The Birth of Empire: The State of Qin Revisited

Summary of the Workshop

The workshop on the state and empire of Qin took part in Jerusalem on December 10-19, 2008. The workshop, supported by the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israeli Science Foundation, ACLS-CCK grant and the Frieberg Center for East Asian studies, gathered historians and archeologists from Mainland China, Taiwan, the U.S., Canada, Germany and Israel. It was a multi-disciplinary and multinational attempt, the first of its kind, to assess comprehensively the cultural, social and political trajectories of the state and the empire of Qin, its relation to other cultures within and outside the Zhou cultural sphere, its historical image and its impact on subsequent history of the Chinese empire.

The first part of the workshop dealt with archeological data and its analysis. Most of the papers in this section addressed various aspects of Qin cultural identity and its place within the larger Zhou and extra-Zhou cultural sphere. Zhao Huacheng (Beijing University) presented new data from the excavations of early Qin sites and analyzed the light that these data shed on the origins of the Qin people, their early migration in the Han river valley, and their relations with the Zhou and the Siwa cultures. Wang Hui (the Institute of Archeology and Cultural Relics, Gansu Province) focused on one of the most spectacular of the recent Qin-related discoveries, the Warring States (453-221 BCE) period cemetery from Majiayuan 马家塬，which he attributed to the local Rong 戎 inhabitants who maintained close ties with the Qin culture. Lothar von Falkenhausen (UCLA) analyzed various theories regarding the ethnic origins of Qin and suggested that at the current stage of our knowledge it is advisable to deemphasize the interpretation of cultural traits as markers of ethnicity in favor of other explanatory strategies. In a heated debates that followed, various methodologies were compared, and it turned out that the differences are mainly on how to define of a Qin entity during the Western Zhou and earlier periods. The debates highlighted broad consensus according to which the state of Qin from the late Western Zhou period on was closely related to the Zhou cultural sphere, so that the once popular identification of Qin with "western barbarians" is no longer tenable. Yet disagreement persists about the process of formation of indigenous Qin identity (and that of other Zhou states) and on the implications that such processes have on our understanding of the socio-political trajectory that led to the imperial unification.
Two other archaeological papers gave more general overviews and also discussed broad theoretical issues. Teng Mingyu (Jilin University) analyzed from an archeological perspective the development trajectory of Qin from a regional state to a "universal" empire. Her analysis of different stages in the development of Qin burials suggests that the original Qin population became increasingly mixed with the people of different cultural origins, and that the initial kinship-based order had been replaced during the Warring States period by a new territorial-based identity. Teng's data indicate that the most substantial changes in Qin burial system occurred during the later half of the Warring States period; and the discussants agreed that these changes should be related to Shang Yang's (商鞅, d. 338 BCE) reforms and their social and cultural impact. This understanding that Shang Yang's reforms are clearly reflected in the archeological data may be considered another important case of scholarly consensus during the workshop.

Gideon Shelach (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) used archeological data to test various traditional and modern explanations of the rapid collapse of the Qin Empire and to propose a new theoretical model instead. In particular, his data show that that investment in public work, such as the construction of the Great Wall, roads, channels, and the burial complex of the First Emperor, accelerated towards the end of the dynasty. Shelach argued that such over-exploitation of manpower and resources contributed to the demise of Qin, especially because the rigid Qin system created interdependency among many sub-parts of the political system, and once few sub-parts came under stress the entire system disintegrated. Such a model, it was argued, is relevant to our understanding of socio-political collapses of pre-modern states in other parts of the world. Some of the participants suggested better ways of quantifying the amount of labor invested in the Qin public works. This paper also initiated the discussion, which continued in other sections of the workshop, about whether the collapse of the Qin marks a rupture with the rest of the imperial era or is it insignificant in the face of the long-term continuity between the Qin and the Han

The second section of the workshop dealt with sociopolitical, institutional and cultural history of the state and the empire of Qin as reflected primarily in the recently unearthed epigraphic sources. Hsing I-tien (Academia Sinica) made a systematic analysis of the household registration and labor obligations during the Qin-Han period as reflected in a variety of Qin and Han epigraphic data, beginning from the Liye (imperial Qin) slips and ending with those from
Yinwan (late Western Han). In addition to his detailed analysis of the administrative and fiscal realities of the Qin and early Han periods, Hsing I-tien offered a novel insight about probable identification of the entombed administrative materials as *mingqi* 明器 replicas of the original documents rather the originals themselves. A comparison between the Qin and the Han figured prominently in another paper, by Robin D.S. Yates (McGill University), who focused on the changing status of slaves in the Qin-Han transition. Utilizing the early Han materials from Zhangjiashan, Yates modified his early observations about the status of the slaves in the late pre-imperial and early imperial periods, noting that the Han dynasty made a conscious effort to assimilate slaves into the family system. Both presentations emphasized high degree of continuity from the Qin to early Han amidst certain changes and modifications of the Qin system under the Han.

In his paper "Mass Communication and Common Knowledge During the Qin Dynasty," Charles Sanft (University of Muenster) focused on the imperial order of 221 BCE commanding establishment of a unified system of measures as an example of the role of "mass communication" in the Qin empire. Sanft argued that inscribing the imperial order on weights and measures served not just for the specific purpose of unifying the measurement system throughout the newly unified realm, but primarily to promulgate the idea of the unified empire among the subjugated population. His observation about the Qin adaptation of earlier technologies of mass communication with the aim of creating common knowledge of the dynasty among the population at all levels opens new avenues of investigation of the political role of the commoners in pre-imperial and early imperial China. Religious beliefs and aspirations of the Qin commoners were analyzed in a paper by Poo Mu-chou (Academia Sinica) "Religion and religious life of the Qin." Poo assessed that the religious mentality of the Qin people was markedly "materialistic," that is possessing little transcendental element. Poo's paper further addressed possible interrelation between popular cults and official religion under the Qin.

Chen Songchang (Yuelu Academy) introduced to the participants Qin bamboo slips recently acquired from the Hong Kong antiquities market by the Yuelu academy. The heretofore deciphered slips contain a variety of data, ranging from hemerological to legal materials, and from accounts about activities of certain individuals to divination based on the interpretation of dreams. Among these new slips some have parallels among the previously unearthed Qin materials, such as *Wei li zhi Dao* ("The Way of Being a Clerk") from Shuihudi, Hubei. The publication of the 2000-odd Qin slips from the Yuelu Academy collection will surely shed
further light on religion, legal system and ideology of the state of Qin on the eve and in the immediate aftermath of the imperial unification.

The last section of the workshop focused on the image of Qin in the Han and in the subsequent centuries, on the relations between Qin and Han political practices and on the reliability of the Shiji – our major source for Qin history. The question of the continuity versus rupture in the transition from the Qin to Han periods was addressed by four presenters. Michael Nylan (UC Berkeley) in "A revisionist history of Han ideas of Qin" assessed that most instances of what is perceived as a rupture between the two dynasties reflect primarily misunderstanding and later biases. She concluded that the still fashionable presentation of the two dynasties as dichotomous is largely false and argued that we should be more sensitive to important changes that occurred during the Han rather than attributing them to the transition from the Qin to the Han. Yuri Pines (The Hebrew University) proposed a different angle of explanation of the ongoing confusion between "continuity" and "rupture" from the Qin to Han: namely, that this perception reflects genuine efforts of Qin propagandists to buttress the uniqueness of their regime and to present it as an "end of history." Pines identified what he calls "Messianic" aspects of the Qin imperial stance as peculiar to this dynasty and suggested that this peculiarity distinguishes Qin from its predecessors and successors and at times overshadows obvious continuities between the Qin and Han regimes.

Griet Vankerberghen (McGill University) and Hans van Ess (University of Munich) addressed the issue of the Qin-Han continuity through in-depth analysis of the accounts about the Qin empire in the Shiji. In a highly provocative paper, Vankerberghen assessed that the common supposition that the Qin empire abolished the position of regional lords (zhuhou 諸侯) may reflect a deliberately biased presentation in "The Basic Annals of the First Emperor" in the Shiji, a bias which is related to Han political controversies rather than to Qin realities. Van Ess, in turn, meticulously compared the portraits of the First Emperor of Qin and of Emperor Wu of the Han in the Shiji, suggesting that the former might have been modified as a caricature of the latter. Van Ess asserts that "it is very plausible that the tale of the First Emperor of the Qin which we find in the Shiji was actually written as a warning to Emperor Wu of the Han." All four papers and the discussions that followed them, touched on fundamental issues of our definition of the Qin. The debate revolved around differences in emphasis rather than on clear dichotomies. Such disagreements are difficult to resolve but they call upon us to present our argument in a more systematic way and pay more attention to various nuances of our arguments.
In a final paper of the workshop, Andrew Plaks (The Hebrew University and Princeton University) took the participants forward in history to the Yuan and Ming dynasties, analyzing the image of the First Emperor as reflected in the traditional Chinese fiction of the later imperial period. Contrarily to expectations, the First Emperor is depicted in these texts in a relatively balanced way, "neither an evil genius nor a bad last ruler." This observation aptly summarizes the common perception of the participants that the image of Qin and of the First Emperor in later historiography and in popular imagination was much more nuanced and less negative than what is usually perceived by most modern scholars.

Nine days of intensive discussions did not yield definitive answers to numerous enigmas of the Qin history, and nor was this expected of the participants. Yet the workshop may be considered a milestone in Qin studies, as it outlined new areas of scholarly consensus and disagreement and proposed further avenues for exploration of this extraordinarily important period in China's long history.