* of Ssu-ma Ch’ien. He used the name Yen for the city instead of Chi and said:

Yen is also an emporium between Po (渤) and Chieh (碣). It is in direct communication with Ch’i (齐) and Chao (趙) in the south, and is adjacent to the Hu (胡) in the north and east. From Shang-ku (上谷) to Liao-tung (遼東) the land is remote and it abounds in fish, salt, dates and chestnuts. To the north it is connected with Wu-huan (烏桓) and Fu-yü (夫余). From the east stream, there are the valuable products of Wei-mo (濊貊), Ch’ao-hsien (朝鮮) and Chen-fan (真番).\footnote{Op. cit., 129/7b.}

\footnote{Po’ is the abbreviation of Po-hai Chün (渤海郡) which was along the southern part of the sea coast of the present province Hopei. ‘Chieh’ is the abbreviation of Chieh-shih (碣石), the name of a famous hill in the northeast corner of the same province. ‘Chi’ and ‘Chao’ indicate generally the northern part of the present Hopei and Shansi provinces. ‘Hu’ was then used as a common name for the nomadic peoples. ‘Fu-yü’ and ‘Wu-huan’ were two nomadic tribes in central and western...}
This paragraph is especially interesting because it not only mentions the city as an emporium but also emphasizes the factors which had contributed to its development. The first thing that deserves notice here is the local resources. It lists fish, salt, dates and chestnuts as the chief products of the district in abundance. These are the things peculiar to the district; therefore they are mentioned.\(^{17}\) Neither of the last two items would seem to be of any value until their special importance is made known. Long before the Han dynasty, the district of Yen was already famous for its products of dates and chestnuts. It was mentioned in *Chan Kuo Ts‘e* that ‘the people (of Yen) even if not engaged in cultivation, would never be short of dates and chestnuts’.\(^{18}\) Down to the Han dynasty, the plantation of chestnut trees had been developed into a prosperous occupation. It was declared by Ssu-ma Ch‘ien that ‘the owner of a thousand chestnut trees in (the districts of) Yen and Ch‘in’\(^{19}\) …is equal to a marquis of thousand *hu* (i.e. a fief with thousand families of inhabitants)’.\(^{20}\) The reason is that both dates and chestnuts entered into trade just the same as fish and salt. They were then all local products of commercial value in demand elsewhere.

However, the main cause of the commercial development of Chi lay in its geographical position rather than its local resources. And there are two aspects of this geographical position, namely the relation with the nomadic lands in the north and the relation with the territories of South Manchuria and North Korea in the northeast. The location of the city along the northern frontier and its easy access to the nomadic lands through the mountain passes afforded it the greatest advantage for the development of trade with the pastoral nomads—a geographical position which had no rival among all the other cities on the great plain. In these days certain nomadic products such as horses, cattle, sheep and felt which were constantly mentioned by early writers as the great profits of the northern lands were highly valued by the Chinese, while the agricultural products and other luxuries from China were always in great demand by the northern nomads. Though the markets where the exchange of goods actually took place were probably located along the border, the city of Chi must have been a collecting centre of Chinese goods from the plain to the markets as well as a distributing centre of nomadic goods from the markets to the plain. It was recorded in the *Hou Han Shu* (《后汉书》, *The Dynastic History of the Later Han*) that the official markets under the supervision of Chinese officers were established at Shang-ku,\(^{21}\) in the intermountain valley between the Nan Kow pass and Kalgan of today. Chi controlled the only way leading to the

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\(^{17}\) See *Chan Kuo Ts‘e*, Kuo-hsüeh Chi-pen Ts‘ung-shu edition, 29/55a.

\(^{18}\) There would be great amount of agricultural products such as wheat and grains which were chiefly for local consumption and did not enter into trade, hence not mentioned.

\(^{19}\) ‘Ch‘in’ here indicates the place originally held by the Ch‘in state during the late Chou dynasty, or the Wei Ho Valley of today. The statement implies that the Wei Ho Valley then was also as famous for the production of chestnuts as the district of Yen.


Even today Peiping is famous for chestnuts.

\(^{21}\) *Wu-huan Chuan* (《乌桓传》, History of the Wu-huan), Ssu-pu Pei-yao edition, 120/3a-b.
markets. There might have been some political reasons for the establishment of these official markets. It is most unlikely that they represented the beginning of trade relations between the Chinese and the northern nomads. Free exchange of goods must have long existed.

Moreover, the territorial expansion in the northeast during the Han dynasty greatly increased the commercial prospects of Chi. Products of the forest, especially furs, which were abundant in the newly conquered territories, were the most desirable articles in Chinese markets, hence the remark of Ssu-ma Ch’ien that ‘from the east stream in the valuable products of Wei-mo, Ch’ao-hsien and Chen-fan’. On the other hand, the Chinese colonies which sprang into prosperity as said above must have greatly encouraged and promoted the commercial intercourse between the homeland and the outlying territories. The only highway, which the merchants could follow, either to or from these outlying territories, was the one that led from the city Chi to the lower valley of Liao along the coastal lowland beyond Shah-hai Kwan of today. There was no other alternative by land. At the city Chi, the road from the northeast linked up with the ancient highway along the foot of the Taihang Range which had been greatly improved during the reign of Ch’in Shih Huang Ti. Meanwhile a branch road of the ancient highway which provided the shortest cut from the imperial capital to the city Chi had been fully developed as well. It crossed the Yellow River probably after it was joined by the river Wei and followed the Fen Valley north-eastward to the present city T’ai-yüan (太原). From T’ai-yüan it turned eastward, passing through the gorge of Ching-hsing (井陉), and joined the ancient highway at Cheng-ting (正定). Thus we find that during this period, the central government of

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22 This was to try to pacify the nomadic tribes by maintaining commercial relations with them in order to supply them with commodities which they could get nowhere else. Otherwise, predatory invasions of the nomads could not be avoided. The same policy was employed during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to deal with the Mongols. This gave rise to the so-called Horse Markets along the Great Wall on an unprecedented scale. See J. C. Hou [5].

23 The emperor himself travelled in 215 B.C. as far as the hill Chieh-shih in the northeast corner of the great plain. His visit was followed again by his son, the second emperor of Ch’in 6 years later (209 B.C.). They must have travelled along the great highway through the city Chi. There was no other road. See Ssu-ma Ch’ien, op. cit., Shih Huang Pen Chi (《始皇本纪》, Chronicle of Shih Huang) and Er Shih Pen Chi (《二十本纪》, Chronicle of Er Shih).

24 This was the route which the army of Ch’in had taken in the conquest of the present province of Shansi. Tai-yüan was made the chief city of a Chün of the same name as early as 247 B.C., and a decisive battle was won by the Ch’in army at Ching-hsing in 229 B.C. while on its way to the conquest of the whole plain. See Shih Chi (vol. 15), Liu Kuo Nien Piao (《六国年表》, Chronological Table of the Six States). The branch road was probably also further improved by Ch’in Shih Huang Ti after he had unified the whole country in 221 B.C. On his last (the fifth) tour of inspection of the empire in 210 B.C., he died on his way back from the present Shantung province before reaching the ancient highway somewhere near Hsingtai (邢台), and his remains were brought back to the capital by his followers via Ching-hsing and T’ai-yüan. It was probably the route he had intended to take. See Ku Tsu-yü, op. cit., 10/6b.
the great empire and the frontier lands in the remote northeast were admirably linked together by the ancient highway and its branch roads (Fig. 2.3).

The city Chi then became not only a converging point of the roads from the northern nomads but also a vital link on the great line of communication between the heart of the empire and its outlying territories. It had been this highway which had given rise to the city long before the unification of the empire. It was the highway again which brought commercial prosperity to it after the unification when peace and order were the rule of the day.²⁵

²⁵ During the Han dynasty, we find that most of the capital cities of both Chùn and Kuo (commanderies and principalities) in the great plain were concentrated along the ancient highway. This striking phenomenon, as can be best observed in Fig. 1.5, bears witness to the continued importance of the ancient highway.
References

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