

PAN Yue

# Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations



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## **Part II**

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# *Foreword*

## *I*

“A sustainable civilization is one that can examine itself, tolerate and accommodate others, coexist in harmony with others, and learn from others” – this is a common wisdom of both the Chinese civilization and the Greek civilization. It is the wisdom very much needed in today’s world, where challenges we face are global, and we need more than ever to work together, to learn from each other, and to focus on common values. Pan Yue’s book makes an important contribution to the civilizational dialogue between the East and the West, and helps to bring us to the common ground, or “Agora” as I would call it, to

enrich each other via debate, to move forward together, and to create a shared future for us all.

H.E. George Papandreou,  
182nd Prime Minister of Greece,  
President of the Socialist International

# *Foreword*

## *II*

The West has been the primary author of global history for the last two centuries. As a result of its dominance, the world sees history through a Western prism, based on an underlying assumption that the Western experience is universally relevant. The classic example is the nation-state. It has become the precondition for the recognition of polities. When a vast number of countries won their independence from their colonial masters after the Second World War, they were required to become nation-states. It was a condition of their independence. Yet the invention of the nation-state was an entirely European affair dating back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The global dominance of Europe, and then the West more

generally, imposed on the world a European-designed international system at the heart of which was the nation-state. It was not until the late 19th century that China was finally forced by its state of abject weakness to adapt to the European norms of the international system and begin the process of becoming, at least in part, a nation-state.

But China had never been a nation-state. It was a product of an entirely different history that was rooted in the Chinese civilization. China was a civilization-state. It is still primarily a civilization-state, although, being secondarily a nation-state, it might be described as a hybrid. And China is not alone. As Pan Yue points out, there are many other nation-states that are the product of civilizational histories such as Iran, Turkey, and Russia. But it is China that concerns us here. It is impossible to make sense of China unless its history as a civilization is recognized and understood. Alas, the West is in denial. It sees the world, and China, in narrowly Western terms. As a result, in a most fundamental way, the West does not understand China.

It requires China to be Western, but China does not conform to the Western paradigm, never has and never will. During China's long history of weakness, this did not matter. China could be used, abused, and ignored. But China's rise makes this position unsustainable. The West is now obliged to understand China as it is not how it thinks it should be.

Pan Yue's book is a book for our time. He shows how profoundly different the histories of Europe and China have been over more than two millennia and how this has resulted in the very different societies we see today. This is not a reason for regret but embrace and celebration: It is testimony to the richness of human history and the diversity of human experience. A knowledge of history, and a resulting respect for difference, opens up the possibility of a new kind of creative dialogue between the West and China based on mutual respect and understanding.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. The fundamental problem in the West is that it does not understand China, or even know how to understand

China. The ideas in this book are the path of enlightenment.

Martin Jacques,  
British Scholar of China Studies

## *Preface*

China and the West are already well-acquainted with each other's science, technology, and economy. They have certain understanding of each other's political system. However, they are complete strangers with regard to each other's civilizational core. Moreover, Western political and intellectual elites are even less familiar with the Chinese civilization than their Chinese counterparts are with the Western civilization.

For more than a century from the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) to the present, generations of Chinese have been tirelessly studying Western history and civilization. Today, English is part of compulsory education even in the remotest mountainous areas of China where it may never be used. From top to bottom,

Chinese officials are required to be tested on their knowledge of “international conventions” (which means conventions of Western Europe and the United States).

There are many great Sinologists in the West, but their wisdom is marginalized in the body politic. A few Western politicians have read *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Art of War* by Sunzi, but almost none has systematically read Chinese history. Thus, even in a famous study like *The Thucydides Trap*, which deals with a potential conflict between the United States and the People’s Republic of China, none of the examples are from Chinese history. All come from Athens and Sparta, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Britain, and the United States. The book is entirely about the West’s own history of hegemony (the only non-Western exception being Japan). This habitual resort to the Western historical experience when judging China’s strategy is the root of the West’s repeated mistakes.

What are China’s strategic goals? The answer depends on what is the length of Chinese history you are acquainted with.

If you think that China has a history of only 30 years of “communist tyranny” plus 40 years of “reform and opening up,” then you may think China’s major goal is to move from “autocracy” to “freedom.” If you know only China’s history that started in 1840 with the “century of humiliation” following the Opium War, then you may think the country must have a “feeling of victimhood” and “will retaliate against the West after its rise.” But what about China’s history before the Opium War?

Pre-1840 China remains *terra incognita* for the vast majority of Western elites. This is not accidental. Hegel, one of the most influential Western philosophers, said about the imperial China: “This empire ever remained autonomous, ever remained what it was.... And so it is an empire untouched by history (*ungeschichtlich*), for internally it developed undisturbed; it was not destroyed from without. No alien principle came to displace the ancient one. To that extent it has no history.”<sup>1</sup> Hegel

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<sup>1</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume I: Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lecture of 1822-3*, edited and translated by Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 214.

was aware that China has “a continuous, well-ordered, and quite well-attested history,”<sup>1</sup> but nonetheless considered the Chinese empire as an “a-historical” entity. The problem was that he did not know Chinese language and could never approach the wealth, complexity, and heterogeneity of China’s history. Nor could other great masters of European thought do it.

China before 1840 encountered countless crises and disastrous collapses, but also learned how to cope with them. It was neither “autonomous” in Hegel’s meaning, nor a-historical. Rather, it absorbed many foreign ideas and practices, and underwent dramatic changes. As early as 221 BCE, China established a modern centralized state with impersonal and professional bureaucracy, similar to the modern states established in Europe after 1600. At least eight Chinese dynasties lasted more than 250 years each, which is as long as the entire history of the United States. Moreover, despite periodic recurrence of woeful turmoil and disintegration, China was repeatedly reunified after these – at times quite

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

lengthy – periods of fragmentation. More significantly, turmoil and breakouts notwithstanding, China maintained remarkable civilizational continuity. Its own experience of periodic collapses and resurrections shaped its perceptions of laws of history in the past and continues to influence its self-awareness in the present. Naturally, these perceptions are quite different from those of Western countries, whose historical outlook was shaped by their own history. Therefore, one cannot understand China's historical viewpoint from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but should instead turn to Chinese own classical historical works, such as the *Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (左传), *Stratagems of the Warring States* (战国策), and Sima Qian's (ca. 145-90 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (史记).

China is a civilization with an exceptionally strong sense of history. The system of scribes (historians) assigned with recording the past dates at least from the Zhou Dynasty (around 1000 BCE). We have systematic records of events for every year in imperial history

from the earliest imperial Qin Dynasty (started in 221 BCE) to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1911). Unlike “classical history” in the West, which served primarily for the purpose of elite education, in China, knowledge of early and recent past, enshrined in canonical works, in historiographic texts, and permeating literature, poetry, dramas, and even popular religions, was disseminated throughout the entire literary segment of the population and down to the lowest strata. In current China, the experiences of the past and the lessons that can be gleaned from these experiences are read and discussed by people of any profession, from political leaders to cab drivers. This historical awareness encourages Chinese statesmen to address long-term goals rather than focus on immediate interests only. The Chinese people as a whole are normally able to endure short-term pains so as to support the country’s long-term goals.

For the past 500 years (and most prominently in the last 250 years), the West (Europe and then the United States) has been the center of the world.

Western leaders and the public in general felt no need to understand others; they focused on their own performance. It was actually the major weakness of imperial China as well, especially during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and the latter half of the Qing Dynasty. The significance of other ancient civilizations was studied by specialists who published excellent studies, but these had limited impact on the broader public. Western academic disciplines in social sciences and humanities were overwhelmingly shaped by the West's own historical experience, and this to a significant extent remains valid even today. But now the situation changes. China's presence on the global scene requires not just deeper engagement with its current economic and political system, but, no less crucially, deeper understanding of its history and philosophy. It is China's civilizational experience rather than merely immediate contingency that underpins China's strategy. Whether you are for or against China, you have to understand the real China first, rather than fight chimeras produced by intellectual laziness.

Coming to terms with the Chinese civilization may become an opportune moment for Western intellectual and political elites to start systematic engagement with other non-Western civilizations that have been largely ignored for the last 250 years. Just like China, these ancient civilizations, when recovering their power, will shape their future not according to Western norms alone but according to their own civilizational code. In the new global world in which Western domination is coming to an end, mutual understanding among different civilizations becomes necessary for all. China also will have to improve understanding of non-Western civilizations, the study of which it still needs to strengthen.

The power configuration in the current world should not be defined as competition between China and the United States for hegemony. Rather, we witness a shift from the situation in which a single civilization dominated the globe to common prosperity of diverse civilizations. What China has inaugurated is not a “Chinese century” but a “century of diverse

civilizations,” a new era in which there will no longer be a single civilizational hegemon.

Welcome to the new era.

Part I

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**The Warring States and  
Ancient Greece**

## *Introduction*

With the extraordinary continuity of his or her own society, a typical Chinese mind tends to observe other societies through their history and understand other nations' glory and dream through the civilizations they have inherited.

For instance, the modern West encompasses classical heritage of ancient Greece and Rome, Russia encompasses classical heritage of the Orthodox Christian civilization. Islamic countries encompass classical heritage of the Golden Age of Islam, Iran encompasses classical heritage of the Persian civilization, and Turkey encompasses classical heritage of the Ottoman empire. All these classical heritages eventually helped shape the modern mentality of those

nations. To know the past is to know the future.

Samuel P. Huntington wrote, “We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.”<sup>1</sup> That is a typical Western approach.

The Chinese know who we are when we know whom we share similarities with. Even differences are not necessarily destined, but may grow out of similar human nature. Just as Confucius said, “Human beings are similar in their natural tendencies (*xing*, 性), but vary greatly by virtue of their habits (*xi*, 习)” (性相近, 习相远).<sup>2</sup>

There are profound similarities and differences between the Chinese classical civilization and the Western classical civilization. A comparative study of both is necessary for mutual understanding. A treatise cannot possibly be all-inclusive, but a brief discussion on specific issues from a historical perspective is a

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster Inc, 1996, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, translated with an Introduction by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1998, p. 203.

realistic approach.

For instance, the Westerners are often as surprised at the Chinese people's obsession with "unification" and "order" as the Chinese are often surprised at the Westerners' depreciation of the two concepts, since "unification," "conformity" and even "harmony" are all derogatory terms in the West. This difference in values can be traced back to the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) and ancient Greece, since the similar situation of China and the West in that period produced totally different results.

The Warring States and ancient Greece coexisted for several centuries BCE. They nurtured the core elements of each civilization.

Ancient Greece lent Rome its philosophy, art and science. Ancient Greek religion, mythology, and philosophy were key sources of basic Christian doctrines. Ancient Greek thinkers contributed to the rise of modern science in Europe. In politics, the ancient Greeks developed concepts of freedom, democracy and humanism that later became the main spiritual grounds of the Renaissance and the

Enlightenment. Only by understanding the ancient Greek civilization can we understand the modern Western civilization.

Similarly, the Warring States Period saw the emergence of most Chinese thoughts, including Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and the Military Strategy School. The fierce competition in that period broke aristocracy based on blood ties and marked the beginning of political meritocracy. The wars in that period bred the *junxian* system (county and prefecture system under centralized administration), which later became the basic political system of unified dynasties. To know how the Warring States Period evolved into the Qin and Han dynasties (the earliest two dynasties of great unity in China) is a key point for understanding how China became China.

Between the fifth and the third centuries BCE, ancient China and ancient Greece were faced with remarkably similar situations:

First, they were both decentralized in chaotic civil wars. In ancient China, the collapse of the state system

of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE) resulted in a war of annexation lasting for more than 200 years which was known as the Warring States Period. Seven strong states (Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Qin, Wei and Han) and dozens of small ones competed with each other.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, ancient Greece entered the period of “the Crisis of the Polis.”

Second, in both of the war-torn places, there emerged campaigns for unification. In ancient China, the seven strongest states vied to accomplish unification of All-under-Heaven. In ancient Greece, the “Pan-Hellenistic movement” emerged calling for the end of strife among the city-states and for unity in joint efforts to seek external expansion.

Ancient Greece was known for its decentralized city-state system, although internally there was an urge to unify. It gave birth to a powerful Mediterranean hegemony embodied in city-state alliances and the Empire of Alexander the Great stretching across Asia,

Africa, and Europe.

Aristotle once said that, “The people of cold countries generally, and particularly those of Europe, are full of spirit, but deficient in skill and intelligence; and this is why they continue to remain comparatively free, but attain no political development and show no capacity for governing others. The people of Asia are endowed with skill and intelligence, but are deficient in spirit; and this is why they continue to be peoples of subjects and slaves. The Greeks stock, intermediate in geographical position, unites the qualities of both sets of peoples. It possesses both spirit and intelligence, for which reason it continues to be free, to have the highest political development, and to be capable of governing every other people – if only it could once achieve political unity.”<sup>1</sup>

Third, the dominant powers in unification were not civilized states in the core areas, but militarily strong ones in the marginal areas who were often seen as

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<sup>1</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Ernest Barker, revised with an Introduction and Notes by R. F. Stalley, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 266-267.

semi-barbarians – the State of Qin among the Warring States and Macedonia in ancient Greece.

Fourth, a great number of scholars, including Confucians, Legalists,<sup>1</sup> Daoists, and Political Strategists in pre-Qin China, and philosophers and orators in ancient Greece, were lobbying for unification. Feeling the brunt of the crises of their times, they all put forth a series of philosophical, political and moral doctrines.

However, the outcomes of the two campaigns were different. What came out of the Greek unification campaign was the Empire of Alexander the Great, which quickly split into three successor kingdoms that got involved in infighting for many years before they were finally annexed by Rome one after another. Rome retained the culture and art of Greece but discarded its political system.

The Warring States' struggle for unification ended with the establishment of a unified Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE). Similar to the Empire of Alexander

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<sup>1</sup> “Legalism” is an extremely common translation in English of *fajia*, but actually it is misleading, because *fa* means not just “laws” but standards, methods, etc.

the Great, the Qin Dynasty only survived for 14 years before it collapsed. But the broken pieces soon reunified into a new empire called the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), which lasted for 400 years.

The Han Dynasty's reunification was not like Rome's conquering of Greece. Rome had long been a strong power outside the Greek world, while Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, was only a civilian and a county official at the lowest level in the Qin Dynasty. The Han's reunification totally relied on internal resources. The Han Dynasty basically adopted the political system of the Qin. Thereafter, the Qin and Han system was inherited by subsequent unified dynasties for more than 2,000 years.

Why did similar historical conditions bring about different outcomes? Are there any regularities in the sequence of past events that we can follow to observe the current situation and predict the future of China and the West?

We may find the answers by probing into the lives of some thinkers in the same period.



*Chapter I*

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THE  
WARRING  
STATES

*1*

In December 1975 a discovery with a far-reaching impact on Chinese historiography occurred at the location of Shuihudi, Yunmeng County of Hubei Province. A farmer working on a water conservancy project unearthed in the field the tomb of a low-level Qin official. Under the body of the deceased were inscribed bamboo slips, mostly legal documents from the State of Qin. These are the famous Shuihudi Qin Bamboo Slips.

Scholars were surprised to discover among these overwhelmingly legal texts, which ostensibly fit to Qin's

image as a “Legalist” state, a manuscript aimed to train officials, named “How to Be a Good Official.” The content of this manuscript was, quite unexpectedly, very “Confucian”:

*Be tolerant and loyal,  
balanced, without ill-will.  
Don't repeat your rued faults,  
Don't abash subordinates,  
Don't offend superiors,  
Don't block off remonstrance.*

*[If you] come across riches and face profit, do not choose wealth just because it seems opportune.*

*[If you] come across difficulties and face death, do not choose redemption just because it seems opportune.*

*The wish for wealth may be so great – for the pauper it is out of reach.*

*The wish for status may be so great – for the humble it is out of reach.*

*[Therefore] don't rejoice in being rich, and don't loathe the paupers; [do only] act upright and keep yourself correct. When faults are purged, luck will*

*abide*.<sup>1</sup>

This is not the only example of such a text. Similar Confucian-sounding ideas were expressed in other Qin bamboo manuscripts directed at the would-be officials.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the Qin Dynasty was not totally averse to Confucianism, *pace* its common image. This understanding calls into question a common assertion in later generations that having “burned the books and killed Confucians,” Qin was exclusively relying on Legalist thought.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation cited with small amendments from Enno Giele, “Spreadsheet Adages: Tabulated Principles for Early Chinese Functionaries,” Paper given at the *Rise of Writing* Conference at the University of Chicago, October 15-16, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Liu Deyin. “The Norm of Politics” (为政之常), “Qin Tomb 15 at Wang Jiatai, Jiangling, Hubei,” *Cultural Relics*, Issue No.1, 1995. Chen Songchang. “Taking Official, Governing Official and the Populace” (为吏治官及黔首), *Annotations of Qin Bamboo Slips Collected at Yuelu Academy* (Revised Edition), Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2018. Zhu Fenghan. “Summary of ‘Canons for Politicians’ Career’ Inscribed on Qin Bamboo Slips Collected at Peking University” (北大藏秦简《从政之经》述要), *Cultural Relics*, Issue No. 6, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> “Burning the books” refers to the decision of the imperial Qin government in 213 BCE to ban private learning and burn copies of the canonical books and the “Speeches of the Hundred Schools of Thought” from private collections. “Killing” (*keng*, sometimes interpreted as

Common perceptions should be questioned not only with regard to Qin but also with regard to other “six states” (i.e., Qin’s Warring States rivals). For instance, despite a common view that the Legalist system with intensive emphasis on agriculture was established by the Qin Legalists, in practice it originated in the State of Wei. The State of Chu, which is often conceived of as “free and unorganized,” actually introduced the centralized counties system before the State of Qin. The State of Qi is commonly viewed as committed to commerce, but the text *Guanzi*, produced there, contains elements of low-level community control and the system of mutual responsibility akin to those adopted in the agricultural State of Qin.

From this we can see that Confucian and Legalist methods were employed simultaneously, punishments and the rule by virtue were both implemented, and this was the common tendency throughout the late Warring

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“burying alive”) of scholars (who failed to provide the First Emperor with the drug of immortality) occurred in 212 BCE. In the Han Dynasty, this act was interpreted as targeting Confucians, and although this interpretation may be incorrect, it is deeply entrenched in popular imagination of the Qin.

States Period. The commonalities were dominant on the level of political ideology as well. This is most strongly observable on the level of the common quest toward unification of All-under-Heaven. None of the Warring States appeared to be content with separate rule in a small territory. Each of the contenders aimed to subjugate All-under-Heaven. There was no debate about whether or not unification was desirable, but just about who would unify the realm and the means necessary to do so. The one who was able to ensure the quickest pace of economic development and most effective political system was the most legitimate contender. This concern with entire “All-under-Heaven” (China) remained characteristic of Chinese political leaders throughout the subsequent dynasties. And the same can be said about political thinkers as well.

The period of contest among the Hundred Schools of Thought is the first apex of intellectual freedom in China’s history, hailed by modern and contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Yet by emphasizing the contention among the rival schools of thought,

scholars often ignore the process of integration and synthesis. Numerous manuscripts unearthed in recent decades testify to the practice of mutual impact and amalgamation of distinct intellectual traditions. For instance, among the texts from the site of Guodian (Hubei Province, discovered in 1993), one can observe a mixture of Confucianism and Daoism; whereas the silk manuscripts unearthed in 1973 from the site of Mawangdui (Hunan Province) incorporate ideas borrowed from Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. “Virtue” (*de*) was not exclusively advocated by Confucius (551-479 BCE) and Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE); the Way (Dao) was not an exclusive possession of the authors of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*; “laws” or “standards” (*fa*) were not endorsed only by Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE) and Han Fei (d. 233 BCE). The integration of distinct intellectual currents started long before the State of Qin conquered its eastern rivals and established the first imperial dynasty.

Despite huge philosophical differences among the Hundred Schools, they all adhered to the common

bottom line, which is the establishment of a unified political order. Confucians advocated “stability is in unity” (*Mencius* 1.6), aspiring to the unified realm based on ritual, music, the Way, and virtue. Legalists advocated unified administration and unity of laws: “Vehicles have the common gauge, documents employ the common writing system.”<sup>1</sup> Followers of Mozi (ca. 468-376 BCE) endorsed the unified social order based on “elevating uniformity” and establishing a common value system. Even the most radical adherents of liberty, the Daoists, were supportive of unified political order. Many scholars identify Laozi’s advocacy of “small states with scarce population” (par. 80, *Laozi*) with the idea of separate rule, but this is not so. The term “state” (*guo* or *bang*) in this context refers to an administrative unit which is a part of the broader unified realm. The ultimate goal is still All-under-Heaven: “Look at the state through the state, look at All-under-Heaven through All-under-Heaven” (par. 54, *Laozi*). Besides,

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<sup>1</sup> This is the motto of the unified Qin Dynasty, cited in the “Basic Annals of the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty” from Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian*.

Laozi discussed “seizing All-under-Heaven” (par. 29 and 48, *Laozi*), and how to become the “monarch of All-under-Heaven” (par. 78, *Laozi*). But Laozi had exceptionally high requirements of the “monarch of All-under-Heaven”: He who aimed at this position should not rely on political power alone; he should be the sage. “Marquises and monarchs attain the One (i.e., the Way) and become rectifiers of All-under-Heaven” (par. 39, *Laozi*). This concept of the sage monarch resembles Plato’s ideal of philosopher-king.

As for Zhuangzi, who claimed “I have heard of leaving All-under-Heaven alone; I have never heard of governing All-under-Heaven” (chapter 11, *Zhuangzi*), he is often conceived as an anarchist. However, what Zhuangzi opposed is imprudent activist government advocated by Confucians, instead of which he advocated the Daoist ideal of “governing through non-action.” Yet when governing is concerned, it is in the final analysis the governing of the entire realm. “Although the myriad things are numerous, there is one way through which they are ordered (or governed)”

(chapter 12, *Zhuangzi*).

On this common ground of pursuing unity, the Warring States became a melting pot of distinct ideologies. Legalists from Qin contributed the system of grassroots administration for the unified realm; Confucians from Lu – a unified moral order; Daoists from Chu – the spirit of freedom.<sup>1</sup> In the State of Qi, Daoist and Legalist ideas were merged into the so-called Huang-Lao (Yellow Thearch and Laozi) system that advocated governing by non-action. This idea, aside from the concept of wealth regulation through market advocated in *Guanzi*, became Qi's contribution to the unified realm.<sup>2</sup> Wei

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<sup>1</sup> Qin implemented from 359 BCE the reforms advocated by Shang Yang, the major “Legalist” thinker, hence its image as a Legalist state. Lu was the home state of Confucius and many of his disciples and followers, while Mencius, the most famous of his followers, was born in Zou, a neighbor statelet of Lu. Many traditions, even if somewhat disputable, associate the putative authors of two major Daoist texts – *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* – with the southern state of Chu.

<sup>2</sup> *Guanzi* (Master Guan) is a heterogeneous collection of texts penned in the State of Qi (probably in Jixia Academy, discussed below); it bears the name of Guan Zhong (d. 645 BCE), an eminent leader who launched the State of Qi and his patron, Lord Huan (r. 686–643 BCE) to the position of supremacy in the Chinese world. Several chapters of *Guanzi* focus on economic policies, containing the most advanced monetary theories in

and Han contributed diplomatic strategies of “Vertical and Horizontal Alliances” and the governing philosophy based on “performance and titles,” and “techniques of law.”<sup>1</sup> Zhao and Yan contributed the military system that combined cavalry and infantry.<sup>2</sup> And this list goes on.

The final result of these developments was the emergence of the Han Dynasty. The political system of the Han Dynasty was inherited from Qin, but its ideology was borrowed from Lu, its economic system

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early China.

<sup>1</sup> Vertical (anti-Qin) and Horizontal (pro-Qin) Alliances dominated intermittently the political arena of the Warring States since the last quarter of the fourth century BCE. Many of the alliances’ architects came from the State of Wei or from the remnants of the Zhou royal domain located near the State of Han 韩 (not to be confused with the Han 汉 Dynasty). The school of “performance and titles” (*xingming*) is an early designation of what became later known as “Legalist” school. It is associated with two major thinkers from the State of Han, Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE) and Han Fei, and its focus of concern was administering the bureaucracy. The term “techniques of law” (*fashu*) is primarily associated with Han Fei.

<sup>2</sup> The states of Yan and Zhao, located in northeastern and northern parts of China proper, expanded northward, which brought them in contact with the nomadic dwellers of the steppe belt. Under the impact of the latter, King Wuling of Zhao initiated in 307 BCE dramatic military reform, which included adoption of nomadic attire that facilitated shift to mounted warfare. This was the start of a massive shift to cavalry, which until then remained marginal in Chinese military strategy.

was indebted to Qi, its arts came from Chu, and its northern strategies against the Xiongnu inherited the practices of Yan and Zhao.

In the final analysis, Qin's unification of All-under-Heaven did not mean that Qin conquered All-under-Heaven, but rather that All-under-Heaven digested Qin.

## 2

The choice of their path by the Qin and Han dynasties was not accidental. Rather it was based on the accumulated historical experience from the Xia (ca. 2070-1600 BCE), Shang (ca. 1600-1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046-256 BCE) dynasties on the one hand, and from centuries of contest that spanned the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods on the other. The most important experience was that of the last 50 years of the Warring States Period.

Although Qin's unification of All-under-Heaven was

attained between 232 and 221 BCE under King Zheng (the would-be First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, also known as Qin Shi Huang), the foundation of Qin's preeminence was laid several decades earlier, under King Zhaoxiang (r. 306-251 BCE). Back then, especially between 269 and 260 BCE, Qin's strongest rival was the State of Zhao. Qin adopted the strategy of "allying with the distant and attacking the close" (远交近攻),<sup>1</sup> preparing to launch the decisive blow to Zhao.

Ambitious men of service and scheming ministers of the Warring States Period can be divided into two major groups. In the State of Qin, to the west of Hangu Pass, the most active were the so-called Legalists and adherents of the Vertical and Horizontal Alliances. To the east, in the competing six eastern states, the most active were Confucians, Daoists, Military thinkers, Yin-Yang scholars, and adherents of the so-called "School of Performance and Titles." Jixia Academy in the State of Qi, which resembled the Plato's

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<sup>1</sup> See *Stratagems of the Warring States*, compiled by Liu Xiang, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1998, p. 190.

Academy in ancient Greece, was the gathering place of intellectuals from the six eastern states.<sup>1</sup> From the start of Shang Yang's reforms in Qin in the middle fourth century BCE, Jixia Academy represented an alternative spiritual world to that of Qin.

Jixia Academy was reportedly initiated by the Yin-Yang scholars, but ever since Mencius' visit to Qi in the late fourth century BCE it fell under predominantly Confucian influence. Later, Xunzi (d. after 238 BCE), the last major Confucian master of the Warring States Period, headed the Academy for three terms, becoming the intellectual leader of the eastern states. Yet this Confucian master surprisingly travelled westward to the State of Qin, where Legalists were respected. At some point between 269 and 262 BCE, Xunzi, who was supposedly in his sixties, travelled throughout the State of Qin *en route* to its capital, Xianyang.<sup>2</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> The history of Jixia Academy is poorly understood because most of the references to it come from the Han Dynasty sources, written more than a century after the Academy's demise. From what we know it appears as a free gathering of thinkers of different intellectual affiliations under the patronage of the kings of Qi.

<sup>2</sup> Xunzi's biography is primarily reconstructed from Sima Qian's *Records*

researched the situation in Qin's towns and villages, and took notes. When asked by Qin's chancellor about his impressions, Xunzi replied:

*When I entered its borders and observed its customs, I saw that its common folk are simple. Their songs and music are not perverse and corrupt. Their clothing is not provocative. They greatly fear those in charge and comply with them. They are the same as the common people in ancient times. Coming to its cities and their official bureaus, the hundred functionaries behave solemnly. All are reverent, restrained, earnest, respectful, loyal, and trustworthy, and free of shoddiness. They are the same as functionaries in ancient times. When I entered its capital and observed its officers and grand ministers, I saw that they exit their personal compounds and enter the official compounds; they exit the official compounds and return to their homes – there are no private dealings among*

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*of the Historian* and is supplemented from the information in the book that bears Xunzi's name. Certain details, including those concerning Xunzi's age during his stay in Qi and his sojourn in Qin, are disputed.

*them. They do not conspire together. They do not form cliques. Maintaining their distance, all are intelligent, comprehending, and without prejudice. They are the same as officers and grand ministers in ancient times. When I observed its court, I saw that the way it hears and decides the hundred affairs when court is held is such that no tasks are left over. It has a leisurely manner, as if there were nothing to put in order. It is the same as court in ancient times.<sup>1</sup>*

In Confucian discourse, following “ancient times” meant emulating governing models of the sage monarchs of the past; this was the highest standard of rule to which Confucians aspired. That such a high esteem of Qin’s governance was pronounced by a Confucian master is surprising. Should it not be the Qin bamboo texts unearthed more than two millennia thereafter, Xunzi’s praise could have been considered a forgery.

Qin administrative and legal texts discovered in

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<sup>1</sup> “The Strong State,” chapter 16 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 171.

Shuihudi and elsewhere demonstrate Qin's strict top-down accountability system. If wrong information was found in an official document, the officials at every level of the bureaucratic ladder in charge of the document were held responsible and were fined or even meted physical punishment. In every hamlet, oxen were measured four times a year, and if they decreased in girth the hamlet head and the local overseer of agriculture were to be punished. Administrators were fined for every inaccuracy or delay in their duties. A judge who tried the case unfairly would be subjected to tattooing and would be made a convict laborer. Qin's meticulous control and inspection of every level of government from the remotest hamlets to central administration was denser and stricter than that under any imperial dynasty thereafter.

Xunzi's praise of Qin can be contrasted with his low esteem of the State of Qi, the home of Jixia Academy: "The queen wreaks havoc in the palace, deceitful ministers wreak havoc in the court, greedy functionaries wreak havoc in the official posts, and the

commoners all strive for benefits, making contention and grasping into their custom.”<sup>1</sup> Qi was a state that adopted Confucianism, the state where the doctrines of Confucius’ grandson Zisi (d. 402 BCE) and Mencius were passed on; yet the attempt to put in practice Confucian ideals in Qi’s governance went off the track.

Xunzi concluded that the achievements of Qin were not fortuitous but inevitable. “Thus, Qin has been victorious for four generations, and this is due not to luck, but rather to its methods.”<sup>2</sup> That the head of Jixia Academy said this, meant turning his back on the political stance of the six states. Yet Xunzi added another important statement: Despite all its achievements,

*.... there is still something Qin fears. It combines the preceding accomplishments and possesses them fully. Nevertheless, if one hangs it up for comparison with the accomplishments and fame of True Monarchs (i.e., sage monarchs of the past who*

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167, with the translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171, with the translation slightly modified.

*succeeded to unify All-under-Heaven), then the distance by which it does not match up is far indeed. Why is this? Might it be because Qin lacks any Confucians?*<sup>1</sup>

What is considered “having Confucians”? Xunzi replied:

*Curtail your awe-inspiring majesty and return to refinement; employ the noble men who are upright, have integrity and trustworthiness and perfect themselves so as to rule All-under-Heaven. Allow them to participate in the governance of the state, to rectify what is right and what is wrong, to order what is crooked and what is straight.*<sup>2</sup>

Qin “turned officials into teachers,”<sup>3</sup> whereas Xunzi hoped to order All-under-Heaven through the employment of noble men.<sup>4</sup> This idea was the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172, with the translation slightly modified.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170, with the translation modified.

<sup>3</sup> The idea of “turning officials into teachers” (i.e., imposing state control over intellectual activities) was advocated by Xunzi’s disciple, Han Fei (in “Five Vermin,” chapter 49 of *Han Feizi*); it was put in practice by another of Xunzi’s disciples, Li Si who banned private learning in Qin’s empire in 213 BCE.

<sup>4</sup> A “noble man” (exemplary person, or *junzi*) is the central concept in

prototype of what eventually emerged as the idea of the royal authority “ruling All-under-Heaven together with scholar-officials.”<sup>1</sup> Xunzi insisted that should Qin amend its single weakness – i.e., it should employ Confucians – then its problems would be solved: “If things are like this, then even if one were to build for Qin a Hall of Light outside its borders and summon regional lords there, that might succeed.”<sup>2</sup>

Xunzi realized that although the Confucians had the ideal of a unified moral order, they lacked the governance system effective enough to attain political unity. The Legalists, in contrast, had the governance system able to achieve unification of the realm, but they

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Confucianism. Whereas originally the term referred to nobility of blood, ever since Confucius, the focus shifted to the noble man’s moral self-cultivation, which turned him into a natural spiritual leader of society.

<sup>1</sup> The statement, “your majesty rule All-under-Heaven together with scholar-officials” is attributed to the Song Dynasty minister, Wen Yanbo (1006-1097). It reflected aspirations of scholar-officials to act as the emperor’s companions rather than mere servitors.

<sup>2</sup> “The Strong State,” chapter 16 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 170, with the translation slightly modified. The Hall of Light (*mingtang*), associated with the early Zhou Dynasty, was supposed to act as the ritual center of All-under-Heaven.

were much lacking with regard to the spirit of morality. Should Confucian system of political meritocracy based on trustworthiness, propriety, benevolence and love be integrated with the impartial standards-based political system of Qin, only then it could become the correct Way for the future of All-under-Heaven.

King Zhaoxiang of Qin, however, turned a deaf ear to Xunzi's words. Xunzi had no choice but to head back to the east. The correctness of his estimate had been proven by the events that occurred several years after his visit to Qin. The Battle of Changping (262-260 BCE) between Qin and Zhao became the bloodiest military encounter of the Warring States Period. After the Zhao army surrendered, the Qin general Bai Qi (d. 257 BCE) reportedly ordered to treacherously massacre 400,000 Zhao warriors who had surrendered.<sup>1</sup> This trespassed the moral bottom line even of the bloody Warring States Period.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of the massacred Zhao soldiers and whether or not they were all killed after surrender is a matter of dispute among the scholars. The precise details may be unverifiable, but that the huge Zhao army was eliminated during the campaign and in its aftermath is beyond doubt.

Qin remained forever committed to its realistic and utilitarian approach to attain All-under-Heaven, and did not want to be curtailed by benevolence, righteousness, the Way, and virtue.

## 3

After the Battle of Changping, Xunzi (who was a native of the State of Zhao) might have been so distressed as to give up searching for a court career. Under the patronage of a powerful Chu courtier, he got the position of governor in Lanling County, bordering the states of Qi and Chu. There he concentrated primarily on writing and teaching. Yet his teaching experience also happened to be distressing. Two of his best-known disciples are Han Fei and Li Si. Both are renowned as leading figures in the Legalist intellectual

current. Both sought employment in Qin; and whereas Han Fei was not successful (reportedly due to Li Si's machinations), Li Si eventually reached the apex of power in the court of Qin.

Li Si originally was a low-rank official in the State of Chu. Having studied under Xunzi, he turned to Qin, rising in rank until attaining the position of chancellor (prime minister) a few years after the imperial unification. It was he who convinced Qin Shi Huang to cast away the Zhou model according to which broad swathes of territory were to be allotted on the hereditary basis to the monarch's sons and kinsmen. Instead, he promulgated profound centralization in which the entire empire was divided into counties and prefectures controlled from the center. Li Si's other recommendation that brought him bad fame for millennia to come was outlawing private learning and burning privately possessed canonical texts and discourses of the Hundred Schools (213 BCE). Suppression of Confucian scholars (so-called burying of Confucians) is also widely (even if erroneously)

attributed to him.

A Han Dynasty story tells that having learned about Li Si's appointment as a Qin chancellor, Xunzi refused to eat.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not the story is reliable should not concern us here. What is important for us is that Xunzi's other outstanding disciple, Han Fei, had also tried to cast his lot with Qin.

Han Fei came from the ruling lineage from the State of Han. He is considered the great synthesizer of the Legalist philosophy, having integrated its three sub-currents which emphasized respectively *fa* (laws, standards), *shu* (management techniques), and *shi* (positional power). Certain details of his biography are disputed, but it is clear that he hoped – evidently unsuccessfully – to find employment in Qin. During his second visit to Qin, as an envoy of the Han ruling house, he was framed by Li Si and died in Qin

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<sup>1</sup> The story is told in the “Destroying Learning” chapter of the *Discourses of Salt and Iron* (盐铁论; composed in the mid-first century BCE). It is doubtful that Xunzi lived long enough to see Li Si reaching the top of Qin's government; but for sure he was still alive when Li Si cast his lot with Qin. Chapter 15 of *Xunzi* contains Li Si's debate with his teacher, in which Li Si defends Qin's policies.

custody. His ideas, however, had greatly impressed King Zheng of Qin, who reportedly regretted very much Han Fei's death. Thus, both practical service of Li Si and ideological contribution of Han Fei greatly accelerated Qin's wars of unification.

Why did the two disciples of the Confucian Xunzi become leading Legalist thinkers? It was because Xunzi's thought contained certain systemic contradictions, which allowed departures into either Confucian or Legalist direction. Despite being a devoted follower and admirer of Confucius, Xunzi had in practice modified Confucius' legacy, incorporated ideas coming from other intellectual currents (including the Legalists), and deviated on certain points from the ideas that characterized Confucian thought theretofore.

For instance, whereas Mencius argued that innate human nature is inherently good, Xunzi argued that "innate human nature is inherently bad" and therefore applying harsh punishments and severe laws is mandatory. This is consistent with the Legalist

teaching.<sup>1</sup>

The Confucian concept of Heaven was that of supreme moral force that punishes the bad and endorses the good. Xunzi, in contrast, argued that Heaven has nothing to do with good and evil: “Heaven’s conduct is constant: it does not persist because of the [sage monarch] Yao, nor does it perish because of the [evil tyrant] Jie.”<sup>2</sup> It is because of this that the people can “control Heaven’s Mandate and use it.”<sup>3</sup> This may be considered China’s earliest example of materialist thought.

Confucians extolled “the Way of the [True] Monarch” (王道) and denigrated “the Way of the Hegemon” (霸道). Xunzi considered the Way of the [True] Monarch superior, but also advocated that in the generation of chaos, the Way of the Hegemon is useful

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<sup>1</sup> For Xunzi’s views of human nature, see chapter 23 of the eponymous work.

<sup>2</sup> “Discourse on Heaven,” chapter 17 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 175, with the translation modified.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180, with the translation modified.

and can be used side by side with the Way of the [True] Monarch.<sup>1</sup>

Confucians preferred to focus their discourse on righteousness (or propriety, *yì*), and did not discuss benefits (or profits, *lì*). Xunzi, in contrast advocated simultaneous awareness of righteousness and benefits. He considered humans as naturally inclined to seek both at the same time. Even the best of the political systems cannot eradicate the human inclination to attain benefits; nor even the worst of the political practices can eradicate the human desire – or, more precisely, the desire of a “noble man” – to behave righteously. Both values should be applied simultaneously.

Confucians extolled the rule through ritual norms, whereas Xunzi considered that ritual should be implemented parallel to punitive laws. Ritual refers not just to the norms of etiquette but to apportioning each one his responsibilities according to fixed norms and measures. As such, the concept of ritual in *Xunzi* has much in common with the concept of laws or

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., “The True Monarch and the Hegemon,” chapter 11 of *Xunzi*.

standards (*fa*) advocated by the Legalists.

Confucians advocated “modeling ourselves after the former kings,” whereas Xunzi emphasized the advantages of “modeling ourselves after the later kings.” This idea laid the ideological prototype for the advocacy of reforms by such major imperial-period reformers as Wang Anshi (1021-1086) and Zhang Juzheng (1525-1582).<sup>1</sup>

It was precisely due to this ideology of unifying the opposites that Xunzi was able to train not only many Confucian disciples but also such Legalist thinkers as Han Fei and Li Si.

The existence of ostensible contradictions in Xunzi’s thought had much to do with the time of great

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<sup>1</sup> Following “later kings” meant learning from the recent examples (such as kings of the Zhou Dynasty) rather than from the remote and idealized legendary past (such as the age of the mythical “Five Thearchs,” including Yao and Shun). Earlier sages are not denigrated, but actual policies can be adapted to more recent circumstances. This idea was conducive to reformist thought of major reformers in Chinese history: Wang Anshi attempted the most comprehensive reform in China’s imperial history (starting in 1069); Zhang Juzheng was less ambitious, but his overhaul of the late Ming Dynasty government was arguably the single most significant attempt in the Ming history to save the government from progressive financial and administrative paralysis.

upheaval he lived in. At the age of Confucius (the late Spring and Autumn Period), the largest battles, such as that of Ailing (484 BCE), involved armies of a few dozen thousand soldiers and resulted in thousands of casualties. A century and a half later, by the time of Mencius, major campaigns, such as Maling (341 BCE), involved a hundred thousand soldiers or so, and resulted in tens of thousands of casualties.<sup>1</sup> Back then, major campaigns were separated by ten years and more. By Xunzi's time, however, campaigns involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers and resulting in more than 100,000 casualties became fairly common.

Suffice it to say several of the bloodiest campaigns fought by the State of Qin under the leadership of its

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<sup>1</sup> Ailing campaign was fought by the State of Wu against Qi (Wu was supported by Qi's southern neighbor, the State of Lu). *Zuo's Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Lord Ai 11.3) mentions the Wu armies capturing "eight hundred chariots covered in hide, and the heads of three thousand armored men." Maling campaign, in which Qi defeated the State of Wei, was among the most significant military encounters of the middle Warring States Period. See details in Yang Kuan, *History of the Warring States* ( 战国史 ), Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1998, pp. 344-346. For the size of the armies and the scope of military conflicts in the Warring States Period, *Ibid.*, pp. 303-317.

most renowned (and arguably the most murderous) general, Bai Qi. His invasion of Chu in 278 BCE was among the most sophisticated and large-scale campaigns in Chinese history. The overall number of casualties is unknown, but suffice it to say the flooding of Chu's major city of Yan, which resulted in the death of "hundreds of thousands" of civilians and military personnel. Five years later, in 273 BCE, the Qin armies defeated the coalition of the states of Wei and Zhao during the Huayang campaign, inflicting on them accumulated losses of 130,000 to 150,000 soldiers. Eleven years later the Changping campaign started, at the end of which, in 260 BCE, no less than 400,000 Zhao soldiers were massacred.

These are just a few major campaigns, but in between lesser campaigns, e.g., Qin's incursions into the State of Wei, recurred almost annually, often resulting in dozens of thousands of victims.<sup>1</sup> The Qin casualties,

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<sup>1</sup> For these campaigns, *Ibid.*, pp. 402-416. *Stratagems of the Warring States* contains the following observation: "Qin killed several million people of the Three Jin [i.e., the states of Han, Wei and Zhao]. Those who are alive today all are the orphans of those who died by Qin" ("Yan Stratagems" 2.1).

though not reported in the Qin sources, and the bloody campaigns fought by the other Warring States among themselves, not involving Qin, would be predictably very high. To put an end to this tremendous and ever escalating bloodshed, neither powerless morality nor immoral power sufficed. Xunzi sought a new way, a combination of Confucianism and Legalism, of morality and power.

As for Han Fei and Li Si, they learned only one aspect of Xunzi's thought – that of Legalism. They both forgot that even though their teacher, Xunzi, approved of the Legalist methods, he remained a consistent adherent to Confucian values such as loyalty, righteousness, filial piety, and brotherly love. Thus, Xunzi advocated the idea of “follow the Way, do not follow the ruler,” and “follow the righteousness, do not follow your father,”<sup>1</sup> which became the hallmark of the scholar-officials' spirit. He based his political recommendations on the “Way of

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Way to Be a Son,” chapter 29 of *Xunzi* (the first citation recurs in chapter 13, “The Way to Be a Minister”). Cf. translation in *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 325 and p. 135.

the [True] Monarch” and in military affairs advocated prioritizing benevolence and righteousness.<sup>1</sup> Xunzi’s endorsement of “benevolence” (*ren*) is identical to that of Confucius and Mencius. Overall, Xunzi succeeded in maintaining a delicate balance between the Legalist means and the Confucian soul. Not all of his students were so successful, though, in preserving this balance. Some – like Li Si and Han Fei – erred by endorsing only one aspect of their Master’s legacy.

Very soon after the deaths of Han Fei and Li Si, the empire that they had designed collapsed. The people conquered by Qin did not acquiesce to their position as Qin’s subjects. Their rebellion demonstrated the correctness of Xunzi’s warning: Violence can ensure conquest but is not conducive to the consolidation of one’s power. Consolidation derives from acceptance of the new rule in one’s heart, a matter ignored by Qin. Recall Xunzi’s saying:

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Regulations of the True Monarch” (chapter 9) and “A Debate on Military Affairs” (chapter 15), of *Xunzi*.

*To capture and take over others is something that it is easy to be capable of doing, but it is solidifying and consolidating one's grip on them that is the hard part.... Thus, if one is able to take over another land, but not able to consolidate one's grip on it, it is sure to be snatched away. If one is neither able to take over another land nor to consolidate one's grip on one's original holdings, then one is sure to perish. If one is able to consolidate one's grip on one's original holdings, then one will surely be able to take over another land. When one obtains it, then one will consolidate one's grip on that as well, and one's capture and taking over of lands will have no boundaries.<sup>1</sup>*

The Qin empire toward its end came to grasp the problem of its suppressive methods. The “Edict Issued in the First Year of the Second Emperor of the Qin Dynasty” (209 BCE) discovered among the bamboo slips unearthed from a well at the site of Tuzishan,

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<sup>1</sup> “A Debate on Military Affairs,” chapter 15 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 162.

Yiyang (Hunan Province) in 2013, clearly decreed that no additional corvée work should be imposed on the people. Alas, this edict was issued too late. Half a year later, Chen Sheng and Wu Guang rose in revolt at Daze Canton, in present-day Anhui Province. This rebellion triggered the series of uprisings that toppled the mighty Qin government in just three years.

The contradictions in Xunzi's thought reflect a subtle yet well palpable tension that permeates Chinese political tradition in general. Confucianism and Legalism contradict each other, and yet they are inseparable. Both traditions are indispensable. Without Legalism, Confucianism would not be able to organize and structure society, and it would fail either to mobilize grassroots resources or to strengthen the state in the age of conflicts. Yet without Confucianism, Legalism would become too rigid and inflexible. Its system of authority would become completely standardized, vertical and homogeneous without any space for flexible, localized and inclusive accommodation characteristic of Confucianism.

As for Xunzi's philosophy, it incorporated not just Confucian and Legalist ideas but also achievements of other major intellectual currents of the Warring States Period. In *Records of the Historian*, Sima Qian said that Xunzi's thought incorporated attainments of Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists:

*In order to set forth the prosperity and ruin that come, respectively, from acting in accordance with Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists, he listed and arranged them in a book of several ten thousand characters, and then he died.<sup>1</sup>*

This is a good summary. Indeed, Xunzi was critical of the Mohists who “do not understand the proper scales of unifying All-under-Heaven and establishing the state,”<sup>2</sup> but absorbed their idea of “universal love” (or “care for everyone,” *jian'ai*), and developed it into a tenet of selfless politics oriented toward the entire

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 74 of *Records of the Historian*.

<sup>2</sup> “Against the Twelve Masters,” chapter 6 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 40, with the translation modified.

“All-under-Heaven.” He criticized the Daoists, such as Zhuangzi, who are “blinded by the Heavenly and do not understand the value of the human,”<sup>1</sup> but accepted their idea of impersonal Heaven that has no likes and dislikes, developing it into a proto-materialist outlook of “controlling Heaven’s Mandate and using it.”<sup>2</sup> He criticized Laozi (here perhaps standing for Huang-Lao tradition), who “saw the value of bending down but not of straightening up,” but accepted the Huang-Lao economic thought, in particular the value of commerce for the state’s economy.<sup>3</sup> He aimed at transforming the “pure Confucianism” associated with Confucius and Mencius into the “Great Confucianism” which would be broader and more diverse. From a modern point of view, it is justified to say that the transformation from

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<sup>1</sup> “Undoing Fixation” (or “Dispelling Blindness”), chapter 21 of *Xunzi*; cf. translations in *Ibid.*, p. 227 and *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, by John Knoblock, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> “Discourse on Heaven,” chapter 17 of *Xunzi*.

<sup>3</sup> For citation, see “Discourse on Heaven,” chapter 17 of *Xunzi* (cf. translations in Hutton 2014: 181 and Knoblock 1994: 22). For Xunzi’s endorsement of commerce, see, e.g., “The Regulations of the True Monarch,” chapter 9 of *Xunzi*.

disputation among the Hundred Schools of Thought into synthesis of the Hundred Schools was primarily Xunzi's contribution.

The noble man “attains the apex of height and brilliance, but walks along the middle path (the Mean).”<sup>1</sup> Xunzi's definition of the “middle path” was more pragmatic than that of traditional Confucianism. He believed that the standard of the middle path (“following what is central”) is not in following a certain dogma but in using the ideas that benefit practical affairs. In modern parlance it can be said that Xunzi's idea was “seeking truth from facts”:<sup>2</sup>

*In general, when you practice anything, if it is of benefit to orderly rule, establish it. If it is of not [no] benefit to proper patterns, discard it. This is called making one's affairs conform to what is central. For every kind of knowledge and theory, if*

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from paragraph 28 of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸).

<sup>2</sup> “Seeking truth from facts,” i.e., prioritizing practical value of ideas over dogmatic sophistry, was the essential idea of Mao Zedong in his essay “On Practice” (1937). It was readopted by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and remains one of the primary principles of the Communist Party of China ever since.

*it is of benefit to orderly rule, proceed with it. If it is of no benefit to proper patterns, abandon it. This is called making one's theory conform to what is central. Practices that lose what is central are called vile affairs. Knowledge and theories that lose what is central are called vile ways.<sup>1</sup>*

The spirit of following “what is central” based on “seeking truth from facts” allowed the Chinese civilization to excel in accommodating contradictory ideas and containing the opposites. This ability to come to terms with ostensibly irresolvable contradictions, to harmonize mutually exclusive modes of action and create viable synthesis is one of the major sources of China’s civilizational longevity.

It is much easier to be purist and endorse a single way than follow the middle path. Those who walk along the middle path must prepare themselves for being abandoned or vehemently criticized by

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<sup>1</sup> “The Achievements of the *Ru* (Confucian),” chapter 8 of *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 56, with the translation modified.

supporters of one of the extremes. Because Xunzi attempted to establish a middle path between Confucianism and Legalism, and even, more broadly, among Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism, he was vehemently criticized by later Confucian purists. He was even expurgated from the ranks of great Confucian masters. For 1,800 years following the Han Dynasty, Confucians maintained sacrifices only to Confucius, Mencius, and several of Confucius' disciples, but not to Xunzi. For the Neo-Confucians of the Song to Ming dynasty, Xunzi represented heterodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, real history ultimately advances along the middle path. Although Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) and Emperor Xuan (r. 74-49 BCE) of the Han Dynasty did not openly extol Xunzi, in practice they followed many of his recommendations, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Neo-Confucianism is the Western designation of the "School of the True Way" (*daoxue*) or the "School of Principle" (*lixue*) synthesized by the great Song Dynasty thinker, Zhu Xi (1130-1200); an alternative offshoot, the "School of Heart/Mind" (*xinxue*), associated with Wang Yangming (1472-1529), prospered in the Ming Dynasty. Neo-Confucians endorsed Mencius, whose book was elevated to one of the "Four Books," the essence of Confucian education in late imperial China. Xunzi, in contrast, was disparaged.

“combining ritual and law” and “imposing orderly rule through Confucianism and Legalism.” Emperor Xuan had declared: “The House of the Han has its own system; it is rooted in mixing the Way of the Hegemon and the Way of the [True] Monarch.”<sup>1</sup> This synthesis, even if constantly altered and modified, was inherited and carried on by subsequent dynasties. Yet because Xunzi’s mixture of different strands of thought was not considered pure enough, the rulers adopted his ideas in practice but not in name. Their fondness of Xunzi was on the level of following his practical advice rather than on the level of open recognition.

Eventually, Confucianism and Legalism flowed together throughout the imperial history. Legalists established the centralized state power based on the *junxian* system and created bureaucracy that penetrated society down to grassroots level. Confucians, in turn, contributed to the empire the spirit of scholar-officials and the collectivist ethics based on the integration

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<sup>1</sup> “Basic Annals of Emperor Yuan,” chapter 9 of *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (汉书).

of the “family, state, and All-under-Heaven.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in the period starting with the Wei (220-265) and Jin (265-420) dynasties and continuing into the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties, Confucianism fused with Daoism and Buddhism, forming the spiritual world based on the integration of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

The result of these multiple ideological syntheses was the formation of a super-stable unified state structure. In due time, this model had been disseminated throughout East Asia influencing neighboring polities. It became “the secret” of the Chinese civilization. It allowed imperial China to avoid hegemonism when strong and to escape total disintegration when weak. More importantly, it allowed flexibility and adaptability that ensured the civilization’s survival. I call this model a China’s “secret” because it was not openly promulgated and hence barely noted by foreign (especially Western)

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<sup>1</sup> Moving from rectifying one’s self to ordering the family, ruling the state properly and “clarifying one’s virtue to All-under-Heaven” is the Confucian ideal as embedded in the canonical text, *The Great Learning* (大学).

observers, who were routinely adopting the label of “Confucianism” when dealing with China. Yet what gave the Chinese civilization its vitality was not a dogmatic acceptance of a single truth but the ability to accommodate tensions and contradictions. It is time that the West comes to terms with this understanding.

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## *Chapter II*

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# ANCIENT GREECE

## 1

While the Warring States Period developed in China, the city-states system in the Greek Peninsular entered a period of crisis (404-338 BCE).

In 346 BCE, when Shang Yang, chancellor of the State of Qin, had almost finished his reform of the *junxian* system, remote Athens was undergoing the “Pan-Hellenistic movement,” at the center of which was a man named Isocrates (436-338 BCE), the leading orator of Athens.

He is reported to have studied with several prominent teachers, including Tisias (one of the traditional founders of rhetoric), the sophists Prodicus

and Gorgias, and to have associated with Socrates. He defined for the Greek world the form of rhetorical proses, which was later imitated by Cicero, a Roman orator and statesman.

Differing from the other Attic Orators, Isocrates distinguished himself from those he called “sophists,” and insisted on delivering “speeches” (*logoi*) that were intended to be circulated in writing and read by others. He played an important role in the intellectual life of fourth-century BCE Athens and was also a politically influential figure, especially under the Athenian political system, in which all matters of importance must go through debates at the Athenian assembly (*ecclesia*).

Early in his career, Isocrates opened a school where he taught about education and rhetoric, that is, politics. At the core of his teaching was practical application of ethics, politics, and public speaking. Among his pupils were many prominent Greeks of the time, including many who became prominent orators (Isaeus, Hyperides), writers (Theopompus,

Ephorus, Androtion), and military and political leaders (Timotheus, Nicocles).

Democracy as cherished in the West today existed only briefly in the history of Athens. In the decades before and after the golden age of Pericles' rule, the Greek city-states were incessantly mired in vicious internal strife. Whoever became the hegemon would use tributes paid by small city-states to reinforce his own military force. All small city-states that refused to align with the hegemon were brutally bullied, as Milos and Sicyon were by Athens. The bitter strife between Athens and Sparta had to be mediated for some time by their common foe – Persia. In times of war, lands fell into the hands of the rich, while the poor deprived of land had to become mercenaries of other city-states and often had to attack their home city-state. This state of turmoil lasted for a century.

Out of this chaos emerged an appeal that all Greek city-states should stop fighting for the limited resources they shared and join hands in conquering and colonizing Persia and Asia so that Greece would see

peace and prosperity. Isocrates was the first to make that appeal. In the *Panegyricus*, a speech that he made in 380 BCE, he argued, “The Greeks were closed up in a small space and, because of the scarcity of land, were plotting and sending forces against one another, and some were dying through want of daily necessities and others through war.”<sup>1</sup> He added, “It is impossible to have a secure peace unless we join together to make war against the barbarians, and it is impossible for us to be unified until we gain our advantages from the same sources and run our risks against the same enemies. When this happens and we have removed the confusion in our lives – a confusion that dissolves friendships, causes relatives to hate one another, and drives all people to war and factionalism – then there is no way that we will not be unified and feel honest goodwill toward one another. For this reason, we must try as hard as we can to move the war here in Greece

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<sup>1</sup> *Isocrates II* (The Oratory of Classical Greece, Vol. VII), translated by Terry L. Papillon, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, p. 36.

over to Asia as quickly as possible.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea, known to modern historians as “Pan-Hellenism” or “Magna Graecia,” was to create colonies on Persian land through expeditions, conquests and pillage so that the population who remained on their native land would once again have sufficient lands. This was by no means triggered by any threat from Persia, as the Greco-Persian Wars had ended a century before with a peace treaty. The fundamental drivers of Greek unification were land scarcity and overpopulation. The spread of the Greek civilization was only a by-product of that campaign. In the centuries to come, this ancient Greek colonization became the prototype of Western colonial imperialism. For this reason, Isocrates can be regarded as the first advocate of colonial imperialism.

Pericles, who reigned during Athens’ golden age, had proposed the concept of Athenian imperialism that spread the ideals of a value system excluding military expansion, but Isocrates’ concept of imperialism took shape in an era of decline when those ideals were

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

reduced to sheer desire for colonization.

While calling for “Magna Graecia,” Isocrates insisted that Athens should lead this unification because it possessed the mightiest naval forces, the most advanced civilization, and the greatest moral obligations and internationalist spirit.

By contrast, his opponents argued that military conquest would only result in greater-scale massacres and that Athens should not repeat the atrocities it had already committed. Isocrates maintained that hegemony would be benign as long as Athens did not habitually rely on harsh power and was able to maintain its empire for the longest time. “How then is it not right to praise us, since we were harsh least often and were able to maintain our empire for the longest time?”<sup>1</sup>

What baffled Isocrates was that Athens was turning a deaf ear to him after he had promoted his proposal for almost 40 years. The reason was that the next generation of orators such as Demosthenes were all for civil wars. They held that Athens should continue to

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

fight Sparta, Thebes and Macedonia. They would rather pay for mercenaries to battle against other city-states than unite with them in war against Persia. Isocrates lamented that the city-states “who have always been accustomed to looking at their own advantage would never agree to share equally with one another”<sup>1</sup> and that the hawks were people “who also are in the habit of keeping their own cities in disarray, because they think that a common peace for all would be an attack on their own personal interests.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Xunzi was so disappointed with the State of Qi that he began to lobby the State of Qin for the unification of All-under-Heaven (China), so was Isocrates in such despair with Athens that he began to persuade Macedonia to ally with other Greek city-states. Ignored by Athens, he had to turn to other states for help. In a political rally in 346 BCE, he openly called on Philip, King of Macedonia, to ally

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

with Greece.<sup>1</sup> Macedonia had long been a marginal state in comparison with other Greek city-states. Its origin was only remotely related to ancient Greece. When he was 87 years old, Isocrates wrote to Philip, whom he had never met, an open letter in which he expressed his disappointment with Athens and Lacedaemon (Sparta): “For either of these cities would have easily blocked the other if it tried to do this. But now I think that things are different, for I know that everyone has been put on equal footing now because of their troubles.”<sup>2</sup> He believed that King Philip was the only politically powerful man who could unify Greece by conquering Persia.

He also offered Philip the following suggestion: “If you were to cross over to the mainland, he [Idreus, the satrap of the Persian province of Caria] would gladly

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<sup>1</sup> Isocrates stated in his open letter “To Philip”: “I found that Athens would stay peaceful only if all the greatest cities would decide to put off hostilities among themselves and carry the war into Asia, and if they should plan to gain from the barbarians, the advantages that the barbarians now think they should get from the Greeks.” *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

greet you, thinking you had come to help him. You will also draw many other satraps away if you promise them freedom and spread this word throughout Asia [Isocrates means here Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey], for when this word came to Greece, it brought the downfall of our empire and Sparta's."<sup>1</sup> Here, it sounds like he in fact resented "freedom."

What he suggested concerning freedom here was more a means of dismembering Persia than of spreading the values of the Greeks. No matter how many philosophical laurels he won, Isocrates was primarily a statesman. Philosophers may think about metaphysical or abstract issues, but statesmen must face reality. Twenty years later, Philip's son Alexander precisely embraced Isocrates' strategic approach and conquered Egypt and Persia, thus establishing the colonial empire of Greater Greece. However, Alexander's mentor was not Isocrates but Aristotle, who went even further than Isocrates down the road to "Magna Graecia."

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

## 2

Different from Isocrates, Socrates and Plato, who were all pure Athenians, Aristotle came from the fringe of the Greek world, the small city-state of Thrace under the jurisdiction of Macedonia. To Athenians, Thrace was only a remote place inhabited by barbarians, where Spartacus, who revolted 260 years later, would also be born.

As Plato's most brilliant student, Aristotle was for some time the prospective successor to the Academy. Disappointingly, Plato, on his deathbed, named his own nephew Speusippus as his successor, mainly because

Aristotle was a metic with no “citizenship,” who could neither own property (land) legitimately nor participate in politics in Athens.

According to law, only those who were born in Athens and descended from Athenian citizens could be treated as Athenian citizens. This law barred from Athenian citizenship not only the greatest and wisest Greek thinker, but also all those who were born outside Athens but were willing to serve it. Ironically, this law was enacted by none other than Pericles, who would later be hailed by the West as a paragon of democracy.

Aristotle had to leave Athens.

Three years after Isocrates wrote his letter “To Philip,” Aristotle was invited to the Court of Macedonia to serve as Alexander’s teacher.

He taught Alexander in a cave for about three years with the highest standards of the Greek civilization, leading the 14-year-old to fall in love with Greek literature and Homer’s epics and endowing him with knowledge in biology, botany, zoology, and, more

importantly, politics.<sup>1</sup>

To better instruct Alexander, Aristotle wrote “On Kingship” and “Alexander, or a Plea for the Colonies.” Alexander communicated with his mentor frequently by letters even during his eastern expedition. As Plutarch wrote in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, Alexander constantly asked questions about political science in his letters to Aristotle, and the replies he received gave him much greater joy than the conquest of any city. Hegel said, “Alexander’s spirit and deeds furnish the highest testimonial for Aristotle – should he need one – with regard to the business of education. Aristotle had a more worthy pupil in Alexander than Plato had in Dionysius. Here we have a refutation of the idle chatter about the practical uselessness of philosophy. From the outward circumstances we see that Aristotle worked with Alexander in a fundamental way and not in the customary manner

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Truth Behind the Myth*, Woodstock and New York: Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc. 2004, p. 48.

of instructing princes; and we must not suppose that Aristotle himself was capable of that sort of superficiality.”<sup>1</sup>

During his brutal conquest, Alexander promoted Greek culture by all available means. He built numerous Hellenized cities with sports arenas and temples, for instance, in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and India. Museums and libraries built in these Hellenized cities became centers of science, culture, philosophy and art. He also frequently sent specimens of Asian flora and fauna back to Aristotle’s school in Athens for research. Later, Napoleon Bonaparte, who regarded Alexander as his idol, took with him a large number of archaeologists during his expedition to Egypt, and they eventually discovered the Rosetta Stone and set up a new discipline called Egyptology.

However, there were still conflicts in their hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6, Volume II: Greek Philosophy*, translated by R. F. Brown and J. M. Stewart with the assistance of H. S. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 227-228.

Isocrates' only demand for Macedonia was that the Persians could be "compelled" whereas the Greeks should be "persuaded." He said, "Persuasion will be useful with the Greeks; compulsion will be advantageous against the barbarians."<sup>1</sup> Aristotle even put it in plainer terms, "...act towards Greeks as their leader, towards foreigners as their master, treating the former as friends and kinsmen and the latter as animals or plants."<sup>2</sup> What he said about the innate character of the Greek Empire can be summarized as democracy within and colonization without.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Isocrates II* (The Oratory of Classical Greece, Vol. VII), translated by Terry L. Papillon, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Revised Oxford Translation, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 5261.

<sup>3</sup> According to some viewpoints, there was "distinction between the Chinese and the barbarians" in ancient Chinese history and Confucianism, which was similar to the distinction between the "civilized" and the "barbarians" in Greece. On the other hand, difference did exist. First, Confucians differed the Chinese and the "barbarians" by culture rather than by bloodline or race. In their opinions, the "civilized" and the "barbarians" can be transferred to each other. The states that adopted "barbarian" rituals would be taken as "barbarians" and those that adopted Chinese rituals would be taken as Chinese. Secondly, the *keju* system (the imperial examination system) helped to counter racism. The "barbarians" from border areas and even people from an alien state could be promoted to be high-level aristocrats as long as

The American historian William Scott Ferguson said, “An empire is a state formed by the rule of one state over others. It is immaterial in this connection what form of government the ruling people prefers.”<sup>1</sup> “Transcendent as is the imperial achievement of the Romans, and unrivaled as is the political sagacity with which they consolidated their power and made it enduring, it must still be recognized that they were the heirs, in war, diplomacy, and government, of the Greeks, their predecessors. They worked with greater power and with larger units than did the Spartans and the Athenians.”<sup>2</sup> The Greek Empire thus became a

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they had passed the examination. Thirdly, the distinction between the Chinese and the “barbarians” by culture made the world of the Western Zhou Dynasty open and non-exclusive, without externalities. It was a unity inclusive of heterogeneity. As is indicated by the “vortex pattern” proposed by Zhao Tingyang, China’s expansion, in which tribes and communities in the surrounding regions were voluntarily involved in the vortex, was different from the West’s expansion from center to outside. That vortex pattern was owed to the concept of All-under-Heaven. See Zhao Tingyang, *The Making and Becoming of China: Its Way of Historicity* ( 惠此中国：作为一个神性概念的中国 ), Beijing: CITIC Press Group, 2016, p. 50.

<sup>1</sup> William Scott Ferguson, *Greek Imperialism*, New York: Biblo and Tannen Booksellers and Publishers, Inc., 1963, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

political and spiritual prototype for later European empires, whose land routes of invasion eastward after the 17th century were strikingly similar to the routes of invasion Alexander took.

## 3

Isocrates spent his twilight years in a way remarkably similar to that of Xunzi.

The Battle of Chaeronea between Athens and Macedonia ended in 338 BCE, with the former bitterly beaten, while the latter went on to establish the League of Corinth and make preparations for marching on Persia after becoming the hegemon of the Greek Empire.

Isocrates, then 98 years old, was praying in the Health Temple of Hippocrates when he heard the news of Macedonia's victory over Athens. After refusing

to eat anything for days, he died on the ninth day of Macedonia's victory, when the funeral was being held for the fallen Athenian soldiers. This was a time when he should have been celebrating the realization of his 50-year dream of the unification of "Magna Graecia." He chose to die because he still loved Athens. He chose to die because the rise of Macedonia at the cost of Athens' fall had broken his heart and tormented his soul.

Similar to Xunzi's often-contradictory doctrines, Isocrates' vision of "Magna Graecia" encompassed an inextricable contradiction. On the one hand, how could he ensure that mighty Macedonia would subjugate Athens by way of "persuasion" rather than compulsion? On the other hand, how would the eloquent Athenians allow themselves to be easily "persuaded" by Macedonia? The deaths of so many young Athenians in the battle against Macedonia reminded him that the tragedy could be repeated in the future.

Although Isocrates loved freedom, he craved

political unity as well. He knew that the violence that came with unity would destroy freedom, and that the chaos that came with freedom would undermine political unity. Unable to resolve the conflict between his ideal and reality, he had to commit suicide. After his death, that conflict only grew even fiercer.

The Greek city-states never saw a second unity. Philip was assassinated on the eve of the Greek expedition and Thebes immediately rose in rebellion (the Battle of Thebes, 336 BCE). Soon after Alexander died in Babylon, Athens started a new uprising (the Lamian War, or Hellenic War, 323-322 BCE). By the time Macedonia entered a decisive battle with Rome, the Greek city-states stabbed it in the back (the Second Macedonian War, 200-196 BCE). The Greek city-states would rather perish together under foreign invasion than submit to Macedonia, despite its contribution to the Hellenistic world.

Meanwhile, the Macedonian Empire was descending into absolutism. Alexander had slaughtered Thebes and sold its women and children as slaves, and right after

he had conquered Persia, he ordered his Greek allies to kiss the dust under his feet and revere him as a deity, namely the “son of Zeus-Ammon.” As the proud city-states refused to bow to any “human being,” he had to become a god to legitimize his rule over them. As Ferguson put it, “From his point of view [Alexander], his rule was legitimized when he was enrolled among the deities recognized by each city; for thereafter he had a clear right to issue orders to all the citizens of his world. From their point of view, on the other hand, by deifying Alexander they escaped from the intolerable necessity of obeying the commands of a foreigner. They thereby gave their consent to be ruled by him. They subordinated their will to his. The deification of rulers was, accordingly, simply the proskynesis [referring to the traditional Persian act of prostrating oneself before a person of higher social rank] of cities. Its consequences were an absolutism such as Europe – and for that matter Asia – had never known before and has never ceased to know since.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Alexander's successors in Asia (the Seleucid Empire) and Africa (the Ptolemaic Dynasty) followed in his footsteps by exalting themselves and their descendants as "living gods" who were offered sacrifices while still alive.<sup>1</sup>

As the rebellion of the Greek city-states and the absolutism of the Macedonian Empire interplayed and developed, it became increasingly difficult to tell which was cause and which effect.

As Ferguson pointed out, "The city-states of Greece were unicellular organisms with remarkable insides, and they were incapable of growth except by subdivision. They might reproduce their kind indefinitely, but the cells, new and old, could not combine to form a strong nation."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some people hold that Alexander's exalting himself as a "living god" was similar to the monarchs of the Western Zhou, Qin and Han dynasties proclaiming themselves "son of Heaven," since both manifested the combination of royal and divine power. However, the "Mandate of Heaven" of the Western Zhou Dynasty came from the people, just as the *Book of History* (尚书) said, "Heaven sees what the people see and hears what the people hear." The status of "son of Heaven" did not come from blood ties with Heaven, but from the virtue of protecting people. If he failed to protect his people, the ruler would lose his mandate and ceased to be the "son of Heaven."

<sup>2</sup> William Scott Ferguson, *Greek Imperialism*, New York: Biblo and Tannen

The reason is that the foundation of the city-state politics is not necessarily democracy but certainly self-rule. The dual kingship of Sparta and the monarchy of Asia Minor lasted as long as Athenian democracy did. Between Sparta and Asia Minor there was the Corinthian oligarchy, another major political system. The city-states could choose any political system of their own but would never yield to any foreign authority. Besides, only native residents of the city-states got to decide what political system to adopt and only “citizens” of the Greek city-states who were born there of the same group of people were entitled to vote. Metics could neither gain political power nor become leaders.

However, “absolute self-rule” means also “absolute localism,” preventing the possibility of unification. Ancient Greek city-states all had the autonomy to determine their own political systems. The result is that they discriminated against outsiders and it was impossible for ancient Greek city-states to achieve a

larger form of political unity. As Ferguson pointed out, “in Boeotia or in the Hellenic league organized by Philip II, in each of which the federal synod, being constructed on the idea of representation according to population, made districts and not cities the units; [with the result being] that the smaller cities felt themselves discriminated against and tended to rebel against being clubbed together.”<sup>1</sup>

But if a “one city, one vote” system endorsed by the smaller city-states such as the Achaean League and the Aetolian League was adopted, larger city-states such as Athens and Sparta “alone persisted in their isolation, the former on the strength of an international guarantee of autonomy, the latter in stubborn reliance upon its own powers.”<sup>2</sup> Just as Ferguson pointed out, the scheme obviously had defects: “‘Equality,’ says Aristotle, ‘is just, but only between equals.’ The cities which had an equal voice in the international board, ...

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

were unequal in population and in wealth.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a great pity that the entire Greek world, up to the time it was conquered by Rome, had never been able to develop a confederacy to the satisfaction of all city-states.

My goal here is not to use Chinese standpoint to criticize Greek city-states for their failure to form a viable confederacy. In ancient China there was an interesting, albeit historically inconsequential attempt to form a confederacy (more often two competing confederacies) of local polities. This happened during the Spring and Autumn Period, when most polities were similar in their size to the Greek city-states. The ultimate failure of these experiments with confederacy (which in China was called “the system of covenants and assemblies,” *huimeng zhidu* 会盟制度), convinced early Chinese statesmen and thinkers that the only way for political stability and prosperity lies in full political unification, that is establishing a centralized mega-state based on the county and prefecture system. As

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

mentioned in Chapter I, this did not imply eradication of pluralism. Rather, cultural and economic experiences of seven kingdoms were to a considerable extent preserved and amalgamated with the unified political order. Which is better, unification and centralization or a city-state confederacy, is a matter of one's value orientation and will not be discussed here. For my discussion what matters is that – much like the Chinese of the Spring and Autumn Period – the Greek city-states failed to turn confederacy into a viable choice in the long term.

## 4

The Warring States of ancient China and ancient Greece had utterly different political interpretations of “division” (*fen*, 分) and “unification” (*he*, 合).

In remote ancient times, China saw thousands of states co-existing or one city being a state on its own, much like the Greek city-state polity. “When Yu [禹, the founder of the Xia Dynasty] assembled the states on Mount T’oo, there were 10,000 states whose princes bore their symbols of jade and offerings of silk.”<sup>1</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Volume V: The Ch’un Ts’ew with the Tso Chuen*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960, p. 814.

the early Zhou Dynasty, China still consisted of 1,800 tribal states. However, these states were never separate for long. Instead, they grew into regional kingdoms through wars and annexation and evolved into a unified dynasty. The same seemed true of the ancient civilizations of West Asia and North Africa such as Sumer, Egypt and Persia. But in fact it was not the case. The ancient nations of West Asia and North Africa relied on “divine power,” while China relied on secular and ethical common sense.

Among all states of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, there was always a predominant large state that held nominal or *de facto* sway whether in terms of political power or cultural influence.<sup>1</sup> Whoever was made the leader had to be the one who had

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<sup>1</sup> Archeological findings have proved Shang, a state of wide kingship, produced its influence to the south of the Yangtze River. Li Boqian, chief scientist of archeological projects of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, points out that the findings of cooperative research in literature, archeology and year-measuring technology have proved that Xia did exist in Chinese history and the history of that dynasty is credible. See Wang Ding, Gui Juan and Shuang Rui (reporters from Xinhua News Agency), “Solutions to Goldbach Conjecture: Six-Decade Exploration of the Xia Dynasty,” [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/30/c\\_1125292348.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-11/30/c_1125292348.htm)

received the one and only Mandate of Heaven, which was supposed to govern both military power and morality. Morality relied not on divine power but on the people's support. The one who held the Mandate of Heaven must be strong enough to protect the people. Otherwise, the Mandate of Heaven would shift itself away. The theory of shift of the Mandate of Heaven was used to justify the revolutions in which Shang replaced Xia and Zhou replaced Shang. However, states having lost the Mandate of Heaven might not necessarily perish, but would survive and develop as subordinates to the new order. Although the seven strongest states of the Warring States Period no longer obeyed the King of Zhou, they shared the common faith that there was only one Mandate of Heaven and separate rule in a small territory would not last long. Despite massive dissent among the various schools of thought, representatives of those schools shared a consensus that the key path from chaos to harmony was the establishment of a unified order. In contrast, the Greek city-states of the same

period did not have a common, predominant ruler. All they had were alliances of different factions who fought each other without believing in the existence of any common order.

In terms of the relationship between the fiefdoms and the King of the Zhou Dynasty, the Zhou people's new fiefdoms owed the King of Zhou a duty of protection, while the non-Zhou people's fiefdoms established kinship with the Zhou court through marriage. Moreover, there was a complete set of rules governing relations between fiefdoms. For example, when a plague struck one state, others would be obliged to provide material or financial support; when a famine struck one state, others had to lend food to it; and when one state had celebrations or memorial events, others were required to celebrate or mourn with it.

These mandatory obligations were fulfilled under the King of Zhou's watch. Even in the Spring and Autumn Period, when the authority of the King was waning, powerful chiefs of fiefdoms still had to

keep this set of rules to maintain their status. These obligations strengthened the states' sense of identity as part of the "Chinese world."

By contrast, the Greek city-states failed to establish relationships of obligation toward one another despite the existence of ancestral blood relations. Even new city-states that separated from the mother city-state owed no duties or obligations to the latter but often went so far as to turn against it. Frustrated, the Greeks organized big festivals and sports events for purposes of "awakening" people's common identity as Greeks. But even during the Greco-Persian Wars, their shared identity played only a marginal role.

The different roots and natures of the two civilizations molded two different paths.

While "unification" was stressed in the Chinese civilization, "division," also one of the concepts of the Chinese civilization, refers to "division of labor" rather than "separation of rule." Xunzi gave the clearest interpretation of the relationship between division and unification. "How could physically weak humans

survive in the face of competition from other species?” he asked, and the answer he gave was that humans can form groups and the key to that is division of labor. In other words, different social roles can be defined and individuals are held accountable for each other. He further stated that division of labor that complies with “ritual propriety and justice” can effectively integrate society. Thus, “division” begets harmony, harmony begets unity, unity begets strength, strength begets power, and power begets the ability to transform nature.<sup>1</sup>

While division was stressed in the Western civilization, in the Greek civilization, the concept of “unification (centralization of authority)” did occur at various points. Aristotle, for instance, put forward the concept of “absolute kingship” in his *Politics*. He

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<sup>1</sup> See *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated and with an introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 76: “Why are humans able to form communities? I say it is because of social divisions. How can social divisions be put into practice? I say it is because of *yi*. And so if they use *yi* in order to make social divisions, then they will be harmonized. If they are harmonized, then they will be unified. If they are unified, then they will have more force.”

pointed out, “This is the absolute type, where a single person is sovereign on every issue, with the same sort of power that a tribe or a city exercises over its public concerns. It is a type which corresponds to paternal rule over a household.”<sup>1</sup> In his opinion, “A whole is never intended by nature to be inferior to a part; and a man so greatly superior to others stands to them in the relation of a whole to its parts. The only course which remains is that he should receive obedience, and should have sovereign power without any limit of tenure, not turn by turn with others.”<sup>2</sup>

Who was the prototype representing such “absolute kingship”? The Australian scholar A. B. Bosworth held that Aristotle’s ideal of the true king was of course the concept underlying the flattery at Alexander’s court.<sup>3</sup> As the first thinker who defined and justified city-

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Ernest Barker, revised with an Introduction and Notes by R. F. Stalley, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> See A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 105-110.

state politics, that Aristotle should have conceived the system of absolute kingship indicates some conflict lurking in the Greek ideological world. Zeller said, “We can imagine that he [Aristotle] used his ideal of the true king (if he had sketched it at so early a period as his residence in Macedonia) as a means of directing to beneficial ends a power which would endure no opposition and no limitation, and of saying to a prince whose egotism would admit no title by the side of his own that absolute monarchy can only be merited by an equally absolute moral greatness.”<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is familiar to the Chinese, since it is similar with Xunzi’s motivation to persuade the State of Qin to accept Confucianism and similar to the whole of Confucianism, Daoism and the rest of Chinese thought as the “Way of the [True] Monarch.”

But most Western mainstream academics safeguard Aristotle’s faith in the republic system. They hold that

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<sup>1</sup> *Aristotle and the Earlier Peripatetics: Being a Translation from Zeller’s Philosophy of the Greeks*, Vol. II, by B. F. C. Costelloe, M. A. and J. H. Muirhead, M. A. London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897, pp. 255-256.

“absolute kingship” was not a concept underlying the flattery at Alexander’s court, but that it referred to the despotic regime (*oikonomia*) of Persian Kingship,<sup>1</sup> or that the ideal monarch was only a theoretical construct,<sup>2</sup> not ready to be put into political practice, because a greatly superior man would be damnably hard to find in reality but would only exist in theory.<sup>3</sup> “Aristotle’s preference is for the monarchy of a ‘god among men,’ since transcendent virtue is more likely to be found in one man than in any larger number. But this he recognises to be an ideal almost impossible to realise.”<sup>4</sup> However, “the polis is a human institution, developed by imperfect individuals to serve their need for a

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<sup>1</sup> See Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, with an introduction, two prefatory essays and notes critical and explanatory by W. L. Newman, M. A. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1902, p. 243, and pp. 255-256: “This is as much as to say that they are Absolute Kings. The Persian King was a law to the Persians” (p. 243); “It is the expediency of the Absolute Kingship, however, that he really wishes to discuss. In his account of this form Aristotle probably has the Persian Kingship before him” (pp. 255-256).

<sup>2</sup> See A. B. Bosworth, *Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Sir David Ross, *Aristotle*, with an introduction by John L. Ackrill, Sixth edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 268.

good form of communal life.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Aristotle’s fundamental pursuit remained republican politics (*politeia*, a so-called Polity, a constitutional government composed of mixed elements) and his ideal political form was a combination of aristocracy and democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 246.

## 5

In 325 BCE, Alexander led a huge army that conquered Egypt, Persia and India all the way to the Beas River in present-day Punjab Pradesh, India. On the other bank of the river lay the rest of India and even the China of his dreams. He fervently inspired his generals and soldiers to march on, but the horsemen who had fought with him for years and had been rewarded with loads of spoils of war on horseback and camelback did not want to move a step further east. Alexander could do nothing but cry at the riverside in the setting sun and return home. He died of illness two

years later.

In the same year as Alexander headed back home, King Huiwen of Qin was done digesting the achievements of Shang Yang's 30-year reform and had set his mind on unifying China, and King Wuling of Zhao took the throne and began training horse archers wearing the attire of ethnic nomads, thus creating the strongest integrated legion of cavalry and infantry in East Asia.

Around the same time, Mencius traveled to the states of Zou, Teng and Wei, where he inherited the teachings of Confucius and systematically advanced the idea of "benevolent governance"; Zhuangzi traveled to the states of Song, Chu and Wei where he inherited the teachings of Laozi and proposed the idea of "the Way of Heaven"; and the State of Qi began to build Jixia Academy to incorporate the thoughts of Confucians, Daoists, Logicians, Legalists, Military Strategists, Agriculturalists, and Yin-Yang scholars that were to mold the ethos of the Chinese civilization.

In the same epoch, the two ancient civilizations of

China and Greece each nurtured their core values in terms of military strategy, social system, and ideology. History did not bring the two together at that juncture despite the possibilities.

Nonetheless, there are still some traces of later cultural and commercial exchanges.

In the 20th century, archaeologists dug up a strange kind of copper coin in Hotan of Xinjiang. The round coins were stamped with imperforated designs in typical Greek shape, but their face value and weight were marked according to the Qin and Han standards (copper coins weighing 24 *zhu* or 6 *zhu*). On the face of the coins were Chinese seal scripts and on the back, Kharosthi scripts. Kharosthi was the official language of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom founded by Alexander in present-day Afghanistan. With the Yuezhi Kingdom which migrated west as an intermediary, the Bactrian Kingdom established cultural and commercial exchanges with the Han court, thus laying a foundation for the Silk Road that would connect the East and the West. This could be

seen as a solace to Alexander's dream of marching to the "boundary of the world" as mentioned above.

After Alexander's death, his empire disintegrated into three successor kingdoms that battled with and split apart from one another. The reason was not that Alexander died young, but that prior to his death, he had failed to strengthen their internal political integration or construct grassroots institutions within the expanded empire, apart from promoting marriage alliances with other European and Asian states.

Macedonia expanded itself by creating autonomous Hellenistic cities in all areas it had occupied. To each new Asian city that he had conquered, Alexander would appoint a close friend of his as governor to take charge of military affairs and taxation. The city's civil affairs were administered by an "autonomous council" composed of Greek immigrants. To obtain revenue in advance and cut administrative costs, these governors from Macedonia even transferred their rights to collect taxes to merchants by auction.

The way grassroots institutions were established

in the Warring States Period was utterly different. Unearthed Qin bamboo slips show that the State of Qin would establish township- to county-level grassroots organizations in every newly conquered territory. Township and county officials were responsible for collecting taxes, organizing land reclamation, conducting household surveys, recording property, and submitting collected information to the capital Xianyang for record. Qin officials did not serve in one place for long, but they were transferred here and there every few years. It was a well-integrated and well-coordinated *junxian* system.

The governors from Macedonia, who bypassed civil administration and focused on tax and fee collection, and would suppress dissent or acts of disobedience by force, could maximize wealth at minimum administrative cost, but at the same time they gave up conducting long-term and comprehensive community planning locally. This mode was merely feasible when the central government had overwhelming authority, but once its power was weakened, the colonized cities

would break away from its control. That was why Alexander's Empire was doomed to fall.

Similar to the Empire of Alexander the Great, the Qin Dynasty only survived for 14 years before it collapsed. But the broken pieces soon reunified into a new empire called the Han Dynasty, which lasted for 400 years. The Han Dynasty's reunification was not like Rome's conquering of Greece. Rome had long been a strong power outside the Greek world, while Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, was only a civilian and a county official at the lowest level in the Qin Dynasty. The Han's reunification totally relied on internal resources. The Han Dynasty basically adopted the political system of Qin but modified it to a more accommodating way. Thereafter, the Qin-Han system was inherited by subsequent unified dynasties for more than 2,000 years.

We cannot blame Alexander for the fall of his empire, because even his mentor Aristotle had never created a theory fit for any large political entity. His concept of absolute kingship was deduced from the

perspective of a city-state only. While in those days large political entities such as Egypt and Persia were available for research, Aristotle took it for granted that they were “apolitical” and backward and only politics of the Greek city-states could be called politics.<sup>1</sup> Because only in small city-states were citizens able to know each other and to get acquainted with the ruler. In *Republic*, Plato ordained that his ideal city should have 5,000 citizens.<sup>2</sup> In Aristotle’s *Politics*, “[A] polis of a hundred thousand would be absurd, because it could not govern itself properly.”<sup>3</sup> It was the deeply-rooted city-state consciousness of the Greeks that made the establishment of a large political community

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<sup>1</sup> “Most people think that the happiness of a city depends on its being great. They may be right; but even if they are, they do not know what it is that makes a city great or small. They judge greatness in numerical terms, by the size of the population; but it is capacity, rather than size, which should properly be the criterion. Cities, like other things, have a function to perform; and the city which shows the highest capacity for performing the function of a city is therefore the one which should be counted greatest.” See Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Ernest Barker, revised with an Introduction and Notes by R. F. Stalley, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

very difficult. This problem was solved by the Roman Empire, which was much larger and lasted longer than a Greek empire of any political form. The Roman Empire and the Qin and Han later became the two large political bodies in Eurasia.

Later generations argued that while unified Greece as a political entity had perished, Greece as a cultural ethos dwelt eternally in the body of Rome and became the mother of the European spirit. The eternal life of the culture more than compensated for the demise of the state.

Let us listen to what the Greeks back then had to say. During the demise of the Greek city-states, a great many senior Greek scholars were sent as hostages to Rome to serve as family teachers in noble Roman families. Among them was Polybius the famous historian. In his masterpiece, *The Histories*, Polybius asked why Greece was collapsing but Rome was becoming stronger. He was probably not content with only having a spiritual Greece, but a Greece that could exist both physically and spiritually.

## *Conclusion*

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*1*

Isocrates was neglected and undervalued after his death. For a long time in history, his suicide was interpreted as a divine punishment for his collaboration with Philip in trapping Greece. On top of his funerary column stood the statue of a Siren that lured people to their doom with singing. He was not rehabilitated until modern times when people started reevaluating Macedonia's credit in spreading Greek culture.

After Alexander's death (323 BCE), Aristotle's enemies in Athens lost no time in cobbling together an indictment against him. He was of course suspected

of treason, because of his ties to Alexander and Antipater.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's honorific inscription at Delphi was torn down and thrown into a well. (In the 20th century, archaeologists found fragments of a tablet honoring Aristotle at the bottom of a well in Delphi.)

After Aristotle's death in 322 BCE, "his disciple Theophrastus became scholarch of the Lyceum, and for several years the Peripatetics maintained their presence in Athens. But in the generation after the death of Theophrastus in 287 BCE, the Peripatetics were overshadowed by the schools of Epicurus, Zeno, and Pyrrho, as well as the Academy of Plato and the shameless antics of the Cynics. Copies of Aristotle's published works (with a few exceptions) became hard to come by. His private papers remained unpublished."<sup>2</sup>

"Only with the publication of the corpus established by Andronicus (40 BCE) did Aristotle's reputation begin to revive, and even then the revaluation occurred

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<sup>1</sup> James Miller, *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

slowly and took many centuries.”<sup>1</sup>

In the third century, Diogenes Laertius, a scholar from the Epicurean School, recorded Aristotle’s life and opinions in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. From the standpoint of the Epicurean school, the book contained some attacks against Aristotle, because Epicurus regarded a life lived in tranquility, undisturbed by superfluous luxuries and idle curiosity as the true goal of philosophy. As a result, Epicurus charged that Aristotle posed a greater danger to philosophy. From the sixth century, however, Aristotle’s thought was gradually forgotten by European scholars until the 11th century. It was not until the Middle Ages, when theologians started using his thought to prove the existence of God that he regained the sublime status that he deserved. His masterpieces were preserved in the Great Library of Alexandria in Egypt and first translated into Syrian by scholars from Byzantium and Syria, and later translated by the Arabs before being brought back to Europe by the Crusades to kindle the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

## Renaissance.

Having already discussed what happened to Xunzi after his death above, I will just add a few further comments on his modern fate here. Tan Sitong (1865-1898) attacked Xunzi in his *Learning of Benevolence (Ren Xue)* written between 1896 and 1897. In the book, he argued that Chinese rulers throughout history had practiced the doctrines of Xunzi, regardless of what thought they ostensibly adopted. (“Politics over the last 2,000 years has been the politics of Qin and thus autocrats, and learning over the last 2,000 years has been the learning of Xunzi and other hypocrites. Autocrats have utilized hypocrites, and hypocrites have flattered autocrats.”<sup>1</sup>)

Liang Qichao (1873-1929) was even more scathing in his attack on Xunzi, calling him the chief villain who mixed Legalism with Confucianism and kept autocracy alive for 2,000 years. However, 30 years later in 1927,

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ren Xue: The Collected Works of Tan Sitong* (仁学——谭嗣同集), from the series of “Collected Texts from Chinese Enlightenment Thought” (中国启蒙思想文库) with Zhang Dainian as the chief editor, Shenyang: Liaoning People’s Publishing House, 1994, p. 70.

Liang, constantly fighting “today’s me with yesterday’s me,” rehabilitated Xunzi, shortly before his death in 1929.

Xunzi’s top “sin” was his “idea of evil human nature,” which was once regarded as depreciating human goodness as hypocritical (其善者伪). However, Liang Qichao went to great lengths to find another interpretation of the word “伪 (*wei*)” (hypocrisy or hypocritical): The ancient Chinese character “伪 (*wei*)” in the Warring States Period did not mean “hypocrisy,” but rather “deliberate effort,” and therefore “其善者伪” means “their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort.”<sup>1</sup> Xunzi believed that human nature was evil but changeable; he did not mean that evil human nature makes despotism necessary. His doctrines can thus be unified with those of Confucius and Mencius, since he wanted to employ law and punishment to deal with human evil, and ethics and morality to cultivate human goodness.

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<sup>1</sup> *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, translated by and with an Introduction by Eric L. Hutton, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 248.

In the last 30 or so years of his life, Liang Qichao had seen the Monroe Doctrine at work, witnessed World War I and the failure of seeking help from the League of Nations to protect China's rights, advocated constitutionalism, organized the Hundred Days Reform, established the Constitutionalist Party, joined the Second Revolution against Yuan Shikai and eventually resumed his career as a scholar. By then he had gained a better understanding of China and himself, and he reinterpreted the word “*wei*” used by Xunzi based on research.

Liang Qichao was not the only one who reevaluated Xunzi in modern history. Zhang Taiyan saw Xunzi as a sage second only to Confucius;<sup>1</sup> Hu Shi believed Xunzi was related to all other schools of thought in his time; Guo Moruo asserted that Xunzi was the great synthesizer of diverse schools; Feng Youlan held that Xunzi's place in Chinese history is equivalent to that of Aristotle in the history

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Political Writings of Zhang Taiyan* (章太炎政论选集), edited by Tang Zhijun, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1977, p. 38.

of the Western world;<sup>1</sup> and last but not least, Mao Zedong, calling Xunzi a materialist and a “leftist” among Confucians, admired Xunzi’s philosophy of “controlling Heaven’s Mandate and using it” and his historical perspective of “modeling ourselves after the later kings.”<sup>2</sup>

The destinies of the thinkers mentioned in this chapter show that every civilization and every spiritual pursuit involves big contradictions. In social progression, there is no theory that could explain everything, nor any absolute principle that could apply universally.

Every thinker committed to changing the real world rather than constructing a utopia will eventually face an irreconcilable moment of conflict and pain and out of that conflict and pain may come a mutually complementary path toward the future. Therefore, thinkers must be bold enough to create possibilities out of the impossible and not bow to absoluteness.

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<sup>1</sup> Feng Youlan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (中国哲学史), Vol. I, Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2000, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> Chen Jin, *A History of Mao Zedong’s Readings* (毛泽东阅读史), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2014.

## 2

The greatest contradiction we are faced with today is still whether we should have “freedom first” or “order first.”

The Greeks’ love for freedom has caused the word “Greek” as a racial term to become a synonym for “wisdom.” To call someone “Greek” is to say he or she is wise, regardless of where he or she comes from. The Chinese people’s love for order has sustained the Chinese civilization as the only civilization with the same origin and written language that still exists in the form of a state today.

Very often, the strengths of a civilization are also its weaknesses. In terms of science and technology, for example, modern science did not develop in the Chinese civilization. So far as a system is concerned, the pursuit of order, when taken to an extreme, will prevent the development of efficiency-driven values and cause a loss of drive for technological innovation. In terms of value systems, extreme pragmatism and empiricism tended to suppress logical reasoning about the objective world and cause the separation of theory from scientific experimentation and technology, thus hindering the emergence of modern science in China.

While the scientific and technological achievements of the Greek civilization were inspired by knowledge of mathematics, astronomy and engineering accumulated by the ancient civilizations of Asia and Africa, it was the Greek civilization rather than the ancient civilizations of Asia and Africa that put the achievements of these civilizations together, digested them and transformed them into something that would become the bedrock of future European science. This is a strength of the

Greek civilization that the Chinese civilization should learn from.

All unified civilizations, including China, call for a primary value foundation of stability. But which is more worth pursuing, the civilizational continuity (sometimes with rigid stability), or the innovation (sometimes with chaotic freedom)?

This question necessarily encompasses endless debates in diverse areas, including philosophy, politics and ethics, which boil down to a conflict of values between different civilizations that can never come to a unanimous conclusion.

Even within the Greek and the Roman civilizations, there may be different answers to the same kind of questions. For example, many scholars of ancient history argue that Rome had far less wisdom to offer than Greece. Almost all the classical schools of philosophy and disciplines of science originated from Greece, while Rome produced nothing more than a few poets and craftsmen. Nevertheless, without Rome's political structure, there would have been no worldwide

spread of Greek culture and Christianity. For another example, some political scientists claim that only direct democracy practiced in Athens, in which the right to govern is determined by the ballot, is true democracy. In fact, without the mixed government in Rome, the spirit of Athens would have been forever confined to a small city-state of just tens of thousands of people and would not have developed into a cosmopolitan civilization.

A different answer may lead to a different path.

To preserve these differences is to leave room for civilizations' development. The co-existence of plurality and contradiction will leave more seeds in the gene pool of human civilization.

Therefore, discrepancies concerning the priority sequence of freedom and order should constitute the foundation upon which Chinese and Western civilizations learn from each other rather than an obstacle blocking interaction between the two. On the eve of the explosive innovation that comes with technological development, we grow increasingly

cognizant of the importance of the creativity wrought by freedom. On the other hand, frequent outbreaks of unconventional security crises give us a renewed understanding of the value of order. As far as freedom is concerned, we need to explore ways to maintain order and prevent disintegration. As for order, we need to probe ways to grant greater freedom and inspire innovation. The key is not which of the two to choose, but at which points to make more effort to preserve freedom and order respectively.

In the past, it would take hundreds of years and several generations to test an idea. Today, however, thanks to the technological revolution, ideas can be tested and verified within several years. A sustainable civilization is one that can examine itself, tolerate and accommodate others, coexist in harmony with others, and learn from others. For this reason, China and the West should sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk.

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Part II

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**The Qin and Han Dynasties  
and Ancient Rome  
Introduction**

## *Introduction*

In recent years, the significance of ancient China in comparative politics is being reassessed. For example, Francis Fukuyama wrote in *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, “[M]any of the elements of what we now understand to be a modern state were already in place in China in the third century B.C., some eighteen hundred years before they emerged in Europe.... China alone created a modern state in the terms defined by Max Weber. That is, China succeeded in developing a centralized, uniform system of bureaucratic administration that was capable of governing a huge population and territory.... China had already invented a system of impersonal, merit-based bureaucratic recruitment that was far more

systematic than Roman public administration.”<sup>1</sup> The centralized merit-based bureaucratic mega-state created in the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE-220 CE) dynasties shaped the ensuing Chinese dynasties for nearly 2,000 years, and served as the social and cultural foundation underpinning modern China’s super-strong state capacity. As Fukuyama said, “China was the first world civilization to create a modern state.... Compared to other world civilizations, the Chinese ability to concentrate political power was remarkable.... The default Chinese political condition over the past two millennia was to be a centralized bureaucratic state punctuated by periods of disunity and decay[.]”<sup>2</sup>

The rise of ancient Rome occurred parallel to the emergence of the Qin and Han dynasties. It is no exaggeration to say that the lasting impact of Rome on the European (and more broadly, Western) civilization was similar to that of the Qin and Han models on

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, pp. 19-21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

China. Throughout the Western history, from Charles the Great (ca. 742-814) to Napoleon (1769-1821), from the Holy Roman Empire to the Pax Americana, it was ancient Rome that had been an inspiration to them in establishing a large-scale political entity.

Ancient Greece shaped the spiritual gene of the Western civilization; ancient Rome crafted the political gene. Transcending the Greek city-state political framework, ancient Rome established a legal and administrative system, and a private law system, and formed the early Western civil society. Either as a republic or as an empire, it became the wellspring of political ideas, systems and laws that influenced the Western political entities for millennia to come. James Harrington's *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) published during the English Bourgeois Revolution bears the imprint of the Roman Republic; the French revolutionary figures like Robespierre (1758-1794) patterned themselves after the heroes of the Roman Republic; the US senate and presidential system bears the imprint of the Roman Senate and consul

system. Well into the 20th century, conservative scholars in the United States still debated over which founding principles the country should follow – those of the ancient Roman Republic, or those embodying democratic natural rights advocated by the Enlightenment Movement. The phantom of Rome has never vanished in the Western political civilization.

Although the Qin and Han dynasties and ancient Rome were greatly different, there were, nevertheless, as many similarities as differences between the two civilizations. Chinese readers will excitedly realize that when reading books on Roman history.

The two ancient civilizations, dominating Eurasia's east and west around the same period, had similar-sized territory and population. In the late Roman Empire, the Mediterranean area had a population of 50 to 60 million,<sup>1</sup> equivalent to the Chinese population by the end of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE-8 CE)

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<sup>1</sup> See A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1964.

recorded by the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (汉书).<sup>1</sup>

There has been a prevalent view in China regarding the country as primarily an agricultural civilization, contrasted with the more commercialized Greco-Roman civilization. It is inferred then that the divergent development paths of the two civilizations were determined by their different origins. This, however, is a disputable conclusion. According to the academic and classical scholar Moses I. Finley, both ancient Greece and ancient Rome were primarily agricultural societies, in which commerce supplemented but did not supplant farming. As Ian Morris pointed out in his “Foreword” to Finley’s *The Ancient Economy*: “This was a world in which family came first and nearly everyone aimed for economic self-sufficiency. Trade generally took place on a small scale and was conducted over short distances. Most fortunes were made from rents and control of the machinery of taxation. Only rarely did traders or industrialists make good, and when they did,

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<sup>1</sup> *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, annotated by Yan Shigu, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1999, p. 1309.

they were eager to invest their gains in land.... [E]ven in the high Roman empire, the truly urban population was never more than one-twentieth of the rural. It would be a mistake to call Graeco-Roman civilization urban, although its ruling classes certainly were. They showed little interest in the countryside so long as they could get enough food from it, and there was rarely (if ever) anything we could call state economic policy.”<sup>1</sup> The Greco-Roman civilization depicted by Morris bore considerable resemblance to the social framework and economic conditions of the Qin and Han dynasties.

While ancient Greece was renowned as the cradle of philosophers, ancient Rome was home to peasants and soldiers. When Roman soldiers swept the Mediterranean area, their wish was to own a piece of land after being decommissioned, so that they could plant olives and grapes, just as the Qin and Han soldiers hoped to “take the armor off and return to their fields” after their demobilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Morris, “Foreword” to M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. xxi.

Roman citizens despised commerce, regarding trade and financial activities as the domains of the subjugated populations. In the golden era of the Roman Republic, merchants were ineligible for any seat in the Senate. All the patricians' accumulated wealth was spent on land purchases to expand their manors. Agriculture was not for making a living, but for enjoying aesthetic pastoral pursuits. Similarly, in the Qin and Han dynasties, agriculture was considered as the "primary" occupation, whereas commerce was "secondary." Only very seldom could a merchant become an official. As for the literati who occupied official positions, their ideal was still to maintain the life of "tilling and reading."

The Romans did not excel in refined religion or science. Their strengths lay in engineering, war waging and state governance. Whereas the Greeks left behind temples, sport arenas and theaters, the most famous Roman remains include the Triumphal Arch, the Colosseum, aqueducts, and various public baths. Similarly, the Qin and Han dynasties also focused more on handling practical affairs, maintaining state governance, and

building infrastructure (including roads, courtier stations and the Great Wall). They did not excel at logic or science.

As super-large political entities based on agriculture with similar social framework and economic foundation, both China during the Qin and Han dynasties and ancient Rome (as a republic or an empire) needed to address a similar set of challenges, such as the problem of land engrossment and the resultant destruction of small-scale peasant economy, and relationships between the central authority and the localities, between political power holders and regional warlords, between the commoners and the elites, and between native cultural traditions and new universal religions coming from elsewhere.

Yet similar challenges notwithstanding, the two empires evolved in very different directions. The collapse of the Western Roman Empire in 476 marked the end of the Roman Empire in Western Europe in its real sense. The follow-up polities that inherited the name of the Roman Empire (that is

the Carolingian Empire of Charles the Great, and later the Holy Roman Empire) borrowed some of the Roman imperial symbols and expressions, but they were fundamentally different political entities with only superficial resemblance to the original Rome. The Roman idea of “great unity” (i.e., great unity transcending ethnic differences) had largely shifted from a political unity (the Roman Empire as a centralized political power) to a Christian unity (Christendom as a religious unity). In China, in contrast, following the prolonged period of fragmentation after the collapse of the Han empire in 220, renewed unification in the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties was clearly based on the Qin and Han models, which were, actually, not abandoned even when the post-Han political disintegration reached its nadir.

In this book, I will try to find out the reasons for the “great divergence” between the two great civilizations in the east and west of the Eurasian continent. In other words, I will try to answer the question: Why did the two imperial systems, sharing many similar functioning

modes and facing similar challenges, take so starkly contrasting paths with dramatically different outcomes?



*Chapter I*

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THE  
TWO CIVILIZATIONS

*1*

In 2002, in the town of Liye, located in the northwestern part of Hunan Province, near the Wuling Mountain Range, archeologists discovered the remnants of an ancient town of the Qin Dynasty. They found in a disused well over 30,000 bamboo slips and wooden tablets, more than 17,000 of which were inscribed. Most of these slips and tablets contained administrative and legal documents. The significance of Liye documents for understanding the functioning mode of China's first imperial dynasty, the Qin, is second only to the famous Terracotta Warriors and Horses discovered

in 1974. Most notably, these documents provide us with a rare glimpse of the grassroots administration during the Qin Dynasty.

The Old Town of Liye was the county seat of Qianling, a county established by the State of Qin in 222 BCE, after its conquest of the State of Chu. Liye was a small town, no bigger than a college sports ground nowadays. Despite its smallness, Qianling County, with just 3,000 to 4,000 residents, had a well-established governance system. The county was divided into three townships (*xiang*, 乡), which in turn ruled rural hamlets and urban wards. It was supposed to be run by 103 officials on the payroll (even though the actual number of officials was smaller).<sup>1</sup> The tasks of these officials included among other matters

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<sup>1</sup> See Hunan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology *et al*, “The Relics of the Warring States in Liye: A Brief Report on the Excavations of the No. 1 Qin Well” (湖南龙山里耶战国——秦代古代一号井发掘简报), *Cultural Relics*, Issue No. 1, 2003, pp. 4-35; Hunan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology *et al*, “Annotation of Selected Liye Qin Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets” (湘西里耶秦代简牍选释), *Journal of National Museum of Chinese History*, Issue No. 1, 2003, pp. 8-25; Hunan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, *Report on the Excavations of Liye* (里耶发掘报告), Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 2007, pp. 179-217.

mobilization of local residents to reclaim wasteland. Their efforts notwithstanding, due to the mountainous terrain, arable lands were scant. After considerable efforts, the average arable land per household reached 35 *mu*, which was just over one third of the normative plot of 100 *mu* per household. The tax rate in Qianling was around 8.6 percent, which was less than a tenth determined by the Zhou regulations.<sup>1</sup> The county's annual tax increment was equivalent to the yearly grain ration of just 6.5 households. Economically speaking, therefore, the number of officials was incompatible with the local land output.

The Qin officials, however, were not just concerned with grain taxes. One of the Liye tablets (No. 8-455) bears data on a local plant discovered in the depth of the mountains – the raisin tree. The Qin officials

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<sup>1</sup> One *mu* at that time equaled 461 m<sup>2</sup>. For tax rates in Qianling, see *Annotation of Liye Qin Bamboo Slips and Wooden Tablets* (里耶秦简牍校释), Vol. 1, edited by Chen Wei, Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2012, pp. 345-347. Actually, Qin had a flexible taxation system (unlike all the other dynasties from the Han on, they were adjusting tax rates annually on the basis of actual yields). In Qianling, the rates differed from one township to another.

meticulously recorded the tree's appearance (it was approximately four meters tall), location (three kilometers outside the township), and yield (which was disappointing: in 213 BCE, there were no fruits at all). This information was kept in the county's archive. This tablet manifests the officials' sense of mission. They spared no efforts in exploring the production of mountains and rivers. Step by step, the Qin officials expanded arable land, conducted household surveys, and compiled maps that were submitted to the superior administrative unit, the prefecture (*jun*, 郡). The prefectures compiled cumulative maps on the basis of those from subordinate counties and transmitted them to the imperial court, where the maps were archived for the officials' use.

Apart from promoting local production, the Qin officials had to deal with a variety of civil and judicial affairs. Qin created an extraordinarily sophisticated legal framework with statutes and ordinances covering a huge variety of judicial and administrative matters. It also established a system of legal precedents

and appeals to higher-level authorities. Meticulous regulations were imposed on local officials, covering even such items as the time they were allowed to spend *en route* from one locality to another, and requiring written report on even the tiniest financial or commodity transaction. Any administrative document had to be copied and sent for monitoring and verification to the superior administrative unit. Officials found to have imposed an excessive sentence for a light crime or a light sentence for a serious crime were all held accountable. If legal articles applicable in a certain case were contradictory, the case would be reported to the higher authorities for arbitration. This meticulous system of grassroots governance imposed more than two millennia ago was exceptional in the ancient world.

The Qin officials had fixed terms of occupying one's office. Many of them had to move from one prefecture to another – sometimes as promotion, and sometimes as demotion or administrative punishment. After the imperial unification, Qin experienced a shortage of administrative personnel in the newly occupied

territories. A few *Liye* documents report the deaths of many minor officials at their posts due to overwork or illness.<sup>1</sup> Of Qianling County's 103 official positions, 49 remained vacant.

The Qin authorities enforced hard work not only on their subjects in general, but also on their own administrative apparatus. This pressure contributed to Qin's rapid demise, just 14 years after the imperial unification. And yet, its brevity notwithstanding, Qin succeeded in attaining remarkable achievements, such as the unification of weights and measures, script and laws, currency, and even the axle length of the vehicles. Qin's exploitation of natural resources, establishment of the empire-wide transportation system, and the like – all benefitted future generations. But the immediate costs were huge. The people were demanded to sacrifice too much, and their bitterness overshadowed the ultimate benefits of unification. Evaluation of the past is never based on calm calculations of costs and benefits only;

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<sup>1</sup> See *Liye Qin Bamboo Slips*, Slip No. 8-809; Slip No. 8-1610; Slip Nos. 8-938 and 8-1144.

one's sentiments matter as well. Therefore, when the Qin Dynasty fell, nobody under Heaven regretted this.

After the rebellion toppled the Qin Dynasty in 206 BCE, the rebels' most powerful leader, Xiang Yu (d. 202 BCE), sought to restore the enfeoffment system. He had no wish to govern a vast centralized empire, preferring instead to go back to the familiar decentralized system of the Zhou in which he would rule as *primus inter pares*. In contrast, his rival, Liu Bang (d. 195 BCE), the eventual founder of the Han Dynasty, opposed renewing enfeoffment and preferred the centralized Qin system instead (even though eventually he had to compromise and adopt a mixed system with centralized rule over the western half of his realm and renewed enfeoffment in the east).

The main difference between Liu Bang and Xiang Yu was their social origins. Xiang Yu was from a Chu family of military noblemen, whereas Liu Bang was just a constable, i.e., coming from the bottom of Qin officialdom. Most members of Liu Bang's core group were also minor officials from his native

Peixian County: The would-be chancellor Xiao He (d. 193 BCE) was a bureau chief in local administration; his replacer as a chancellor, Cao Can (d. 190 BCE), started his career as a prison warden. They were most cognizant of how to combine grassroots governance with upper-level administration, best familiar with the *junxian* system (a system of prefectures and counties under centralized administration), and grasped best the commoners' needs. These men had the deepest insight into the secret of maintaining unified rule. This explains why, upon Liu Bang's troops' occupation of the Qin capital, Xianyang, Xiao He sought neither gold nor treasures, but rather went immediately to seize the Qin archives, from which he rescued legal codes, maps, and population registries. It was on the basis of these documents that the Han Dynasty managed to rebuild the *junxian* system.

Grassroots administration was the foundation of the efficient rule in All-under-Heaven. This explains how the Qin and Han dynasties succeeded in establishing "the earliest modern state" in the world.

## 2

In 206 BCE, just when China was amid the war between Xiang Yu and Liu Bang, Rome was engaged in the Second Punic War against Carthage's famous leader, Hannibal. After another 50 years, Rome finally captured and destroyed Carthage and dismembered Macedonia, becoming the hegemon of the Mediterranean world. Significantly, during the process of its hegemonic expansion, Rome preserved the republican political system.

Greek historian Polybius (ca. 200-118 BCE) ascribed Rome's success to its "mixed political system"

that combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. The consuls represented the monarchic principle, the Senate – aristocracy, and the citizens’ assembly – democracy. The consuls held the military power to fight foreign states, the Senate held the financial power, and the citizens’ assembly held the veto power. Therewith, the three forces balanced each other.

The Romans – and later observers – believed that the conflict of interests was a necessary evil to ensure freedom and the state’s prowess.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the conflict ultimately contributed to domestic solidarity. Indeed, the early conflicts in Rome were relatively temperate and controllable. For example, in 494 BCE Roman plebeian soldiers bargained with the Senate for improvement of

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<sup>1</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) opined “I must say that it appears to me that those who condemn the disturbances between the nobles and the plebeians condemn those very things that were the primary cause of Roman liberty, and that they give more consideration to the noises and cries arising from such disturbances than to the good effects they produced; nor do they consider that in every republic there are two different tendencies, that of the people and that of the upper class, and that all of the laws which are passed in favour of liberty are born from the rift between the two, as can easily be seen from what happened in Rome.” See his *Discourses on Livy*, translated and edited by Julia C. Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 67.

their lot through a sort of “collective strike” (retreating from the city and refusing to return until their demands were satisfied). The Senate was ready to compromise and concede certain rights to the plebeians, the military value of which was very high. For almost 200 years, no matter what conflicts occurred among the consuls, the patricians, and the plebeians, they were unquestioningly united in the face of foreign rivals.

It was not until the first century BCE that compromise no longer functioned in ancient Rome and conflicts became irreconcilable. In the course of civil wars of 88-31 BCE,<sup>1</sup> first, Gaius Marius struggled for six years to withstand attacks from his opponents, notably fellow general Sulla; then Caesar successively defeated Crassus and Pompey in an internal strife lasting for 16 years;<sup>2</sup> and then, after the death of Caesar, a 13-year-long power struggle ensued among

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<sup>1</sup> Nic Fields, *The Roman Army: the Civil Wars 88-31 BC*, London: Osprey Publishing, 2008, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> See Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, Vol. 4, Part 1, translated by William Purdie Dickson, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 166.

Antony, Lepidus and Octavian.<sup>1</sup> In 27 BCE, Rome finally adopted the imperial political system, and Octavian, who assumed the title of Augustus, became a new type of leader. So why, after approximately 150 years during which Rome avoided domestic military conflicts, it descended into life-to-death struggles among rival armies?

It was because of lands.

A century and a half of overseas conquests had enabled the Roman patricians to bring many slaves and huge amounts of treasure back to their homeland, thus engendering large-scale estates run with the servitude of the slaves (*latifundia*). As *latifundia* thrived on the basis of superior technology and greater efficiency, a great many tiny landholders were losing in the competition, causing them to sell their land to the rich and powerful, exacerbating therewith the problem of land engrossment. Reduced to poverty, many ordinary Romans even went down to the position of vagabonds.

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<sup>1</sup> Nic Fields, *The Roman Army: the Civil Wars 88-31 BC*, London: Osprey Publishing, 2008, p. 53.

For these underclass paupers, joining the army was the best way out of poverty. They were ready to fight for any contender for power who would promise them highest material benefits. Thus, those who once were citizens fighting for the sake of their state became mercenaries fighting for the sake of rival generals.

Rome's political system was unable to regulate the problem of land engrossment. There had once been a legal code stipulating fair distribution of conquered land between the patricians and the plebeians, and setting a ceiling on land owned by the patricians. As Machiavelli observed, however, this law had never been enforced.<sup>1</sup> Anyone, even a patrician, who tried to bring the code into effect, would be killed, as the fate of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, translated and edited by Julia C. Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 156. "This law had two principal provisions. The one provided that no citizen could possess more than so many *jugers* of land; the other provided that lands taken from the enemy were to be divided among the Roman people. It harmed the nobility, however, in two respects: those who possessed more land than the law allowed (and the greatest number of these were nobles) had to be deprived of this surplus, and dividing lands taken from the enemy among the plebeians deprived the nobles of the means of enriching themselves. Thus, as these laws came to offend powerful men who considered opposing them to be defending the public interest."

Gracchus brothers proved.<sup>1</sup>

Among the three forces – the monarchy (the consuls), the patricians (the Senate) and the plebeians (the citizens' assembly), the patricians were the most powerful. Moses Finley observed: “[B]etween 232 and 133 B.C. the 200 consuls came from 58 aristocratic lineages (*gentes*), and of these, 159 came from 26 lineages, 99 from only ten lineages.”<sup>2</sup> Such hereditary noble families who were able to make their members into “kings” were called in China *menfa* (门阀, powerful lineages or dominant families). Rome's electoral system did not restrict the power of the patricians but actually reinforced it. This was because electoral victory demanded many votes, and only Roman *menfa* had many clients and also had enough wealth to bribe other voters. This allowed the patricians to select their representatives as consuls.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge Ancient History Volume IX: The Last Age of the Roman Republic 146-43 BC*, edited by J. A. Crook, Andrew W. Lintott, and Elizabeth Rawson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 65.

Machiavelli once said that the Roman patricians were willing to make concessions to the plebeians in matters of honor, but never of property.<sup>1</sup> Redistribution of land was something that the fearless Romans feared most. Rather than to risk land redistribution and inevitable new round of civil wars, most of the Romans preferred colonization of the newly occupied lands. Finley explained that the Romans preferred “colonization when that was possible rather than redistribution of land. [Colonization] was perhaps the best safety-valve against civil war and the key to political ‘quiescence’ and stability.”<sup>2</sup> This was yet another reason why the landless Romans supported the military leaders. Only successful generals could conquer

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<sup>1</sup> See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, translated and edited by Julia C. Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 157-158. “It is also clear from this that men value their property more than honours, for the Roman nobility always gave way to the plebeians without extraordinary strife in matters concerning honours, but when it came to property, their stubbornness in defending it was so great that in order to satisfy their own desires, the plebeians had recourse to those extraordinary methods that have been discussed above.”

<sup>2</sup> M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 110.

more lands and only they could compel the Senate to allocate land to the soldiers.

Thus, when the politicians were unable to reach a consensus, the generals came to the fore.

## 3

The period that spanned the struggles within the First Triumvirate (an alliance among Crassus, Pompey and Caesar) to the emergence of the Second Triumvirate (an alliance among Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus) was the age of the eloquent orator and brilliant philosopher Cicero (106-43 BCE). Cicero was the staunchest defender of the classical Republic. Not incidentally, he was adored by Voltaire and Montesquieu, among others.

Cicero was born into a well-to-do equestrian family, that is, he belonged to a lower stratum than

the patricians. The equestrian stratum was the one which profited from the loss of land by petty landholders. They became a wealthy stratum, but their political power fell much behind that of the patricians.

Cicero, however, was an exception. He was a gifted and eloquent orator who once studied under a Greek master named Apollonius. As Plutarch wrote: “Apollonius, we are told, not understanding Latin, requested Cicero to declaim in Greek. He complied willingly, thinking that his faults would thus be better pointed out to him. And after he finished, all his other hearers were astonished, and contended who should praise him most, but Apollonius, who had shown no signs of excitement whilst he was hearing him, so also now, when it was over, [sat] musing for some considerable time, without any remark. And when Cicero was discomposed at this, he said, ‘You have my praise and admiration, Cicero, and Greece my pity and commiseration, since those arts and that eloquence which are the only glories that remain to her, will now

be transferred by you to Rome.”<sup>1</sup>

By dint of his orating skills, Cicero became a successful lawyer and made wide connections over two decades. His successful career as a lawyer finally won his election to the consulship in 63 BCE.<sup>2</sup> For his political achievements he was honored as *pater patriae*, “the father of the state.” His career as a singularly influential political figure spanned the history from the First Triumvirate to the beginning of the Second Triumvirate. He caused deaths of some, defeat of others, and perennial commemoration in historical books of certain personalities. He even had played a major role in the death of Caesar.

Caesar’s assassin, Marcus Junius Brutus, was Caesar’s adopted son, but spiritually he could be considered

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<sup>1</sup> See Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough, New York: The Modern Library, 1992, p. 1043.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1047. “These things the greatest part of the good and honest citizens apprehending, put Cicero upon standing for the consulship; whom the people readily receiving, Catiline was put by, so that he and Caius Antonius were chosen, although amongst the competitors he was the only man descended from a father of the equestrian and not of the senatorial order.”

a son of Cicero. During the months preceding the assassination, Cicero was relentlessly instilling in Brutus the belief that assassination of a tyrant would be really heroic, and the closer you were to the tyrant in terms of descent, the noblest would be your deed (this resembles an old Chinese saying that “for the sake of righteousness, one exterminates his own kin”<sup>1</sup>). At the end, when Brutus drew his dagger to kill Caesar, the name he cried was that of Cicero. All the senators were present; only Cicero was not.

After Caesar’s death, Cicero invested all his efforts in suppressing Caesar’s heir, Mark Antony. Many historians believe that Cicero needlessly provoked the renewed civil war. According to this interpretation, Antony had no inclination to become a new dictator; rather he was satisfied with sharing power with the Senate. Antony not only rejected the petition by enraged troops demanding revenge for Caesar’s assassination, but also declared that he would not hold the assassins, the republican defenders, accountable.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Zuo’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (左传), Yin 4.5.

From the point of view of human morality, this clemency was a betrayal of Caesar, but from the perspective of state governance, it represented a military leader's voluntary submission to the republican order and stability. However, as the leader of those committed to the republican institutions, Cicero paid no attention to Antony's readiness to compromise. To the contrary, he allowed the republican supporters to recruit soldiers from eastern provinces and simultaneously tried to instigate rebellion by Caesar's great-nephew and adopted heir, Octavian.

Octavian, only 19 years old then, was no more than a marginal political figure. He inherited Caesar's property but not his political power. Intent on replacing Antony, he mustered an army of 3,000 loyal veterans with his personal assets and marched toward Rome, an act which constituted an open insurrection against Mark Antony's legitimate regime. So, Octavian's only hope was the support of Cicero, whose influence could sway the Senate into legitimizing his rebellious force. Cicero was happy to oblige. The illustrious orator then

turned on Antony in a series of speeches in the Senate called the *Philippics*, in which he denounced Antony as the person who instigated the civil war, and hailed Octavian as a guardian of the Republic.

Then, Octavian's small troops, together with the much larger army dispatched by the Senate, defeated Antony at the battle of Mutina (April 43 BCE). Yet Octavian's ambition could no longer be hidden. To their dismay, the senators realized that the army of several dozen thousand soldiers was more willing to follow Octavian than the Senate. Alarmed, the senators immediately relieved Octavian of military power. This was supposed to be the end of Octavian's career, forever preventing him from becoming Augustus.

Desperate, Octavian appealed to Cicero as his "father." His hope was that Cicero would consent to help him in becoming the new consul. He swore that upon being elected, Cicero would be the one calling the shots, whereas he, Octavian, would acquiesce to the position of Cicero's pawn. The 63-year-old Cicero considered the youngster Octavian as harmless and

acquiesced to his request. This was a huge help to Octavian, as he would normally have had to wait at least 20 years to reach the age of 40 required to be nominated for the consular position. The surging opposition notwithstanding, Cicero, with his unrivalled credentials and connections, persuaded the Senate and won Octavian many votes. He made a personal promise that “the little Caesar” (Octavian) would forever protect the original nature of *res publica*.<sup>1</sup> Yet what happened next is well known.

Octavian was elected consul in August 43 BCE. He soon reconciled with Antony and then they together allied with Lepidus, another leading Caesarian, to form the Second Triumvirate dividing the political power among themselves. Antony, who hated Cicero, demanded his life in return for the alliance. According to Plutarch, Cicero hurriedly fled off and frequently looked out of the sedan to observe whether there were any pursuing forces. However, he was intercepted

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<sup>1</sup> See Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough, New York: The Modern Library, 1992, p. 1067.

and slain by Antony's troops. His head was nailed on the Rostra in the Forum Romanum,<sup>1</sup> the same place from which he had once proclaimed, "[A]rms should give place to the gown, and the soldier's laurel to the tongue."<sup>2</sup>

This was the most tragic episode in the history of Rome. The curtain fell on the Republic which gave way to the imperial system. In 31 BCE, Octavian triumphed over Antony in the Battle of Actium. In 27 BCE, he assumed the title of Augustus, becoming the first emperor of Rome.

How could a veteran politician like Cicero lose ground to a young lad, Octavian? The Senate's Achilles' heel was its tradition of maneuvering for power rather than seeking solutions to practical problems. Through balancing measures, the senators hoped to forever maintain their dominant role. What they overlooked was that the Roman people and soldiers had been tired

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1069. "He [Antony] commanded his [Cicero's] head and hands to be fastened up over the rostra, where the orators spoke; a sight which the Roman people shuddered to behold, and they believed they saw there, not the face of Cicero, but the image of Antony's own soul."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1071.

of those orators' political chicanery, and preferred to place their hopes on military leaders.

Cicero could not solve the crucial problems of the Roman people, such as the gap between the rich and the poor; the soldiers' vain self-sacrifice that could not secure them adequate land allotment; the absence of supervision over the collusion between corrupt governors in outlying provinces and tax farmers; and the centuries-long absence of police force to take control of public security and civil administration in the city of Rome. The Senate had several centuries to solve these problems, but had never thought of tackling them. Among Cicero's extant works, we encounter discussions of the great principles of the republic system, of laws, and of justice; yet few pieces address the burning issues that were of major concern for the populace. It was Octavian who set out to solve these problems. He set up a military treasury earmarked for delivering land and cash to decommissioned soldiers, thus freeing soldiers from their dependence on multiple military leaders. He instituted Rome's first internal

police and fire-fighting services. He also established personal control over most of the provinces and the income derived from them.

Caesar also had grand administrative plans. He wanted to drain the Pontine Marshes near Rome in order to give arable land to tens of thousands of poor Roman peasants. He had planned to build the Corinth Canal as a way of integrating Asian commerce with Italian economy, which would also be vital for Rome's control of provinces in the East. If these projects had been completed, they would benefit the Romans both immediately and in the long term. Yet Cicero with his great rhetorical skills argued that these projects were trivial in comparison to the safeguarding of "liberty." Elizabeth Rawson summarized Cicero's arguments: "In comparison with his destruction of the aristocracy's liberties, the great reforms, especially the public works, that Caesar planned or was credited with planning – the draining of the Pomptine marshes, the digging of the Corinth canal – weighed as nothing; or rather they were signs of the tyrant's *hubris*; and did not Aristotle

maintain that it was the very mark of a tyrant to embark on such works to keep the people busy and enslaved?”<sup>1</sup>

This type of argumentation recurs in some Western scholars' views of ancient China. They perceive grand public projects as a breeding ground for despotism. For sure, these projects consumed huge material and human resources and were often hated by the populace at large and bitterly criticized by eminent statesmen. Yet aside from the costs, let us consider benefits. Thanks to the construction of the Grand Canal, the areas to the south of the Yangtze became connected with the Central Plains and the areas further to the north. Without the Great Wall separating the arid areas of the north from the semi-arid areas of China proper, which were more suitable for agricultural cultivation, it would not be possible to protect the agricultural lands in northern China and ensure livelihood for the poor.

The word “freedom” or “liberty” was abused by

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<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth Rawson, *Cicero: A Portrait*, London: Allen Lane Penguin Books Ltd, 1975, p. 258.

orators and military leaders alike. For the military leaders, freedom meant freedom from political supervision. Throughout the history of Rome time and again we encounter a similar situation: Once one political group controlled the Senate, the opposition would indignantly claim that the governing group was “inhibiting freedom” and therefore they had to turn to arms to “defend freedom.” For instance, having denounced Gaius Marius (157-86 BCE) who controlled the Senate as a tyrant, Pompey (106-48 BCE) recruited a private army to defend freedom, despite the illegality of privately enlisting citizens as soldiers. In Caesar’s case, after decrying the Pompey faction’s alleged violation of the Roman people’s freedom, he, then governor of Gaul, led the legions, which should have fought to defend Rome, across the Rubicon and thus ignited a civil war. As for Octavian, he rebelled on the pretext of liberating Rome from Antony, and upon his victory, he even had his portrait engraved on the coinage as the defender of Roman freedom.

The historian Ronald Syme observed, “It is

evident that *res publica constituta* or *libertas restituta* lend themselves as crown and consecration to any process of violence and usurpation.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, people were at liberty to construe the concepts of “freedom” and “legitimacy” according to their own interests, and then fight for them. Freedom thus became an excuse for different interest groups to wage endless wars.

Having amassed vast wealth in the Mediterranean area, why did Rome not apportion some to close the rich-poor gap for preventing the *res publica* from fragmenting? Many historians have blamed this on the luxurious lifestyle of the Roman patricians. But that is not a comprehensive answer. What cannot be denied is that, despite their economic hardships, the peasants who lost their lands still could vote. Consuls were elected annually; and the patricians competed among themselves to attract the voters’ support through sponsoring sumptuous celebrations, gladiator fights, and other festivities. Investing in these events was much

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<sup>1</sup> See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 160.

easier than distributing land.

Thus, however rich, the patricians constantly faced the pressure on their resources due to the staggering price of annual election campaigns. Many of them went bankrupt. Caesar was said to have had huge debts. Thus, tax farmers, merchants, usurers and the like appeared on the stage. Although these financial magnates could not personally rise to the leading positions, they could invest in a leader ready to act on their behalf.

Cicero argued that the patricians and financial magnates should rule together, defending the harmony of the elites (“the reasoned balance of the highest and the lowest and the intervening orders”<sup>1</sup>). His essays were full of legal defense of financial magnates.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, edited by James E. G. Zetzel, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 56-57. “In playing the lyre or the flute, and of course in choral singing, a degree of harmony must be maintained among the different sounds, and if it is altered or discordant a trained ear cannot endure it; and this harmony, through the regulation of very different voices, is made pleasing and concordant. So too the state, through the reasoned balance of the highest and the lowest and the intervening orders, is harmonious in the concord of very different people. What musicians call harmony with regard to song is concord in the state, the tightest and the best bond of safety in every republic; and that concord can never exist without justice.”

Yet these magnates hedged their bets on both sides: investing some in senators, and some in military leaders. It was these magnates who pulled the string of all the secret agreements among military leaders. Among a cohort of sponsors for the First and Second Triumvirates were various tax farmers and financial magnates. When military leaders took control of the administration, they added these sponsors to the Senate as new patricians. Caesar increased the Senate's membership from 600 to 900, which was later increased to over 1,000 in the reign of the Second Triumvirate.<sup>1</sup>

The incessant inflow of wealth into Roman legions from financial magnates fueled factional fights, which escalated into a civil war. To cover military expenditures, military leaders began intercepting provincial tax revenues. Both the Pompey faction

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<sup>1</sup> See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 196. "The foundations of the new order were cemented with the blood of citizens and buttressed with a despotism that made men recall the Dictatorship of Caesar as an age of gold. Thinned by war and proscription, the Senate was now replenished to overflowing with the creatures of the Triumvirs: before long it was to number over a thousand."

and the republican faction extorted Asian provinces; Caesar fleeced Gaul and Spain. To pay the soldiers and supply military provisions to 43 legions, the Second Triumvirate squeezed Italy to the extent that even toilets were taxed.<sup>1</sup>

Five major civil wars fought over 20 years sent the entire Mediterranean area into anarchy.<sup>2</sup> The price of civil wars exceeded by far the amount needed to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. In chaos and desperation, the Romans elected Octavian. Tacitus summarized: “After Brutus and Cassius were killed, there was no longer a state military force; and when Pompeius had been vanquished in Sicily, Lepidus discarded, and Antonius killed, even the Julian party

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<sup>1</sup> *Suetonius: The Lives of the Caesars*, with an English translation by J. C. Rolfe, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914, p. 319. “When Titus found fault with him [Vespasian] for contriving a tax upon public conveniences, he held a piece of money from the first payment to his son’s nose, asking whether its odour was offensive to him. When Titus said ‘No,’ he replied, ‘Yet it comes from urine.’”

<sup>2</sup> See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 9. “In these last and fatal convulsions, disaster came upon disaster, ever more rapid. Three of the monarchic *principes* fell by the sword. Five civil wars and more in twenty years drained the life-blood of Rome and involved the whole world in strife and anarchy.”

was left with no leader other than Caesar Octavian. Dropping the title ‘triumvir’, Octavian presented himself as a consul, and as a man satisfied to hold tribunician authority in order to safeguard the people. Then, by seducing the military with donatives, the masses with grain allowances, and everybody with the pleasure of peace, he gradually increased his powers, drawing to himself the functions of Senate, magistrates, and laws. He met no resistance. The most dynamic men had fallen in battle or through the proscriptions; and the remaining nobles rose to wealth and offices in proportion to their appetite for servitude. Having benefited from the revolution, they preferred the security of the current regime to the dangers of the old.”<sup>1</sup>

Five centuries before Octavian, the Romans, out of their utmost detestation of monarchic rule, founded the Republic. Now, the Roman citizens conversely voted for dictatorship. In 49 BCE, the Romans acquiesced

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<sup>1</sup> See Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero*, translated by J. C. Yardley, with an introduction and notes by Anthony A. Barrett, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 3.

to Caesar's role as dictator; in 43 BCE, they agreed to the Second Triumvirate. In 27 BCE, the people voted for Octavian, effectively replacing the republic with an imperial rule.<sup>1</sup>

It was not that the Romans did not love freedom, but that freedom alone did not bring them equality, prosperity, and security that they sought. Empty talk about freedom failed to meet the people's immediate needs. The Roman political system, which allowed reaching consensus without resorting to violence, could only succeed in the early days of Rome when conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> "Caesar was invested with the dictatorship at first temporarily after the return from Spain in 705 [49 BCE], then after the battle of Pharsalus from the autumn of 706 [48 BCE] for an indefinite time, lastly after the battle of Thapsus from the 1st Jan. 709 as an annual office, to which he was designated at first for ten years, and ultimately in 710 for life; ... then with the first place, and along with this the right of leading the vote, in the senate; lastly (708) with the title of Emperor for life." (Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*, Vol. 4, Part 2, translated by William Purdie Dickson, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 467-468.) In 43 BCE, Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus established an alliance in Bologna – the so-called Second Triumvirate. In the same year, the citizens' assembly passed a law that authorized the alliance power to promulgate decrees and appoint high-rank officials, as well as a five-year tenure to rule Rome. For Octavian's initiation of imperial rule, see H. F. Jolowicz and Barry Nicholas, *Historical Introduction to the Study of Roman Law*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 4.

were moderate enough and could be easily contained. Once the gap between the rich and the poor widened to the degree that no mechanism could adjust it, the erstwhile moderate conflicts became an antagonistic struggle which engendered a dramatic social split. What was needed to reconcile the parties was neither emotional solace nor politics of votes, but the willingness of political elites to sacrifice their personal interests and carry out structural reform.

Freedom is not protected by freedom only.

Here, I do not intend to criticize the Roman republic system from a Chinese standpoint. The Roman republic system is one of the greatest institutions in human history, which also gave birth to the modern Western political civilization. The Roman republic history is also the Western classical history that the Chinese people are most familiar with and show the most respect for. I just want to point out that the strengths of every civilization may be its weaknesses at the same time, as the old Chinese saying goes, “The success or failure of an affair is all due to the very same factor” (成也是

它，败也是它). The Roman republic system could not escape the shackles of its own strength (also weakness) – liberty. China was no exception. It was deeply bound by its own strength (also weakness) – the centralized bureaucratic system.

Overseas sinologists have done a lot of critical research in this respect. As the classic Needham-Thesis pointed out, Confucianism, as the official doctrine of the bureaucratic society, encouraged humanism (too humanistic), but neglected science and technology, which led to the Confucian scholars' concentration on the craft of bureaucratic government. As he said, “[I]ts [Confucianism's] intense concentration of interest upon human social life to the exclusion of non-human phenomena negated all investigation of Things, as opposed to Affairs.”<sup>1</sup> A typical example taken by Needham is Xunzi, “[Xunzi] insisted on the practical application of technological processes while denying the importance of theoretical investigation. In this

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<sup>1</sup> *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought*, by Joseph Needham, with the research assistance of Wang Ling, Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1956, p. 12.

way he struck a blow at science by emphasising its social context too much and too soon.”<sup>1</sup> China’s major scholarly tradition tended to be backward-looking and incapable of the abstraction needed by modern natural science, which led to the failure of China’s cognitive revolution and scientific revolution in modern times.

Other examples include theories of Adam Smith, Wittfogel, and Mark Elvin about the growth stagnation in a unified empire and the technological stagnation caused by the lack of a competitive system. For instance, Mark Elvin proposed a theory of “high-level equilibrium trap” to explain China’s economic development without technological change, pointing out that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, “technological invention was inhibited by the establishment in the economy of a high-level equilibrium trap”<sup>2</sup> and so China was unable to produce

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973, p. 203. “[I]n late traditional China economic forces developed in such a way as to make profitable invention more and more difficult. With falling surplus in agriculture, and so falling per capita income and per capita demand, with cheapening labour but

an industrial revolution.

There have also been criticisms of the Chinese bureaucratic system. For example, Weber believed that China was a “patrimonial bureaucratic state” under “patriarchal and patrimonial domination” rather than a “rational bureaucratic state” in the modern sense;<sup>1</sup> Philip A. Kuhn’s research on China’s bureaucratic monarchy pointed out the contradiction between the emperor’s “arbitrary power” and provincial bureaucracy’s “routine power”;<sup>2</sup> Zhou Xueguang pointed out the “upward accountable system” of the

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increasingly expensive resources and capital, with farming and transport technologies so good that no simple improvements could be made, rational strategy for peasant and merchant alike tended in the direction not so much of labour-saving machinery as of economizing on resources and fixed capital. Huge but nearly static markets created no bottlenecks in the production system that might have prompted creativity. When temporary shortages arose, mercantile versatility, based on cheap transport, was a faster and surer remedy than the contrivance of machines. This situation may be described as a ‘high-level equilibrium trap.’” *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 993.

<sup>2</sup> Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Chinese bureaucracy, the inertia and path dependence of the bureaucratic machine characterized by the bureaucracy's self-serving and routine-ridden habits and its complexity, multi-layered, inefficient, and formalistic traits, and the paradox of "centralization-decentralization" on the centrality-locality relationship, in which when the central government centralized power, the local would lose its vitality, and when the central government delegated more power to the local, the latter would always fall into chaos.<sup>1</sup>

Among these views, some are strongly agreed with by Chinese historians while some cannot be accepted by them, just as Western historians disagree with some of the evaluations of Rome by their Chinese counterparts. Some shortcomings of China remain the same, and some have been improved significantly. What I want to point out is that China has a very clear understanding of the shortcomings of its own

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<sup>1</sup> Zhou Xueguang, "Authoritative System and Effective Governance: The Institutional Logic of Contemporary Chinese State Governance" (权威体制与有效治理: 当代中国国家治理的制度逻辑), *Open Times*, Issue No. 7, 2011.

civilization and tradition, and also has a strong desire to make progress. A century ago, it was the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that thoroughly criticized the traditional civilization, and promoted the shaping of a modern China, and this self-reflection has continued for a century. But just as the Roman civilization has a deep continuity in Western society, so does the traditional Chinese civilization in modern China at the social and cultural levels, if not stronger. This continuity has a lot to do with the “centralized merit-based bureaucratic system.” In order to help Western readers better understand this system, we need to go back to the Western Han Dynasty, a critical period in which the system really took shape.

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## *Chapter II*

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# THE WESTERN HAN DYNASTY

*1*

The Western Han Dynasty co-existed with the Roman Republic.

At the beginning, the Han Dynasty had both inherited and modified the system of its predecessor, the Qin. It inherited the Qin administration that penetrated the society down to the grassroots levels of counties and townships, but allowed relative autonomy to the local elite lineages. It inherited most of Qin's legal regulations, but eliminated some of the mutilating punishments. It inherited (albeit with certain compromises) the centralized power framework, but

upheld “governing through non-action” to allow the people to recuperate after devastating domestic wars.

During the 40 years known as “the orderly rule of Emperors Wen and Jing” (180-141 BCE), the Han Dynasty rose from the situation where even the emperor could not find four horses of the same color<sup>1</sup> to a prosperous empire in which:

*The granaries ... were full and the government treasuries were running over with wealth. In the capital the strings of cash had been stacked up by the hundreds of millions until the cords that bound them had rotted away and they could no longer be counted. In the central granary of the government, new grain was heaped on the top of the old until the building was full and the grain overflowed and piled up outside, where it spoiled and became unfit to it.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 30 of *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

How did the empire become wealthy so suddenly? Confucian classicists attributed its success to “ruling All-under-Heaven through thrift.” In their opinion, should the emperor avoid extravagant spending, the people would become wealthy. Yet the historian Sima Qian (ca. 145-90 BCE) had a deeper insight:

*After the Han rose to power, the barriers and bridges were opened and the restrictions on the use of the resources of mountains and lakes were relaxed. As a result, the rich traders and great merchants travelled all around the empire distributing their goods to every corner so that everyone could buy what he wanted.<sup>1</sup>*

Having eliminated separate regimes and unified the vast territory, having unified the script, the coinage, and legal regulations, having established a unified system of weights and measures, the empire brought about a huge unified market. Commerce brought the country's

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 129, *Ibid.*, p. 440.

major economic regions together. The commercial value produced by division of labor prompted the increase of overall wealth, which, in turn, enabled a considerable rise in agricultural productivity. It was the Qin's unification that had laid the foundations for this prosperity, but its excessive activism undermined the population's livelihood. It was the Han that utilized the unification to reap economic benefits.

“The orderly rule of Emperors Wen and Jing” was based on the utilization of the Legalist techniques of rule under the aegis of the Huang-Lao thought.<sup>1</sup> The Daoist (Huang-Lao) thought excelled at amalgamating the ostensibly antithetical ideas. Positioning themselves in between Confucianism and Legalism, or in between Confucianism and Mohism, the Huang-Lao adherents advanced when the time was appropriate and retreated when the situation was less advantageous. Although they did not leave to posterity famous chancellors, their achievement was creating an integrative whole

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<sup>1</sup> Meng Wentong, *Multi-analysis of Chinese Ancient Studies* (古学甄微), Chengdu: Bashu Book Society, 1987, p. 284.

from the contradictory proposals of rival schools. They bequeathed the Chinese civilization the art of integrating different strands of thought without bothering too much with the ostensible conflict between the “name” and “reality.” This ideological relaxation and the focus on practical success may have anticipated later Deng Xiaoping’s famous saying, “It does not matter if it is a yellow cat or a black cat, as long as it catches mice.”

This said, although the Huang-Lao adherents solved certain problems, their period of political dominance resulted in a new set of problems. The big merchants expanded throughout the imperial space, whereas small landholders were losing their plots of land. Texts from the early Han period repeatedly tell of impoverished peasants driven to sell their children for saving themselves.<sup>1</sup> Whereas some people displayed chivalrous spirit of helping the needy and the poor, there were more and more great landowners and powerful families

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<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works of Jia Yi* (贾谊集), Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1976, p. 201; *Annotated Works of Chao Cuo* (晁错集注释), Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1976, p. 31.

that were able to do anything as they pleased in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, whereas among the princes some endorsed moralizing statecraft exposed in such texts as *Huainanzi* (composed at the court of Liu An [d. 122 BCE], the prince of Huainan), others were inclined to defend their territorial possessions by force if needed. The latter stood behind the “Rebellion of the Seven Princes,” which severely endangered the Han court in 154 BCE.<sup>2</sup>

The Han political system was finally modified during the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE). He was renowned due to three major contributions. First, he weakened the princely power by increasing the number of the princes (through abolishing the primogeniture

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 30 of *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty, the central government directly administered just 15 prefectures, accounting for only one third of the country’s total territory. The eastern part of the realm was turned into hereditary possession of the princes, most of whom were related to the ruling house. Curtailing the princes’ power became one of the most urgent tasks of the Han emperors *en route* to restoring the Qin-like centralized rule.

principle and requiring division of the princedoms into ever smaller units) and by limiting the political prerogatives of the princes. This resulted in the restoration of the *junxian* system throughout the realm and the subsequent consolidation of the centralized control under the auspices of Confucian ideology. Second, it was under Emperor Wu's reign that China's territorial contours took shape. Third, it was during his reign that Confucian ideology was embraced, even if superficially, as the leading intellectual current.

Confucian political ideals were rooted not in *The Analects of Confucius*, but rather in the less known text, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋). The Han Confucians believed that the latter was based on Confucius' editing of the annals of his home state of Lu. This editing supposedly was used to criticize contemporaneous rulers and to elucidate "the Way of the [True] Monarch" (王道), i.e., provide the blueprint for an ideal rule.

Among manifold commentarial traditions of the *Annals*, the one that gained prominence under Emperor

Wu was the *Gongyang Tradition* promulgated by Gongsun Hong (200-121 BCE) and Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BCE). The core of the *Gongyang* interpretation of the *Annals* was the idea of political unity. Dong Zhongshu supplemented this political ideal with the religious-philosophical conceptualization of the interaction between human and Heaven based on mutual “resonance.” At the core of the *Gongyang* administrative thought in Dong’s interpretation stood political centralization and the elevation of civil officials. Its ethical thought was based on the promulgation of the Three Bonds (ruler-subject, father-son, and husband-wife) and the Five Constants (benevolence, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and trustworthiness).

The *Gongyang* ideology in Dong’s version resolved the major problem of legitimacy of the Han Dynasty, established as it was by a commoner. It validated the Han’s position as being supported by Heaven. The most sophisticated part of this ideology was simultaneous bolstering of the ruler’s authority and imposing restrictions on the ruler’s whims. The

Chinese idea of the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*, 天命), rooted in the Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) and resurrected by the *Gongyang* exegetes was not identical to the Western “divine right” doctrine. In Rome, for instance, divinization of the emperors was a potent means of strengthening their authority; but it was not directly related to the popular endorsement of an individual emperor. In China, in contrast, Heaven’s will would be manifested directly through the sentiments (and actions) of the people below. Insofar as the Son of Heaven treated the people well and got their consent, he was a real “Son of Heaven.” Otherwise, Heaven could revoke the Mandate and transfer it to another capable and virtuous man. According to the *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* (春秋繁露) – the text associated with Dong Zhongshu, “if his virtue is sufficient to bring security and happiness to the people, Heaven bestows [the Mandate] on him; if his evil is sufficient to injure and harm the people, Heaven withdraws [the Mandate] from him.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, translated by Sarah A. Queen

In order to strengthen the emperor's respect to and awe of Heaven, Dong Zhongshu added to the above ideas the theory of portents and omens. Whenever Heaven sent down its omens, the emperor should reflect on his behavior and check whether or not he had made any mistakes. Therefore, the Son of Heaven, the Mandate of Heaven and the "people's heart" formed a tripartite system of checks and balances. The Son of Heaven ruled All-under-Heaven; Heaven kept an eye on him; and the "people's heart" was equivalent to Heaven's Mandate. This system emphasized that one's power was deeply connected to one's responsibility. The more power one had, the greater his responsibility was. The penalty for not adhering to one's responsibility was losing the power's legitimacy. Even parental and the emperor's authority could be rejected should the parents and the ruler fail to live to their responsibilities. The *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn* summarizes:

*The [principle] of the Spring and Autumn Annals is not to fear a powerful opponent.... Hence, to threaten and assault the altar of the earth does not necessarily mean that one has failed to respect the spirits; to drive out the Heavenly King does not necessarily mean that one has failed to respect a superior; to resist the commands of one's father does not necessarily mean that one has failed to serve one's father; to cut off relations with one's mother does not necessarily mean that one has failed to be filial and generous.<sup>1</sup>*

Elsewhere the text adds: “Those with the Way replace those without the Way. This is the principle of Heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

The idea of “great unity” as promulgated by Dong Zhongshu and his intellectual associates contained aspects of political morality, social morality, and personal morality. Take for instance the idea of benevolence. Dong Zhongshu argued: “A humane man

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124, with the translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

is one who corrects his Way but does not calculate what benefits that will bring him; adheres to principles without hurrying after success.”<sup>1</sup> He called upon a person of forbearance to “criticize the self abundantly and censure others sparingly.”<sup>2</sup> As for sociopolitical norms, Dong advocated:

*Human beings receive their destiny from Heaven. Consequently, they differ immeasurably from other forms of life. Inside their households, they have the kinship relations of father and son, and of elder and younger brother. Outside their households, they have the propriety of ruler and minister, and of superior and inferior. When they gather together in social intercourse with others, they have the various social distinctions of seniority and youth. How splendid are the cultural forms with which they communicate with one another!*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dong Zhongshu’s memorial cited in his biography, the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Translation borrowed from *Ibid.*, p. 645.

<sup>2</sup> *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, translated by Sarah A. Queen and John S. Major, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Dong Zhongshu’s memorial cited in his biography, the *History of the*

Laudable as they might seem, these ideas, when taken to the extreme, brought about negative results. The theory of portents and omens at its extreme generated superstitious belief in apocryphal prophecies that proliferated during the Eastern (Later) Han Dynasty (25-220). The concepts of the Three Bonds and the Five Constants, when taken to the extreme, became the dogma that suffocated social vitality. The principles of “treating relatives as relatives and respecting those who deserve being respected” (i.e., respecting social hierarchy), when taken to the extreme, weakened the population’s legal consciousness. Yet in the lengthy process of “crossing the river by touching the stones,” that is, the process of formation of a huge polity during the Qin and Han periods, there were no ready recipes for building a viable sociopolitical structure. The advancement was through trials and errors, with many solutions adopted, and then abandoned or improved. Dong Zhongshu’s ideas were part of this trial-and-error process.

Emperor Wu embraced the ideas of Dong and his intellectual associates regarding Heaven's interaction with humans.

Emperor Wu's first action was to elevate the "filial and incorruptible." Before that, most officials inherited their positions, and some merchants could also purchase official positions as well. This resembled the joint rule of patricians and financially powerful equestrians in the Republican Rome. However, since Emperor Wu, the government had opened its doors to humble Confucians, who "understood the tasks of the generation" or were renowned for their filial piety and incorruptibility.<sup>1</sup> The responsibility for

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge History of China Volume I: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221B.C.-A.D.220*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 154. "From these humble beginnings and the practical attempts to solve an urgent problem there was eventually to arise the highly complex system of examinations that formed so conspicuous a feature of China's imperial administration. Right from the start, candidates whose views reflected the writings of Shen Pu-hai or Han Fei suffered some discrimination. A further step that concerned the training of China's officials showed a positive bias in favor of the traditional writings which were being associated with Confucius. This was the establishment, in 136 B.C., of official posts for academicians, who were intended to specialize in the interpretation of five specific works: the *Book of changes*, *Book of songs*,

recommendation fell on local officials. Any failure to recommend qualified candidates was considered equal to the crime of “great irreverence” to the throne. This was a very toilsome demand for local officials. It took some 40 days for an imperial edict to reach frontier regions, and then the local officials had to organize the journey of the recommended scholars to the capital through the post relay system. There they would have an audience with the emperor to answer his questions. The entire process took seven months or so, but it was worthwhile. Emperor Wu’s court absorbed many people of humble origin, who rose to the top of the government positions thanks, for instance, to their mastery of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.<sup>1</sup> From then on, any noble wishing to join the civil service had to prove adherence to Confucian moral principles

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*Book of documents, the Rites, and the Spring and autumn annals.* This all-important edict had significant consequences; the concept of the classical or canonical texts of China derived therefrom, and a precedent was set whereby these works formed the primary texts for educating officials.”

<sup>1</sup> The most notable of these was another *Gongyang* exegete, Gongsun Hong, who played an important role in designing new promotion policies under Emperor Wu.

and knowledge of Confucian classics so as to gain appointment.

This was the beginning of the recommendation and examination system that in due time shaped profoundly the nature of China's imperial polity. Emperor Wu realized that to rule effectively his huge realm, he could not rely exclusively on the power of local magnates who prospered under his predecessors. Rather he should incorporate into his government a much broader stratum of elites and sub-elites, discovering the men who were most knowledgeable, most moral, and had the strongest sense of social responsibility. Only therewith would he be able to consolidate the people's support and expand the social foundations of his rule. Local officials in the Qin Dynasty excelled at enforcing harsh laws, but did not bother with educating the people and generating broad support from below through non-coercive means. Emperor Wu allowed the Confucian scholars to share prestige with law-enforcing officials. This was the simultaneous adaptation of the principles of "governing and educating." Henceforth,

prefectural governors and county magistrates were in charge not just of local governance and control, but also of establishing educational facilities and improving the people's mores.

To be sure, the recommendation and examination system had its weak points. Malpractices thrived. Teachers and students collided to pull each other up the social ladder. The Confucians created networks of mutual recommendation and support, which generated considerable corruption. These networks eventually stifled social mobility. By the Eastern Han a new hereditary elite emerged with powerful lineages of classical scholars boasting of having “three dukes in four generations” (duke was the highest honorific for a civil official). It was not until the formation of the imperial examination system during the Sui and Tang dynasties that the principle of impartiality in selecting officials gained some prominence. Yet the recommendation and examination system of the Han Dynasty signified a decisive step forward.

Emperor Wu also instituted the system of regional

inspectors to oversee civil officials. Inspectors were appointed on the low level of a county. They had to make random visits to prefectures and counties and inspect the following abuses:

*First, powerful clans and local magnates have excessive fields and residences, which allows the strong to bully the weak, the many to oppress the few. Second, the 2,000-bushel officials (i.e., high-ranking officials) neither follow the emperor's edicts, nor respect the dynastic institutions; they turn their back to the common good and serve their private interests; twist the edicts to preserve private benefits, and plunder the people. Third, the 2,000-bushel officials do not carry out careful investigations of legal cases, but cruelly kill the people. When they are enraged, they punish others; when they like somebody, they pardon him. They disturb the people with their cruelty, and suppress the multitudes, causing the people deep pain. They enrage the people to the extent that mountains collapse and stones split; and evil portents and malicious rumors increase. Fourth, the 2,000-bushel officials*

*make unfair promotions, practice favoritism and oppress the worthy. Fifth, the children of the 2,000-bushel officials rely on their prestige and power to interfere in civil affairs and secure advantages. Sixth, the 2,000-bushel officials transgress against the common good. They make cabals below, fawn upon the rich and powerful, let bribery go rampant, and damage the government decrees.<sup>1</sup>*

The inspectors had to deal both with the land engrossment by the local magnates and with the manipulation of power by civil officials. These tasks marked the beginning of the central supervisory system that matured in the ensuing dynasties.

Emperor Wu is often said to have “expurgated the Hundred Schools, and exclusively respected the Confucian techniques [of rule].” This is a misconception. Aside from employing Confucian classicists, such as Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun

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<sup>1</sup> For Chinese, please see *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, annotated by Yan Shigu, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1999, pp. 623-624.

Hong, he filled the court with men of highly different origins and ideological inclinations, such as the Legalist Zhang Tang; the merchant Sang Hongyang (155-80 BCE), whose ideas were close to the Legalists (see below); the rich herd owner Bu Shi; and even the Xiongnu prince Jin Midi.<sup>1</sup> These people, although conversant with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, were not necessarily followers of Confucianism. Whereas Emperor Wu established the Imperial College staffed by Confucian erudites (*boshi*) who specialized in specific canonical traditions, in society at large there were still followers of such schools as Legalism, Mohism, Yin-Yang and Daoism. The Western Han political life was ideologically diverse both in theory and in practice. Recall also that even Confucianism itself – especially in its imperial form, which emerged due to the efforts of Dong Zhongshu and others – was a synthetic teaching that borrowed much from other intellectual traditions, accommodated highly divergent views, and

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<sup>1</sup> For these personalities, see Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods (221 BC-AD 24)*, Leiden: Brill, 2000.

allowed multiple interpretations of Confucius' putative legacy. Without such open-mindedness, ideological uniformity could never have been achieved, nor would Confucianism be actively pursued by most of the Han empire's leaders.

The pluralism and political unity in the Han Dynasty (and in the subsequent imperial dynasties) formed an organic whole. Confucianism provided a common bottom line or an intellectual framework, aiming to prevent ideological cleavages from tearing the realm apart. It had also facilitated the formation of common political vocabulary and common value orientation. But it was not a means of suffocating intellectual life from above. Actually, the selection of Confucianism as the ideological core of the empire can in part be interpreted as the rulers' yielding to the pressure from the educated elites and sub-elites from below. Recall that Confucianism ensured more than any alternative ideology self-respect of the men of letters and imbued them with the sense of mission. It provided the literati with a potent means to criticize the throne, if needed,

and to voice their disagreement with the imperial policies. That the imperial leaders opted to elevate it above other traditions was a nod to the literati – an ideological compromise with them rather than imposing the “correct ideology” from above. What mattered to the imperial rulers was that Confucianism excelled at ensuring the political unity of the realm. Within this “great unity” multiple ideas and traditions could coexist and coalesce into one integral political body.

Similar pluralism within the unified whole characterized the empire’s cultural life. Thus, whereas the State of Qi had been extinguished long before, its “monthly ordinances” became the core of the ritual calendar of the Han Dynasty. Similarly, the highly influential idea of the island of immortals – Penglai – was borrowed from Qi. The State of Chu had also been extinguished long before, but the Han inherited the worship of the Chu deity, Taiyi, eulogized by Qu Yuan (d. ca. 278 BCE) in his poem; for a long time, remained so. Much of the Han mythology, including such figures as primordial ancestors Fuxi and Nüwa, the “Divine Husbandman”

Shennong, Thearch Zhuanxu, and the god of fire, Zhu Rong – were all borrowed from the Chu pantheon. The Han imperial family originated from the Chu territory, which explains the immense impact of Chu poetry on the hymns and poems composed by Liu Bang and by his great-grandson, Emperor Wu; but these poems were put into music by a descendant from Zhongshan of the State of Zhao, Li Yannian, who founded the Han's Music Bureau (*yuefu*).

Regional cultures did not perish but interpenetrated. Archaeologists have discovered in the north, at the sites along the Great Wall, Chu-style bronze vessels and lacquerware, whereas in the region south of the Yangtze River some Xiongnu-style ornaments decorated with characteristic steppe animal patterns were unearthed.<sup>1</sup> The Han Dynasty bronze mirrors excavated in Hebei in the north and Guangxi in the south bore patterns and inscriptions unique to the Shu

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<sup>1</sup> Huang Zhanyue, "On the Northern-Style Tablets with Animal Patterns Excavated in the Region of Guangdong and Guangxi" (关于两广出土北方动物纹牌问题), *Archaeology and Cultural Relics*, Issue No. 2, 1996.

area in the southwest (today's Sichuan Province).<sup>1</sup> All these discoveries demonstrate that the unification did not extinguish local cultures, but instead facilitated their spread. As long as opening up was upheld, the unified polity could sustain and even facilitate pluralism. It may be said that this pluralism and ability to sustain divergent and even contradictory ideas, systems, cultures, and human collectives in a unified state was the major advantage of the Han over the Qin. It may be one of the reasons for which the Han rather than the Qin is viewed as more representative of Chinese culture as a whole.

Pluralism in the unified entity is the spirit of the Han Dynasty.

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<sup>1</sup> Zheng Junlei, "Archaeological Anthropology Investigation on the Baiyue Groups' Integration into the Unified China" (百越融入中华一体的考古人类学考察), *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities* (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), Vol. 40, Issue No. 2, March 2018.

## 2

Critics of the traditional Chinese political system often equate it with the overbearing and suffocating imperial control which allegedly stifled any opposition. Yet this is a premature conclusion. To demonstrate its fallacy, suffice it to look at the critical mindedness of China's imperial historians. Nobody demonstrates this critical mindedness and spiritual freedom more than the father of China's imperial historiography, Sima Qian. Although he studied Confucianism under Dong Zhongshu, he also adored the Huang-Lao thought. He was supportive of *laissez-faire* commercialism, and

lauded “governing through non-action” of the ages of Emperors Wen and Jing. He included in his masterpiece *Records of the Historian* the biographies of famous ministers and generals, but also of assassin-retainers, wandering swordsmen, and merchants. He took up the cudgel for Li Ling (d. 74 BCE), an unjustly accused senior general, and was outspoken in his criticism of Emperor Wu, for which reason he suffered the penalty of castration.<sup>1</sup>

Sima Qian epitomized the spirit of non-conformism and dissent, but he never disengaged himself from the society and the state. After sentencing Sima Qian to castration, Emperor Wu, who adhered to the principles of impartiality embodied in “the Way of the ruler,” re-appointed him to be the head of the Imperial Secretariat. The historian, who adhered to “the Way of the minister,” meanwhile continued his assiduous recording of history and forthright expression of his opinions. Although critical of Emperor Wu’s policies,

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Biographies of Ji An and Zheng Dangshi” (汲郑列传), *Records of the Historian*, annotated by Han Zhaoqi, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2010, p. 7100.

Sima Qian nevertheless commended the imperial decree abolishing the primogeniture principle, which required the holders of the upper nobility ranks to divide their landholdings among their heirs. This step which strengthened the centralized control over localities was considered by Sima Qian a good solution to political turmoil.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, despite remaining poor throughout his life, Sima Qian bore no grudge against the rich. He considered the merchants' riches as coming through hard work and a good understanding of economic principles: "They simply guessed what course conditions were going to take and acted accordingly, kept a sharp eye out for the opportunities of the times, and so were able to capture a fat profit."<sup>2</sup> Although tortured by "harsh officials," Sima Qian still considered the Legalist policies of the Qin Dynasty as adequate: Should they be properly implemented, they

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 17 of Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 802.

<sup>2</sup> "The Biographies of the Money-makers" (货殖列传), *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 453.

could ensure “peace for a myriad of generations.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite his personal suffering, Sima Qian never developed systematic criticism of the Han political system. His primary concern was not with personal gains and losses but with the common good of All-under-Heaven. He criticized power holders not because he sought independence of political power, but because he believed that they harmed the common good of All-under-Heaven; and when he lauded power holders, this was not out of flattery but because he believed that they benefitted All-under-Heaven. He put his personal interests behind those of All-under-Heaven. The supreme value of spiritual freedom for him was taking on his responsibility for “the family, the state, and All-under-Heaven” (家国天下);<sup>2</sup> and to fulfill this responsibility, the most important was protecting his spiritual freedom. One should not only destroy negative things but also construct something positive;

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 16 of Sima Qian’s *Records of the Historian*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 760.

<sup>2</sup> This sequence of responsibilities is outlined in Confucian canonical text, the *Great Learning* (大学).

one should not only pursue differences but also seek common ground. The unity of individual freedom and collective responsibility has been a defining trait of Chinese intellectuals, which distinguishes them from their Western counterparts.

*Records of the Historian* not only criticized Emperor Wu, but also depicted how the Han founder Liu Bang was suspicious of his meritorious generals; how his widow, Empress Lü, wreaked havoc in the political order; how the meritorious ministers and famous generals who helped to found the dynasty had their shortcomings. As only two handwritten copies of *Records of the Historian* existed, this highly critical book was vulnerable to destruction. Yet by the time of Emperors Zhao and Xuan (87-49 BCE), this “slanderous book” had become the officially preserved canonical text and the cornerstone of the official history of the Han Dynasty. This would have been impossible if the emperors had not been tolerant and ready to endorse the spirit of self-criticism.

In the Han Dynasty, the office of the court historian

was elevated to a new height: The historians had the utmost power to voice criticism of the emperor. In China, history played a quasi-religious role; the verdict of the historian was to a certain extent tantamount to the “final judgment.” Sima Qian himself was well aware of this new power of the historian. In the long authorial digression to the first among the “Arrayed Biographies” in his text (“The Biography of Boyi”), he positioned himself as the person who could right the wrongs inflicted by Heaven itself. Those who met injustice in their life, those who died prematurely or suffered from power holders – all will live in generations due to the commemoration in the historian’s work. This “commemorative immortality” can be viewed as a counterpart to the promises of afterlife justice in numerous religious traditions worldwide. The historian represented the transcendent judgment.

Historical judgement, of utmost importance, became a paramount principle in China’s political life. It was upheld by rulers of various dynasties alike, and

was honored even by the most cruel and tyrannical emperors. A ruler could execute a certain historian, but never dared to abolish the institution of court historians or suppress the historical genre as a whole. Abolishment of this institution was tantamount to abandoning dynastic legitimacy (*zhengtong*, 正统, the transmission of correct rule).

The foundation of China's dynastic legitimacy is the ideological legitimacy (*daotong*, 道统, the transmission of the correct Way). The lasting stability and prosperity of a huge political entity could not rely solely on the authority of power. It could be ensured only through the genuine acceptance of the guiding political principles (the correct Way) across different social strata. The heart of the "correct Way" is being devoted to the common good (*gong*, 公) of All-under-Heaven at the expense of self-interest (*si*, 私). Each role has certain principles, norms, and values to adhere. There is the Way of sages and the worthies, the Way of the ruler, the Way of the ministers, the Way of the generals, and the Way of the merchants. Even on the level of

playing the musical instrument of *qin* or playing chess, of calligraphy and painting, of medicine and drinking wine, of tea and swordsmanship – each has its Way. And the Way of the scholars is epitomized by the principles allegedly embedded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, that is, every matter, every power holder, every political action – all can and should be subjected to criticism.

To illustrate the point of this perennial importance of historical judgment, let us take the evaluation of leading ministers of the Han Dynasty at the various stages of its existence for instance. Three most famous powerful ministers were Huo Guang (d. 68 BCE), Wang Mang (45 BCE-23 CE) and Zhuge Liang (181-234). Yet the historical image of each differs dramatically. Wang Mang positioned himself as a devoted Confucian, but eventually he usurped the Han throne (in 8 CE), for which reason he was castigated as being committed to self-interest and abandoning the common good. Huo Guang was ostensibly committed to the common good, and twice intervened in the

imperial succession; but his oppressive behavior antagonized many. Zhuge Liang was the chancellor of a regional state Shu-Han (221-263), which considered itself the legitimate heir of the Han Dynasty. Despite the weakness of this regime, Zhuge Liang committed himself to the goal of restoring the unified rule of the Han Dynasty; he preferred risking defeat but not acquiescing to “partial peace in one corner of the realm.” For this reason he was considered a person fully committed to the common good rather than self-interest, to the goal of reunification of the realm rather than ongoing separatism; and among scholars and commoners alike his figure was greatly admired. This view was maintained not only in the historical texts but also in countless literary works, making him one of the most popular figures in China’s history.

The Way is lofty, and nobody can escape the judgement according to the principles of the Way. Even the warlords had their own “Way.” For instance, the Han’s last famous chancellor (and Zhuge Liang’s major foe), Cao Cao (d. 220) was often depicted as the traitor

to the Han Dynasty (which was abrogated by his son Cao Pi immediately after his death). And yet in one of the most celebrated episodes in his life, Cao Cao was said to have composed a poem in which he compared himself to the Duke of Zhou, the paradigmatic regent of a young king early in the Western Zhou Dynasty and a symbol of political acumen. Cao Cao justified his ruthless actions by saying, “Should it not be myself, nobody would be able to count how many people under Heaven would declare themselves emperors and kings.” Ruthlessness aside, Cao Cao remained deeply concerned with his historical image. Warlords who dispelled this lofty stance completely – like the notorious Dong Zhuo (d. 192), who had contributed directly to the collapse of the Han Dynasty – were considered criminals who lacked both the Way and the political acumen, ephemeral leaders who did not deserve any commemoration.

The power of the “righteous brush” – a courageous historian who passed his verdict on power holders – had a lasting impact on Chinese political culture

as a whole. Whereas it could not prevent abuses of power or outbursts of tyranny, it could to a certain degree moderate them. In Chinese society, in which historical knowledge was disseminated from the first steps of primary education, one's "commemorative immortality," or, more precisely one's image mattered a lot. Historians, even if paid by the court, maintained considerable independence in making their judgments about former and recent leaders. Collectively, even if not individually, they did not represent the throne but the common opinion of the literati. The power of this opinion was such that most political actors had to act – at least overtly – to fit the norms of the Way, which were the norms of the common good of All-under-Heaven.

## 3

In high summer of 2017, a joint China-Mongolia archaeological team discovered a mottled and vague inscription on a red precipice in the Hangay (Khangai) Mountains of Mongolia. After close examination, the scholars concluded that this was the famous “Inscription at the Yanran Mountains” composed by Ban Gu (32-92), a leading Han historian and literary official, who served in the victorious campaigns of the Eastern Han Dynasty against the Xiongnu. The inscription commemorating the decisive victory over the Xiongnu in 89 was mentioned in numerous texts,

but its actual location remained unknown. This was the northernmost reach of the Central Plains armies in their history. Now, finally, the precise location of the inscription could be verified.

The inscription is also highly relevant to Roman history. It commemorates the end of almost three centuries of wars between the Han and the Xiongnu. The Northern Xiongnu's defeat was the reason for their move westward, which set in motion a series of westward moves by the steppe peoples of Inner Asia. After two centuries, the waves of invasions by the Huns, the Ostrogoths, and the Visigoths broke the Roman defense lines and brought about the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire. Chinese historians often claim that the Huns are the Xiongnu, whereas most of the Western historians reject this identification. Although in terms of ethnic belonging, the Huns are not necessarily directly related to the Xiongnu, what is clear is that the Xiongnu's shift westward set in motion the large-scale westward migration of the people across the Eurasian

steppes.

The struggle between the Xiongnu and the Han lasted throughout much of the Han history. Early in the Western Han, the emperors opted for a policy of appeasement (“harmony of the kin” – *heqin*, 和亲), which meant sending a Han princess to marry the *chanyu* (“emperor”) of the Xiongnu and sending the *chanyu* lavish gifts. This policy initially could ensure a decade or so of peace, but gradually its efficiency faded. By the beginning of Emperor Wu’s rule, the Xiongnu’s incursions intensified and the appeasement policy failed. By then, the Central Plains suffered from periodic floods, droughts, and other natural disasters, but the state survived these due to its accumulated economic strength. The Xiongnu, by contrast, were much more vulnerable to natural disasters, which often prompted them to engage in pillaging the northern Han regions. The ability of the political system of a civilization to withstand natural disasters is one of the major factors influencing the civilization’s sustainability.

By the ninth year of his reign (133 BCE), Emperor

Wu decided to respond to the Xiongnu's incursions by launching a major war against them. The beginning was highly successful. General Wei Qing (d. 106 BCE) secured the Hetao area, where Shuofang prefecture was established; and general Huo Qubing (140-117 BCE) expanded westward toward what is called today the Hexi Corridor, where Wuwei and Jiuquan prefectures were established. This was also the beginning of regular communication of the Han with the Western Regions (areas in current Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and further westward into Central Asia). New territorial acquisitions became the bases from which the Eastern Han generals succeeded in reaching the Mongolian Plateau hinterland. However, the victories won by Wei Qing and Huo Qubing were hugely expensive: The grain reserves accumulated during the reigns of the preceding Emperors Wen and Jing were depleted. Facing increasing financial pressure, Emperor Wu opted to grant official positions to anyone willing to donate money or grain. The joke of "bringing sheep to become a palace attendant" was born precisely during

these first years of conflict with the Xiongnu.

Huo Qubing's decisive victory that secured the Hexi Corridor was accompanied by a major embarrassment. King Hunye of the Xiongnu together with 40,000 of subordinate tribesmen surrendered to the Han. Emperor Wu decided to set up five dependencies in the frontier region to accommodate Hunye and his troops. He then ordered to contribute 20,000 chariots as "settling-in allowances" for the Xiongnu who had surrendered. But the capital government lacked resources, and when it tried to requisition horses from the populace, the people hid their horses and the requisition failed. The emperor was so furious that he threatened to execute the governor of the capital.<sup>1</sup> Later, he planned to execute over 500 merchants for illegally trading with the Xiongnu. One of the chief ministers remonstrated:

*The Xiongnu have attacked the main roads*

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<sup>1</sup> See *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 312.

*along the border and broken off peaceful relations with us. Therefore China has called up troops to punish them, suffering innumerable dead and wounded in the process and spending cash by the billions. In my unworthy opinion any Xiongnu that Your Majesty captures should be treated as slaves and presented to the families of the men who died in the fighting, along with whatever spoils were taken, in order to repay the empire for the hardships it has borne and gratify the hearts of the common people. Even if that is impossible at the moment, what is the reason, when the Hunye king comes with his 30,000 or 40,000 followers and surrenders to the Han, for emptying the treasuries and showering gifts on him, and ordering out faithful Chinese subjects to wait on him as though he were a favourite child?*<sup>1</sup>

The emperor “listened to these words in silence and expressed no approval.”<sup>2</sup> In the end he pursued his policy of supporting the submissive Xiongnu with

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

lavish subsidies. Yet to do so he opted not to use the public treasury but rather dispense the private resources of the imperial family. This case elucidates one of the interesting aspects of the Chinese civilization. Some say that the Han expansion at its boundaries was not different from other colonial empires, but it is not easy to find a colonial empire that would, instead of enslaving the defeated population at its frontiers, support them with lavish subsidies at its own expense. Recall that around the same period, the Romans razed the city of Carthage in the aftermath of the Third Punic War (149-146 BCE) and enslaved the 50,000 people who had surrendered – children, women, and elders. The difference could not be starker!

Both Greece and Rome profited from wars, whereas the Han had to pay for its expansion from its own resources. This policy met with strong domestic disapproval; historians in particular accused Emperor Wu of “wasting all the resources within the seas.” But the goal of the Han’s policy was winning the subjects’ hearts rather than their money. As long

as the Xiongnu were ready to fully accept the Han emperor's superiority, they should be treated exactly like the Chinese people, with displays of the emperor's benevolence and righteousness, and, if needed, with giving them financial support. The goal was of "winning the hearts of the people from afar." This manifested the Confucian spirit of "benevolent rule."

However, the burden of this "benevolent rule" was heavy. The Central Plains were as vulnerable to natural calamities as the steppe areas. "When the rain does not come in appropriate seasons, the people look at each other as wolves; when the harvests are bad, they request to sell their ranks and their children."<sup>1</sup> Due to natural disasters, small landholders became entrapped in debts and had no choice but to sell their farmland and dwellings. Who bought these? Wealthy merchants naturally. Land engrossment by wealthy merchants in the Han Dynasty was a process similar to the creation of *latifundia* in Rome. In both the Han

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<sup>1</sup> This statement of the early Han scholar-official Jia Yi (200-168 BCE) is cited from the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 1128.

empire and ancient Rome, profiteering merchants and land magnates were indifferent to the state's interests. The wealth of most successful merchants dwarfed that of local governments. "The richest dominated a prefecture, the next richest dominated a county, and the smallest dominated townships and hamlets; these were uncountable."<sup>1</sup> When, in 154 BCE, the rebellion of the seven pryncedoms erupted, the government "began looking around for ways to borrow money to provide for the expedition. The moneylenders, considering ... that the fate of that [rebellious] region was still a matter of grave doubt, were unwilling to lend them any money."<sup>2</sup>

From the times of Emperors Wen and Jing, the court and the society at large were engaged in intensive debates about how to deal with the contradiction between agriculture and commerce. Some, like the renowned statesman and man of letters Jia Yi, put forward the Legalist idea of "strengthening the root"

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<sup>1</sup> *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 453, with the translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452.

(i.e., agriculture) and “suppressing the branches” (i.e., commerce). The suppression of commercial activities was advocated most strongly in the Legalist masterpiece in the Warring States Period, *The Book of Lord Shang* (商君书), associated with the major Qin reformer Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE). The book proposed a series of coercive measures against the merchants, whose social status should be debased, economic interests undermined, and the number reduced drastically so as to make agriculture the only attractive means of one’s enrichment. However, these recipes fitted the relatively underdeveloped commercial economy of the State of Qin in the early days of that period; they were of no use for the Western Han, the prosperity of which was based on commerce. Another solution was put forward by Jia Yi’s younger contemporary, Chao Cuo (d. 154 BCE), who proposed cutting agricultural taxes. Chao Cuo was often identified as a Legalist, but this proposal fitted well Confucian thought as well. Yet should agricultural taxes be reduced, what would the central government rely on to fund disaster relief and military

expenses? The debates continued with neither Emperor Wen nor Emperor Jing finding an adequate solution.

The problem was solved finally by the time of Emperor Wu. One of his advisors offered him the way of enriching the state without either returning to the early Qin anti-commercial policies or increasing the small landholders' burdens. "Though taxes on the people had not been increased, there was now more than enough to cover the expenditures of the empire."<sup>1</sup> That man was neither Confucian nor Legalist, but a merchant.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

## 4

A year before Emperor Jing's decease, 13-year-old Sang Hongyang, son of a great merchant from Luoyang, became an imperial attendant, thanks to his proficiency in "working sums in his head."<sup>1</sup> Unlike Chang'an, the then capital, Luoyang was a commercial hub where "people preferred engaging in commerce over making official career."<sup>2</sup> The Han Dynasty forbade the merchants from being employed as officials. Only

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 1651.

descendants of prefectural governors and generals could be appointed as imperial attendants. For a merchant's son, to get an appointment within the palace was highly unusual.

Sang Hongyang entered the court to serve as the study partner of Liu Che (who ascended the throne one year later). Hence, Sang and the emperor read the same books. Whenever the emperor went on incognito tours outside the palace, Sang acted as his guardian. Among the guardians of Emperor Wu, many became famous ministers and generals, but Sang Hongyang was not employed in important positions for the next 20 years. His time arrived during the event described above, when merchants refused to donate horses to assist resettling the submissive Xiongnu.

At that moment, the sullen emperor did something that astounded the Confucians. In 120 BCE, acting on Sang Hongyang's advice, he promoted the famous salt merchant Dongguo Xianyang and the iron merchant Kong Jin to be high-ranking officials. Therewith the state monopolized the lucrative salt and iron

trade, which had hitherto been dominated by private merchants. Sang Hongyang, the emperor's attendant and reading mate, was coordinating with them the policies from inside the court.

Salt and iron were the most important consumer goods in ancient China. Their monopolization by the state allowed it to attain the biggest source of business revenue. Many people criticized the state for “fighting for profit” with private merchants, but it was salt and iron merchants who helped the government monopolize the trade. It is interesting that whereas the Roman merchants ruthlessly pressed the government to allow them to enrich themselves, the Han merchants helped the government with macroeconomic regulation which impeded the merchants' private interests.

Aside from the institution of these two monopolies, Sang Hongyang had also promoted two major policies – “equal supply system”<sup>1</sup> (*junshu*, 均输) and “balancing standard” (*pingzhun*, 平准).

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 113.

“Equal supply system” meant that every locality would hand to the government its special products, which would then be delivered and sold in the areas of high demand. For the people, this would save them from paying the merchants’ surcharges; for the state it meant attaining an additional source of income without increasing the agricultural taxes. As for “balancing standard,” this referred to the price adjustment policy aimed at curbing price fluctuations through a government-owned network. Whenever the price of certain goods would rise or drop alarmingly, the government would use its resources to either buy or sell the goods to stabilize prices.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the above measures, Sang Hongyang also unified the currency. Early in the Han Dynasty, due to the Huang-Lao policies of *laissez faire*, minting became decentralized, as it was maintained by prefectures or princedoms. Sang Hongyang regained the court

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<sup>1</sup> In Rome, when emperor Diocletian faced similar fluctuations in 301, he issued an edict capping everything ranging from commodity prices to salaries, but it proved a failure. Emperor Julian made a similar attempt in 362, but also failed.

monopoly on minting, introducing the new *wuzhu* coins, which became thenceforth the only way of payment.<sup>1</sup>

The macroeconomic regulatory policies initiated by Sang Hongyang helped the Han withstand the shocks of natural disasters and the invasions of the Xiongnu. The income from the “equal supply system,” “balancing standard,” and the salt and iron monopolies allowed the government to pay the soldiers’ expenses and provide famine relief. In 81 BCE, during the court debates with his critics, Sang Hongyang emphasized: “It was entirely due to the stores accumulated through the equal supply system and the hoard in public granaries that the troops were supplied and the distressed people succored.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the new macroeconomic regulatory policies did not avoid major flaws. For example, the state-made iron tools frequently failed to meet the

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<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the central government of ancient Rome monopolized only the minting of gold and silver coins, whereas bronze coins were still minted by individual cities.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2 of Huan Kuan’s *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (盐铁论), translated by Esson M. Gale, Taipei: Ch’eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1967, p. 13, with the translation slightly modified.

needs of small landholders (the state-run foundries opted to produce large plows which could be pulled by two oxen only; this benefitted the rich who possessed oxen but not the poor). In enforcing the price adjustment policy, officials often abused their power and carried out forced arbitrary collections. Moreover, the government encouraged the people to report those who concealed properties, and would reward them with a half of the confiscated property if the charge was verified. That led to a nationwide upsurge of denouncements. In his late years, Sang admitted during the salt-and-iron debates of 81 BCE that the results of his policies had somewhat diverged from his original intention: “There are some corrupt officials who do not carry out the government’s prohibitions and decrees, with the result that the people are disturbed and distressed.”<sup>1</sup> Yet flaws aside, the policies worked.

Sang Hongyang made two other memorable moves. First, he lent state-owned farmland to the peasants. Under the land system in the Qin and Han

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 6, *Ibid.*, p. 34, with the translation modified.

dynasties, there was public land owned by the state and private land owned by individuals.<sup>1</sup> In 114 BCE, Sang Hongyang, who had just assumed his first high position in the outer court (a vice minister of agriculture [i.e., finance]), lent the land confiscated from speculators and usurers to the displaced landless peasants. The Roman Empire also established a similar public land system whereby the government lent conquered land to the poor. However, public land dwindled due to the increasing encroachments by the rich and powerful, and the empire finally lost control of it. Meanwhile, in the Han the public land was appropriated by the local magnates (豪强) in the late years of the dynasty.

Another major step taken by Sang Hongyang was consolidating the Han's control over the newly

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<sup>1</sup> The public land was often used as a resource to reallocate the tax burden and prevent concentration of land in private hands. The system acted with different degrees of success, intermittently abandoned and renewed. Its heyday was the institution of the equal-field system in the late fifth century, when the state ensured that every landowner possess enough land to meet tax demands easily. However, the system, which could not accommodate population increase, was ultimately abandoned in the eighth century. Its ups and downs were closely related to the ups and downs in the destiny of individual dynasties.

acquired Western Regions. The Han established four prefectures in the Hexi Corridor primarily as a military installation, but following Sang Hongyang's proposal, this region started being developed agriculturally. The government transferred 600,000 settlers there and to the newly recovered territories in the Hetao area, establishing military settlements. These settlements developed arable lands and provided supplies for the military. The costs of the land reclamation were huge:

*Roads were repaired and provisions sent to the forces from the central part of the empire. All of the men were dependent on the ministry of agriculture for their supplies, although the distance over which supplies had to be transported was anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 lí [400-1,200 km].<sup>1</sup>*

This investment allowed the Han to solidify its control over northwestern territories and expand further into the Western Regions which were eventually

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<sup>1</sup> *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II* (revised edition), translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 80.

put under protectorate by the Eastern Han Dynasty envoy and general, Ban Chao (32-102). These steps proved also crucial for establishing the renowned Silk Road, which passed through the Hexi Corridor westward. Actually, Sang Hongyang seemed to be more committed to the consolidation of western territories even than the emperor himself. During Emperor Wu's late years, Sang advocated establishing agricultural settlements further to the west in Luntai (in the middle of today's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region). These settlements were meant to consolidate the Western Regions; but here the emperor decided to abandon the project and issued an edict calling "to cast away the military means and go back to civilian ways."

What drove the son of a wealthy merchant to lend land to the poor and push the dynasty to spend enormous wealth on expanding the territory to the west desert with bare economic benefits? It was because he had read the Confucian classic *Spring and Autumn Annals* in the *Gongyang* interpretation which reaffirmed the "great unity" as the foundation of the Han Dynasty

politics. As a child reading mate of Emperor Wu, Sang read the *Annals*, and other canonical texts, such as the *Book of Poems* in Lu's version (鲁诗) and the *Book of History* (尚书). Thus, in his senior years, when debating the salt and iron monopolies which were bitterly opposed by the Confucians, Sang was able to refute his critics by resorting to citations from the Confucian classics. The versatility in the classics became a prominent demand on a government employee ever since the advancement of Confucian learning under Emperor Wu. Without the background in canonical works, it would be impossible to promote and defend new policies. However, Sang Hongyang did not just focus on the Confucian classics. In the salt-and-iron debates, he displayed versatility in the Legalist works, as well as economic theories of *Guanzi*. All these shaped his state-centered political approach.

Sang upheld merchant values. He told his critics: "In regulating the expenses for chariots, horses, and robes, and the expenditure of my family, servants, and clients, I balance the debit and credit side of my budget and

live a life of strict economy. I keep account of each and every one of my salaries, appointments, and gifts. My wealth has accrued gradually until I have become rich and acquired an estate.”<sup>1</sup> Yet with all his pride in self-enrichment, he never forgot the public interests, such as investing heavily in land reclamation in the west and flood control in the east. His goal remained management of the affairs of “All-under-Heaven.” He shared the Confucian spirit, but despised empty talk of the Confucian scholars who “know nothing of dealing with the real world but are adept at criticizing others.”<sup>2</sup> He was on the right track. None of the Han Dynasty’s achievements would have been possible without the centralized fiscal system that he helped to create.

So, who was Sang Hongyang? A merchant? An official? A Confucian? A Legalist? From his example one can open endless debates. Is the mission of a merchant to pursue unrestricted personal enrichment, or, in addition to

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 17 of *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, translated by Esson M. Gale, Taipei: Ch’eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1967, p. 106, with the translation modified.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 58 of *Discourses on Salt and Iron*.

benefitting himself, also to contribute to benefitting All-under-Heaven? This question is a focal point of debate among China's merchants. Their different responses have foreshadowed their different destinies.

## 5

Sang Hongyang's contemporary in ancient Rome was Marcus Licinius Crassus (ca. 115-53 BCE), part of the Triumvirate with Caesar and Pompey, and Rome's most prominent merchant. He is best remembered for his victory over the slave revolt led by Spartacus.

Crassus was "the richest man in Rome." According to Plutarch, as Rome had no public fire brigade at that time, Crassus formed a private fire brigade of 500 slaves and turned up wherever in Rome a fire broke out, offering to extinguish the house fire as long as

the owner first sold it to him at a low price. If the owner refused, the house would be burnt down; if he accepted, Crassus would put out the fire, renovate the house, and then lease it to the miserable seller at a high price.<sup>1</sup> In this way, he got half of Rome for nothing. He was also the biggest slave trader in Rome, with his human trade spanning plantations in Italy to silver mines in Spain. His fortune was equal to the annual revenue of the Roman treasury.

Crassus' generosity as a statesman was as startling as his voracity as a merchant. He used one tenth of his wealth to fund ceremonies, and distributed living allowances to each Roman citizen for three months. This largesse won him an easy election in 70 BCE, making him joint consul with Pompey. By contrast, it was after 10 years of fierce battleground fighting that Caesar made the Triumvirate with them.

A well-known quote of Crassus reads, "no man was to be accounted rich that could not maintain an army at his

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<sup>1</sup> See Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur Hugh Clough, New York: The Modern Library, 1992, p. 651.

own cost and charges.”<sup>1</sup> He died bravely on the expedition to Parthia – for his own interests as well as Rome’s. There was an unspoken rule in ancient Rome whereby whoever conquered new land would be first to plunder its wealth. However, Crassus never captured Parthia. The Parthian cavalry executed him and filled his head with gold.

Like Rome, there were also many greedy and lawless merchants in the Han Dynasty; unlike Rome, Confucianism opposed merchants’ participation in politics. In the Han Dynasty, the recommendation and examination system was to select grassroots officials and Confucian scholars who were proficient in classics, excluding merchants (that Sang Hongyang, as a merchant’s son, participated in politics, was an exception in the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, rather than a commonplace). The Tang Dynasty even did not allow merchants to participate in the imperial examinations. This prohibition was changed in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) with the economy becoming increasingly prosperous. The elites

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

of merchants could have different channels to engage in politics. Despite the differences in the policies on merchants' participation in politics throughout the Song, Yuan (1271-1368), Ming, and Qing dynasties, the common prerequisite for merchants to enter politics was receiving Confucian education and making particular contributions to the country. This was the origin of China's tradition of Confucian merchants. It would be impossible for merchants with a bad reputation – like Crassus – to become prominent statesmen in China.

On the other hand, although Roman Stoic ethics, like Confucian morality, also imposed strict moral requirements on officials and rejected Crassus' behavior, Roman politics was determined by elections: As long as Crassus could afford an army and enough votes, he could maintain political power. There were many bankers, tax farmers, and slave traders like Crassus in the Mediterranean world created by ancient Rome. They invested in imperial politics, but escaped unharmed when the Western Roman Empire collapsed.

They succeeded under the “barbarian” rulers and under the church rule, and transformed themselves into new feudal lords. As Peter Heather observed, after the Western Roman Empire collapsed in 476, local elites, especially Roman landowners, had to choose to cooperate with the barbarian kingdoms and surrender to the barbarian kings in order to maintain their land wealth (the status of these people depended almost entirely on the ownership of land, and wealth tied to the land was immovable). These local elites thus threw off their allegiance to the empire.<sup>1</sup>

In modern times, some scholars averred that only by the late Ming Dynasty did “sprouts of capitalism” emerge in China. The spirit of commerce was considered as secondary to the agricultural mainstream of China’s Confucian civilization. But this is not

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<sup>1</sup> In Peter Heather’s opinion, “when the Roman state started to fail, you were left with little choice. You either had to mend fences with your nearest incoming barbarian king so as to secure the continuation of your property rights, or give up the elite status into which you had been born. If, as the Empire collapsed around them, Roman landowners perceived the slightest chance of holding on to their lands, they were bound to take it.” Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 432.

necessarily the case. The commercial spirit was not secondary but rather an important component of Confucian civilization. It formed early in Chinese history, and did not just passively accept Confucianism, but rather generated substantial changes in Confucian doctrines. As Sang Hongyang said, commerce could also be the foundation of a country: “To enrich the state, why should one see agriculture as the only root? To provide for the people, why should one arrange only ‘well-fields?’”<sup>1</sup> In his view, China should establish a big market integrating diverse commodities so that “each one could obtain what he desired and go back to his occupation as the exchange completed.”<sup>2</sup> He maintained that people’s not getting rich was not due to a lack of morality, but to commercial inadequacy: “When [the country] possesses resources of mountains and seas, but the people are deficient in their wealth –

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 of *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, translated by Esson M. Gale, Taipei: Ch’eng-Wen Publishing Company, 1967, p. 17, with the translation modified. The “well-field” system is an idealized system of equitable landholding promulgated in the book of *Mencius* and endorsed by the Han and later Confucians.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 1, *Ibid.*, p. 6, with the translation modified.

this is because the merchants and the artisans did not make adequate preparations.”<sup>1</sup> These ideas derived from the economic thought of the “Light and Heavy” chapters from *Guanzi*, a text composed in the State of Qi during the Warring States Period. This “Light and Heavy” school of thought proposed regulating wealth through market forces, using currency to shape prices, and guiding social behavior through the mechanism of profit. It also opposed mandatory regulation through administrative measures. These ideas sound very modern. There are many reasons why capitalism did not successfully develop in China, but for sure China did not lack the seeds of commercial civilization.

There is a prevailing view that Sang Hongyang was mainly arguing for state control and nationalization of key industries, so he can hardly be viewed as a spokesman for commercial capitalism and free market economy. However, free market and state regulation are not mutually exclusive. In the Han Dynasty, only a unified political order could create a unified domestic

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7, with the translation modified. Sang cited *Guanzi*.

market, which may not be a “free market” in the Western sense, but an “effective market” in the Chinese sense (according to Justin Yifu Lin’s argument that an effective market is in combination with a capable government).

As Cho-yun Hsu’s research on the Han Dynasty’s agriculture showed, a unified political order will promote the dynamism of the commodity economy and the formation of a unified market network, while a fragmented situation will lead to the degradation of the commodity economy and the emergence of a self-sufficient manor economy (such as *wubao* [坞堡] in the Eastern Han Dynasty, a construction for the rich to defend themselves). Cho-yun Hsu pointed out that farming in the Han Dynasty was agrarian, yet mercantile agrarian. “An agrarian, yet mercantile agrarian, society knit the individual farmer into a massive economic network. The situation is, therefore, very different from the common image of an ancient Chinese agrarian society made up of scattered, isolated, self-

sufficient cells, which were the farming households.”<sup>1</sup> “Family-farm production, therefore, would encourage development of a mercantile agrarianism by which transactions were carried along a treelike structure that seemed to tie the scattered settlements (villages and towns) into a marketing network.... Commercialization would link the local economy to an integrated regional and, ultimately, national economic system.... In the time of Ssu-ma Ch’ien [Sima Qian], around the first century B.C., there were staple goods, such as chestnuts of Yen and a number of other areas, dates of An-i and Ch’in, oranges of Shu, Han, and Chiang-ling, catalpa of the region between the Huai, Chi, and the Yellow rivers, lacquer in Ch’en and Hsia, mulberry trees and hemp in Ch’i and Lu, and bamboo in the Wei valley. These all appear as products in national markets.”<sup>2</sup>

Similar to Justin Yifu Lin’s viewpoint that an effective market depends on a capable government,

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<sup>1</sup> Cho-yun Hsu, *Han Agriculture: The Formation of Early Chinese Agrarian Economy (206 B.C.-A.D.220)*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

Cho-yun Hsu put, “The pivot of active transactions hinged on the stability of the political order. When the empire was unified, when roads were good, when travel was safe, interregional specialization would pull individual farmers in the village to participate in a gigantic marketing network. When political conditions deteriorated, as when the empire was divided and the central government failed to rule effectively, and in more practical terms, when former special export products could not be shipped out and staple goods from outside became too expensive to acquire, the farmer had to change his habits of production and consumption.... There emerged, therefore, a self-sufficient rural community. Since such a small community was often under the dominance of local leaders, it could easily exhibit the characteristics of a manorial system.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, active market transactions are premised on a unified order (unobstructed roads, safe journeys, and a unified market), and are inseparable from the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

state's macro-control to regulate the flow of materials and stabilize prices to ensure market stability. This implies that the market economy does not conflict with the state.

From the very beginning, industry and commerce in China were enmeshed with Confucian moral ethics, and eventually became enmeshed with the concept of responsibilities for the state and All-under-Heaven as well. Some believe that it was these dual constraints that precluded the early appearance of Western-style entrepreneurship in China. However, moral ethics and collective responsibilities pose the questions that Western entrepreneurs cannot escape today: Can pure self-interest automatically lead to common social benefit? Can a free economy be divorced from national sovereignty? In China, these questions were raised 2,000 years ago and have been thought about ever since.

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## *Chapter III*

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# THE ROMAN EMPIRE

*1*

By the time when Wang Mang put an end to the Western Han Dynasty in the year 8 CE, the Roman Empire had been newly founded by Octavian, who was similar in many ways to Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty – Liu Che.

Both were talented young men. Liu ascended the throne at 15, and in his 20s he began turning Confucianism into the dynasty's guiding thought, and started fighting the Xiongnu. He had accomplished these two tasks before turning 49. Octavian became a military leader at 19, consolidated the fragmented state

at 32, and set up a complete system for the Roman Empire before his 47th birthday.<sup>1</sup>

Both were complex men. Historical evaluations of Liu Che have swung over 2,000 years between his being a belligerent militarist and a visionary, gifted emperor. Follower of Confucian doctrines as he was, he behaved like a Legalist, but his refusal to resume some of the mutilating punishments of the Qin's legal regulations would otherwise rule out any Legalist pretensions. Emperor Wu also had a passion for Daoism, yet made Confucianism the empire's guiding thought.

Octavian was similarly complex. He formed the Second Triumvirate solely to make the Senate practically functionless, yet later cooperated with the latter to eliminate the Triumvirate. He kept the name of the republic, but changed its inner operation. He called himself a republican leader, but he was actually an emperor. The many hats he wore in government included those of consul, tribune, and *pontifex maximus*,

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<sup>1</sup> Nic Fields, *The Roman Army: the Civil Wars 88-31 BC*, London: Osprey Publishing, 2008, p. 53.

but his true power lay in the Roman army of 180,000 soldiers. He never set up a clear inheritance system, but the throne of the empire was passed down within his family.

The reason why Octavian and Liu Che were so complex lies in the fact that both the Han Dynasty and the Rome Empire were super-scale and complex political entities governing a huge population and boundless territories, which could not be well integrated through a single theory, system or arrangement in the initial stage.

But the two great minds thought alike when it came to state governance.

Octavian laid great emphasis on the importance of institution building. Apart from emphasizing the building of bureaucratic, military, and tax official systems, he also attached great importance to national ideology, and hoped to unite people with the traditional morality passed down from early Rome advocating loyalty and responsibility to the family, the state, and the Roman gods. Like Liu Che who gained the

support of Dong Zhongshu, Octavian also attracted many great minds. One was Virgil, who authored *The Aeneid* imitating Homer's epics of ancient Greece and constructed the Roman identity. Another was the historian Livy, who wrote *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, the history of Rome, in which he summarized the rise and fall of Rome over 700 years and criticized factionalism. And yet another was Horace, whose *Satires* lambasted rampant corruption and called on the people to fulfill their responsibility to family and state.

But the two leaders adopted entirely different approaches and saw different results.

Octavian put in place a civil official system. To prevent powerful magnates' destructive influence on politics, he boldly incorporated them in this system. Equestrians could start their careers as trainees, progress to the system of tax officials, and rise to the rank of provincial treasurer. Those from the top echelon could enter the Senate. The joint rule by patricians and equestrians (i.e., "the concord of very different people") advocated by Cicero was thus

realized in its true sense.<sup>1</sup> By comparison, the Han sought talents largely from the humble for its civil official system.<sup>2</sup> The modern Chinese historian Qian Mu remarked that the Han Dynasty was the first among Chinese dynasties to advocate a “common people’s spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

The hierarchy of officials in the Roman Empire’s government ended at the provincial level, below which there were no bureaucrats but autonomous kingdoms, cities, and tribes with their own management systems. As the British political scientist Samuel E. Finer said, the Roman Empire was a huge holding-company

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<sup>1</sup> See Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, edited by James E. G. Zetzel, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 52. “[I]f there is not an equitable balance in the state of rights and duties and responsibilities, so that there is enough power in the hands of the magistrates and enough authority in the judgment of the aristocrats and enough freedom in the people, then the condition of the commonwealth cannot be preserved unchanged.”

<sup>2</sup> The Qin really gave the humble a chance to advance through military attainments.

<sup>3</sup> See Qian Mu, *Outline of Chinese History* (国史大纲), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1991, p. 128.

made up of city-states.<sup>1</sup> The emperor appointed a governor and some treasurers to deal with taxation, military, and judicial affairs of each province, but provided no education or public cultural services to the local underclass.<sup>2</sup> The treasurers cared only about provincial-level affairs, and felt disinclined to set up a hierarchical management system that included the grassroots level. “Structurally, this empire [the Roman empire] was a constellation of a myriad self-governing cities – 10,000 in the east alone.... The empire in this phase was little but a superstructure for co-ordination and control; high policy was indeed made at the top, but the dynamics of workaday affairs came from the cities.”<sup>3</sup>

The governors, instead, assigned the task of tax

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol.1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 537. “The empire, we have said, was a great holding-company of cities.”

<sup>2</sup> As Finer pointed out, in the early Roman Empire, some governors, such as the governor of Britain, Agricola, actually encouraged the construction of urban culture and provided (Romanized) education for chiefs’ sons. *Ibid.*, p. 541.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 532.

collection to local leaders, who usually had a decisive say in local affairs. Governors' decisions were generally based on the will of local power groups. For example, Roman governor Pontius Pilate was reluctant to execute Jesus Christ, but ultimately ordered his crucifixion upon the insistence of the Sanhedrin, an elite council of Jewish priests and lay elders. Governors had no concern for civil affairs, nor did they hold public funds. It was local wealthy citizens who campaigned keenly for the positions of magistrate and councilor that generally footed the bill for local development and grand celebrations.<sup>1</sup> Just as Finer pointed out, the Romans did not invent the notion of a salaried professional bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> "In the Roman Empire most of the work that civil servants undertook in [the

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<sup>1</sup> "It was left to them to provide such local services as they chose, such as education, corn supply, water supply, public works, the care of streets and buildings, market regulation, and a civic and rural constabulary. They also provided certain vital services to the central government, for they were responsible for levying recruits, sometimes for repairing the roads and bridges, for maintaining the post-houses on the arterial highways[.]" *Ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

Han Dynasty] China was done by unpaid magistrates and councillors in the cities or by the army (which, when not on campaign, carried out many civilian tasks such as road-budding [sic] and policing).”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the councilors and magistrates in local cities not only provided services for free, but were also expected to endow their cities. As J. W. Thompson observed, in the later period of the empire, they had to make up the difference by themselves when the tax amount was not met. Such municipal office was increasingly so heavy a burden that the rich shunned it, and the government had to force the wealthy to hold official positions. A large number of wealthy families fled to escape the burden of official positions, and were arrested and punished, and then the government had to make their city official positions hereditary.<sup>2</sup>

From the core areas to the marginal regions of the Roman Empire, the welfare endowed by the elites to

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 535-536.

<sup>2</sup> James Westfall Thompson and Edgar Nathaniel Johnson, *An Introduction to Medieval Europe 300-1500*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1937, p. 15.

the plebeians decreased. Comparatively, the empire gave more care to the plebeians in its core areas (the city of Rome and the Italian alliance on the Italian Peninsula). For example, the urban life on the Italian Peninsula was quite colorful, and the plebeians were provided with many living facilities (the cities were provided with baths, circuses, marketplaces, aqueducts and were remarkable for their planning, cleanliness and excellent sanitation; even the poor could share in the civic amenities). But the plebeians in the vaster, non-core areas were not covered by such welfare, as Rome was more willing to grant certain interests to the elites to encourage them to rule those areas. Thus, ancient Rome was an alliance of the elites in the Mediterranean excluding the masses in the non-core areas.

It was an empire shared by the Mediterranean aristocracy that was built on the foundation of the people at the rock bottom of society. “*Sociologically* – and politically too – Rome resembled the Han Empire in that society consisted, broadly speaking, of a narrow propertied elite ruling over the wide masses of

peasants and labourers, but the *nature* of the Roman ruling stratum was quite different from the Chinese. It reflected the structural make-up described above, that is, its basis consisted of the myriad self-governing local units.”<sup>1</sup> As Western academics have remarked, the Roman Empire possessed an unprecedentedly sophisticated and complex superstructure, but its economic base was crude and simple agricultural slavery. “The extraordinary achievements of Graeco-Roman civilization had been the property of a small ruling stratum, entirely divorced from production. Manual labour was identified with servitude, and was *eo ipso* degrading. Economically, the slave mode of production led to technical stagnation: there was no impulse to labour-saving improvements within it.”<sup>2</sup>

The cultural foundation reflected that of its economy. All the elites, except in the east where

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol.1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 532-533.

<sup>2</sup> See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, London: Verso, 2013, p. 116.

Greek remained equally important, could speak Latin. However, teaching it to the general public (outside of the Italian Peninsula) was never considered. Even during the 300 years after Gaul and Spain were incorporated into Rome, peasants still spoke their native Celtic tongue. The “Roman identity” that Octavian had painstakingly created never encompassed the general public because the Latin language remained the patrician reserve.<sup>1</sup> Note the myriad of inscriptions – including tomb epitaphs – in Rome. It was what the Roman historians called “cultural *koine*.”

Similar to Latin which had once tied diverse elites to Roman culture and politics, Chinese *guanhua* (官话) was for those with due ambitions to advance socially in China. And Confucianism played a role in building cultural unity very much like the religious cults promulgated through the Roman Empire. The Romans’ common culture – e.g., theater, sports, etc. – was stronger than that of ancient China, because it unified

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<sup>1</sup> In Europe, Latin became a lingua franca for many centuries (until the 18th century) after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

the rulers and the ruled. But one advantage of ancient China was that, Chinese characters, as ideograms, could surmount the barriers of dialects and local pronunciations, and therefore maintained the cultural identity of elites across the country for over 2,000 years. Yet Latin, as a language based on phonograms (phonetic symbols), became gradually and slowly localized and further differentiated. Consequently, spoken Latin was replaced by vernaculars in the late Middle Ages, and written Latin also withdrew from the historical stage in the 18th century, leading to the later divergence of the European elites.

The linguistic community did undeniably disintegrate in modern Europe, although classical civilization was rediscovered after the Renaissance, and it was just the demands of modern economic and scientific-technological education rather than Latin's functional deficiencies that had gradually resulted in the language's loss of its position in the modern Western elite education. Nevertheless, the cultural community still exists, and Roman culture is the eternal cultural

root of the modern European elites. The only thing that has disappeared is the sense of “a unified Roman state.”

China’s linguistic community and cultural community have never experienced the process of “loss and rediscovery.” The disintegration of a certain dynasty, or even the end of the entire ancient history, did not shake the existence of the two. In contemporary Chinese society, ancient history and literary classics do not function as elite education but as compulsory education. For example, nowadays the common Chinese people are still able to read the *Book of Songs* (诗经) and the *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian – masterpieces that were created 2,000 years ago, while the modern ordinary Westerners have difficulty reading Cicero’s writings and ancient Roman poetry in Latin, and only some elites can master Latin. In terms of the comparison regarding languages and cultures, the more important difference between China and Europe is that the former’s strong sense of “a unified state” has never been interrupted.

Similar to the Roman Empire, when the central

authority collapsed in China, there would also be certain cases of regionalism, as the old saying goes, “the Heaven is high and the emperor is far away” (天高皇帝远). However, the mainstream ideology of the elites was always to rebuild the great unity, and restore the order under “the Way of the [True] Monarch”. The folk beliefs and local customs (such as witchcraft and divination) were, anyway, just what Robert Redfield called “small traditions,” while “big traditions” were still the belief of assuming responsibilities to the family, the state, and All-under-Heaven advocated by Confucianism.

To some extent, there were similar integration measures taken by both Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties, but the former focused on the army and the latter on civilian cultivation, leading to different effects. Just as Finer said, the army was “in some areas the most powerful of all agents of Romanization.”<sup>1</sup> However, the Romanization promoted by the army was

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol.1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 534.

superficial. “Romanization spread downwards from the local oligarchies to the wider circle of city dwellers, and outwards, where it was often superficial and disappeared with the empire[.]”<sup>1</sup> With the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the army, the common identity *Romanitas* was gradually weakening. When the ruling class was disintegrating, the underclass would seek their own fortunes and discard all that was ancient Rome.

By comparison, the Qin and Han dynasties connected the upper and the lower classes through a system of civil officials at the county and township levels. The government selected able talents and, after strict evaluation, put them in various government positions, including taxation, civil affairs, justice, cultural affairs, and education.

According to the Juyan Han Bamboo Slips excavated in northwest China, even bottom-ranking officials responsible for reclamation in the Western Regions were expected to be competent in math, governance,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

and law.<sup>1</sup> Township-level officials should also read history books, write documents, and be versed in social etiquette.<sup>2</sup> In addition to administrative affairs, minor Han officials also needed to promote public cultural affairs.<sup>3</sup> It was the duty of prefectural chiefs and county officials to build schools and promote the education of Confucian ethics and Chinese character writing ability among the lower classes (in the non-core areas), in this way gradually uniting people from both upper and lower classes and from different regions and creating a cultural community.

Someone argued that the disadvantage of the “central-government-dispatched officials system” (*linguanzhi*, 流官制) was that, as the officials presiding over local affairs were from other places, they were not familiar with local conditions, and were prone to make

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<sup>1</sup> See Li Junming, “Research on ‘Accounting’ in Han Bamboo Slips (I)” (汉简“会计”考[上]), *Research on Excavated Texts*, 1998, Issue No. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Huang Hui, *Discourse Weighed in the Balance with Annotations* (论衡校释), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990, p. 1123.

<sup>3</sup> See *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, annotated by Yan Shigu, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1999, pp. 248-249.

wrong decisions. However, China solved the problem with the system of “separating officials from clerks (官吏分途),” that is, using local people as “clerks” (*li*, 吏) to assist and counterbalance the “central-government-dispatched officials” from other places. Such a policy thus prevented the officials from becoming feudal lords or being regionalist, and further prevented the emergence of “absolute cultural localism.” This meant that even if the central government were to fall, the Chinese people could still continue to read and write the same Chinese characters, follow the same code of ethics, and share the same culture. This was the social foundation on which many a unified dynasty rose from ashes.

Just in terms of building a cultural community, China is not the sole achiever. The Roman Empire and Islamic Caliphate also have their own successes. But China successfully maintained both cultural unity and political unity in comparison.<sup>1</sup> Jane Burbank and

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the single most successful process of creating a common cultural identity was of the Arab Caliphate which turned disparate peoples from Morocco to Iraq into Arabs and (overwhelmingly) Muslims.

Frederick Cooper both attributed the success to China's institution of rule by officials, which is convincing. As they mentioned, "empires had to keep their intermediaries both subordinate and loyal. Rome and China came up with distinct ways to do this and their managerial strategies are another part of the answer for why China revived and Rome did not. For China, the key institution was rule by officials. The empire had been created out of conflicts between rival kings, and the main threat to Chinese empire from the start was that subordinated royals or other regional powers could tear the polity apart again or seize command. Against this possibility, Qin and Han leaders created their system of centralized officialdom extending to the countryside. Recruitment, education, and examinations mobilized talent from localities, drawing the best and the brightest into the imperial administration. The rewards for imperial elites could be enormous – in resources, prestige, and a cultured way of life – and

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But, interestingly, this cultural unity, which is very much alive today, did not bring about political unity.

perhaps this is why Chinese empire remained a political ideal worth fighting for in the long interludes between successful dynasties.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 57.

## 2

The second difference between ancient Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties lies in the relationship between the respective polities' political power and military force.

Octavian rose to power from the military. He resolved in the way of a warlord the relationship between the government and the military. After annexing the treasury of the richest Egypt into his *fiscus*, he allocated money out of the *fiscus* to pay his legions.<sup>1</sup> No longer generals' private property, these

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<sup>1</sup> "There was no absolute divide between the emperor's resources and

troops, however, constituted the emperor's private legions. This led to a two-way rule whereby on the one hand, the military belonged to whoever paid the most; and on the other, should the emperor fail to pay the soldiers, he would be replaced. As may be expected, peace reigned for just 50 years after Octavian's decease.

During the civil war from 68 to 69, warlords rushed to the capital to take part in the disputes over the throne. According to statistics, in the 364 years from Octavian to Constantine, there was a change of emperor every six years on average; among them, 39 emperors died at the hands of the guards and the army, accounting for 70 percent of the total, and only 12 emperors died of natural causes, less than 20 percent.

At first, the Praetorian Guard, mainly from Italy, manipulated the emperor to the extent that even a rightful successor could only ascend the throne by bribing them, and they would kill and replace the

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those of the Roman state. Under Augustus's successors, an office called the *fiscus* – or 'money bag' – was charged with administering both the emperor's personal lands and the provinces assigned to his direct governance." *Ibid.*, p. 33.

successor if they were not satisfied with the bribes. For instance, in 193, Julianus was killed after only a 60-day reign.<sup>1</sup> The most shocking scene was the auctioning of the throne to the patricians and the senators in front of the military camp.

It was frontier warlords that conquered the Praetorian Guard: Septimius Severus, governor of a frontier province, led legions of various provinces in dismissing native Italian soldiers and occupying Rome, and thereby established the Severan Dynasty. They slaughtered the Roman patricians and magnates and confiscated their wealth to pay the military. Soldiers' payment doubled, but avarice knew no bounds. The Severan Dynasty fell in 235 when Emperor Severus Alexander died at the hands of his own military. In the ensuing 50 years, Rome had 23 rulers, each of whom died in a military coup within a year after taking the throne.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Cassius Dio, *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, lxxiv, 17.5, London: Penguin, 1987; "Didius Julianus," *Historia Augusta*, Volume I, translated by David Magie, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> Military coups and civil wars generally occurred when an emperor who was killed had designated no one to succeed and avenge him.

Having collapsed, the economy of the late Roman Empire could not afford abundant rewards. As no citizens from the city of Rome wanted to be soldiers, the emperor had to hire Germanic guards. After that, the empire's fate fell into the hands of the leaders of barbarian mercenaries. Alaric, Odoacer and Theodoric, who captured Rome, were all mercenary leaders. We must recognize that the most remarkable achievement of the Roman Empire was that it did not disintegrate despite frequent coups and civil wars in the early times. Its resilience proved the success of the Roman cultural project. Also, the Germanic soldiers of the first centuries became profoundly Romanized. All the things, however, changed after the Crisis of the Third Century and Rome had to cope with the crisis caused by large-scale barbarian invasions. Rome thrived thanks to the military but also fell because of it. Tacitus once said that the secret of the Roman Empire lay in the emperor's fate being in the hands of the military.

Why could Rome not control military intervention in political power? The first reason is that Rome had

no grassroots government, and it was the military that performed many administrative functions. Provincial governors relied on the military to maintain social order and collect taxes which were then paid to the military. The surge of provincial troops and taxation created a scene where governors who were supposed to represent the central government turned into local warlords. In comparison, the military in the Qin and Han dynasties had no power either to collect taxes or manage civil affairs. Under the guarantee of a sound civil official system, the military was made up of peasant conscripts who would be recruited as soldiers in wartime but return to farming after the war.<sup>1</sup> Border troops also supported themselves by farming. They did not, however, become vested interest groups like Roman legions.

The second reason is the vanishing of the Roman military's loyalty to the central authority in the late

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<sup>1</sup> This ended in the late Western Han Dynasty. To some extent, China moved gradually in the Roman direction of mercenary troops and warlordism in the period of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The end of the Eastern Han Dynasty was precisely the "Roman way."

Roman Empire. The army institution was used to help build a Roman identity. “Roman towns are studded with inscriptions attesting to native sons who had retired from being a *primus pilus* and had settled down to become the big man of the locality.”<sup>1</sup> The soldiers proudly received a hefty payment when they retired and wrote on their inscriptions: I am a veteran of such-and-such legion. However, once the central authority declined, the soldiers’ Roman identity would gradually disintegrate. Montesquieu said that, far away from Rome, legions would soon forget their home. He noted: “But when the legions crossed the Alps and the sea, the warriors, who had to be left in the countries they were subjugating for the duration of several campaigns, gradually lost their citizen spirit. And the generals, who disposed of armies and kingdoms, sensed their own strength and could obey no longer. The soldiers then began to recognize no one but their general, to base all their hopes on him, and to feel more remote from the

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol. 1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 552.

city.”<sup>1</sup>

In the late Roman Empire, although the troops still kept partial loyalty to the emperor (for example, they worshipped the emperor and the goddess Roma), although they still had a sense of honor as Roman soldiers (as indicated by the inscriptions of veterans), and although there emerged famous generals defending the empire with no fear of sacrifice (such as General Flavius Stilicho who was half-Vandal in origin), it was undeniable that the empire’s military was composed mainly of mercenaries, especially barbarian mercenaries, rather than citizen soldiers. The economic foundation underlying citizen soldiers – the owner-peasant economy – had been destroyed. Before that, citizens played the roles of both soldiers and peasants, and were willing to defend their country with the motivation of the post-conquest reward of land and their strong patriotism. Nonetheless, after mercenaries

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, translated, with notes and an introduction by David Lowenthal, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1999, p. 95.

replaced citizen soldiers, the patriotism of Roman soldiers declined. The military was gradually privatized into armed forces claiming allegiance to mercenary chiefs. With the collapse of the empire's central authority, wars broke out among warlords in various regions, who either proclaimed themselves emperors or cooperated with barbarians.<sup>1</sup>

They would no longer swear loyalty to the remote city of Rome and Ravenna (the capital of the late Western Roman Empire), nor would they defend the

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<sup>1</sup> In invasion of central European tribes led by the Vandals, over the Rhine on New Year's Eve 406, an irruption into western Gaul and then (in 409) into Spain was almost unresisted; and also in 407 another invasion of Gaul, this time by a usurper, Constantine III (406-411), at the head of the army of Roman Britain. After Stilicho was executed in 408, his Italian troops were massacred or fled to Alaric. When Goths went north into Gaul, "they found and contributed to, a still greater confusion, with as many as four rival emperors in 411, most of them the protégés of different 'barbarian' groups." See Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, London: Penguin, 2009, p. 89. Military leaders fought over the young Valentinian, with Aetius winning out by 433 and ruling the West as *magister militum* until 454. After Aetius was assassinated by Valentinian III personally in 454, emperors were always overthrown by military coups (like Emperor Majorian), and then the army supported puppet emperors (like Ricimer). Until Odovacer, the next effective military supremo in Italy (476-493), did not bother to appoint any emperor of the West, and governed Italy in Zeno's name as *patricius*. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

empire. Or rather, they had lost interest in “centralized authority” as an institution, and did not think themselves obliged to reinvent the empire.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, although China basically prevented the emergence of warlords through the grassroots official system in the Western Han Dynasty, in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, it was confronted with a situation similar to that facing the late Roman Empire. Accumulated for several centuries, the drawbacks of the Han Dynasty’s recommendation and examination system led to local magnates gradually gaining control over the local bureaucratic system, and some people, breaking away from the administration of the *junxian* system, attached themselves to local magnates. Consequently, most of the local warlords in the late years of the dynasty were once prefectural governors. Nonetheless, Confucian ethics’ high moral demand of maintaining political

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, in 490, “there were still armies which looked to Rome, under Aegidius around Soissons, Arbogast around Trier, and Riothamus, a British warlord, on the Loire; but Aegidius had recognized no emperor since Majorian, and these can be regarded as effectively independent polities, probably using rather fewer Roman traditions than the Goths and Burgundians did.” *Ibid.*, p. 95.

unity had once greatly curbed military leaders' desires for independence.

For example, Ban Chao, a famous general in the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty, was born in a family upholding Confucianism. His elder brother Ban Gu, a Confucian scholar and a historian as great as Sima Qian, joined Dou Xian, a relative of the emperor, in defeating the Northern Xiongnu, and drafted the "Inscriptions at the Yanran Mountains" upon the victory. But Ban Gu died in prison at the age of 60 after becoming embroiled in Dou's alleged treason.

Ban Chao, meanwhile, was in a remote corner in the Western Regions, where he was preparing for a major campaign along with his motley squad of 1,000 soldiers encircled by tens of thousands of troops from small local city-states. He used his diplomatic and strategic skills to restore governance over the Western Regions and reopen the ancient Silk Road. The Western Regions were thousands of miles from the imperial court, separated by the world's second largest quicksand desert. The nomadic Yuezhi and Kushan

people as well as the small city-states in the Western Regions respected no one from the Han court but Ban Chao. Faced with the political risk of being implicated in treason, he could have chosen to rule the Western Regions. However, he lodged no complaint with the court about his brother's grievance, but instead focused on the hard battles ahead. All the 50 city-states in the Western Regions submitted to the Han's protectorate.

After the campaign, Ban became terminally ill. He made only one request – to be buried in his hometown, without taking any private troops away. He repeatedly implored the emperor to let him return home, but to no avail. His younger sister, Ban Zhao (ca. 49-ca. 120), interceded with the emperor on his behalf. In the end, he was permitted to return, but passed away a month or so after his return.

Ban Chao was exactly a typical representative of China's scholar generals who were exceptionally obedient to the central government, with other representatives such as Wei Qing, Huo Qubing, Ma Yuan (14 BCE-49 CE), and Dou Rong (16 BCE-62

CE).

Some say that the Roman military's ability to intervene in politics stemmed from the "moderate autocracy" of the Roman Empire, as opposed to the "absolute autocracy" of the Han Dynasty. They hold that the military's obedience could only be sustained by the central authority's strict control rather than its own free will. But this can be refuted by another example – Huangfu Song (d. 195).

He was a renowned general in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, when local generals' power became increasingly strong with the decline of imperial power. After Huangfu Song suppressed the Yellow Turban Rebellion, some urged him to consolidate his military power, since the emperor, although weak in power, might kill him in court due to his conspicuous achievements. Huangfu refused, saying: "Day and night I think of common good; my heart does not forget about loyalty. Why then should I not be at peace?" He also said: "Although there is much slanderous talk, at most I shall be expelled and dismissed. Yet

still I possess my fine name; and when I die, it shall not decay.”<sup>1</sup> He returned to Chang’an and gave up his military power. Why would Huangfu Song obey the rules in such a case of weak imperial power? It was not out of fear of imperial autocracy, but rather active obedience to the Confucian concept of loyalty to royal authority.

However, not all the generals in the Eastern Han behaved like Huangfu Song. As mentioned above, events in the late Eastern Han Dynasty happened much like those in the Roman Empire, and China was also confronted with warlordism. When the order of the central government collapsed, the loyalty of local governors to the central government declined.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, a significant difference between the

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<sup>1</sup> See “The Biographies of Huangfu Song and Zhu Jun,” *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (后汉书).

<sup>2</sup> Fox example, Dong Zhuo, and dozens of warlords divided the empire among them (including Liu Bei and Sun Quan). Armies were privatized and heeded only their generals. It was only with the garrison militia system (府兵制) of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581) that the situation became more manageable; but after that, in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, China reverted to warlordism again. The Song decided to put an end to this, willing to pay the price of a weaker military.

warlords of the late Eastern Han and those in the late Roman Empire was that, although the former each established separate rule, they did not dare to overtly proclaim themselves emperors, and would superficially support the legitimate Son of Heaven (i.e., the emperor of the Han). Even Cao Cao, with the greatest might at the time, could only command the nobles through his control of the emperor. The sole legitimate reason for the warlords to launch wars was to end division and reunify the country, since “separate rule within a small territory” had never been legitimate in China’s political tradition of “great unity.” Even such treacherous ministers as Dong Zhuo also awed the righteousness advocated by Confucius in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (as Mencius said, “Confucius completed the ‘Spring and Autumn’ and rebellious ministers and villainous sons were struck with terror”<sup>1</sup>[孔子成春秋，而乱臣贼子惧]).

After the collapse of the Eastern Han, China also

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Mencius*, Translated, with Critical and Exegetical notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes by James Legge, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970, p. 283.

faced “barbarian” invasions for several centuries as Rome did. Yet even the generals of those five nomadic tribes (*wuhu*, 五胡) in China all stuck to the doctrine of “reunifying All-under-Heaven (China)” rather than occupying a piece of territory to establish separate rule by each ethnic group. In a word, both the warlords of the Han Dynasty and of the five nomadic tribes in China pursued reinventing the empire rather than dividing and dismantling it.<sup>1</sup>

The tradition of great unity in the Chinese civilization produced a unique military tradition called “scholar generals.” Under the dual forces of the Legalist system and Confucian consciousness, there were civil officials controlling the army at most times, which ensured comparatively lasting stability. Despite

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<sup>1</sup> What is remarkable is that the empire was able to reinvent itself thanks to the reforms of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) and its successor polities. Compared with the Northern Dynasties, the Six Dynasties in the south (from the Kingdom of Wu to the Southern Dynasties) were in the process of ongoing warlord turmoil for almost four centuries. The Jiankang government (in today’s Nanjing) could not effectively control even Xiangyang, not to say Sichuan or Guangdong. Certainly, it is for this reason that the Northern Dynasties could annex the Southern Dynasties and unify the whole China.

occasional setbacks between unified dynasties, the system gradually took shape. Sinologists acknowledge that “civil officials controlling the army” was a hallmark of the Chinese civilization. To some extent, Cicero’s dream of “arms giving place to the gown” came true in China.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, we must clarify that this is the situation in the early Han and then in the Song and later. But in between, it was exceptional (mostly valid under the Sui to the mid-Tang).

## 3

The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire and the introduction of Buddhism into China occurred in almost the same period, but they had different historical trajectories.

Let's start with Christianity. The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire was connected to the decline of polytheism. Polytheism was unable to save the fallen Roman society, while Christianity was concerned about the poverty and suffering of the common people. Roman polytheism did not impose strict moral norms and it was more of an entertainment than a

religion. The rich spent their wealth on worshipping the gods, and the general public enjoyed the fun. As Theodor Mommsen described, “The Latin worship was grounded essentially on man’s enjoyment of earthly pleasures, and only in a subordinate degree on his fear of the wild forces of nature; it consisted pre-eminently therefore in expressions of joy, in lays and songs, in games and dances, and above all in banquets.... The god of the Italian was ... above all things an instrument for helping him to the attainment of very substantial earthly aims ... and the neglect or wrong performance of the worship of each god revenged itself in the corresponding incident, it was a laborious and difficult task even to gain a knowledge of a man’s religious obligations[.]”<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Christians and other religious groups such as the Jewish community did what they could to support orphans and the elderly, take care of the poor, and nurse plague victims. Polytheism took

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<sup>1</sup> See Theodor Mommsen, *History of Rome*, Vol. I, translated with the sanction of the author by William Purdie Dickson, D.D., LL.D., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1866, pp. 221-223.

pride in religious liberty. The Pantheon enshrined 10,000 gods but each had its own priest. There was no interaction between the priests of these gods. Christianity, however, had a strict discipline, with grassroots organizations in remote cities and barbarian tribes, and a large number of followers in the military and the imperial court. It threatened to become an ever stronger “invisible state” in the body of Rome. As Russell said, “The Catholic Church was derived from three sources. Its sacred history was Jewish, its theology was Greek, its government and canon law were, at least indirectly, Roman.”<sup>1</sup> The organization of the church grew gradually and eventually developed into a unified quasi-bureaucratic administration of a centralized Catholic church in Rome.

Rome was intimidated at first by this solid and orderly spiritual entity, and for almost three centuries subjected Christians to persecution and massacre. But in 313, Constantine the Great recognized Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 7.

as a legal religion and even invested judicial power in bishops in the hope of uniting Caesar and God under the watchword of “One God, one Empire, one Religion.”<sup>1</sup> In 392, Theodosius made Christianity the official faith of the Roman Empire and destroyed polytheistic temples.

Why did Rome make Christianity its official faith? Some historians say the ruler wished to win the support of the plebeians and ordinary soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Some say that it was because monotheism made it easier to maintain the absolute authority of imperial power, since polytheism involved too many deities, and every dissenting military leader would proclaim himself the descendant of some deity. But Rome’s plan fell through.

In 354, four decades after Constantine the Great legalized Christianity, a boy was born to a government official’s family in Numidia, a Roman province in North Africa. Raised according to Roman patrician

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol. 2: The Intermediate Ages*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 660.

<sup>2</sup> Hartwin Brandt, *Das Ende der Antike. Geschichte des spatromischen Reiches* (Beck Wissen), München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2001, pp. 23-27.

standards, he, proficient in Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and philosophy, was an admirer of Virgil's epics and Cicero's political statements.<sup>1</sup> When he first read the Bible, he said, "For when I studied the Scriptures then I did not feel as I am writing about them now. They seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the grand style of Cicero. For my pride shrank from their modesty, and my sharp eye was not penetrating enough to see into their depths."<sup>2</sup> He delved into Neoplatonism and was a believer in Manichaeism for a short time. But in all things, he displayed Roman wit. Even his private life was Roman – he had a son out of wedlock with a low-born woman in his early adolescence.

At the age of 30, he went to Milan and became a public orator at the court of the Roman Emperor

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<sup>1</sup> See Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, translated by Rex Warner with a new introduction and afterword by Martin E. Marty, New York: New American Library, 2001, p. 42. "In the normal course of study I came across a book by Cicero, a man whose style, though not his heart, is almost universally admired. This book of his contains an exhortation to philosophy; it is called *Hortensius*. Now it was this book which altered my way of feeling, turned my prayers to you, Lord, yourself, and gave me different ambitions and desires."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

Valentinian II, praising the emperor and preaching imperial policies. The senior Roman statesman Symmachus regarded him as a “flame carrier” of the classical Greek and Roman civilizations. However, nothing – wealth, liberty, or extremely low standards of personal virtue – could fill the void deep in his heart. While reading the Bible again, he experienced a divine moment of revelation which culminated in his becoming Christianity’s greatest theologian. The man was St. Augustine. Knowledge of the Greek and Roman civilizations enabled him to expand the original Christian doctrines into a gigantic theological system. His views on sin, divine grace, predestination, and free will epitomized the Christian Patristic philosophy. The theology of the Western Middle Ages was thereafter nothing more than a footnote to St. Augustine.

Although regarded as an inheritor of classical civilization, St. Augustine reassessed Greece and Rome. Originally an admirer of Cicero’s political statements, after converting to Christianity, he dismissed the thinker as “a dabbler in philosophy.” Once deeply touched by

the epics of Virgil, whom he once called “our poet,” after conversion he referred to the poet as “their poet.” Although once inspired by the heroes in the *Aeneid*, as a Christian, he questioned how the god who Aeneas rescued from the ruins of Troy could protect Rome if he could not protect Troy.

In 410, Alaric I, leader of the Visigoths, conquered Rome and sacked the city for three days and nights, a disaster that became known as the fall of the eternal city. Some said that this was a consequence of Rome’s abandonment of its native polytheism and acceptance of a foreign religion. St. Augustine angrily rebutted this view with *The City of God*, which completely denounced the Roman civilization. In it he observed that Romulus had killed his brother when building Rome, thus sowing the seed of its eventual collapse. None of the Roman gods – Apollo, Mars, or Venus – had curbed either the Romans’ moral corruption or the barbarians’ ruthless invasions.<sup>1</sup> Citing Cicero’s saying that Rome

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<sup>1</sup> See Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. I, translated by Rev. Marcus Dods, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 2014, pp. 165-166. “And yet where was this host of divinities, when, long before the corruption of

was a colored painting in *On the Republic*, he lambasted Rome for never achieving true justice or the people's cause, rendering it not a true republic but a kingdom without justice. And according to St. Augustine, it was clear what this implied for Rome: "Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms?"<sup>1</sup>

Western scholars believe that St. Augustine's judgment on whether or not Rome was a republic was inconsistent. In Book 2 of *The City of God*, he quoted Cicero's words, denying that Rome was a republic, for only the state created and commanded by Christ had justice and fulfilled the cause of the people, and could thus be called a republic.<sup>2</sup> His definition of justice

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the primitive morality, Rome was taken and burnt by the Gauls? Perhaps they were present, but asleep? For at that time the whole city fell into the hands of the enemy, with the single exception of the Capitoline hill; and this too would have been taken, had not – the watchful geese aroused the sleeping gods! And this gave occasion to the festival of the goose, in which Rome sank nearly to the superstition of the Egyptians, who worship beasts and birds."

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> "For I mean in its own place to show that – according to the definitions in which Cicero himself, using Scipio as his mouthpiece, briefly

differed from Cicero's. But in Book 19 of *The City of God*, Augustine once again recognized Rome as a republic, proposing a new definition of a people as "an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of love," and arguing that on that basis Rome was in some sense a republic. Yet because the Roman people did not love God or obey the command of God but loved various evil spirits, they had thus not achieved true justice, and so Rome was not a true republic.<sup>1</sup>

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propounded what a republic is, and what a people is, and according to many testimonies, both of his own lips and of those who took part in that same debate – Rome never was a republic, because true justice had never a place in it.... But the fact is, true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ, if at least any choose to call this a republic; and indeed we cannot deny that it is the people's weal." *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>1</sup> See Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. II, translated by Rev. Marcus Dods, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 2014, pp. 629-630. "According to this definition of ours, the Roman people is a people, and its weal is without doubt a commonwealth or republic. But what its tastes were in its early and subsequent days, and how it declined into sanguinary seditions and then to social and civil wars, and so burst asunder or rotted off the bond of concord in which the health of a people consists, history shows, and in the preceding books I have related at large. And yet I would not on this account say either that it was not a people, or that its administration was not a republic, so long as there remains an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common

Thus, although we cannot say with certainty that St. Augustine believed Rome was not a republic but a great robbery, we can definitely say that St. Augustine believed kingdoms without justice were great robberies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there existed the possibility that Rome was not a republic but a great robbery, considering that St. Augustine held that the late Roman Empire was void of true justice and the Roman people did not believe in Christianity but rather evil spirits. St. Augustine even scoffed at the fabled spirit of honoring patriotism in early Rome, saying that all honors proceeded from

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agreement as to the objects of love.... For, in general, the city of the ungodly, which did not obey the command of God that it should offer no sacrifice save to Him alone, and which, therefore, could not give to the soul its proper command over the body, nor to the reason its just authority over the vices, is void of true justice.”

<sup>1</sup> See Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. I, translated by Rev. Marcus Dods, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 2014, p. 140. “Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies? For what are robberies themselves, but little kingdoms? The band itself is made up of men; it is ruled by the authority of a prince, it is knit together by the pact of the confederacy; the booty is divided by the law agreed on. If, by the admittance of abandoned men, this evil increases to such a degree that it holds places, fixes abodes, takes possession of cities, and subdues peoples, it assumes the more plainly the name of a kingdom, because the reality is now manifestly conferred on it, not by the removal of covetousness, but by the addition of impunity.”

God. He moreover dismissed the Roman virtues of abstinence, prudence and fortitude as incomparable to the Christian teachings of faith, hope and love.<sup>1</sup>

St. Augustine concluded that Rome deserved to fall. The ultimate hope of Christians was for a City of God, represented primarily by the Roman Catholic church. Strictly speaking, the City of the Earth and the City of God are distinguished by love for oneself and love for God. St. Augustine recognized that there were citizens of the City of the Earth in the church, and correspondingly people outside the church were also eventually able to become citizens of the City of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 451-495.

## 4

Why did Augustine see the Roman Empire as “void of true justice”? He must have had good reason. For instance, the late Roman Empire failed to ensure proper functioning of the political apparatus, central power was splintered by military revolts for 200 years, and the upper class cared little about the welfare of those at the bottom end of society.

However, a typical Chinese mind would disagree with St. Augustine’s conclusion. Good or bad, should Rome not be regarded as the Romans’ homeland? If it became corrupt, should not the people try to reform

the system and reinvigorate civic virtue and patriotism? When it was plagued by “barbarian” invasions, should not the people take up arms to defend it first, and discuss absolute truth after re-establishing unity and peace? How could people abandon the homeland when they had not fulfilled their due responsibility to reform it? All in all, despite becoming the imperial faith, Christianity was not totally integrated with the Roman Empire and there were inner tensions between Christianity and the Roman Empire. Actually, some Romans, especially the priests, were essential in defending Rome – by converting the “barbarians” and turning them from foes into protectors of the Faith which now mattered more than the empire after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. In this sense, they cared about a unified religious community more than a unified political community.

In comparison, there were similar tensions between political order and spiritual order in ancient China, but the unity between the two was much greater than these tensions. To Confucianism, ideological legitimacy

represented the legitimacy of ruling All-under-Heaven (China) while dynastic legitimacy represented the actual ruling authority. The ideal state that Confucianism looked toward was a unity of ideological legitimacy and dynastic legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> When the two conflicted, Confucianism advocated making the greatest efforts to coordinate them, admonishing the emperor, rectifying political malpractices, and implementing the reforms. When a certain dynasty's politics became extremely and irreversibly corrupt, the Mandate of Heaven would shift, and a new dynasty with benevolent governance would arise. Confucianism would support the transition from a state of *wudao* (无道, in which the Way does not prevail in the world) to one of *youdao* (有道, in which the Way prevails in the world).<sup>2</sup> This can be regarded as

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<sup>1</sup> See Wang Fuzhi, chapter 15 of *Comments about History as a Mirror* (读通鉴论), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013, p. 413. "The ideological legitimacy (the Confucian legitimacy) and the dynastic legitimacy (the legitimacy of the monarch's rule) run parallel in the world, and one will rise when the other falls. The ideal state is the simultaneous rise of the two, in which All-under-Heaven is governed well through the Way (*Dao*), and the Way is manifested by the Son of Heaven's rule" (儒者之统与帝王之统并行于天下, 而互为兴替。其合也, 天下以道而治, 道以天子而明).

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from Confucius' *Analects* – “天下有道则见, 无道则隐”

the revolutionary tradition of Confucianism.

Confucianism agrees with the people's revolution, and killing tyrants is a legitimate act (as Mencius said, "I have heard of the cutting off of the fellow Chau, but I have not heard of the putting a sovereign to death, *in his case*"<sup>1</sup> [闻诛一夫纣矣，未闻弑君也]).

However, it does not mean denying dynastic legitimacy and attributing justice to religious or moral authority. Confucianism would never think that dynastic legitimacy itself is "void of justice" such that it could be completely denied and overthrown. In a word, the absolute loyalty of Confucian civil officials and scholar generals laid in the *jiangshan sheji* (江山社稷, literally "the rivers and mountains, the altars of soil and grain")

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– and the translation is from *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, translated, with an Introduction by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1998, p. 196. Another translation is from James Legge, "When right principles of government prevail in the empire, he will show himself; when they are prostrated, he will keep concealed." See *The Chinese Classics: Vol. 1. The Life and Teachings of Confucius (Analects, Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean)*, London: N. Trübner, 1869, p. 122.

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Mencius*, Translated, with Critical and Exegetical notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes by James Legge, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970, p. 167.

itself, which was the “Chinese state institution” (imperial authority along with the civil-official system) in a broad sense in today’s expression. Confucianism was not a religion, but if it is roughly compared with religion, it can also be said that the church of Confucianism was the “Chinese state institution” (*jiangshan sheji*).

Compared with the Christian world where ideological legitimacy could only be founded upon God, the ideological legitimacy in China could be founded upon the human world, because the Way of Heaven (*tiandao*, 天道) had to be realized in the human world and needed to be proved in the earthly world. Therefore, the ideological legitimacy in China strongly emphasized the importance of practical solutions to social and political problems.

On the one hand, Confucian political ethics were much stricter than those of Roman polytheism. It was the political elites’ responsibility to “protect and take care of widows and widowers, orphans and the childless.” This responsibility cannot be shifted to any religion. On the other hand, compared with the “holding-company” model in Rome, China’s

*junxian* system inspired by the Legalists was more executive and efficient in dealing with grassroots civil affairs during the crisis. Most of China's elites and commoners would not perceive the state institution as "a great robbery." Certainly, there are some exceptions, such as Daoist Zhuangzi who advocated the ideal of "governing through non-action,"<sup>1</sup> and Huang Zongxi, a scholar in the late Ming Dynasty, who questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy and centralized power.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zhuangzi denied the legitimacy of the rulership and he said, "One man steals a purse, and is punished. Another steals a State, and becomes a Marquis" ( 彼窃钩者诛, 窃国者诸侯 ). See *Chuang Tzu: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*, Translated from the Chinese by Herbert A. Giles, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889, p. 114. The translation is modified.

<sup>2</sup> Huang Zongxi also criticized the institution of rulership, especially the legitimacy of China's monarchy. He said, "with those who later became princes it was different. They believed that since they held the power over benefit and loss, there was nothing wrong at all in taking for themselves all the benefits and leaving to others all the loss. They made it so that no man dared to live for himself or seek to benefit himself. Thus the prince made his own private interests the common end of all.... He looked upon the world as an enormous estate to be handed on down to his descendants, for their perpetual pleasure and well-being.... The reason for [these contrasting attitudes] is this: In ancient times the people were considered hosts and the prince was the guest. All of his life the prince spent working for the sake of the people. Now the prince is host and the people are guests." See *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. I, compiled by William Theodore De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1960, pp. 532-533.

But the mainstream thought in China has always been Confucian ethics of assuming responsibilities to the family, the state, and All-under-Heaven. This could not be achieved through preaching. Only when the state is seen as a “good state” in reality will the people support it in the long run.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the Chinese civilization established the country on a foundation of humanistic rationality, making it a rare civilization without religion as its foundation. This quality was never discredited – not even during the proliferation of Daoist and Buddhist ideas with their concepts of individual and collective salvation. The religions – whatever their metaphysical background – had to accept this. Acceptance of these rules of the game was the major step toward Buddhism’s adaptation to China, which happened in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, roughly the same time

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Confucian political morality also did not function well during chaotic times such as the turmoil in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Religions (first Daoism and then Buddhism), however, gave the people protection and solace much like Christianity in Rome. The parallels between Rome and China are clear, but the outcome differed.

that Christianity rose in the Roman Empire.

Much like the Roman Empire, ancient China witnessed its prolonged periods of weakness and turmoil. By the end of the Eastern Han, state power was waning. Grassroots administration weakened, while powerful magnates gained much economic, social, and at times even political control over their localities. They appropriated much of the state's revenues, leaving it lacking necessary funds to provide for the people and organize effective defenses along the northern frontier. Natural disasters, military setbacks, and debilitating power struggles at the top between the eunuch-led inner court and the literati officials exacerbated the crisis. Many frustrated literati turned away from government service, with lofty recluses becoming more admirable than government officials. By the last decades of the Han Dynasty, even the government's control over the military faded, and the new phenomenon of warlordism would plague the empire for centuries to come. Weakened, the imperial rulers failed to maintain even a semblance of political unity. For almost four

centuries (220-589), China remained divided into two (and often more) competing regimes engaged in perennial internecine conflict.

This crisis was conducive to the proliferation of new organized religions that promised individual or collective salvation and also tried to help believers in this world. First came religious Daoism, and then Buddhism coming from India gained greater prominence. Both religions attracted huge numbers of believers across the social strata – from the poorest and most desolate to emperors and their courtiers. They filled in some of the void left by the state's retreat from its normative functions of ensuring the basic livelihood of its subjects, and they filled in some of the intellectual void left due to widespread frustration with the corrupt and malfunctioning political system. In due time, Daoist and Buddhist monasteries became a prominent part of China's urban and rural landscape, just as Christian churches changed the landscape of Europe. Monumental Buddhist sculptures and magnificent frescoes dating from the fourth century

onward are testimony to the lavish patronage of the foreign creed by emperors, officials, and local elites.

And yet, despite these religions' undeniable successes (which caused one eminent Western scholar, Erik Zürcher, to speak of “the Buddhist conquest of China”<sup>1</sup>), politically speaking their impact was incomparable to that of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Although there were many pious Buddhists and Daoists among top officials and among emperors themselves, the basic parameters of Chinese political culture as shaped in the Qin and Han dynasties remained unchanged. Religious establishments – either native Daoism or foreign Buddhism – had to accept this and acquiesce to the emperor's political superiority. Nor could they openly challenge the basic parameters of Confucian ideology, in particular the Three Bonds.

Thus, whereas originally Buddhists were not supportive of either familial or political obligations, once entering China they had to accommodate to the

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

local rules of the game. In due time, organized religions positioned themselves as assistants of the throne and the bureaucracy, not as their competitors. The emperor himself also had a clear consciousness – no matter what religion he personally believed in, he always insisted on Confucianism as the imperial ideology. Even in the regimes (the fourth to sixth century) established by the five nomadic tribes, although the royal families mostly believed in Buddhism, they all ruled with the Confucian civil service system and did not let their regimes become “Buddhist states.”

In Rome, controlling religion was difficult and sometimes utterly impossible. Even in the “Caesaropapist” Byzantine Empire, the emperors had only limited ability to intervene in religious affairs or soothe doctrinal cleavages. According to Fowden, the core doctrine of Constantine’s project was the idea of “one God, one Empire, one Emperor.” This was an absolute and powerful great unity in which religious orthodoxy was no less important than political orthodoxy. Fowden also showed why this project

failed. Internal religious cleavages weakened the empire (especially the Christian Roman Empire in the east, the Byzantine Empire, which was supposed to be the apex of the church-empire symbiosis).<sup>1</sup> Thus the distinction between religious orthodoxy and political orthodoxy caused the conflict between religious power and imperial power. It was surprising how quickly the church outpowered the emperors. St. Ambrose, who excommunicated Theodosius I in 390, marked the point from which the power of religion was stronger than that of the emperor, and the struggle between the two continued for many centuries.

In China, by contrast, such a power of religion would never appear. The imperial establishment had the right to control everything – the number of monasteries and ordained monks, the maintenance of monastic discipline, and so forth. This right was not always rigidly exercised, and some monks protested vehemently against such political supervision, but

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<sup>1</sup> Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

anyhow the state maintained its superiority over the clergy. In extreme cases, Buddhism and Daoism could even be persecuted and partly outlawed, as happened, for instance, under Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (543-578) between 574 and 578. Normally, however, the emperors preferred to patronize the religious establishments and thereby control them without going to extremes. And the religious establishments had to accept this. Such an event as the excommunication of the emperor (done by St. Ambrose to Theodosius I) would be entirely unthinkable in China.

In general, unlike Rome – either massacring and suppressing Christianity for hundreds of years, or accepting it in its entirety – China did not go to the extremes in its treatment of Buddhism. It took China 800 years to absorb and digest Buddhism, and finally to combine Buddhism with Confucianism and Daoism, resulting in Chinese Buddhist sects that differed from Indian Buddhism. Infiltrated by the Confucian spirit, Sinicized Buddhism deeply recognizes the “value of

the state,” and believes that the merits and virtues of good secular rulers (仁君) in governance are no less significant than those of eminent monks.

Some argue that Chinese philosophy never produced such Western concepts as freedom and independence, thus resulting in a spiritual defect which obstructed China’s political modernization. The spirit of “negative liberty” in modern Western politics based on viewing the state as a “necessary evil” originated with the separation of the City of God from the City of the Earth in Christian thought. Christianity regarded the Roman state as evil, and eventually this “evil” label would be attached to the Catholic Church by its foes during the Reformation. The tension between the City of God and the City of the Earth was more common in medieval Europe and the modern United States to some degree. In modern European thought, the state is not regarded as evil, but rather fallible, and can still be improved through such measures as legislation (i.e., human law) to approximate the ideal natural law and eternal law.

The Chinese civilization, in contrast, holds that a good state can be realized in the secular world. The Confucians hold that since there is both good and evil in human nature, one should just follow good examples and cultivate oneself, and then it will be possible to attain a better state in morality. The Legalists hold that through systems of strict administrative accountability and standardized impartial governance, it will be possible to attain a better state in practice. The ideal of “a good state” reflects the memories of golden ages under unified dynasties when Confucian and Legalist ideas were upheld simultaneously. The memory of these successful experiments was passed down over generations as proof that a good state is possible.

## *Conclusion*

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## 1

The Chinese historian Lü Simian once said that the Qin and Han dynasties marked a key historical transformation in the political system in Chinese history. This transformation has been commended by some as distinct progress from the patriarchal clan enfeoffment system of the Western Zhou Dynasty toward the *junxian* system of the Qin and Han dynasties, an impersonal, merit-based system of prefectures and counties under centralized administration, but slandered by some others as “the beginning of Oriental despotism.”

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first to propose the concept of “Oriental despotism,” referring to the phenomenon that monarchs had unlimited power over their civilians without any legal restrictions, just as masters dealt with their slaves. According to Aristotle, “[The] type of kinship is the sort which is to be found among some uncivilized [i.e. non-Hellenic] peoples.... The reason is that these uncivilized peoples are more servile in character than Greeks (as the peoples of Asia, in turn, are more servile than those of Europe); and they will therefore tolerate despotic rule without any complaint.”<sup>1</sup> The Oriental world in the eyes of ancient Greeks and Romans, however, was only made up of Egypt and Persia; to Middle-Ages Europeans, it meant only India and Mongolia. They knew less about China, east of the Orient, because they were reading only some second-hand literature (e.g., travel notes, Chinese classics translated by missionaries, letters and journals written by missionaries) about the

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Politics of Aristotle*, Translated with an Introduction Notes and Appendixes by Ernest Barker, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 138.

country.

In 350 BCE, over two decades before Aristotle defined “despotism,” the State of Qin, through Shang Yang’s Reforms, set up the *junxian* system marked with registry of households and rule in accordance with law. There is a viewpoint that the state institution of the Qin Dynasty initiated by Shang Yang was the most extreme form of the “despotism” or the totalitarian militarist state (“weakening the people to strengthen the state”). However, new Western studies reveal that, according to Weber’s definition of rational bureaucracy, the *junxian* system, created by the Qin and inherited by the Han, was precisely the “modern state bureaucracy,” similar to that established in Europe after 1600. As American political scientist Fukuyama, the author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, observed, “The state of Qin had many if not all of the characteristics that Max Weber defined as quintessentially modern.”<sup>1</sup> “Among the characteristics of modern bureaucracy,

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, pp. 125-126.

according to Max Weber's classic definition, are offices defined by functional area with a clearly defined sphere of competence, organization of offices into a clearly defined hierarchy, candidates selected impersonally on the basis of qualifications, officials lacking an independent political base and subject to strict discipline within a hierarchy, and salaried offices treated as careers. The Chinese government of the Former Han Dynasty fulfilled virtually all of these criteria of modern bureaucracy."<sup>1</sup>

What is puzzling, however, is that despite Weber's extensive reading of Chinese literature (mostly secondary sources, translated and written by missionaries) and his considerable knowledge of the situation in China, he believed Imperial China's political system was characterized by irrational traditional domination (*traditionale Herrschaft*), since he regarded Imperial China as a "patrimonial state" (*Patrimonial burokratie*).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> Weber's research on China has influenced a large number of Sinologists, including Philip Alden Kuhn and Jonathan D. Spence, who all inherited Weber's perception of the irrationalization of the Chinese bureaucracy.

Fukuyama explained the mystery by saying that China's political modernization was not accompanied by economic, social and ideological modernization (such as the rise of capitalist market economy), so much so that Weber denied the modernity of Chinese politics. As he pointed out, "Nor was it accompanied by social modernization: kinship was not superseded by modern individualism but continued to coexist with impersonal administration, up to the present day. Like other modernization theorists, Weber believed that the different dimensions of development – economic, political, social, and ideological – were tightly interconnected. It may be that because the other dimensions of modernization did not appear in China, Weber didn't recognize the presence of a modern political order. Political, economic, and social modernization were in fact not closely connected temporally in European development either; but the sequence was different, with social modernization

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For example, Philip Alden Kuhn regarded it as a "bureaucratic monarchy." See Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, pp.187-219.

preceding growth of a modern state. Europe's experience was thus a unique one that would not necessarily be replicated in other societies."<sup>1</sup>

Weber's view is somewhat a misreading about Imperial China's political system, an embodiment of the long-standing "Eurocentrism" and the cognitive model of Western scholars of measuring non-Western civilizations by the Western-style modernization standards (so-called "rationalization"). In comparison, Fukuyama's observations are more insightful. China, although it did not follow the Western development path later in the economic, social and ideological fields, was undeniably 1,800 years ahead of the Western world in establishing a "modern state system," and the rational bureaucratic system established in the Qin and Han dynasties has enabled China's unified political entity to last to this day.

Europe's first acquaintance with China was made by Jesuit missionaries who had been to China in the Ming

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, p. 126.

and Qing dynasties, thus triggering a passing phase of “sinomania”: the French king wore Chinese attire to a ball at the Palace of Versailles; the public thronged at Chinese shadow puppet plays on the banks of the Seine; keeping goldfish became a hobby of respectable ladies; and high-born women took to traveling in sedan chairs.

This triggered some controversy between two groups of masters of thought there. One, headed by the French Enlightenment thinker Voltaire, admired the Chinese civilization, intending to reform their system by taking that of China as a model. Voltaire named his study “The Temple of Confucius” and called himself “Master of Confucius Temple.” The German polymath Leibniz saw China’s imperial examination as the fulfillment of Plato’s ideal of rule by philosopher kings. To French economist François Quesnay, China’s system was established on the basis of vision, and well-defined laws that everyone had to observe, including the emperor. The other group tended to belittle China, spearheaded by another Enlightenment thinker Montesquieu. Intending to draw attention away from

their own determined opposition to France's absolute monarchy, they made China the scapegoat for their own purpose by describing the country's system as the prototype of "Oriental despotism."

The imperial rule in the West was called "monarchy," while that in China, "despotism." The major difference was that "Oriental despotism" was a power unto itself, while European monarchy was held in check by both the aristocracy and the church. In fact, ancient China's colossal civil official system placed restraints on the emperor by virtue of a complex system of checks and balances, namely, the separation of the power of the monarch from that of the prime minister,<sup>1</sup> the sealing and refuting system (returning the emperor's decision which the ministers found improper before it was announced), the supervision by historian officials

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<sup>1</sup> "The traditional politics after the Qin Dynasty in China obviously often retained a division between the monarch's position and the ministers' position, in other words, the division between the monarch's power and the ministers' power. It can also be said to be the division between the royal family and the government." See Qian Mu, *New Comments about Chinese History* (国史新论), Shanghai: Shanghai SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001, p. 83.

and the admonishment by imperial censors. More importantly, the system of grassroots officials in a large number had restraints on both the emperor and central civil officials. The relationship between the monarch, and the central civil and grassroots officials was changing throughout dynasties. Despite inefficient checks and balances in some dynasties, it is unfair to conclude that China, generally speaking, had no system of checks and balances and thus that its imperial rule was despotism. The highly-developed system of civil officials and grassroots governance differentiated China from other civilizations.

Montesquieu's taunts went further in his addressing the monarchy of China and the Tatar Empire as the same "Oriental despotism" to which in comparison, a Western monarchy's most tyrannical government was far preferable.<sup>1</sup> As he pointed out, "[that] the people of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu*, Vol. 1, London: T. Evans, 1777, p. 360. "The Tartars, who destroyed the Grecian empire, established in the conquered countries slavery and despotic power; the Goths, after subduing the Roman empire, founded monarchy and liberty."

Tartary, the natural conquerors of Asia, are themselves enslaved. They are incessantly making conquests in the South of Asia, where they form empires; but that part of the nation which continues in the country find that they are subject to a great master, who, being despotic in the South, will likewise be so in the North, and, exercising an arbitrary power over the vanquished subjects, pretends to the same over the conquerors. This is at present most conspicuous in that vast country called Chinese Tartary, which is governed by the emperor with a power almost as despotic as that of China itself, and which he every day extends by his conquests.”<sup>1</sup>

Later, Hegel, one of the most influential Western philosophers, proposed the view that history started in the Orient but would end in the West. He held that the Orient represented the childhood of History, and that humans’ subjective freedom could not be realized there. According to him, China, Mongolia and India were all despotic and patriarchal states, mired in

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

backwardness, stagnation (outside the World's History, i.e., *unhistorical*) and slavery. He said, "With *China and the Mongols* – the realm of theocratic despotism – History begins. Both have the patriarchal constitution for their principle.... In China the Monarch is Chief as Patriarch."<sup>1</sup> "China and India lie, as it were, still outside the World's History.... The Substantial [Positive] in its moral aspect, rules therefore, not as the moral disposition of the *Subject*, but as the despotism of the *Sovereign*."<sup>2</sup>

On China these European thinkers did much research, which, however, was all based on second-hand sources, such as writings of Western missionaries and overseas Chinese. For instance, most of Montesquieu's knowledge of China came from Huang Jialue, an overseas Chinese in France, and he quoted Huang six times in his *The Spirit of the Laws*. The European masters, knowing little of the Chinese language, could not systematically read original and authentic Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, With Prefaces by Charles Hegel and the Translator, J. Sibree, M. A., Kitchene: Batoche Books, 2001, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

history – for instance, Hegel read the *Detailed Outline of History as a Mirror* (资治通鉴纲目) translated by French missionaries – so they could not make a detailed observation of the change and evolution of China’s political system. For example, they did not distinguish clearly the political systems of the Chinese, Indian and Mongol empires, which were all categorized into the “Oriental civilization.”

The West, who has rarely listened to China after all, has always been the center of modernization for hundreds of years. China, like other Eastern civilizations, has always been on the verge of being transformed and educated. Today, the West has shifted its focus onto China again because of the country’s success in industrialization. Nonetheless, the incomprehensive understanding and judgment of European thinkers about China, to a certain degree, have influenced Chinese scholars’ cognition of their own country for several generations.

In modern times, many Chinese reformers were caught in the struggle between “freedom” and

“despotism.” For example, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), one of the most influential Chinese social and political activists who participated in the Hundred Days’ Reform in 1898, wrote essays after the failure of the reform, denouncing the “despotic regime” as the people’s common enemy and calling on the Chinese people to destroy it, while acknowledging (paradoxically) that China’s “despotic system” was different from the European feudal system since in the former, the dominant families were restrained and the common people’s interests were taken care of to an extent.

Later, when he visited the United States in 1903 to investigate and learn from the US political system, Liang listened to President Theodore Roosevelt’s two speeches on strengthening the Navy. The president pointed out, “European nations have seated themselves along the eastern coast of Asia, while China, by her misfortunes, has given us an object lesson in the utter folly of attempting to exist as a nation at all if at the same time content to be both rich and defenseless. Meanwhile our own mighty Republic has stretched

across the Pacific, and now in California, Oregon and Washington, in Alaska and Hawaii and the Philippines, holds an extent of coast line which makes it of necessity of a power of the first class on the Pacific. The extension in the area of our domain has been immense, the extension in the area of our influence even greater, ... we must go on with the work we have undertaken.... We must keep on building and maintaining a thoroughly efficient navy, ... Only thus can we assure our position in the world at large, and in particular our position here on the Pacific. It behooves all men of lofty soul, who are proud to belong to a mighty nation, to see to it that we fit ourselves to take and to keep a great position in the world; for our proper place is with the expanding nations and the nations that dare to be great, that accept with confidence a place of leadership in the world. All our people should take this position, but especially you of California, for much of our expansion must go through the Golden Gate, and the States of the Pacific Slope must inevitably be those which will be most benefited by, and take the lead in

the growth of American influence along the coasts and in the islands of that mighty ocean where East and West finally become one.”<sup>1</sup> Liang was so astounded after listening to the speeches that he could not fall asleep for days.

Three years later, in 1906, after having made an overall investigation in Europe and the New Continent, his thought changed, so he wrote another essay on China’s political tradition, wherein he called the ancient Chinese system “enlightened absolutism” rather than “despotism.” He pointed out that “absolutism” in ancient China also had the element of “enlightenment,” as was in enlightened absolutism and absolute state building of 17-18th century Europe, for instance, during the reigns of Friedrich II of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia, both of whom offered support to the Enlightenment Movement. He held that Confucianism, Legalism and Mohism all embodied “enlightened

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<sup>1</sup> *President’s Speech at the Pavilion*. Theodore Roosevelt Papers. Library of Congress Manuscript Division. See <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o289827>. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.

absolutism.” According to him, the people-oriented thought (*minben*, 民本) in Confucianism and Mohism was similar to the thoughts of the German philosopher Christian Wolff and the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, while the state-interests-oriented thought (*guoben*, 国本) in Legalism was comparable to the ideas of the French political philosopher Jean Bodin and the Italian philosopher Machiavelli.

Liang’s inner contradictions and his change of thought were reflective of the painful mentality of many Chinese intellectuals who, on the one hand, wanted to learn from the Western civilization to reform their own civilization, and on the other hand, disagreed, because of their Confucian mindset, with the law of the jungle deriving from Social Darwinism in modern Western civilization concerning the international order.

## 2

The Qin and Han dynasties and ancient Rome were two different civilizations with their own tracks and their own heydays and troughs. We should not compare one side's troughs with the other's heydays and vice versa. Instead, one civilization should recognize the other's merits presented in its heydays, and find out the other's flaws exposed in its troughs. Thus they can reflect on their own merits and flaws to better themselves. As Mencius said, "When we do not, by what we do, realise *what we desire*, we must turn inwards,

and examine ourselves in every point”<sup>1</sup> (行有不得者，皆反求诸己). China was far from perfect in history; otherwise, it would not have suffered so much in modern times. The Chinese civilization still needs to better itself to demonstrate its ability to keep up with the times.

The Romans believed that vitality could be inspired by conflicts within limits, which was the unique value of the Roman civilization. Andrew William Lintott, a scholar of Roman history, once described the Republic “as a society which achieved and maintained greatness by allowing its most able citizens wide scope to fulfil themselves, and which accepted that within limits vigorous conflict could be creative.”<sup>2</sup> It was not conflict itself but conflict without limits and the absence of unity that led to Rome’s collapse. For a conflict-ridden political system, solidarity could only be achieved in the face of a common foe. Some Western historians hold

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Mencius*, Translated, with Critical and Exegetical notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes by James Legge, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 66.

that, once the Roman Empire defeated its enemies and attained peerless supremacy, all balanced factors began to cross the “boundary” and the empire thus collapsed. Indeed, its decline began as early as when it conquered Carthage (146 BCE) and then became the overlord of the Mediterranean.

In the Qin and Han dynasties coexisted unity and pluralism, the former guaranteeing social cohesion and the latter, social vitality, which was the unique value of the Qin and Han models. Certainly, how to balance unity and pluralism proved a severe challenge. When the former overwhelmed the latter, the political system started to ossify, while when the latter prevailed over the former, disintegration ensued. The Qin collapsed as a result of the overriding of Legalism. The Western Han perished as a result of the absolute predominance of Confucianism. The Eastern Han had the same destiny because of excessive pluralism – concurrent social cleavage at both the lower and upper levels. Therefore, how to maintain the very balance between unity and pluralism remains an everlasting challenge in

China's political system.

No political system can succeed solely on its own. It is the persons who run it that make it work. Therefore, the true vitality of every system lies in its ability to produce people who can both uphold its fundamental values and fix its flaws. Today, it lies in the ability of the system to produce a young generation that both upholds its own unity and embraces the pluralism of the world.

China is not the world's only ancient civilization. Others have also struggled between Western modernity and their own civilizational code. They will certainly realize their modernization while reviving their traditional values that have been veiled for centuries by Western modernity. The successful dialogue between Chinese and Western civilizations will clear the way for mutual learning and acculturation between ancient civilizations.

In other words, neither the East nor the West will overthrow their own historical heritage and start anew, but at least, they can work out a way through mutually empathetic and considerate dialogue and cooperation.

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Part III

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**China and Europe  
under the Alien Rule  
Introduction**

## *Introduction*

In my previous study, I discussed the parallels and differences between the Qin (221-206 BCE) and the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) dynasties and ancient Rome.<sup>1</sup> Between 300 and 600 CE, the Central Plains of China and the Roman Empire once again encountered similar circumstances, such as the deterioration of the central government's power and repeated incursions of the neighboring ethnic groups. In China, these resulted in the establishment of multiple political entities in the northern parts of the former Han Dynasty. The five ethnocultural groups that ruled most of these entities

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<sup>1</sup> See Pan Yue, *Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations: The Qin and Han Dynasties and Ancient Rome*, Beijing: New World Press, 2022.

– Xiongnu (匈奴), Xianbei (鲜卑), Jie (羯), Di (氏), and Qiang (羌) – were collectively referred to as *wuhu* (五胡) or the “Five Northerners.”<sup>1</sup> As for the Roman Empire, it suffered from repeated invasions by a variety of Germanic peoples, such as Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Burgundians, Franks, and Lombards. These invaders eventually established a series of “barbarian” kingdoms in the western part of the Roman Empire.

These parallel historical trajectories, however, produced utterly different outcomes in China and in Western and Central Europe.

In China, among more than a dozen political entities founded by the Northerners, two succeeded in reunifying the northern part of the Chinese world. They were the Former Qin (351-394) established by the Di tribes and the Northern Wei (386-534) formed

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<sup>1</sup> There is considerable debate among the Western scholars about the proper translation of the term *hu*, which is a common designation of a variety of ethnocultural groups who dwelt along the northern and northwestern borders of the Central Plains. Since this term may be sometimes used pejoratively, not a few scholars translate it as “barbarian,” but this translation does not fit countless instances in which *hu* is a neutral designation of the Northerners. We opt for the neutral translation. – *Tr.*

by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei. Although in both cases the unity of the northern regions turned out to be ephemeral, these two partial reunifications laid the foundation for restoring effective centralized rule patterned after the Qin and the Han dynasties. Eventually, the northern rulers overcame their southern counterparts, the rulers of the Southern Dynasties (420-589) who considered themselves the true custodians of China's imperial culture. It was the northern rulers of mixed ethnocultural origins who succeeded in reenacting the glory of the Qin and the Han by establishing two of China's most illustrious dynasties, the Sui (581-618) and the Tang (618-907).

In the case of the Roman Empire, centuries of infighting among different conquerors of the Western Roman Empire brought about a different result. Whereas some of the Germanic kingdoms, such as the Frankish Kingdom, could dominate much of Western Europe and even appeared to be well positioned to inherit the mantle of the Western Roman Empire, their success proved to be ephemeral. The prevailing

logic of divided political authority contributed to the proliferation of separate feudal states, which were unified only at a spiritual level under the aegis of the “universal” church. The notion of political unity was not entirely abandoned, but was sidelined in favor of a more easily maintainable “Catholic Commonwealth.”<sup>1</sup>

Why, despite the undeniable lasting appeal of the Roman Empire in Europe (and beyond) and of the *translatio imperii* ideal, was there no unified political entity on a par with the Roman Empire resurrected in the former Roman realm? This question is too complex to be addressed in the current short study. Yet it can be surmised that one of the problems was the competition among different entities that inherited the empire’s mantle. First, there was a Roman Empire in the East, which for a short while (especially after the success of Justinian I [r. 527-565]) appeared as a potentially viable successor to the unified Roman realm. Second, there

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<sup>1</sup> For the notion of commonwealths (Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and Islamic), which replaced the idea of a unified monotheistic empire, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

were attempts to resurrect the Empire in the West, most notably under Carolus Magnus (Charlemagne, Charles the Great, r. 768-814), and later under the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire (10th-19th centuries). The third potential heir to the Empire was the Church, the head of which (the Pope) eventually appropriated one of the Roman emperors' titles as *pontifex maximus* to buttress his position as the real heir to the Roman power. The Church, which mimicked the Empire's top-down centralized administration, was for centuries in a position to vie for secular and not just spiritual power. Even though politically speaking its success remained limited, its cultural impact was enormous. It was the Church that ensured an impressive degree of cultural unity throughout the politically fragmented Roman realm, and eventually throughout the entirety of Central and Western Europe.

Whereas the unity of Christendom never attained universal dimensions as envisioned, in the writings of Eusebius, the enthusiastic biographer of Rome's first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great (r. 306-

337),<sup>1</sup> it was nonetheless remarkable. Notwithstanding periodic schisms and cleavages, the Catholic Church provided the post-Roman Europe with a common cultural identity that transcended boundaries of countless kingdoms, princedoms, and smaller political entities carved out from the Roman space. This common identity was further strengthened due to the formation of a trans-ethnic aristocratic culture shared by the vast majority of European nobility. Ties of intermarriage among the ruling families of different polities and the nobility at large became an additional check against centrifugal tendencies in the post-Roman world. These cultural and political ties could alleviate to a certain degree the persistent inter-state conflicts that plagued Europe for centuries during which the erstwhile *Pax Romana* was no more than a pipe dream.

The trajectory of the Chinese world was markedly different. Whereas cultural cohesive forces – such as the Daoist and Buddhist religions, the Confucian learning, the common educational curriculum, and the

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<sup>1</sup> For Eusebius' vision, see *Ibid.*

broadly shared literati culture based on the mastery of “literary language” (*wenyan*, 文言) – played an important role during the ages of fragmentation and beyond, they were secondary to the political imperative of restoring the unified rule in All-under-Heaven. A great variety of political actors – natives of the Central Plains and outsiders, people in the south and those in the north, military and civilian elites – were fully committed to the idea that only in a politically unified realm could peace and stability ensue. More than any other cultural trait, this common commitment transcended ethnocultural divides during the ages of fragmentation. Most notably, it engulfed the northern elites (who were mainly ethnic *hu*) no less than their southern counterparts (who were ethnic Han). For the Chinese of whatever ethnic background, a culturally united but politically divided commonwealth was neither desirable nor viable. Hence, the rulers of competing polities, were willing to allocate very considerable resources – human, material, and cultural – to regain unity. Without at least a nominal quest for the realm’s reunification, any regional polity

would be deemed illegitimate not just by its rivals, but, more ominously, by significant segments of its elites.

These observations will stand at the backdrop of my discussion of the post-Han and post-Roman worlds. As I hope to demonstrate, each of the realms opted for a different way of dealing with new internal and external challenges. In the West, cultural unity in a politically fragmented world was acceptable. In terms of political orthodoxy, there could be many kings, dukes, and even claimants for the imperial mantle, but there should be only one Catholic (i.e., “universal”) Church, only one legitimate interpretation of the divine, only one legitimate Pope. Any deviation from this spiritual unity was considered a major threat to order and justified suppression. In China, by contrast, coexistence of different religious doctrines and cultural norms was normally tolerated; yet there should be only one legitimate emperor under Heaven, the single locus of political authority. Political fragmentation – even when it lasted for centuries like in the period under discussion – remained a dangerous aberration rather

than a *fait accompli*. And the quest for unity became a self-fulfilling prophecy. As we shall see, after centuries of turmoil, the political space of the Qin and the Han once again came under the rule of a single monarch.



## *Chapter I*

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# THE “FIVE NORTHERNERS” ENTERING THE CENTRAL PLAINS

*1*

The Battle of the Yanran Mountains in 89 CE was a fateful event in the history of both the ancient China and the Roman Empire. The allied army under the command of the Han general Dou Xian (d. 92) inflicted a major defeat on the Northern Xiongnu, effectively ending their political fortunes. The defeated Northern Xiongnu were pushed westward. After a lengthy (and still insufficiently understood) movement across much of the Eurasian continent, they reached the fourth-century Eastern Europe, setting in motion the Age of Migrations there, which brought about

Germanic incursions into the Roman heartland and the eventual collapse of the Western Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> The Southern Xiongnu, by contrast, allied themselves with the Han court. Their migration to the south and resettlement in the frontier commanderies of the Han paved the way to what was eventually known as “the ‘Five Northerners’ entering the Central Plains.”

In 2017, archaeologists from China and Mongolia jointly discovered the “Inscription at the Yanran Mountains” composed by Ban Gu (32-92)<sup>2</sup> and carved on a cliff in the Khangai Mountains of central Mongolia. The inscription, also known as “Mount Yanran Stele,” celebrated the Han victory over the Northern Xiongnu. The discovery of this stele cheers up those partial to the Han Dynasty, who often use it as a reminder: “Those who dare to offend the Great

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<sup>1</sup> The details of the Northern Xiongnu’s westward migration are hotly disputed. Among early proponents of the connection between the Xiongnu and the Huns were eminent orientalists such as Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800) and Friedrich Hirth (1845-1927). The topic is continuously explored by historians, archeologists, philologists, and even DNA specialists, but a definitive answer has not been given yet.

<sup>2</sup> Ban Gu, a historian of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). – *Ed.*

Han, will be wiped out, however distant they may be!”<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, it was the leader (*chanyu*, 单于) of the Southern Xiongnu who detected that the Northern Xiongnu were enmeshed in internal turmoil and suggested on his own initiative that the Han send troops against them.<sup>2</sup> Of the 46,000 cavalymen led by Dou Xian, 30,000 were from the Southern Xiongnu, and a half of the remaining 16,000 belonged to the Qiang people.<sup>3</sup> It can be said, therefore, that the Northern Xiongnu were defeated not by the Han alone, but by the joint forces of the nomadic groups who dwelt to the south of the Gobi, led by a Han general.

Was the southward drive of some of the nomads reflective of the lack of cultural solidarity among the steppe dwellers? Not necessarily. Rather, it was primarily a result of geographic and climatic constraints

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<sup>1</sup> Ban Gu, chapter 70 of *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (汉书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, p. 3015.

<sup>2</sup> Fan Ye, chapter 23 of *History of the Later Han Dynasty* (后汉书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, p. 814.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

on the nomads’ economy. Facing a harsh environment, especially when cold waves rolled across the grasslands, the nomads would prefer to move southward. In terms of natural resources, the grasslands could support only a limited population (approximately one tenth of what the agriculturally productive areas in the south could support). Economically speaking, the nomads depended on the exchanges with the Central Plains to obtain grain, silk, linen, and later, tea. They were attracted by the advanced agricultural products and handcrafts from the Central Plains.<sup>1</sup> Hence, whereas the nomads living to the north of the Gobi tended to expand westward, those who lived to the south were more interested in cooperation or even integration with the dwellers of the Central Plains. Partaking in economic and transportation networks of northern China could secure them better access to food during the famines and lower the cost of economic transactions with the agricultural heartland. Eventually, the nomads and

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<sup>1</sup> See Fei Xiaotong, “Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese People” ( 中华民族的多元一体格局 ), *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, Issue No. 4, 1989, pp. 1-19.

semi-nomads living along the northernmost reaches of China formed a socioeconomic community with the Han residents to their immediate south. This community, formed over a history of more than 1,500 years, encompassed the people along the lengthy frontier area between the steppe and the sown through much of Northeast Asia. These people shared folklore, languages, culture, and institutions.<sup>1</sup>

After the Battle of the Yanran Mountains, the Southern Xiongnu started resettling in the northern territories under the Han court's control. Due to the Han's conciliatory policies, they were not required to pay regular taxes and levies, but were subjected to population control under the centralized *junxian* system (a system of prefectures and counties under centralized administration).<sup>2</sup> In due time, a new mixed Han-

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<sup>1</sup> For the process of this cultural mixture in northern China in the context of the fourth-century establishment of the Northern Dynasties there, see Charles Holcombe, "The Sixteen Kingdoms," *The Cambridge History of China. Volume 2: The Six Dynasties: 220-589*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 119-144, especially pp. 121-124.

<sup>2</sup> See Fang Xuanling *et al.*, chapter 97 of *History of the Jin Dynasty* (晋书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2548.

Northerner culture evolved in these areas. The many Southern Xiongnu tombs unearthed in today’s Ningxia, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, northern Shaanxi, and Shanxi provide positive proof of this. While having the Han-style structure, these tombs also contain steppe-related sacrificial goods such as heads and hooves of livestock. At times, only inscriptional evidence can prove that the tomb occupant was not a Han person. For instance, Tomb No. 1 at Shangsunjiazhai Village, discovered in Qinghai in 1973, was shaped and furnished according to the Han habits, and in it was found a camel-topped bronze seal with the inscription that means: “Head of the Xiongnu who has pledged allegiance to the Han court.”<sup>1</sup> Without the seal, it would be next to

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<sup>1</sup> The seal was discovered at Tomb No. 1 in Shangsunjiazhai Village, Houzihe Township, Qinghai. The Chinese characters engraved on it indicated that it was an official seal issued by the central government of the Eastern Han Dynasty to a Xiongnu head who had submitted to the Han court and was therefore conferred upon the title “*guiyi*” (“pledging allegiance”). For the discovery, see Qinghai Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, *The Han and Jin Tombs of Shangsunjiazhai Village* (上孙家寨汉晋墓), Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 1993, pp. 151-152. Also see a brief discussion in Sophia Karin Psarras, *Han Material Culture: An Archaeological Analysis and Vessel Typology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 32.

impossible to establish the tomb occupant's ethnic identity. It is one of the many proofs of the ongoing cultural amalgamation between the Northerners and the Han people along the northern and northwestern frontiers of the Han Dynasty.

Parallel to the Southern Xiongnu's southward migration, other northern ethnic groups such as the Di and the Qiang from the northwest, the Xianbei from the northeast, and the Jie from the north of the Gobi Desert also started moving toward the Central Plains. Two factors contributed to their migration. First, amid internal wars that plagued much of northern China since the weakening of the Han Dynasty, and even more during the turmoil that accompanied the disintegration of the Western Jin Dynasty (265-317), the emperors of the Han and the Western Jin courts and their ministers repeatedly appealed for military help from the northern nomadic and semi-nomadic groups, enticing them to move deep into the Central Plains. Second, the same turmoil also contributed to a southward migration of the Han peasants from the

vast areas of northern China. They moved toward the relatively secure territories to the south of the Huaihe and the Yangtze rivers, leaving the northern territories open for new migrants. These two parallel processes resulted in the dramatic overhaul of northern China’s ethnic composition. Historical records mention millions of nomads and semi-nomads who resettled on the Central Plains in a century following the downfall of the Han Dynasty: no less than 700,000 Xiongnu, 800,000 Qiang, one million Di, and 2.5 million Xianbei.<sup>1</sup> Hence, by the end of the Rebellion of the Eight Princes (291-306), which effectively ended the rule of the Western Jin Dynasty, out of about 15 million residents in northern China, only one third were ethnic Han; the rest were Northerners (*hu*).

This observation calls us to pause and rethink

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Dawei, “A Study of the Total Ethnic Minority Population Integrated with the Han People during the Sixteen Kingdoms Period and the Northern Dynasties” (十六国北朝各少数民族融入汉族总人口数考), *Zhu Dawei on the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties* (朱大渭说魏晋南北朝), Shanghai: Shanghai Scientific and Technological Literature Press, 2009, pp. 124-128.

the background for what is called *Hanbua* (汉化) or “Sinicization,” the topic of the next sections. Not a few scholars identify Sinicization with assimilation of numerically small minority groups into a huge Han ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> This is a demonstrably wrong assertion, though, especially in the case of the fourth-century northern China. Back then, the Northerners enjoyed not just military superiority over the Han, but also clear numerical superiority.<sup>2</sup> It was entirely possible to envision the process of “nomadization” of northern China, i.e., turning its vast territories into pastureland to fit the nomads’ cultural habits. It was entirely possible that the northern rulers, instead of adapting to the Han ways, would rather “northernize” their Han subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> Lin Qian, “On Ethnic Relations from the Perspective of Social Science” (从社会科学的视角谈民族关系), *Theory and Methods of Border Research in China* (中国边疆研究理论与方法), Taipei: Bohaitang Cultural Company, 1992, pp. 573-586.

<sup>2</sup> Jiang Tong (d. 310), a Western Jin scholar, mentioned in his essay “Discourse on the Migrating Nomads” (徙戎论) that the ratio of the nomads to the Han population in Guanzhong (关中, the region “within the passes”) at this time was 1:1 and the number of the nomads was even higher than that of the Han in northeast Shaanxi (See chapter 56 of *History of the Jin Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, pp. 1529-1535).

This did not happen, though. As we shall see below, the new rulers of the Central Plains chose to adapt to the Han ways, albeit doing this on their own terms.

## 2

The success of the Northerners in establishing their rule over the Central Plains might be related to the major military innovation of the early fourth century: the proliferation of stirrups and the parallel rise in heavily armored cavalry that replaced the light cavalry of the preceding centuries. These developments gave the Northerners, who were more proficient in riding and had much ampler supply of horses, a decisive advantage over the dwellers of the Central Plains. In the battles waged during the Rebellion of the Eight Princes and in its immediate aftermath, the nomads

proved decisively superior to the infantry-based Han armies. In a very short period of time, this military superiority was translated into political one. New political entities established by the Northerners ruled the Central Plains henceforth for centuries to come.<sup>1</sup> Yet whereas militarily speaking, the nomads were clearly superior to the Han infantry (at least insofar as wars were waged on the Central Plains), politically speaking they were strongly inclined to adopt many of the Han practices. They were moving toward Sinicization.

In different contexts, the term *Hanbua* or Sinicization can refer to a great variety of phenomena – from adopting Chinese writing in administration (a default choice throughout continental East Asia during the age under discussion here) to wholesale change of an ethnic group’s customs, habits, and even private names (as was the case in the Northern Wei Dynasty under Emperor Xiaowen [r. 471-499]). But the term became very sensitive due to some reasons. Initially, this sensitivity

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<sup>1</sup> For a military history of that era, see David Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 35-75.

derived primarily from intra-academic cleavages when some scholars, eager to overturn erstwhile paradigms, questioned the term's usefulness and even its very legitimacy, triggering intense debates.<sup>1</sup> Then, political sensitivities ensued. For some scholars in the West, ethnic identities, especially of minority or weak groups, are valorized as such, and any approach that questions the durability of these identities is rejected. It should be noted that the Chinese term that I use, *Hanbua*, is not identical semantically to what is often translated into English as "Sinicization." Han can indeed refer to China's major ethnic group, but it also refers to the Han Dynasty, and its political, institutional, and, to a certain extent cultural legacy. It is precisely the latter meaning to which I am referring (see the following section). As the term "Sinicization" is more convenient than the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance a heated exchange between Evelyn S. Rawski and Ho Ping-ti, two former heads of the American Association for Asian Studies: Evelyn S. Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 55, Issue No. 4, 1996, pp. 829-850, and Ho Ping-ti, "In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 57, Issue No. 1, 1998, pp. 123-155.

cumbersome “adoption of the Han political model,” it is used infrequently in this study.

The first attempt by the Northerners to establish a kingdom on the Central Plains was that of the Southern Xiongnu who toppled the Western Jin Dynasty. The Southern Xiongnu were also those who pioneered the Northerners’ adaptation to the Han ruling models. Their leader, Liu Yuan (d. 310), was a descendant of *chanyu* Qiangqu (r. 179-188). Due to the long history of intermarriage between the Xiongnu heads and the Han ruling house, Liu Yuan’s ancestors adopted the surname “Liu” of the Han royal family. As a scion of the Xiongnu ruling house, Liu Yuan had stayed as a hostage student at the Jin court in Luoyang. There he became versatile in classical Han culture: He studied such canonical texts as the *Mao’s Edition of the Book of Songs* (毛诗) and the *Book of History* (尚书) and major historical texts such as the *Records of the Historian* (史记) and the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. He was particularly fond of the *Zuo’s Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (左传), a major canonical and

historical text, and the *Master Sun's Art of War* (孙子兵法).

From his power base in northern Shanxi, where the Southern Xiongnu settled over a century before, Liu Yuan rebelled against the moribund Jin court in the year 304, proclaiming himself not the restorer of the Xiongnu power in the north but, rather, of the Han Dynasty, the imperial title of which he adopted. In his capacity as the “nephew” of the Han ruling house, he proclaimed himself the rightful heir to the three powerful rulers of the previous Han courts (Liu Bang, Liu Xiu and Liu Bei),<sup>1</sup> basing his legitimacy on the concept of collateral succession. He even set up an altar to worship Liu Bei's son Liu Shan, derisively known by his baby name Adou and the one who failed to maintain his ancestral state.

Despite his sophisticated legitimation efforts, Liu Yuan did not succeed in restoring political unity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Liu Bang (r. 202-195 BCE) was founder of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE-8 CE); Liu Xiu (r. 25-57 CE), founder of the Eastern Han Dynasty; and Liu Bei (161-223), founder of the Kingdom of Han (221-263) in Sichuan, which is known in histories as Shu Han (Kingdom of Shu).

Jin’s ruling space. Immediately after his death in 310, his kingdom started crumbling under the succession struggles. Soon, it was sidelined and eventually eliminated by one of Liu Yuan’s former subordinates, Shi Le (274-333), who founded the Later Zhao (319-351). Shi Le came from the Jie people of probably Central Asian stock. It is said that the Jie people had “high noses and full beards”; they were subordinate to the Xiongnu and pejoratively referred to as *zabu* (杂胡) or “mixed Northerners.” Unlike Liu Yuan, a nobleman who had grown up in the Jin court, Shi Le was a commoner who had shortly been a slave before becoming a mercenary and ultimately a general in Liu Yuan’s services. This humble background notwithstanding, Shi Le, who was illiterate himself, admired literary studies and was particularly fond of listening to the stories from the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Under his influence, his son, the crown prince Shi Hong, was educated as a true Confucian scholar. However, politically speaking, Shi Le was not successful. Much like the case of Liu Yuan, violent

succession struggles and especially the enthronement of his excessively cruel and erratic nephew Shi Hu (r. 334-349) put an end to the clan's rule. On the ruins of the Later Zhao, two major powers emerged, the Former Yan (337-370) ruled by the Murong clan of the Xianbei and the Former Qin founded by the Di people.

Fu Jian (r. 357-385), the ruler of the Former Qin, became the first of the Northerners to succeed in reunifying northern China in its entirety. From his power base in Guanzhong (the heartland of the pre-imperial State of Qin), he expanded his territory immensely to encompass most of the Han Dynasty possessions to the north of the Yangtze. It is said that his lands reached the sea in the east, Qiuci in the west, Xiangyang in the south, and the Gobi Desert in the north.<sup>1</sup> However, at the apex of his rush to fully reunify All-under-Heaven, Fu Jian suffered a sudden defeat at the hands of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) in the Battle of the Feishui River in 383. In the aftermath of

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<sup>1</sup> See Shi Huijiao, chapter 5 of *Biography of Eminent Monks* (高僧传), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 182.

the defeat, the Former Qin rapidly disintegrated, and northern China was divided once again among several rival polities, the most prominent of which were the Later Qin (384-417) founded by the Yao clan of the Qiang in northwest, the Later Yan (384-407) founded again by the Murong clan of the Xianbei in northeast, and slightly later, the Xia (407-431) founded by the Helian clan of the Xiongnu further to the north of the Later Qin’s territories.

After another generation of wars and internal struggles that plagued each of the competing polities and even allowed the Eastern Jin Dynasty to regain for a while significant parts of the Central Plains, a new force emerged to reunify the north. The Tuoba clan of the Xianbei rose from the southeastern parts of the Mongol steppes. Originally a minor player on the Central Plains, the Tuoba gained the upper hand first against their Murong rivals and then against other competitors. Under the apt leadership of three generations of emperors, the Wei Dynasty (better known as the Northern Wei Dynasty) they built

succeeded in reunifying all of northern China by 439, inaugurating almost a century of relative peace and stability. In the end, however, the Northern Wei entered a new crisis and disintegrated into two rival polities, the Eastern Wei (534-550) and the Western Wei (535-557), which gave rise respectively to the Northern Qi (550-577) and the Northern Zhou (557-581) dynasties. The latter successfully eliminated the former in 577, paving the way to the reintegration of the entire realm under its successors, the Sui and the Tang dynasties.

The above brief survey does not fully address the complexity of the competing polities. They differed in terms of the ethnic composition of the ruling elite, the elite's cultural outlook (some were pure nomads, and others agropastoralists), and the degree of their adaptation to the Han models of rule. Some favored a dual rule in which the Han people and the Northerners were governed separately, whereas others opted for a more uniform Han administration; some were keener to preserve top political positions in the hands of the members of the ruling ethnocultural group, whereas

others were more open to the Han literati; some preferred to feed the armies from plundering, whereas others were keen to develop a solid agricultural base to finance military and administrative expenses. Interethnic relations within the ruling elites also fluctuated widely, with not a few examples of enmity and bitter, even bloody, rivalry, amid multiple instances of successful collaboration among different elite groups. Yet differences aside, it can be concluded that politically speaking, each of the competing polities was moving toward adoption of the administrative and, to a certain degree, cultural patterns associated with the Han Dynasty’s legacy. The difference was primarily of pace rather than of the trajectory.

Among the different political entities, the two that succeeded in reunifying northern China were, incidentally, the two that displayed the staunchest commitment to adapting to the Han model, viz. the Former Qin and the Northern Wei. Fu Jian, the most eminent emperor of the former, was born to a Di family famous for their fondness of drinking. He was

a military hero, but from his young years he was also attracted to the canonical and historical writings of the Han people. After his enthronement, he acted robustly to promote Confucian educational curriculum. Every month he personally visited the imperial academy and examined the students on the meaning of the classics. He set the goals for himself to not fail the subtle implications in the pithy remarks of Confucius and the Duke of Zhou and to surpass Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty (r. 141-87 BCE) and Emperor Guangwu of the Eastern Han Dynasty (r. 25-57 CE) in terms of governance.<sup>1</sup>

Fu Jian's self-identification as a moral Confucian paragon had influenced some of his political choices. For instance, after subjugating the Western Regions, he ordered to return to the State of Dayuan the tribute of the Ferghana horses, so as to display magnanimity and

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 113 of *History of the Jin Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2888. The idea that Confucius encoded his political messages in "subtle words" in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋) gained popularity since the early Han Dynasty; by adding the Duke of Zhou, Fu Jian hinted at his impeccable classical learning. Emperor Wu and Emperor Guangwu were both associated with promoting Confucian learning.

distinguish himself from Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty who, five centuries earlier, had dispatched an army against Dayuan only to obtain this rare equine breed known for its high speed and reddish sweat. Later as Fu Jian sent the army to conquer the Eastern Jin, he ordered to prepare lodging in his palace for the Jin emperor and his ministers, to manifest his commitment to the old Zhou rule of “restoring the states that have been destroyed and reviving the lineages of the big families that have been extinct.” Having defeated the Former Yan, Fu Jian did not kill his captives, Murong Wei and Murong Chui (the emperor and the minister of the Former Yan), but rather appointed them as his own officials. Countless advisors recommended him to kill the captives to eradicate in advance the potential for future troubles, but Fu Jian preferred again to act as a moral exemplar in order to win over his subjects. This proved to be a miscalculation, though: After Fu Jian’s defeat at the Feishui River, the captive Xianbei nobles fled back home, establishing the rival polities of Later Yan (384-407) and Western Yan (384-394). Some

people criticized Fu Jian's obsession with benevolence and righteousness as self-defeating, much as was the case of Lord Xiang of Song (r. 651-637 BCE), who had adamantly refused to attack an unprepared enemy army, only to be badly defeated by the enemy once they had the chance to order their ranks.

Some people say that the Former Qin was destroyed because of its "excessive Sinicization"; but note that the next unifier of the northern regions, the Northern Wei was even more adamant in adopting the Han models, albeit at a somewhat slower pace. Its founder Tuoba Gui (also known as Emperor Daowu, r. 386-409) claimed that the country should be governed through the "simultaneous application of civil and military means," i.e. the combination of nomadic martial traditions and the Han administrative patterns and Confucian learning.<sup>1</sup> The third Northern Wei ruler, Tuoba Tao (Emperor Taiwu, r. 423-452), employed a large number of Han elite members and transferred

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<sup>1</sup> See Wei Shou *et al.*, chapter 84 of *History of the Wei Dynasty* (魏书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995, p. 1841.

many scholars from the recently conquered areas in Gansu to his capital Pingcheng (today’s Datong in Shanxi Province), so that the Xianbei children would benefit from classical studies. As a result, “many people sharpened their skills and revered the Classics, and Confucian studies resumed prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> Tuoba Hong (Emperor Xiaowen, r. 471-499) went even farther into the direction of systemic Sinicization. He moved the capital from Pingcheng southward to Luoyang (in today’s Henan Province), the traditional heartland of China; adopted the bureaucratic nomenclature of the Jin and other dynasties in the south, and ordered the Xianbei people to adjust their social ranks, adopt Han surnames and speak only Chinese at court. Taking the lead himself, he also asked his younger brothers to marry women from eminent Han families.

Some historians argue that the reason why the Northern Wei and its successor – the Northern Zhou – were able to reunify northern China, and why later the Sui Dynasty was able to reunify all of China was

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1842.

precisely because they all adopted the Han traditions and practiced the Han rituals and customs. This is not entirely correct, though. After all, the rulers of the Southern Dynasties, who, being ethnic Han, naturally followed the Han customs and rituals, failed in their attempts to reunify China. The critically important factor that allowed the success of the Northern Wei was its systemic reforms based on the commitment to the ideal of great unity. These reforms reinvigorated the Northern Dynasties and enabled them to overcome multiple geographic and political hurdles *en route* to the renewed unity of the realm. The Northern Wei and its successors were able to restore the foundations of the Confucian-Legalist state patterned after the Qin and the Han dynasties; without this restoration, unity, peace, and stability would forever remain a pipe dream.

## 3

After the fall of the Western Jin in 317, a series of natural disasters and human catastrophes devastated the Central Plains. With the collapse of grassroots-level administration, the source of authority shifted from government officials to local magnates and heads of powerful lineages, who built fortified villages, in which they could protect personal dependents. Military turmoil left wide swaths of land uncultivated, turning peasants into landless vagabonds. A vicious cycle ensued. Powerful magnates grabbed ever more land. Landless peasants sought the magnates' protection,

becoming their tenants and personal dependents. Weak governments, which had to rely on the magnates' cooperation to ensure at least a semblance of local order, had to acquiesce in this land grab and were in no position to tax the land and the tenants adequately. The governments' fiscal revenues plummeted, while the rich became richer and the poor poorer.

In 485, Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei initiated one of his most celebrated reforms, the introduction of the equal-field system. The government utilized its nominal control over uncultivated lands and redistributed them to the peasants according to the size of the household. Most of the lands were designated as "open fields" used for grain crops; such lands were the basis of taxation and would be returned to the government for redistribution when the owner reached an advanced age or died. Smaller plots designated as "mulberry fields" and "hemp fields" were inheritable. There were also rules on how to distribute land to seniors, children, the disabled, and widows. The system did not dispossess the rich who benefitted from the

allocation of extra fields to the owners of oxen and of bondservants, but took care of the poor, ensuring them decent livelihood for the first time in centuries. The equal-field system thus became the foundation of China’s landownership from the Northern Wei Dynasty through its successor polities and well until the mid-eighth century, when it was finally abandoned due to the demographic growth and the resultant inadequate land supply.

Parallel to the introduction of the equal-field system, Emperor Xiaowen introduced another major reform, the “three-headman system” (*sanzhangzhi*, 三长制). The local society was divided into five-household neighborhood units; five neighborhoods formed a hamlet; and five hamlets formed a township. On each of the three levels, a headman was appointed as a grassroots administrator. This was aimed at counterbalancing the local magnates and lineage heads, who prospered during the generations of political turmoil and effectively separated the government above from society below. With the introduction of the three-headman system,

the power of the local magnates was weakened, whereas the government restored effective control over society, with regard to population registration, fair distribution of the tax burden, and the like. For all practical matters, it meant the reversal of the situation of bureaucratic impotency that plagued Chinese polities since the waning years of the Han Dynasty. The three-headman system was a crucial step toward restoring the household registration (*bianhu qimin*, 编户齐民), the hallmark policy followed from the Warring States to the Han Dynasty. Besides, the new system also gave more power to the people to select petty clerks in charge of local taxation and administration.

**Table 1.1: Major Reforms of Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty**

Year	Reform
484	Paying regular salary to the officials (to curb corruption)

(Continued Table)

485	Introducing the equal-field system
486	Adjusting the taxation system
486	Introducing the three-headman system
493	Banning intermarriage among the Xianbei clansmen
494	Moving the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang
494	Banning the people from wearing Xianbei clothes
495	Banning the usage of the Xianbei language at court
496	Changing the Xianbei surnames into the Han ones and encouraging intermarriages between the Xianbei and the Han

The person who proposed the equal-field system was a Han Confucian scholar, Li Anshi. The one who put forward the three-headman proposal was a Han official, Li Chong. The equal-field system dramatically increased the number of registered households, tax revenues, and military reserves of the Northern Wei; the three-headman system ended a feudal-style indirect

rule and rebuilt an administrative structure reaching down to the grassroots levels; and additional reforms in the administrative system restored the power of the political center. It was these reforms, rather than adoption of the Han clothes, rituals and ceremonies, that reflected the true spirit of the Han system. This system was fully restored on the Central Plains under the rule of the northern polities a full 170 years after the fall of the Western Jin. This point was summarized by an eminent Chinese historian, Qian Mu (1895-1990), as follows:

*The Northern Wei began as a tribal state based on the “feudal system.”<sup>1</sup> However, as it adopted the three-headman and the equal-field systems, it started transforming from a tribal feudalized*

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese term “*fengjian*” (封建) was adopted in the 20th century as an equivalent of Western “feudalism.” The literal translation is problematic, because *fengjian* could mean different things in different periods of Chinese history and the Western term “feudalism” is also understood very differently by Marxist and non-Marxist historians. In the current discussion, the *fengjian* system refers primarily to the polycentric mode of rule in which the political authority was delegated to the local potentates. As such, there were indeed notable parallels with European feudalism.

*state to a centralized entity based on the junxian system. As a result, the balance of power between the Northerners and the Han was reversed.*<sup>1</sup>

In just 30 years following the reforms of Emperor Xiaowen, the Northern Wei's registered population surpassed dramatically that of the Southern Dynasties. In 520, the population reached almost 35 million, doubling that of the Western Jin during the Taikang Period (280-289), the apex of its prosperity.<sup>2</sup> This increase allowed among other matters significant expansion of the military forces. Such an expansion was achieved under one of the Northern Wei's successor polities, that is, the Western Wei (later Northern Zhou) ruled by the Yuwen lineage. Facing acute shortage of military manpower, the Yuwen rulers

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<sup>1</sup> See Qian Mu, *Outline of Chinese History* (国史大纲), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1996, p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 106 of *History of the Wei Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995, p. 2455. Note that the change reflected not just the objective demographic growth in the north, but primarily the improved ability of the government to register population. As explained below in the text, the Southern Dynasties failed precisely in ensuring adequate population census.

formed the “garrison militia” (*fubing*, 府兵) system, allowing massive enrollment of Han peasants into the ranks of the military. The new system put an end to the previous bifurcation of the population with the Xianbei fighting the wars and the Han tilling the land. This system not only increased the military power of the Northern Zhou, but also allowed its rulers much stronger control over the military than was possible when the armies were primarily staffed by nomadic soldiers, who were often more loyal to their immediate commander than to the imperial court. The garrison militia troops played a crucial role in the success of the wars of reunification which started under the Northern Zhou and were completed by its successor, the Sui.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the Northern Wei that revived the Han system and restored effective centralized power, the Han system inherited by the dynasties in the south – the Eastern Jin and its successors – became increasingly ossified. The civil official recruitment system formed

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<sup>1</sup> For the *fubing* system, see David Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 108-111.

in the Western Han combined recommendations with examinations. Over time, recommendations gained in importance, allowing proliferation of the thick web of ties between eminent families with access to classical education and local bureaucrats. Eventually, the two groups coalesced into a new powerful elite with preferential access to top government positions, which resulted in such phenomena as having “three dukes in four generations” of one family.<sup>1</sup> The elite ossification accelerated in the Kingdom of Wei (220-265), when recommendations based on local reputation became the major avenue for entering officialdom. Social mobility decreased and a few genteel families successfully monopolized political power. The Eastern Jin Dynasty rose to power through garnering support of the genteel families, and it repaid them by allowing further empowerment of what by now became hereditary

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<sup>1</sup> Having three dukes (duke being the highest position for a member of non-imperial lineage) in four generations meant amazing career success, which was the hallmark of newly emerging aristocracy at the end of the Han Dynasty. See Chen Shou, chapter 6 of *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (三国志), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1994, p. 188.

aristocracy at the expense of the throne; as the saying had it, “the Wang and the Sima families share the rule of All-under-Heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

The excessive power of the aristocracy had extremely negative repercussions on the state power in the south. Despite the massive relocation of the Han population southward following the collapse of the Western Jin, and despite the impressive prosperity of southern economy, which surely allowed demographic growth, the scholars noted that “over the three centuries of the six dynasties<sup>2</sup> starting from the Kingdom of Wu (222-280) to the end of the Chen (557-589), there was almost no growth in the registered population to the south of the Yangtze.”<sup>3</sup> This paradox can be resolved if we know that almost all the new

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 98 of *History of the Jin Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2554. The Wangs were the most powerful aristocratic lineage under the Jin; Sima was the Jin’s imperial surname.

<sup>2</sup> The six dynasties refer to the Kingdom of Wu, Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang and Chen, which all had their capitals in the city named Nanjing today. – *Ed.*

<sup>3</sup> Tang Changru, *Three Discussions on the History of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern, Sui, and Tang Dynasties* ( 魏晉南北朝隋唐史三论 ), Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1992, p. 88.

migrants had become private dependents of the eminent families and were not registered. The imperial court lacked correct census data, losing, as a result, much of its revenue and manpower. This weakness should be taken into consideration when we assess the Southern Dynasties. It is true that culturally speaking, their age was marked by immense creativity. The elite engagement in “pure conversation” (*qingtan*, 清谈, pure philosophical disputes divorced from reality), the proliferation of the most elegant literary and artistic styles, and the intellectual sophistication of the Study of the Arcane (*xuanxue*, 玄学) all turned the south into an unrivaled cultural center of the fragmented Han realm.<sup>1</sup> However, this cultural prosperity could not compensate for sociopolitical stagnation, which made the southern polities doomed once the effective restoration of a powerful centralized polity started in the north.

Two leading 20th-century historians, Chen Yinke

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<sup>1</sup> For the cultural prosperity of the south, see Tian Xiaofei, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502-557)*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007.

(1890-1969) and Qian Mu, argued that the unified Sui and Tang dynasties inherited the political system of the Northern Dynasties and the ritual and artistic culture of the Southern Dynasties. This may be so, but it should be emphasized here anew that the real contribution to the reunification came not from the conservative south but from the northern polities, whose innovations such as the equal-field and the garrison militia systems reflected the true spirit of the Han system. It was these innovations that allowed the Sui Dynasty to successfully conduct the first nationwide household census. It was the Northerners' flexibility that allowed the Sui to introduce major changes into the official recruitment system, laying a foundation for the imperial examination system. Professor Chen Yinke once averred: "[The Tang Dynasty] drew the fresh blood of the vigorous barbarians living north of the Great Wall and injected it into the decadent Central Plains culture."<sup>1</sup> What was really injected here was not

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Yinke, *Second Collection of Papers from Jinming Studio* (金明馆丛稿二编), Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001, p. 344.

so much the “barbarian blood,” but rather the spirit of reforms and innovations initiated by the northern polities.

The victory of the Northern Dynasties over their southern rivals was for sure not that of “barbarism” over civilization. Rather, it was the victory of those more capable of inheriting the true spirit of the Han system: the quest for great unity. The “new Han system” that evolved in the north combined the strengths of the Northerners’ and the Han’s political experience, and it proved more viable than the rigid and conservative “old Han system” practiced by the Southern Dynasties. The flexibility of the northern polities may be explained by the fact that the northern emperors, such as Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei, were adept at utilizing the competition between the nomadic and the Han elites so as to chart a middle course suiting the long-term interests of the throne rather than those of the entrenched aristocracy. Their southern counterparts, by contrast, found it difficult to liberate themselves from the suffocating power of the

aristocratic lineages. Furthermore, the northern polities were more concerned with practical results, which was reflected in their policies of selecting and promoting officials. The classical studies in the north were more attuned to practical questions than metaphysical speculations related to the Study of the Arcane that flourished in the south. Another difference is observable in the employment of Confucian scholars: In the north, they occupied positions in both the court and the local administration, whereas in the south those of the lesser elite families (*hanmen*, literally “cold gate”) were too often thwarted in their aspirations by the entrenched power of the aristocrats.

Having recognized the strengths of the Northern Dynasties, we should not dismiss the achievements of the Southern Dynasties. Aside from attaining economic and cultural prosperity, the southerners made important innovations in the field of administration. For instance, they developed the earliest model of the “Three Departments and Six Ministries” (*sansheng liubu*, 三省六部) system, which eventually became the foundation

of the centralized government in the Sui and the Tang dynasties. In the last century of the Southern Dynasties, experiments were made to reaffirm the importance of examinations, and these experiments might have contributed to the eventual restoration of the examinations as a major means of broadening the elite ranks.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most important point is that the Southern Dynasties never abandoned the quest for great unity. Their commitment to this goal was much stronger than that of the Eastern Roman Empire (the Byzantine Empire), for example. Whereas the Byzantine court, through a thousand years of its existence, initiated only one and a half attempts to reconquer the territories of the Western Roman Empire,<sup>2</sup> the Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Zhu Mingpan, *Historical Records of the Liang Dynasty* (南朝梁会要), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, pp. 424-425 and pp. 445-446.

<sup>2</sup> The “one” attempt was under Justinian I and the “a half” was made by Constans II (r. 641-668), who, following the loss of the eastern and southern territories to the Arabs, turned westward again and tried to reconquer the Lombard parts of Italy in the 660s. According to Wickham, Constans II even planned to move the capital to Syracuse, Sicily, which would mean dramatic reconfiguration of power in the Byzantine

Jin and its successors launched during 272 years of their existence over 10 expeditions to the north, in an effort to restore unified rule.<sup>1</sup> Not all of these attempts were equally significant, militarily speaking, and most were undermanned and underfunded; but at the very least they demonstrated the southern polities' ongoing commitment to pursuing the goal of great unity, despite their numerical and military weakness *vis-à-vis* their northern counterparts.

The southerners' attempts to reconquer the north, even if at times lackluster, cannot be dismissed as

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world. He was killed in a coup, ending the final real attempt of western "reconquista." See Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, London: Penguin, 2009, p. 239.

<sup>1</sup> These attempts were respectively undertaken by: Eastern Jin general Zu Ti (266-321) who retook much of Henan immediately after the collapse of the Western Jin; Eastern Jin minister Yu Liang (289-340) who suggested the emperor launch a northward expedition; Eastern Jin minister Huan Wen (312-373) who led three expeditions to the north; Eastern Jin statesman Xie An (320-385) who launched a counterattack northward after the battle at the Feishui River; Liu Yu (363-422), founding emperor of the Song Dynasty (420-479), who assaulted the north twice; Liu Yu's son Liu Yilong or Emperor Wen (r. 424-453) who assaulted the north thrice; Xiao Yan (464-549), founding emperor of the Liang Dynasty (502-557), who launched an expedition northward once the Northern Wei Dynasty started unraveling; and Chen Xu (530-582) or Emperor Xuan of the Chen Dynasty (557-589) who tried to benefit from the crumbling of the Northern Qi Dynasty.

hollow propagandist tricks. History teaches us that no political entity on Chinese soil could attain legitimacy without commitment to the goal of realizing the realm’s reunification.<sup>1</sup> And the problem was not just of legitimacy. In a divided realm, there was simply no way of attaining peace or even domestic stability. As competing political entities were keen to aggravate crises in the rival polity so as to hasten its demise and ease the task of reunification, it was clear to all that ongoing political division was tantamount to perennial turmoil. Hence, the competitors from the south and the north of the Yangtze (or the Huaihe River, which often served as the border between the southern and the northern polities) repeatedly invested huge material and human resources to overcome the ecological divide between the south and the north and restore political unity and peace in All-under-Heaven.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see,

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<sup>1</sup> See Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 11-43.

<sup>2</sup> Note that ecology mattered a lot: Whereas the Central Plains benefitted heavy cavalry, the south, with its abundance of rivers and mountains, was more fitting for naval and infantry warfare. To overpower the other,

this universal commitment to the goal of great unity was one of the major factors that distinguished ancient China from the Roman world.

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both sides had to invest incomparably more resources than fighting on a familiar terrain. That such resources were repeatedly allocated by the relatively weak southern polities demonstrates the overarching importance of attaining great unity.

## 4

Above I have tried to demonstrate that the Northerners turned to Sinicization (i.e., adoption of the Han political model) because they had grasped the essence of this model: the construction of a mega-scale political entity designed to attain lasting peace and stability. Without adopting this model, the Northerners, notwithstanding their military superiority, would never have triumphed over the Southern Dynasties. They also understood that the Han system was not tantamount to the laws and customs of the Han people; rather it was an impartial system with a strong underlying

political rationale that could apply to any political actor. In Chinese tradition, the difference between the Xia (夏) and the Yi (夷)<sup>1</sup> was determined not by blood, but, primarily by adopting certain values, behavioral norms, and institutions.<sup>2</sup> The Han people could lose their legitimacy as the “true successors” of the Chinese civilization should they abandon the basic spirit of the Han system, viz. the quest for a unified and stable polity. By contrast, the Yi or the aliens who were eager to embrace the Han system could claim the position as the true heirs to the Chinese civilization (a point which will be discussed later in Section 7 of Chapter II).

It should be reiterated here that *Hanbua* or Sinicization did not mean assimilation of the aliens by the Han people, but adoption of the Han system.

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<sup>1</sup> Xia (夏), Hua (华), and Huaxia (华夏) are ancient appellations of the Han people living on the Central Plains, and Yi (夷) is an ancient appellation of the tribes living in the east and later a general term for the people living in all directions, who were collectively regarded as “the aliens” by those from the Central Plains. – *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> The understanding that one’s identity is based on culture rather than on bloodline was prominent already in preimperial China; see Yuri Pines, “Beasts or Humans: Pre-Imperial Origins of Sino-Barbarian Dichotomy,” *Mongols, Turks and Others*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp. 59-102.

In the early Western Han Dynasty there was no such term as “Han people”; the people were primarily identified according to their belonging to the rival states into which the Zhou realm was divided before the Qin reunification (this identification is prominent, for example, in Sima Qian’s discussion of the different habits among the dwellers of the Han realm). The term “Han people” gained certain prominence after the reign of Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty, but it was used not as an ethnic designation but as a reference to the subjects of the Han Dynasty. Notably, it was under Emperor Wu that the “Han system” started taking a recognizable shape, which was established through the amalgamation of distinct intellectual and institutional achievements of the Warring States. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> this system synthesized, among other matters, the Legalist institutions from the State of Qin, the Confucianism from the State of Lu, the Huang-Lao techniques of governance and economic

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<sup>1</sup> Pan Yue, *Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations: The Warring States and Ancient Greece*, Beijing: New World Press, 2022, pp. 23-25.

theories from *Guanxi* associated with the State of Qi, the cultural and artistic accomplishments from the State of Chu, the diplomatic strategies of “vertical and horizontal alliances” and the governing philosophy based on “performance and titles (*xingming*)” from the states of Wei and Han<sup>1</sup>, and the military system from the states of Yan and Zhao. The “Han people” were those who accepted these institutions and endorsed their underlying ideas. Put it in other words, the “Han people” was not an ethnic category, but a political and civilizational construct, the earliest example in Chinese history of successful creation of an ultra-large-scale meta-ethnocultural entity.

The institutional foundations of the Han system are traceable to the Qin and early Han eras; but once formed, this system was no longer an exclusive possession of the Chinese people. Rather, it became a common classical legacy of East Asian civilizations. It is exactly like the case of *hanzi* (汉字) or the “Han

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<sup>1</sup> The preimperial State of Han (韩) in the 3rd to 5th centuries BCE was different from the Han (汉) Dynasty.

[Chinese] characters,” which are not restricted to the Chinese people but are a common cultural legacy of the East Asian subcontinent. The administrative, historical, and philosophical texts, written in these characters, became indispensable for the dynasty-builders throughout East Asia, whatever their ethnic origins were. Thus, when the Northerners chose “Sinicization,” this was not tantamount to self-depreciation or deviation from their ancestral culture. It actually reflected their ambition to establish a meta-political entity that would transcend erstwhile tribal identities.

“Romanization” can be used as a parallel term to “Sinicization.” Similar to the Han, the Roman political system was an effective amalgamation of native Roman and neighboring political traditions; and again, similar to the Han, it became a foundation of common political culture across the vast swaths of Europe and the Mediterranean area. Yet another similarity is the role of the Latin language, which evolved from the language of the Romans to the major carrier of classical

European civilization in general. It would be entirely reasonable to expect the Germanic conquerors of the Western Roman Empire to undergo “Romanization” on a par with the Northerners’ “Sinicization” in China. Indeed, to a certain degree this occurred. For instance, despite the competition from vernacular (Germanic) languages, the Latin language retained for centuries its importance in official communication and legal procedures, and, most notably, it served as the uniform ecclesiastical language throughout Catholic Europe. This can be considered the success of Romanization.

Taking a different angle, though, we can immediately see the differences between “Sinicization” and “Romanization.” First, the point was primarily adoption of relevant political institutions needed to restore the unified realm. Second, the focus shifted from politics and institutions to culture. It was the Church that became the staunchest preserver of the Latin language; it was the Church, the hierarchical structure of which mimicked that of the Roman Empire, that retained the Empire’s ability to penetrate society to its depth; and it

was the Church that remained the symbol of unity in the fragmented Europe. As such the Church became the true heir to the Roman glory, overshadowing its secular patron and rival, the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> But the Church was predicated foremost on maintaining spiritual unity rather than institutional and political one. Hence, many of Roman institutions, ideas, and modes of political functioning faded into oblivion.<sup>2</sup>

The Roman political legacy did not perish entirely, however. It was rediscovered, first under the Carolingians, and then, more consequentially, in the age of Renaissance and thereafter. It could even become hugely influential a full 13 centuries after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, as was demonstrated by the intense utilization and emulation of Roman ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, there were tensions between the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire, which led to the inability of the Empire to restore the political potency of its early Roman avatar.

<sup>2</sup> Note how much the resurrection of the classical ideas and ideals in the Renaissance Europe owed to the preservation of these ideas outside Western Europe (primarily in the Eastern Roman Empire and in the Arab Caliphate). In Western Europe itself, the appeal of these ideas in the centuries following the Western Roman Empire’s fall remained limited.

ideals, historical precedents, and even institutions during the French Revolution and in the ensuing period. It was then that the legacy of the Roman Empire could become politically anew, with Napoleonic empire-building being more closely indebted to the Roman precedents than the Holy Roman Empire's experiments. Notably, however, even Napoleon preferred not to resurrect a universal *imperium sine fine* but rather to divide most of Europe into a variety of client kingdoms. Was it because the Roman practices became too overshadowed by the subsequent history of multi-state Europe promulgated by the Germanic tribes following the Empire's collapse?

Before answering the above question, I want to offer one observation. Both the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire exercised huge and lasting influences on their civilizations. Yet parallels aside, there remained one major difference. The legacy of the Han was foremost political and only then cultural. The legacy of the Roman Empire remained primarily cultural, whereas on the political and institutional level it was

much less influential. Why did the post-Han and post-Roman trajectories diverge? Why did the victorious Germanic tribes eschew “political Romanization”? This will be the topic of the next chapter.

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## *Chapter II*

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# GERMANIC INVASIONS OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

## 1

The Germanic invasions of the Western Roman Empire did not happen all of a sudden. Just as the Han people living on the Central Plains called the neighboring tribes as “Yi” and “Di” (夷狄), the Romans used “the barbarians” to call the great variety of groups living beyond the Rhine and the Danube rivers (later they were called “the Germans”). Just like the Han people’s relations with their neighboring tribes, the Romans’ relations with the Germans fluctuated from wars to alliances. Just like the Han court, which tried – not always successfully – to protect itself

behind the Great Wall, the Romans came to rely on *Limes Germanicus* (Germanic Frontier), a series of fortifications along the Rhine and the Danube. And just as the Central Plains came to be controlled by the Northerners, the Western Roman Empire was overrun by the Germanic tribes.

The post-Han and post-Roman trajectories differed, though. In the case of China, it was primarily the internal turmoil of the Western Jin that enticed the Northerners to establish their rule on the Central Plains, whereas in Rome the primary problem came from the Germanic migrations westward in the wake of the arrival of the Huns to Eastern Europe in ca. 375 CE. Differences aside, the results were similar. Devastated by repeated incursions, the Roman Empire lost much of its population, tax base, and military potential. By 420, only 90,000 field troops were available to defend the core area of the Western Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> This was not enough, and eventually,

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<sup>1</sup> More than 40 percent of the soldiers of the Eastern Roman Empire (20-25 percent of the entire Roman army) were designated for fighting the Sasanians, while the majority of the rest were garrisons mainly in charge

much of the empire's territory was partitioned among the invaders. The Suebi occupied northwestern Spain in 409, the Vandals took over North Africa in 439, the Burgundians seized northeastern France in 457, and the Anglo-Saxons conquered Britain in 449.

Many of the newly established tribal kingdoms were small in size; only the Goths and the Franks succeeded in establishing much larger entities. The Visigoths (West Goths) founded their kingdom in Spain and southern France in 419, the Ostrogoths (East Goths) occupied Italy in 493, and the Franks took over most of Western Europe. The numbers of the Germanic invaders were not particularly large. According to historical estimates, only 110,000-120,000 were involved in bringing down the Western Roman Empire in 476.<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Schmidt (1862-1944) suggested that the population of Visigoths who entered the Roman Empire in 376 was 40,000; and when Wallia entered Spain (416) they numbered

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of less threatening emergencies on the frontiers (Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 447).

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 446

100,000.<sup>1</sup> In 429, about 80,000 Vandals and Alans invaded and occupied North Africa;<sup>2</sup> 10,000-15,000 Franks and 80,000 Burgundians entered Gaul;<sup>3</sup> and Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths, who conquered Italy, brought 300,000 Ostrogoths there.<sup>4</sup> It can be estimated that the total population of the Germanic tribesmen invading the Roman Empire constituted around five percent of the empire's total population, which was substantially smaller than the size of the Northerners who entered the Central Plains.<sup>5</sup> In terms

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Schmidt, *Geschichte der deutschen Stämme bis zum Ausgang der Völkerwanderung: Die Ostgermanen*, 2nd ed., Munich: Beck, 1934, pp. 400-403.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 446. Schmidt estimated the number of Burgundians at 25,000 (cited from Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, New York: Meridian Books, 1959, p. 36).

<sup>4</sup> Prosper Boissonnade, *Life and Work in Medieval Europe: Fifth to Fifteenth Centuries*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Note that these estimates are usually based on "a multiplier of 5:1 for the ratio of total population to warriors" (Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 154). It is clear that the number of the Northerners who entered the Central Plains in the fourth century was considerably higher than that of the Germanic tribesmen in the Roman territories. In the case of Rome, the Germanic tribesmen are

of the newcomers' proportion to the native population, Rome was ostensibly in an advantageous situation in advancing "Romanization" of the conquerors.

This Romanization indeed occurred at certain levels, most notably in the context of Christianization of the "barbarians." But politically speaking, the results of the Germanic invasions of the Western Roman imperial space differed dramatically from what happened in China. Peter Heather summarized:

*After 476, all this [Roman civilization] came to an end. While substantial numbers of the old Roman landowning class still survived in the west with their distinctive culture more or less intact, the key centralizing structures of the Empire had gone. No single law-giving authority was recognized, no centrally controlled tax structures empowered a centrally controlled professional army, and political*

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considered to be around 5 percent of the local population (Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, New York: Meridian Books, 1959, p.37). Wickham is more cautious: He offers numbers running from 2 to 10 percent. (see Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, London: Penguin, 2009, pp. 89-90).

*participation in bureaucracies, armies and courts had all fragmented. [...] Provincial Romanness survived in parts of the West after 476, but central Romanness was a thing of the past.<sup>1</sup>*

Chris Wickham explained further how the Roman system came to an end:

*[I]n Frankish Gaul in the 580s, assessment registers were no longer being systematically updated [...]. Tax was, that is to say, no longer the basis of the state. For kings as well as armies, landowning was the major source of wealth from now on. [...] The shift from taxation to landowning as the basis of the state in the West was the clearest sign that the post-Roman kingdoms would not be able to re-create the Roman empire in miniature, however much their rulers would have liked to. Overall, too, these kingdoms did not match the empire in their economic complexity, either.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 456.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages*

The massive destruction of the civilian infrastructure in the wake of major incursions, which came at the top of the domestic crises that plagued the Western Roman Empire in the decades (some would say centuries) before the Germanic invasions,<sup>1</sup> was not surprising. After all, much of the Central Plains was in ruins – physically and administratively – throughout many years following the collapse of the Western Jin (which started unraveling even before the Northerners' arrival). What matters for me in this study are the long-term trends. To analyze them more pointedly, I want to zoom-in on the example of the Goths.

Having conquered wide swaths of the Roman territories, the Goths opted to live separately from the conquered Romans and built castles outside their cities. These castles, erected in the countryside, have

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400-1000, London: Penguin, 2009, pp. 109-111.

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the recurrence of civil wars in the Roman Empire since the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE and the aggravation of conflicts at the top of the governing apparatus (resulting in repeated insurrections and purges) since the mid-fourth century. See Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

remained a notable feature of the European landscape ever since. To preserve their blood purity and brave spirit, the Goths prohibited interethnic marriages with the Romans. To maintain separation from the Roman subjects, the Goths adopted a system of dual rule. Thus, in terms of the legal system, the Goths followed their customary laws whereas the Romans were ruled according to the Roman law. Administratively, the Goths took charge of military affairs, leaving civil administration to the Romans. As for culture and education, the Goths were disincentivized from learning Latin and classical culture. In regard to religious beliefs, the Goths followed Arianism, which was condemned as a heresy by the mainstream Christian Church to which the Romans belonged. All these buttressed the separation between the conquerors and the conquered. Perry Anderson summarized this trend: The “barbarian kingdoms modified the social, economic, and cultural structures of the later Roman world to a relatively limited extent, and more by fission

than fusion.”<sup>1</sup>

Ethnic separation (based also on the separation between the military and the civil administration) and preferential treatment of the conquerors were by no means exceptional to the Goths. They were practiced in many of the political entities established by the Northerners on the Central Plains. In particular, maintenance of dual rule for the nomads and the non-nomads was common in many of the Northerners' polities, starting with the Later Zhao founded by She Le; it became a frequent choice for the nomads once they established control over the broad groups of agricultural population.<sup>2</sup> But in China, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the dominant trend was toward fusion and not fission; sooner or later the dual rule system was abandoned in favor of the unified (and administratively more effective) Han system. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, New York: Humanities Press, 1974, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> See *Chen Yinke's Lectures on the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties* (魏晉南北朝史讲演录), Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2018, pp. 99-100.

case of the Goths the outcome was different. We shall put aside the Visigothic Kingdom which kept its dual rule system until the mid-seventh century,<sup>1</sup> and turn to the Ostrogothic Kingdom which became the most Romanized. Why did its experiment with Romanization fail?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 421.

## 2

Theodoric the Great (454-526), King of the Ostrogoths, stood out as an exceptional ruler among the Germanic rulers following the Western Roman Empire's collapse. More than any of his peers he understood the value of the Roman civilization, and more than any of them he approached the point of potential restoration of the Roman Empire in the West. His story is illustrative of the potential success and the ultimate failure of the Germanic conquerors' political Romanization.

As an Ostrogothic prince, Theodoric was educated

as a hostage in the court of the Eastern Roman Empire, which enabled him to familiarize himself with the Roman aristocracy. In this sense, Theodoric's background was similar to that of Liu Yuan, the Xiongnu head who founded the Former Zhao and who was raised as a hostage in the Western Jin court in Luoyang. However, whereas Liu Yuan was fond of the classical and historical texts of the Han people, Theodoric "disdained or neglected the arts of Greece, and so ignorant did he always remain of the first elements of science, that a rude mark was contrived to represent the signature of the illiterate king of Italy."<sup>1</sup>

When Theodoric took possession of the Western Roman Empire's heartland in 493 and crowned himself as the King of Italy, he maintained a complex balance of interests between the Goths and the Romans. He banned the Goths and the Romans from cohabiting, but retained the civil service system of the Roman Empire by keeping the consul, the quaestors, and

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4, London: Bell, 1891, p. 244.

other officials to administer Rome. As noted above, he maintained the separation of the administration into the civil run by the Romans and the military run by the Goths. The only benefit that the Gothic soldiers were allowed to gain was one third of the land from the landlords in the Roman countryside. This was the smallest portion by comparison to the amounts of land obtained by other Germanic occupation forces.

Theodoric was renowned for his magnanimity. He allowed the Romans to keep their garments, language, laws, and customs. Even in religious matters, Theodoric was famously tolerant. Although a follower of Arianism, he paid tribute to St. Peter's tomb and never forced the Orthodox Christians to convert to the Arian creed. Most importantly, he allowed the Roman senators to maintain their political and social prestige. This was exemplified by his outstanding treatment of Boethius (480-524), one of the most distinguished Roman patricians and considered the greatest Christian philosopher after Augustine. Boethius had translated and annotated Euclid's geometry, Pythagoras' musical

studies, Nicomachus' mathematics, Archimedes' mechanics, Ptolemy's astronomy, Plato's philosophy, and Aristotle's logic. Historians acclaimed Boethius as "the last Roman." Theodoric entrusted administrative work to Boethius and in 522 appointed Boethius' two young sons as consuls, showing his extraordinary trust in the man.

Theodoric's reign was marred by tensions between the Roman senators and the Gothic nobles, but the king did his best to treat his subjects fairly. For example, when the Roman patricians complained about the king's nephew who had robbed some Romans of their property, Theodoric promptly ordered his nephew to return the robbed property. For many Goths this appeared as favoritism toward the Romans, which led to much resentment; hence, Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) noted that 200,000 Gothic soldiers in Italy "indignantly supported the restraints of peace and discipline[.]"<sup>1</sup> Tensions aside, Theodoric's 33-year reign was marked by relative prosperity. Italy and Spain

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274-275.

maintained the old empire's life of magnificent cities, grand festivals, elegant senators, and religious devotion. As Gibbon suggested:

*The union of the Goths and Romans might have fixed for ages the transient happiness of Italy; and the first of nations, a new people of free subjects and enlightened soldiers, might have gradually arisen from the mutual emulation of their respective virtues.<sup>1</sup>*

What Gibbon depicted was a noble vision, and it might indicate some of the “roads not taken” by the European civilization. The reality, however, was less pleasant. Conflicts between the Goths and the Romans were exacerbated due to the religious discord. Whereas Theodoric, an Arian, tolerated the Roman Church, the Church itself was much less tolerant, in particular toward the Jews. When the mob, instigated by the clergy, burned down the synagogues in Ravenna in 519,

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

Theodoric ordered the city to compensate the Jews and punished the Christians guilty of burning and plunder. As a result, the Roman Christians held a grudge against Theodoric and colluded behind his back with the Constantinople Church in the Eastern Roman Empire. This was part of a larger plot.

In 523, the ex-consul Caecina Decius Faustus Albinus was accused of treasonous correspondence with Justin I, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Albinus' letters, pleading with the Emperor to overthrow the Gothic Kingdom and restore "freedom" to the Romans, got intercepted. Theodoric, in fury, arrested Albinus and other treasonous senators. Despite his close relationship with the Goths, Boethius chose to stand with the Roman patricians at that critical moment. He stepped forward to intercede for Albinus by declaring that the man was not guilty. Calling the charge false, Boethius argued emotionally: "If Albinus be criminal, the senate and myself are all guilty of the same crime. If we are innocent, Albinus is equally

entitled to the protection of the laws.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, by the end of his illustrious reign, Theodoric discovered that with all the hard work he had done for the Romans, he had reaped nothing but hatred. He was angry about this unrequited kindness and reacted harshly. Before the execution of Boethius, Theodoric, in the most egregious violation of the Roman norms, deliberately deprived the accused of his right to defend himself. Prior to his death, the shackled Boethius wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* in a tower-prison, a work that became a must-read for European students throughout the Middle Ages. After Boethius' execution, Theodoric fell into distress and died of illness, groaning for three days and nights before his final breath.

Why did Theodoric fail to integrate the Romans and the Goths? Gibbon averred that no matter how tolerant and benevolent the Goths were, they would never win

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280. For the view that argues the death of Boethius was caused by the political struggles within the senate and the royal court rather than ethnic or religious conflict, see Kang Kai, “A Martyr of the Roman Empire? On the Death of Boethius” (罗马帝国的殉道者? ——波爱修斯之死事件探析), *World History*, Issue No. 242, 2017, pp. 118-131.

recognition from the Romans. He pointed out, “The mildest form of a Gothic kingdom, even the weight of allegiance and gratitude, must be insupportable to the free spirit of a Roman patriot”<sup>1</sup>; the “ungrateful subjects could never be cordially reconciled to the origin, the religion, or even the virtues of the Gothic conqueror[.]”<sup>2</sup> James Bryce (1838-1922) also noted that “Theodoric was tolerant, but toleration was itself a crime in the eyes of his orthodox subjects. Arian Goths were and would remain strangers and enemies among the Catholic Italians.”<sup>3</sup> One might accept these conclusions or question them, but the outcome was unequivocal. The Ostrogoths’ failure to win over the Romans marked the dead end of the attempt to create a fully Romanized political entity under the Germanic rule. History went into a new direction.

In the 10th year after Theodoric’s death, Emperor

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4, London: Bell, 1891, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>3</sup> James Bryce, *The Holy Roman Empire*, London: Macmillan, 1917, p. 22.

Justinian I of the Eastern Roman Empire, driven by a passion to eradicate heresy and eager to reclaim the lost Empire's heartland, launched an expedition against the Ostrogoths. In order to win the war, the Constantinople Church issued an edict to eliminate Arianism. In the meanwhile, Justinian I sued for peace with Persia with an offer of more than 5,000 kilograms of gold to stabilize the East, thus freeing up his hands for the western expedition.<sup>1</sup> In 535, Justinian I dispatched the famed General Flavius Belisarius to conduct a war that lasted for 20 years and eventually eradicated the Ostrogothic Kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Procopius, chapter X of *History of the Wars*, Book II, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914, p. 351.

<sup>2</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Book VIII, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928.

## 3

Did the people of the Western Roman Empire who chose to support the Eastern Roman Empire against the Goths gain what they had anticipated? The answer is surprising.

Flavius Belisarius, a Byzantine military commander, received support from both the patricians and the plebeians of the Western Roman Empire when he attacked the Ostrogothic Kingdom. He entered the city of Rome without bloodshed also because he had obtained clandestine support from Silverius, the aristocratic bishop of Rome.

However, the support from the people of the Western Roman Empire for the imperial forces from the East soon evaporated. As the Goths besieged Belisarius in Rome, the local residents became fed up with prolonged suffering that deprived them of baths, sleep, and eventually food. For them, the Eastern Empire's army was to blame. Belisarius wrote in a letter to Justinian I: "Although at the present time the Romans are well disposed toward us, yet when their troubles are prolonged, they will probably not hesitate to choose the course which is better for their own interests."<sup>1</sup> Indeed the same Pope Silverius, who had previously welcomed the Eastern Roman army, changed his mind and planned to leave the gates of Rome unlocked to the invading Goths at night so that they could sneak in and attack Belisarius from inside, thus ending the siege. Silverius was banished from Rome immediately after his plot was exposed; thenceforth, Belisarius no longer trusted the Romans.

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<sup>1</sup> Procopius, chapter XXIV of *History of the Wars*, Book V, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916, p. 231.

Twice a month he changed the locks of the 15 gates along Rome's perimeter wall; in addition, he frequently switched the guards at the gates.<sup>1</sup>

Such a dramatic change of attitude from welcome to rejection of the Eastern forces took place in a matter of just four months. The Eastern Empire was abandoned not only by the patricians but also by the plebeians. Peasants and slaves from the Western Roman Empire rejoined the army of the Goths, their former masters. Many unpaid "barbarian" mercenaries also joined the Gothic army together to attack the "liberators."

In reality, the people of the Western Roman Empire were loyal to neither the Ostrogothic Kingdom nor the Eastern Roman Empire. They would much rather be left alone – they only cared about their own interests. As Helmut Reimitz pointed out: For many Romans in the western provinces, the "fall of Rome" was by no means a catastrophe. Members of the local or regional

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<sup>1</sup> Procopius, chapter XXV of *History of the Wars*, Book V, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916, p. 243.

elites were in fact working together with the “barbarian” and Roman warlords as well as client kings, replacing the Roman Empire through smaller power blocs.<sup>1</sup>

The Romans of the Western Empire opposed those of the Eastern Empire because the latter were only interested in taxing the people instead of taking care of their livelihood. As the post-war northern Italy was reduced to ruins, its economy went into a downturn and its population dropped sharply. To make matters worse, General Narses, who had succeeded Belisarius, established a military government that imposed predatory taxes for 15 years. The Byzantine tax collectors, known as “Alexander Scissors,” held the power to legally retain one twelfth of all taxes they collected, so they had a ferocious drive to collect as many taxes as they could.<sup>2</sup> The notorious system

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Reimitz, “History and Historiography between the Roman and the Carolingian Empire,” *Between Empires: Rupture, Transformation and Transmission*, Chin. ed., Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2017, p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, “the emperor’s notorious logothete, accumulated a fortune in office ... so there was no limit save human endurance to what he might impose. Even the pay of the troops was stolen” (James Westfall

of tax farming, which allowed tax officers to draw their commissions from state revenue, had been a consistent cruel practice adopted by empires from the Macedonians to the Romans and was even turned into a state policy by the Byzantines. Furthermore, as the Byzantine governors did not try to restore the Roman governance system, the thousand-year-old Roman Senate eventually came to an end.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, the Roman system, which the “barbarian” king Theodoric tried to restore and maintain, was destroyed by the Romans themselves, those from the Eastern Roman Empire. Whether or not this was an almost accidental outcome of the Gothic Wars, as claimed by some historians,<sup>2</sup> or just a result of the

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Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York: Ungar, 1928, p. 125).

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Lot mentions: “[T]here was no longer any Consul after 541. The Senate disappeared in an obscure fashion; the last certain mention of this body is in 579: it was an embassy to Constantinople, which was at the same time a delegation from the Pope, a sign of the times.” See Ferdinand Lot, *The End of the Ancient World*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., James Westfall Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York: Ungar, 1928.

shortsightedness of the Roman patricians who failed to endorse Theodoric, as lamented by Gibbon, is not a topic of discussion in this book. What is undeniable is that post-Ostrothogic kingdoms evolved into a non-Roman direction, politically speaking. The name and the symbols of the Roman Empire were repeatedly employed for centuries to come; but the basic principles of the empire's sociopolitical organization perished into oblivion, just as it happened to the beleaguered Senate after the Gothic Wars.

European Medievalists are engaged in a lively discussion about the degree of cultural rupture in the Western Roman world in the aftermath of the “barbarian” invasions. Some, like Chris Wickham, emphasize the depth of the change: the withering of civilian administration, the militarization of society, and the decline of secular aristocratic hierarchies resulted in a situation where “the secular elite culture of the Roman empire lost its role as a marker of status.... [T]o know Virgil and the other secular classics by heart, to be able to write poetry and complex prose, [...] ceased

to be important; swordsmanship, or the Bible, were far more relevant sources of cultural capital.”<sup>1</sup> By contrast, supporters of the “Late Antiquity” paradigm, such as Peter Brown, prefer to speak of the “transformation” rather than the “decline” of the classical civilization. Brown explained:

*Not only did late antiquity last for half a millennium but much of what was created in that period still runs in our veins. It is, for instance, from late antiquity not any earlier period of Roman history that we have inherited the codifications of Roman law, which are the root of the judicial systems of so many states in Europe and the Americas. [...] The basic structures and dogmatic formulations of the Christian church, both in Latin Catholicism and in the many forms of eastern Christianity, came from this period... Even our access to the earlier classics of the ancient world, in Latin and Greek, was made possible*

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000*, London: Penguin, 2009, pp. 112-113.

*only through the copying activities of late antique Christians and their early medieval successors, locked in an endless, unresolved dialogue with their own pagan past.<sup>1</sup>*

Brown's observations are important insofar as they call attention to cultural continuity in the post-Roman European world. Such continuity became more strongly visible by the end of the "Late Antiquity" age called by Brown, i.e. by the time of Charlemagne, the first Western European king to restore the imperial title after the Western Empire's collapse. Charlemagne brought about a classical civilization's revival known as the Carolingian Renaissance in an attempt to re-Romanize the kingdom. Priests and monks transcribed numerous manuscripts of ancient Greek and Roman classics; Charlemagne took measures to standardize Latin; a great number of libraries were built to preserve the classics. All these endeavors played a great role in the preservation of the classical Roman civilization and

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<sup>1</sup> *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. ix-x.

ensured its ongoing cultural impact throughout much of Europe.

However, once we shift from the cultural and religious realms, we immediately observe the magnitude of rupture. Some of its aspects have been noted above; some (in particular the feudalization of Europe) will be discussed in greater detail below. Here we should pay attention to Brown's analysis of the differences between the politico-cultural trajectories of the post-Roman Europe and of China's Central Plains under the Northerners. Brown contrasted the changes in the social structure and elite culture of Western Europe following the Germanic invasions and the much stronger continuity in China:

*Northern China, for instance, was more thoroughly occupied by the barbarians of Mongolia than ever the western provinces of the Roman Empire were by the Germanic tribes. Yet in China the barbarians "went native" within a few generations, and maintained the Chinese*

*imperial tradition without a break, from dynasty to dynasty. The Visigothic, the Ostrogothic, and the Vandal kingdoms of Western Europe were never absorbed in this way: they survived as foreign bodies, perched insecurely on top of populations who ignored them and set about the more congenial business of looking after themselves. The barbarian invasions [...] drastically altered the scale of life in the western provinces.<sup>1</sup>*

This concise summary perfectly fits my own approach. When I contrast the degree of the Northerners' "Sinicization" and the Germanic conquerors' "Romanization," my focus is not cultural but political. On the cultural level the parallels between the two cases are considerable, even though there are notable differences as well, as pointed out in the aforementioned Wickham's passage. But it was politics that mattered. In Europe, the "barbarian" kingdoms "survived as foreign bodies, perched insecurely on

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971, pp. 125-126.

top of populations who ignored them.” In China, by contrast, it was the Northerners and their Han collaborators who reinvigorated the Han political system and initiated the restoration of a unified political entity which peaked under the ethnically mixed leadership of the Sui and the Tang dynasties. In Europe, when the ostensible resurrection of the Roman Empire occurred under Charlemagne (and later, under the Holy Roman Empire), it was a totally different political entity in terms of functioning mode, political ideology, and dominant cultural orientations. In China, by contrast, continuity – both at the declarative and practical (administrative) levels – was incomparably more palpable.

In a nutshell, what happened in Europe was the preservation of considerable cultural unity and most notably the spiritual unity under the Roman Church, amid parallel loss of political unity. Regionalization and feudalization (i.e., delegation of power to local potentates and progressive weakening of centralized control) became the norm, and utilization of some

of the Roman imperial symbols could not change the tide. Rome retained its position as Europe's foremost spiritual center (and it retains this enviable position for many of the Catholic believers well into our days), but its political prestige was lost, and no replacer came to fill in the void. The "great unity" of the Roman Empire was replaced by a plethora of kingdoms, most of which remained fairly decentralized for centuries to come. The new political feudal system that emerged on the former imperial territories borrowed aspects of the Roman past and the norms of "barbarians," but, as summarized by James Westfall Thompson (1869-1941), it was "neither wholly Roman nor fully wholly German."<sup>1</sup>

The European example shows that lasting cultural unity under the Christian (eventually, Roman Catholic) Commonwealth was possible. But it also shows the limits of this unity's sustainability. Sooner or later, the continent's political fragmentation was bound to

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<sup>1</sup> James Westfall Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York: Ungar, 1928, p. 103.

weaken its unifying cultural ties. Whether or not the eventual separation of the European realm into rival nation-states was predetermined when the Germanic rulers chose to discard the Roman experiment of the politically and administratively unified realm is a meta-question that has no definitive answer. But one point is clear: The political fragmentation – in Europe and elsewhere brought about constant conflicts and bloodshed, which also contributed to cultural alienation. According to Marxist parlance, without the foundation of political unity, the superstructure of cultural unity could not be sustained. Going back to China's case, we can understand this point better.

## 4

Two examples of the monarch-minister relationships in China resembled that between Theodoric and Boethius in Ostrogoth. One was between Fu Jian, the third ruler of the Former Qin, and his advisor Wang Meng (325-375). The other was between Tuoba Tao, Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei Dynasty, and his minister Cui Hao (381-450).

Let us start with the first pair. Fu Jian was renowned as the most benevolent among all the Northerners who ruled the Central Plains. Wang Meng was the most famous scholar in the areas ruled by the Northerners.

When the Eastern Jin general Huan Wen launched his first northward campaign and reached as far as Guanzhong, many local scholars had high expectations of him. Wang Meng went to have an audience with Huan Wen, and both men examined each other's intentions. Huan tried to persuade Wang Meng to join him and go over to the Eastern Jin court, promising high rank and important official position, but Wang turned the offer down. The major reason for Wang's refusal was that he realized that Huan did not really plan to reunify the realm. Wang explained to Huan why the eminent scholars did not join him: "You have now come so close to the major city of Chang'an, yet you have no plan to cross the Bashui River to take the city. So the people can see that you are not committed to the realm's reunification."<sup>1</sup>

Instead of going south with Huan Wen, Wang Meng chose to join Fu Jian, because the latter was fully determined to speedily reunify All-under-Heaven. Fu

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<sup>1</sup> Fang Xuanling *et al.*, chapter 114 of *History of the Jin Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2930.

Jian, who was of the Di origins, remained committed to the goal of “uniting the people in all directions into one family.”<sup>1</sup> Even before he completed absorbing the recently subjugated Xianbei nobles into his polity, Fu Jian started planning the precarious southward expedition against the Eastern Jin, declaring: “Now, only the southeastern part of the country has not submitted to my rule. Whenever I think that All-under-Heaven is not reunified, I cannot look at food and take my meal.”<sup>2</sup> Fu Jian realized that only successful reunification of the realm would fully demonstrate his possession of “the Mandate of Heaven.”

Fu Jian, who excelled himself in numerous military expeditions, was well aware of the danger of his gamble to speedily subjugate the south. But his aspiration to realize “great unity” was strong enough to dismiss the fears of defeat. He followed the same dictum outlined by one of China’s most renowned military strategists – Zhuge Liang (181-234), prime minister

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2911.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

of the Kingdom of Shu, who had urged his emperor to commit resources to an almost suicidal mission of reconquering the Central Plains by reminding him that he should not content himself with “retaining control over only a small part of the country.”<sup>1</sup> For Wang Meng and many likeminded literati, Fu Jian’s choice was clearly preferable. Although later historians tend to mock Fu Jian for his hastened attempt to conquer the south, which led to his fatal defeat in the Battle of the Feishui River in 383, given his sense of historic mission, he appeared much superior to his southern rivals.

The second reason for Wang Meng’s refusal to join Huan Wen and serve the Eastern Jin was that the political system of the Eastern Jin deviated sharply from his ideals. The court of the Eastern Jin, dominated by a few aristocratic families, was a far cry from what Wang Meng aspired to. Wang Meng was committed to the Han system which combined the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Zhuge Liang’s “Memorial to the Throne Before Launching a Second Northern Expedition” (后出师表). See *Collected Works of Zhuge Liang* (诸葛亮集), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012, p. 7.

Legalist recipes of “clear laws and harsh punishments” aimed to restrict powerful magnates, and the Confucian means such as “discovering hidden talents and giving prominence to the worthy,” “encouraging agriculture and sericulture,” and “teaching people the sense of honor and shame.” This Han system was much closer to what was practiced by Fu Jian than to the Eastern Jin policies.

The differences between the two polities were obvious. In the aristocratic Eastern Jin, the officials were appointed primarily on the basis of their pedigree. By contrast, Fu Jian selected skilled personnel even from the lowest strata, proud of his having attracted “many scholars.”<sup>1</sup> While in the Eastern Jin, “half of all the households under Heaven were subordinated to the eminent families,”<sup>2</sup> Fu Jian was concerned with the reach of his administrators down to the lowest social levels, and inspected, personally or through

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<sup>1</sup> Fang Xuanling *et al.*, chapter 113 of *History of the Jin Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2888.

<sup>2</sup> Yao Silian *et al.*, chapter 38 of *History of the Liang Dynasty* (梁书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995, p. 543.

commissioners, the situation of both the Han and the Northerners' settlements in the territories under his control. While in the Eastern Jin, the Study of the Arcane prospered and the officials were primarily concerned with literary elegance, Fu Jian banned the "impractical studies" of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and prophetic texts, and instead he searched for the personnel who comprehensively understood Confucian learning and were able in practical matters.

In the final analysis, Fu Jian, ethnically a Di, was implementing what Wang Meng saw as the Han system much better than the Han rulers of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. For Wang Meng, as well as for many other educated Han people, "Han" did not refer to ethnicity but to the basic principles of proper rule. These literati were ready to collaborate with a ruler of any ethnic background insofar as they supported his policies. It may be speculated that should Theodoric live in China, he would encounter a much warmer welcome among local elites than what he found among the Roman patricians.

Let us go to the second monarch-minister pair, Tuoba Tao and Cui Hao. Tuoba Tao was the emperor of the Northern Wei Dynasty ruled by the Xianbei people, whereas Cui Hao was a descendant of one of the most prominent Han noble lineages from northern China, the Cuis from Qinghe Prefecture. Cui Hao, who served three consecutive emperors of the Northern Wei, was renowned for his literary refinement: He mastered canonical works and historical and philosophical writings, and as a devoted Daoist, he was also versatile in astronomy and in the *yin* and *yang* philosophy. But he was not a mere bookish scholar. On the contrary, he was adept at stratagems and military planning, comparing himself to Zhang Liang (d. 190 or 189 BCE), the legendary strategist who contributed greatly to the establishment of the Han Dynasty. Cui Hao designed plans for the Tuoba to repel the Rouran Khaganate (a Mongolia-based northern rival), topple the Xia (a Xiongnu-led kingdom in the northwest, 407-431), and eliminate the Northern Yan (a “Northernized” Han polity in the northeast, 407-436).

Cui Hao's advice contributed much to the Tuoba's success in accomplishing the reunification of northern China.

Aside from his strategic acumen, Cui Hao was also an avid administrator. His goal was to convince the Tuoba rulers to reform their rule and transfer power from military to civilian officials. He advocated abolishing the six-minister rule by military aristocrats; instead, he proposed restoring the civil official system led by the Department of State Affairs and the Department of Palace Library. He also advocated rectifying grassroots administration and introducing inspection and examination of local officials. In legal affairs, he thrice amended the laws, incorporating many of the rules and regulations practiced by the Han polities of the Central Plains. Furthermore, he called for the integration of the Xianbei and the Han elites. Tuoba Tao heeded much of this advice, recruiting hundreds of Han scholars to serve in his central and local administration.

Tuoba Tao favored and trusted Cui Hao so much

that he would visit Cui's residence in person to ask for advice on governmental and military affairs. He even ordered musicians to compose songs to praise Cui. The Xianbei nobles, however, deeply resented the emperor's favoritism for Cui, and they even conspired with the Xiongnu nobles to launch a *coup d'état*, which was abortive. This resentment eventually brought Cui Hao's illustrious career to a tragic end much like that of Boethius.

The immediate reason for Cui Hao's downfall was his compilation of the dynasty's *Annals* (国记). He recorded some of the Tuoba's old customs, including levirate marriage that was eventually abandoned by the Tuoba, which were carved on stone steles placed alongside the major road in the Northern Wei capital. The Xianbei nobles were infuriated by Cui Hao's record of the "unseemly past." Coincidentally, just at this moment, Emperor Wen of the southern Song Dynasty (r. 424-453), launched his northern expedition against the Tuoba. The Xianbei nobles took this opportunity to accuse Cui not only of insulting their ancestors, but

also of conspiring with the southerners. The rumors were based on the fact that many of Cui's affinal and agnatic relatives were indeed serving the southern court. Outraged, Tuoba Tao ordered execution of Cui Hao and all his kinsmen. Cui Hao, who was nearly 70 years old, was humiliated and tortured before the execution.<sup>1</sup>

Would the integration between the Han and the Xianbei come to an end due to Cui Hao's tragedy? Not so. The relationship between the Xianbei and the Han evolved differently from that between the Goths and the Romans. Unlike the Roman patricians who repeatedly betrayed the Goths, the various branches of the Qinghe Cui lineage remained in the service of the Northern Wei. After Emperor Xiaowen, Tuoba Tao's descendant, ascended the throne, the Qinghe Cui lineage regained preeminence among the top four clans in northern China. Cui Guang, Cui Liang, and

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<sup>1</sup> Wei Shou *et al.*, chapter 35 of *History of the Wei Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995, p. 826; see also Scott Pearce, *Northern Wei (386-534): A New Form of Empire in East Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 15-16 and pp. 199-201.

other clansmen served as ministers at the Northern Wei court, playing key roles in compiling the dynasty's history. The most famous of these historians was Cui Hong (478-525), who collected many of the scattered historical materials and wrote *The Spring and Autumn Annals of the Sixteen Kingdoms* (十六国春秋). The text in 100 chapters served for centuries as the major reference for studying the history of the Central Plains under the Northerners' rule from the fourth to the fifth century.

**Table 2.1: The Sixteen Kingdoms**

Kingdom	Founder	Ethnicity	Capital(s)	Destroyed by
Cheng (later Han) (304-347)	Li Xiong	Badi	Chengdu (Sichuan)	Eastern Jin
Han (later Former Zhao) (304-329)	Liu Yuan	Xiongnu	Pingyang (Shanxi), Chang'an (Shaanxi)	Later Zhao
Later Zhao (319-351)	Shi Le	Jie	Xiangguo (Hebei), Ye (Hebei)	Ran Wei
Former Liang (317- 376)	Zhang Shi	Han	Guzang (Gansu)	Former Qin

(Continued Table)

Former Yan (337-370)	Murong Huang	Xianbei	Longcheng (Liaoning), Ye (Hebei)	Former Qin
Former Qin (350-394)	Fu Hong	Di	Chang'an (Shaanxi)	Later Qin
Later Qin (384-417)	Yao Chang	Qiang	Chang'an (Shaanxi)	Eastern Jin
Later Yan (384-407)	Murong Chui	Xianbei	Zhongshan (Hebei)	Northern Yan
Western Qin (385- 431)	Qifu Guoren	Xianbei	Yuanchuan, Jincheng, and Fuhan (all in Gansu)	Xia
Later Liang (386-403)	Lü Guang	Di	Guzang (Gansu)	Later Qin
Southern Liang (397- 414)	Tufa Wugu	Xianbei	Xiping (Qinghai), Ledu (Qinghai)	Western Qin
Southern Yan (398-410)	Murong De	Xianbei	Guanggu (Shandong)	Eastern Jin
Western Liang (400- 421)	Li Hao	Han	Dunhuang (Gansu), Jiuquan (Gansu)	Northern Liang
Northern Liang (397-439)	Juqu Mengxun	Xiongnu	Zhangye (Gansu)	Northern Wei

(Continued Table)

Xia (407-431)	Helian Bobo	Xiongnu	Tongwan (Shaanxi)	Tuyuhun
Northern Yan (407-436)	Feng Ba	Han	Longcheng (Liaoning)	Northern Wei

These are the “Sixteen Kingdoms” as defined by Cui Hong in *The Spring and Autumn Annals of the Sixteen Kingdoms*. These kingdoms were selected out of over 20 contemporaneous political entities due to the relative length and stability of their rule. Note that some of these kingdoms had more than one name (e.g., Cheng was later named Han).

Unlike the case of Theodoric, whose attempts to forge a stable alliance between the Goth conquerors and the Roman patricians were thwarted after the execution of Boethius, in the case of Tuoba Tao, the tragedy of Cui Hao did not derail the Northern Wei’s path toward adopting the Han model. Tuoba Tao still ordered the children of the Xianbei nobles to study Confucianism. Cui Hao was dead, but his political ideas prospered. Under Emperor Xiaowen, many of Cui Hao’s recommendations were implemented in full,

and the process of the dynasty's "Sinicization" reached its peak. Tensions between the Han and the Xianbei did not bring about ultimate fixation of separate political identities. The rulers were able to rise above the unfortunate incidents and tragedies such as that of Cui Hao and chose a course that was fit for their long-term historical interests, that is, the course of restoring political unity in All-under-Heaven.

## 5

With the Goths' disappearance from Europe's political scene, the fortune seemed to favor the Franks. The Franks were the only ethnic group that did not partake in long-distance relocation during the Age of Migrations. They lived on the Belgian coast and in the Rhine River valley for a long time before their eventual migration, which involved only a slight southward move from their place of origin. At approximately the same time when the Ostrogoths occupied Italy, the Franks seized the Roman province of Gaul, founded the Merovingian Dynasty, and unified the major parts of

today's France. By the middle of the eighth century, the Merovingian Dynasty was replaced by the Carolingians. Their great ruler Charlemagne eventually conquered all of the Western Europe except Spain and was crowned in 800 as an emperor. His empire, which coexisted with the Byzantine Empire, had a territory comparable to that of the Western Roman Empire.

Why were the Ostrogoths destroyed by the Romans whereas the Franks succeeded in stabilizing their rule? One important factor was that Clovis (466-511), King of the Franks, converted to the orthodox Roman Christianity. Clovis was actually notorious for his cruelty; he could go so far as to take an ax and crush the head of someone just after participation in a religious assembly.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, because of Clovis' conversion to the orthodox Christianity, unlike the Ostrogoth King Theodoric who remained faithful to the Arian creed, the Church threw all its weight behind Clovis.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, translated with an Introduction by Lewis Thorpe, London: Penguin, 1974, p. 140.

Clovis' conversion notwithstanding, the Franks remained very different from the Romans politically, socially, and culturally. The difference was even in the sheer appearances of the rulers: The Roman emperors wore laurel crowns over short hair, and the Frankish kings were renowned as "long-haired kings." But there were also much more substantial differences. Rome was an urban civilization, renowned for its palaces, civic buildings, and well-developed urban infrastructure. The Frankish kings, by contrast, preferred living in their manors surrounded by cattle and chicken, close to the places where their serfs produced foodstuff and wine. Rome relied on a centralized fiscal system, whereas the Frankish royal family adopted a decentralized manor-based economy. The differences were most notable at the level of laws. The Roman law maintained a *pro forma* equality among the Roman citizens. By contrast, the Frankish customary law upheld a hierarchical order. Its Salic Code declared that the lives of the Franks were worth more than those of the conquered Gallo-Romans. The penalty for killing an ordinary Frank was

200 sous while that for murdering an average Gallo-Roman was only between 50 and 100 sous.<sup>1</sup>

Legal discrimination of the conquered transformed the Frank-Gaul relationship into one characterized by inequality between the two ethnic groups, aggravating class differences between the aristocrats and the common people. The legacy of this legal inequality survived well into the early modern period. Thus, a French aristocratic scholar, Henri de Boulainvilliers (1658-1722), argued that the French aristocracy, being the descendants of the Franks, were entitled to inherit the rights and privileges of their ancestors. According to his logic, the third estate, being the descendants of the formerly subjugated population of Gaul, should never expect political rights on a par with the aristocrats.<sup>2</sup> That this argument was made just a few decades before the outburst of the French

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<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 664.

<sup>2</sup> Kang Kai, "On the Relationship between the 'Barbarians' and the Roman Empire," ("蛮族"与罗马帝国关系研究述论), *Historical Research*, Issue No. 4, 2014, pp. 165-177.

Revolution was revealing. While the Roman statutory law emphasized the importance of evidence in the legal procedure, the Frankish laws used simple adjudication methods and divine judgment such as ordeals of fire and water.<sup>1</sup> If evidence was insufficient to decide a case, the relevant parties would seek resolution through a duel. The physically weak Romans often had to give up a suit because they were unable to beat the tall, strong Franks in duels. Ironically, this barbarian Frankish custom of solving disputes through fighting instead of reasoning was respected later by many as a manifestation of the noble chivalry spirit.

In the context of the current discussion, what matters most are the different modes of governance. Rome maintained a sophisticated system of financial and municipal bureaucrats, whose number peaked

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<sup>1</sup> To crack a hard case, the trial court would test the accused with water and fire. A suspect holding a red-hot iron would be found guilty if he got burned, but not guilty if he did not. Likewise, a suspect thrown into a pond would be found guilty if he floated up, but not guilty if he sank (Philip Van Ness Myers, *A Short History of Medieval and Modern Times*, Boston: Ginn, 1923, p. 22).

at 40,000.<sup>1</sup> The Franks, by contrast, abandoned the bureaucratic apparatus, opting instead for a feudal system in which the monarch granted land as fiefs to his vassals, who owed him a duty of allegiance and military service. Whereas originally the fiefs were not inheritable, gradually they became hereditary property of powerful aristocrats, who could further subdivide the fiefs to their own vassals. In due time the political landscape of Europe changed completely, as its territory was not just partitioned by rival kings but further sub-partitioned to hierarchically arranged local feudal lords. The feudal lords enjoyed administrative, judicial, military, and financial powers within their fiefs. Just like rulers of independent kingdoms, they held the power of life and death over their subjects. According to Montesquieu's observation, after Charles Martel's (688-741) adoption of the feudal system, the Frankish Kingdom was divided into numerous fiefs, making it unnecessary to enforce the public law. There

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol. 1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 585.

was thus no more need to send officials specifically for inspecting and supervising judicial and political affairs.<sup>1</sup>

This polycentric mode of rule had a profound impact upon the political trajectory of the Frankish Europe. Unlike the Romans who normally (although not invariably) annexed the subjugated kingdoms and turned them into centrally-controlled provinces, the Frankish Kingdom granted the newly acquired territories as autonomous fiefs to secular or ecclesiastical princes.<sup>2</sup> The king was simply the biggest landlord. It was furthermore customary for the Frankish kings to divide the territories among their sons, which resulted in the shrinkage of the kingdom and proliferation of multiple kings. The Slavs, who launched large-scale invasions of Eastern Europe after the Germanic invasions of the Western Roman Empire,

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<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 681.

<sup>2</sup> For example, when the Franks defeated the Visigoths, they bestowed the newly conquered land to Frankish and Visigoth aristocrats. Similarly, Charlemagne bestowed large amount of the land he conquered in Saxony, Lombard Italy, and Spain to the Church, especially to monasteries, as Church property.

adopted, certain modifications notwithstanding, the similarly polycentric political system.<sup>1</sup> This meant that politically speaking, the post-Roman Europe remained divided. Ecclesiastical unity was never matched by a political one, and even when the institution of emperorship was restored – first under Charlemagne and later under Otto the Great – the emperors’ actual power did not match that of their Roman predecessors. The clearly non-Roman political trajectory adopted by the Franks determined the future of Europe. Its legacy is palpable, *mutatis mutandis*, into our days.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 610.

## 6

In the sixth century, the legacy of the Roman political system was still within reach. Why did the Franks, nonetheless, opt for feudalism? One of the possible answers may be related to the literacy of the “barbarians.” The Roman legal and bureaucratic systems were based on the legal codes, administrative norms, and historical precedents in Latin. The Germanic rulers, however, did not encourage their tribesmen to learn Latin reading and writing, thus effectively preventing their in-depth understanding of the Roman historical experience. For instance, the

Goths were allowed to learn only their mother tongue, not Latin; “their contempt for the Latin schools was applauded by Theodoric himself, who gratified their prejudices, or his own, by declaring, that the child who had trembled at a rod, would never dare to look upon a sword.”<sup>1</sup>

Whereas mastery of Greek and Latin was discouraged among the Germanic conquerors, the written versions of their own languages did not emerge until the end of the eighth century. This means that for most of the three centuries spanning the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and Charlemagne’s enthronement (476-800), the vast majority of Germanic elites (not to say commoners) lacked basic literacy. Charlemagne himself, who had a strong thirst for knowledge, spoke Latin poorly and was unable to write in it at all. This held true even for many of the later Holy Roman emperors. Otto the Great (912-973), who was crowned in 962 as the new emperor, did not

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4, London: Bell, 1891, p. 256.

begin to learn how to read until he was 30. Conrad II, who ruled the empire from 1024 to 1039, could not even read a letter. Most of the feudal aristocrats in Medieval Europe were illiterate. This was dramatically different from the situation in the Roman era. It demanded adaptation of the norms of rule.

Unable to write, the Germanic rulers could neither handle complicated documents, nor establish a civil service system, nor implement sophisticated Roman legal codes. As Marc Bloch (1886-1944) pointed out, “[T]he majority of lords and many great barons were administrators incapable of studying personally a report or an account, judges whose decisions were recorded (if at all) in a language unknown to the court.”<sup>1</sup> Unable to maintain a sophisticated bureaucratic system, the Germanic rulers had to rule the territories through a much simpler feudal administration, which allowed relegation of power to their underlings and overall simplification of administrative affairs. As such, they lost the possibility of restoring an effective large empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 88.

The elite's illiteracy led to another salient feature of the medieval European feudalism: the exceptional role of the Church in the administrative affairs. As only monasteries and church schools at that time could train an intellectual elite, the lords had to rely on the clerics in their fiefs to fulfill administrative duties. Charlemagne, for example, appointed bishops as his diplomats and *missi dominici*.<sup>1</sup> A great majority of his edicts, announcements and admonitions came, in fact, from the hands of the English clergyman Alcuin of York. For centuries, ministerial positions under the Frankish kings were predominantly filled by ecclesiastics. In short, the priests not only were authorities concerning religious texts, but also maintained administrative power.

This type of Church-state relationship differed dramatically from that found in the Roman Empire (and in the contemporaneous Byzantine Empire as well). While the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) was subordinate

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<sup>1</sup> James Westfall Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York: Ungar, 1928, p. 238.

to the Roman Emperor and even had to be approved by him,<sup>1</sup> in the Frankish Kingdom, the Church and the king shared power. Aside from active participation in the administration, the Church also functioned as a major landowner, which controlled vast territories and could effectively resist the empire's attempts to tax its landholdings.<sup>2</sup> This concession of administrative power by the Franks to the Church became the basis for the subsequent rise of the Catholic Church as the major rival of the imperial power throughout much of the history of the Holy Roman Empire. Not incidentally, whereas in the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-340), the biographer of Constantine the Great, advocated the "one God, one empire, one emperor"

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<sup>1</sup> In 445, the Roman Emperor Valentinian III issued to Leo I, Bishop of Rome, an edict which granted the Roman Church supremacy over all churches of the West. The edict required that laws made by the Bishop of Rome be implemented by all Christian churches, that the bishops of the diocese and all regional bishops must answer the Bishop of Rome's call, and that all those who refused to answer the call would be escorted to Rome by force by the governor of the relevant region. Leo I adopted the title Pope henceforth.

<sup>2</sup> James Westfall Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages*, New York: Ungar, 1928, p. 201.

paradigm, by the 12th century, the Holy Roman emperor Frederick Barbarossa (r. 1152-1190) advocated the concept of “one God, one pope, one emperor.”<sup>1</sup> The rise of the papal power coincided with the decline of the idea of a single universal empire.

For sure, the Germanic tribes had their own laudable traditions. For instance, their tradition of military democracy was more conducive to the rise of representative democracy in Europe than the imperial Roman top-down mode of rule.<sup>2</sup> According to Montesquieu, the Germanic peoples opted for feudalism and its accompanying autonomy simply because they valued freedom and favored an independent lifestyle:

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<sup>1</sup> Cited from Len Scales, “Religion and the Medieval Western Empire (CE 919-1519),” *Empires and Gods – The Role of Religion in Imperial History*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024, p. 278, which is also an excellent depiction of the persistent tensions between the papacy and the emperors in the “Christo-mimetic” Holy Roman Empire.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the Roman rule was purely “anti-democratic.” It should be noted that the Roman republican institutions remained one of the major sources of inspiration for proponents of democracy in the modern West, and the Roman Empire continued to maintain self-governing city-states as essential components of its political system.

*[The Germanic peoples] were divided by marshes, lakes, and forests [...] they even liked their separation. [...] All these peoples, taken individually, were free and independent, and, when they were mixed together, they remained independent: the homeland was in common and the republic particular; the territory was the same and the nations various.<sup>1</sup>*

It is surely possible that the laudable values of freedom, autonomy, and democracy can be related to the early Germanic lifestyle. Was the resultant creation of a polycentric European world an advantage or disadvantage in terms of ensuring decent livelihood to dwellers of Europe? Was the relegation of political power to the Church (which enjoyed immense spiritual and cultural power) a prudent choice? There can be no definitive answer to these questions, because any answer would be more related to one's political values than to agreed objective criteria of political success or

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<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 535.

failure. Hence, instead of debating the ups and downs of the European feudal rule, I want to turn back to China.

The Northerners, who had ruled the Central Plains since the early fourth century, were also originally dwellers of grasslands and forest areas. Much like the Germanic peoples in Montesquieu's analysis, they were used to sparsely populated territories, in which deserts, forests, and mountain valleys separated one tribe from another. Much like the Germanic tribes, they loved their freedom. After entering the Central Plains, they were less inclined to valorize autonomy and polycentric mode of rule than was the case with the Franks and other Germanic tribes. Instead, after a period of trial and error, they chose the centralized Han-style model based on the *junxian* system, a model that favored multi-ethnic integration instead of preserving one's separate identity. This multi-ethnic nature was reflected primarily in the administrative apparatus, which incorporated the Northerners' and the Han elites, who, in spite of inevitable tensions, came eventually to terms with each other.

The relations between the religious and secular

establishments in China also differed dramatically from the European post-Roman pattern. Whereas Buddhism's spiritual and social power in China was comparable to a certain extent to that of Christianity in Europe, it never became an equally potent political force. Even though many of the northern (as well as Han) rulers were staunch adherents of Buddhism, the Buddhist *sangha* never attained political leverage comparable with the Church in Europe, nor could it replace the Confucian civil bureaucracy. Buddhism was lavishly patronized by some of the rulers, as we can observe, for instance, from the magnificent Yungang Grottoes; but the construction of these caves started shortly after the massive persecution of Buddhists in the last years of Tuoba Tao's rule. This persecution (instigated by Cui Hao, who was a devoted Daoist) did not last long (446-452), but as it manifested, the balance of power between the state and the religious establishment in China was different from that in Europe. Buddhism could prosper under the state's patronage; at its peak in the Northern Dynasties, there

were tens of thousands of temples with millions of registered monks. However, once political or economic considerations dictated this, the power of the religious establishment would be curbed. Outright persecutions were exceptional, but the state's control over the *sangha* was the rule. In China, under any dynasty, it was clear that the political power rested with the imperial court, not with the religious establishment, however attractive the religion could be.

## 7

On the Christmas Day of 800, the Pope crowned Charlemagne as “Augustus and Emperor.” The event touched off a centuries-long debate as to whether the Frankish Empire was transformed therewith into a Roman one. Debates aside, historians agree that the Franks were somewhat ambiguous toward being named the heirs to Rome. Charlemagne himself once admitted that he did not like the imperial title and that he would not have entered the Church of St. Peter had he known that the Pope planned to crown him

there.<sup>1</sup> Thus, even after being crowned as an emperor, Charlemagne retained his titles as King of the Franks and King of the Lombards. In his famous capitulary *Divisio Regnorum* of 806, he did not even mention his title as “Roman Emperor.”

The Franks were not great admirers of Rome. In 961, shortly before being crowned as the new emperor, Otto the Great sent a Lombard bishop as his envoy to the Byzantine Empire, which saw itself as the true heir to the Roman Empire. The Byzantines told the bishop that he was not qualified to represent the “Romans,” and the bishop replied that the Franks considered the word “Roman” an affront.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer*, College Town: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> The Lombard King Liutprand (r. 712-744), who ruled much of Italy (excluding the city of Rome), claimed that “Roman” was a humiliating word among his people. He alleged that Rome was born of a fratricide, and the Romans were the descendants of adulterers, debtors, runaway slaves, murderers, and criminals. See *Liudprandi Cremonensis Antapodosis, Homelia Paschalis, Historia Ottonis, Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana*, Turnhout: Brepols, 1998, p. 182. See more in Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity, and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 199-212.

The Franks' desire to separate themselves from Rome is most clearly observable in their historiography. The rise of the Roman Empire coincided with proliferation of universal histories written primarily by Greek historians. These histories duly addressed the plurality of cultures and identities in the Mediterranean realm and further to the east, but this plurality eventually was incorporated into the "universal" Roman Empire. This universal dimension was duly inherited by the Christian imperial historiography, the most notable representative of which, Eusebius, was, not coincidentally, the most vociferous proponent of the "one God, one empire, one emperor" paradigm. In the post-Roman world, by contrast, there was a visible shift to localized histories, which focused on a single polity, single ethnic group, and single regional dynasty. The Roman order was sidelined, as is exemplified, for instance, in the seventh-century *Chronicle of Fredegar*. The Romans were mentioned in the chronicle as one of the many ethnic communities, and in the "Roman world," numerous tribes and kingdoms maintained

parallel development and never converged into the Roman Empire. The focus was on the local, not the universal.<sup>1</sup>

The change in history writing reflected a large change in political culture, which assigned greater importance to one's *gens* or "nation"<sup>2</sup> at the expense of larger identities. This trend was not reversed even when the Carolingian Empire emerged as an ostensibly legitimate heir to the Western Roman Empire. Actually, Charlemagne's enthronement as a Roman emperor did not make him abandon the earlier titles as the king of the Franks and the Lombards. This caused much political and historiographical ambiguity; as Lifshitz summarized, it is "hardly surprising that no author attempted a sweeping narrative history of the Frankish

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 61-62.

<sup>2</sup> For the semantic proximity of *gens* and *natio* (later, "nation"), see Helmut Reimitz, "History and Historiography between the Roman and the Carolingian Empire," *Between Empires: Rupture, Transformation and Transmission*, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2017, p. 284.

realm for another two hundred years.”<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity was not just in the realm of historiography. Politically speaking, the empire remained a conglomerate of potentially autonomous ethnic groups – Franks, Bavarians, Alemanni, Thuringians, Saxons, Burgundians, and Aquitanians. The primary bonds that unified them were religious rather than political, as a result, the Carolingian Empire as a Europe-wide entity had barely survived Charlemagne’s death and was eventually partitioned into autonomous kingdoms.<sup>2</sup> In the previous section, I have addressed some of the institutional reasons for this fragmentation; what I want to emphasize here is that the fragmentation was also culturally acceptable. The component kingdoms strongly pronounced localized ethnic identity. The notion of a politically unified realm gradually faded

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<sup>1</sup> Felice Lifshitz, “The Vicissitudes of Political Identity: Historical Narrative in the Barbarian Successor States of Western Europe,” *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 2: 400-1400*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 384.

<sup>2</sup> The partition was planned actually by Charlemagne himself who would like to divide his patrimony among his three sons; but since two of the sons did not survive him, the imperial mantle was inherited by the only surviving son, Louis the Pious. Louis’ death in 840 marked the end of the unified Carolingian realm.

from the European political culture.

Once again, the contrast with the Chinese experience is striking. Whereas, similar to post-Roman Europe, China was divided through most of the fourth to the sixth century, many of the political actors remained committed to the unified realm. Powerful rulers hoped to turn their regional state into a springboard toward future reunification of All-under-Heaven, while the rulers of weaker regional polities adopted a less assertive policy of “wait and see.” Through flexible diplomacy they preserved close ties with the major contenders for the Mandate, hoping that they could seek protection of the latter at the expense of their partial independence. It is suitable here to cite Richard Mather’s summary of the rise and fall of the small polities in northwestern China in the late fourth and early fifth centuries:

*There is even something pathetic in the eagerness with which the various non-Chinese [non-Han] groups would offer their allegiance, first to*

*Lü Guang [the founder of the Later Liang, r. 386-399], then to Wei You [Lü Guang's appointee who later rebelled against Lü], then to Qifu Qiangui [the ruler of the Western Qin, r. 388-400, and 409-412], and later to Yao Xing [the ruler of the Later Qin, r. 394-416], always in the hope that at last a leader had appeared who would bring unity and a measure of stability.<sup>1</sup>*

The quest for the realm's reunification explains why, amid wars and bloodshed of fragmented All-under-Heaven, the inclination toward renewed integration dominated both Han and Northerners' polities. This inclination is observable at many levels. Unlike strongly pronounced regionalism in the post-Roman European historiography, in China historians working for the Northerners' polities sought to buttress their rulers' position as legitimate contenders for power in the entire realm under Heaven. This was done in particular

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<sup>1</sup> *Biography of Lü Kuang*, translated and annotated by Richard B. Mather, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959, p. 25, with some of the text modified.

through claiming ties of the ruling lineage to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), the legendary progenitor of the people living on the Central Plains. Such claims made the heads of the Northerners relatives of the Han people, and thereby potentially eligible to rule over the realm.

Let us turn to the role of ethnicity in governance. Unlike in post-Roman Europe, where there were tendencies toward legal and social separation of different ethnic groups, in China the inclination was toward the creation of multiethnic communities. It is true that some of the ruling elites of different ethnic backgrounds tried to preserve their separate status, which entitled them to preferential access to political power and material resources; but the policies of separation were invariably short-lived. The very need of the rulers to create an economically and militarily powerful polity required broader integration of Han and non-Han subjects into administrative and military apparatus (see Table 2.2). It also required encouraging settlement of the Han peasants in the polity's core

areas, either through voluntary or involuntary migration. No fewer than 50 such migrations, involving millions of people, were recorded during the Northern Dynasties.<sup>1</sup> These migrations created a new population mixture and nipped in the bud any possibility of maintaining an “ethnically pure” political entity. The need to improve control over the population was an additional factor that encouraged the adoption of the Han norms at the expense of tribal traditions. For instance, one of the notable reforms carried out by Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei was “scattering the tribes and allocating land for their resettlement.”<sup>2</sup> This was a major step toward what Pearce called “detrribalization” of the Xianbei society,<sup>3</sup> and the first step on the path of integration of the Xianbei, other northern ethnicities, and the Han.

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<sup>1</sup> Genyū Nishimura, *Studies on Chinese Economic History*, Tokyo: The Society of Oriental Research, 1968, pp. 96-99.

<sup>2</sup> Wei Shou *et al.*, chapter 83 of *History of the Wei Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1995, p. 1812.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Pearce, “Northern Wei,” *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 2: The Six Dynasties: 220-589*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 161.

**Table 2.2: Ethnic Background of Civil Officials and Military Officers of Some Northern Polities**

Ethnicity Kingdom	Han	Xiongnu	Xianbei	Qiang	Di	Other ethnicities	Unclear	Total
	Former Zhao <sup>1</sup>	131	114				18	
Later Yan (central government)	56		64			18	37	175
Later Yan (military)	20		45			15	30	110
Later Yan (local officials) <sup>2</sup>	43		30			4	16	93
Later Qin (central government) <sup>3</sup>	19			9	3	1		32
Xia <sup>4</sup>	26	4	4	2		30 <sup>5</sup>		66

<sup>1</sup> Zhou Weizhou, *The History of Han Zhao* (汉赵国史), Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2019, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Gao Ran, *A Study of Murong Xianbei and the History of the Five Yan Kingdoms* (慕容鲜卑与五燕国史研究), Beijing: Peking University Press, 2018, pp. 204-206.

<sup>3</sup> Eqiong Zhuoma, *The History of Later Qin* (后秦史), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2018, pp. 129-130.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Honglin, *A Study of Tiefu Xiongnu and the History of Xia* (铁弗匈奴与夏国史研究), Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2011, pp. 132-133.

<sup>5</sup> Of whom 27 belonged to Tiefu (铁弗), the imperial lineage.

The long history of the Xianbei rule in northern China allows us to understand the logic of multi-ethnic integration as a long-term irresistible trend. The steps of integration started early in the Northern Wei reign (e.g. with Emperor Daowu's reforms), but back then they were counterbalanced by the intentional division of the Northern Wei population into the Xianbei "men of the dynasty" (*guoren*, 国人), who were the core of the Northern Wei mounted cavalry, and the Han peasants. The "men of the dynasty" enjoyed preferential access to political and material benefits and had a strong sense of identity, as was demonstrated among other matters in their indignation against Cui Hao's record of their "unseemly affairs."<sup>1</sup> Gradually, however, the Northern Wei rulers realized that the separation between "the men of the dynasty" and the Han subjects was counterproductive to their ultimate goal to reunify the realm. This was the background for the sweeping Sinicization reforms under Emperor Xiaowen, as

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<sup>1</sup> See *Chen Yinke's Lectures on the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties*, Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2018, pp. 208-209.

discussed in Chapter I. These reforms coincided with the Northern Wei's shift of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang in the heartland of the Central Plains and an attempt (unsuccessful, though) to conquer the south and reunify the realm.

One of Emperor Xiaowen's goals was to create an elite comprising both the Xianbei and the Han. His reforms were so sweeping that they aroused resentment among the Xianbei military aristocracy, resulting in rebellions and the unraveling of the Northern Wei a generation after Emperor Xiaowen's death. The Western Wei (later replaced by the Northern Zhou) ruled by the Yuwen clan was opposed to the Sinicization policies of Emperor Xiaowen. Yuwen Tai (d. 556), the Western Wei's founder, not only restored the Northerners' original surnames, which had been changed into Han ones as ordered by Emperor Xiaowen, but also initiated an opposite process – bestowing Xianbei surnames on meritorious Han subjects.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2 of *Book of the Northern Zhou Dynasty* (周书), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1971, p. 36.

However, while reversing Emperor Xiaowen's policies, Yuwen Tai pursued the very same goal of integrating his ethnically diverse subjects into a new whole. His policies, coming atop earlier steps of integration undertaken by the Northern Wei rulers, were fully successful. The ethnically mixed new elite at Yuwen's stronghold in Guanzhong became the core of the ruling class of the Sui and the Tang dynasties for centuries to come.

The success of multi-ethnic integration in northern China was a by-product of much stronger and unambiguous commitment to the political reunification of the realm. This commitment is yet another feature that distinguishes between Chinese and European civilizations. We may call it the difference in civilizational consciousness. For the Europeans in the post-Roman age, the most important civilizational bond was the religious creed. It was Christianity (eventually, the Catholic version of Christianity) that held together different political, ethnic, and linguistic groups in Western and Central Europe. The religion

became the major source of civilizational identity, separating the Christians from the rest – the pagans, the Jews, the Muslims, and even the fellow Christians who followed the eastern churches or those deemed “heretics.” The cohesive potential of Christianity was indeed remarkable, but the ecclesiastical unity was not translated into a political one. Actually, the Church did not have a uniform political vision; it could accommodate itself to an empire, to regional kingdoms, and even to aristocratic republics later. This political ambiguity of the Church was well visible from one of its most radical political documents: the *Unam Sanctam* (1302), a papal bull issued by Pope Boniface VIII. The bull displayed no visible interest in the political structure of the realm insofar as the unity and the supremacy of the Church and the Papacy were recognized.

In China, multiple religions (native Daoism and imported Buddhism) and a variety of folk and official beliefs such as worship of Heaven did contribute to the cultural unity of the realm, but their role was

minuscule in comparison to the unifying force of a common political culture. This culture is often defined as “Confucianism,” but as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> it was indeed an integration of Confucianism, Legalism, and other strands of thought. This culture prioritized a politically unified realm under a single monarch and administered by meritocratic officials (at least ostensibly if not always in practice). These fundamental principles were shared, as noted above, by almost all the political actors on the Chinese soil – the Han people and the Northerners, literati and military officers, emperors and even peasant rebels. They provided the glue that held the Chinese realm together – both culturally and politically.

In the context of Chinese political culture, ethnicity played no significant role. Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE), one of the most revered Chinese thinkers, noted that the sage Thearch Shun was “a man of the Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Pan Yue, *Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations: The Warring States and Ancient Greece*, Beijing: New World Press, 2022; Pan Yue, *Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations: The Qin and Han Dynasties and Ancient Rome*, Beijing: New World Press, 2022.

Yi,” whereas King Wen, the revered founder of the Zhou Dynasty was “a man of the Western Yi.” They were both “aliens” in the eyes of the people living on the Central Plains, but this did not impair their position whatsoever as China’s paragon rulers: “They fulfilled their aspirations in the Central States [in an identical way] as if they matched tallies. The former sage and the later sage, their principles were the same.”<sup>1</sup> What mattered was their moral virtue and political conduct that benefitted their subjects. This understanding explains why the Northerners were able to carry on the Chinese civilization, and considered themselves its true heirs and superior in morality and political achievements to their Han rivals in the south.

After more than three centuries of continuous cohabitation and cultural integration, the Northerners and the Han merged into a broader and more inclusive entity, which should properly be called the “Sui people” and later the “Tang people” on a par with the “Han people,” who are nowadays the main component

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<sup>1</sup> *Mengzi* 8.1 (“Li Lou Xia”).

of the Chinese nation but are often mistaken as a synonym of the “Chinese” by some Westerners. Actually, the people living in northern China today are the descendants of the ethnic mix of the Han and the Northerners. The Han themselves were not an ethnically “pure” entity (if such “pure” ethnicities are at all possible), either. They were the descendants of the diverse tribes living in the Shang and Zhou core areas through centuries of amalgamation with a variety of neighboring ethnocultural groups. This integration was based on mutual influence and mutual learning, rather than simple assimilation of one ethnic group into another. Dynasties rose and fell, rulers of various ethnicities replaced one another, but the long-term trend toward expanding the ethnic mix continued. The entity which we commonly call today “the Han” cannot be described in terms of ethnic or genetic “purity.” It is a political and cultural construct formed through millennia of Chinese history.

Without this historical perspective, we cannot understand why the monarchs of the Northerners’

polities, each of whom had their own traditions and customs, were eager to model their political conduct after the Han emperors rather than after their own heroic ancestors. Without this historical perspective, we cannot understand why the Northerners moved toward integration with rather than separation from their Han counterparts. Unlike the Ostrogoths or the Franks, the Northerners in China were committed to the ideal of attaining great unity, a mega-polity encompassing the Huaxia people and the “aliens of the four quarters” (*sijiz*, 四夷). They knew that this was the only way to restore stability and prosperity in All-under-Heaven.

This historical perspective also allows us to understand the point I have made above: The Northerners did not consider themselves as outsiders of the Han culture but its true heirs. The sense of ambiguity (or alienation) toward the Roman heritage that characterized the Germanic tribes, was not characteristic of the Northerners. On the contrary, they were happy to position themselves as culturally superior to the Han people in the south, whom they pejoratively

identified as “uneducated aliens.” Thus, when Fu Jian launched his expedition against the Eastern Jin, he appointed a future governor of the Jin territories to the position of “Commandant for the Protection of the Southern Barbarians,” identifying the Han residents in the south as uncultivated “southern barbarians” (*nanman*, 南蛮). The Northern Wei rulers pejoratively called the southerners “island aliens” (*daoyi*, 島夷) and considered themselves superior not just militarily but culturally. One of their ministers boasted: “[Our] statutes regulating reforms in customs and tradition are comparable to those of the Five Emperors, and the richness of rituals, music, and institutions dwarfs that of the hundred kings preceding us.”<sup>1</sup>

The above statement was from a famous dialogue between the Northern Wei minister Yang Yuanshen and the southern general Chen Qingzhi (484-539), which was recorded in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-Yang*, penned in 547 by a former Northern Wei subject

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<sup>1</sup> Yang Xuanzhi, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-Yang*, Eng., Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 116.

Yang Xuanzhi. Chen Qingzhi, who was dispatched to Luoyang by the Southern Liang court in an attempt to utilize the political turmoil in the Northern Wei for the southerners' advantage, was initially confident in the southerners' cultural superiority. He was astounded to discover that Luoyang, which hosted countless refugees from the south, was outstanding both in its cultural achievements and cultural confidence. Having returned to the south after his failed mission, Chen remained highly respectful of the Northerners. Yang Xuanzhi cited him:

*Since the time of the Jin and the Song, Luoyang has been called a wasteland, and all those living to the north of the Yangtze River have been regarded as barbarians. After my recent visit to Luoyang, I began to realize that cultured eminent families are [all] in the Central Plains, where rituals and etiquette flourish and people are rich and prosperous. There were things that I did not know when I saw them, neither can I give a verbal*

*account of what I have seen.*<sup>1</sup>

The story suggests that the Northern Dynasties were gaining success not only on the battlefield, but also in cultural integration, adaptation, and innovation. Their broad vision and open-mindedness exceeded, in my opinion, those of the Germanic tribes in post-Roman Europe.

The Northerners succeeded. After overpowering the Southern Dynasties and imbibing the cultural attainments of the defeated, the new Sino-nomadic elite of the Sui and the Tang dynasties developed an unprecedentedly rich culture renowned for its sophistication, creativity, and successful amalgamation of native and alien achievements. For instance, the Buddhist grottoes, built in the Northern Wei, its successor dynasties, and later the Sui and the Tang dynasties, blended Indian Gandhara and Gupta artistic styles with Chinese ones from the Wei and Jin era. The Seven (later Nine) Musical Divisions of the Sui and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118, with the translation slightly modified.

Tang dynasties included musical performances from the Central Plains and those from outside – e.g., Goguryo music, Indian music, Samarkand music, and Qiuci (a city-state in Xinjiang) music. The *pipa*, which originated in the Western Regions (today’s Xinjiang and part of Central Asia), became a musical instrument favored by the Tang people. Fashions and styles originating in Northern Asia and Persia were not rejected as “alien” but appreciated and warmly accepted by different ethnic communities within China.<sup>1</sup>

So, did the adaptation to the Han culture mean that the Northerners lost their cultural self? To answer this question, we should reject the perspective commonly associated with European historical experience, in which preservation of separate identities was valorized, and existence of ethnicity-based polities was considered as normal. The Chinese experience, by

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<sup>1</sup> The concave-convex painting method popular in India and Central and West Asia was adopted by Wu Daozi (ca. 680-759) and other Tang Dynasty painters and spread to Goguryo and Japan. The frescoes in the ancient golden hall of Horyuji in Nara, Japan, are still available today; see *A History of Sino-Foreign Art Exchanges* (中外美术交流史), Beijing: China Youth Publishing House, 2013, p. 60.

contrast, showed that ethnic integration did not mean “minorities’ assimilation,” and cultural integration did not mean “cultural misappropriation.” Rather, from the viewpoint of Chinese history, the creation of an expansive, pluralistic and politically unified realm was immensely preferable to the interethnic struggles that China encountered during the ages of fragmentation. The Northerners did not lose their “cultural self.” Rather, they enriched it and gained a broader self.

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*Chapter III*

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EUROPE,  
CHINA,  
AND THEIR  
CIVILIZATIONAL  
CHOICES

*1*

Choices of political actors are often determined by the accumulated experience of their civilization. When the Northerners who ruled the Central Plains in the fourth to the sixth century positioned themselves as the rightful heirs to the Chinese civilization, they did it following the logic of integration which influenced China's civilizational trajectory through much of its history. When, by contrast, the Germanic tribes established independent polities in post-Roman Europe, their choice reflected the internal logic of European experience, that is, the experience of a

polycentric world.

This logic of polycentrism remained palpable even at the apex of European unity under the Roman rule. Through much of the Roman history, the imperial rulers did not seek homogenous rule over the subjugated territories, which included, aside from the regions under the Romans' direct control, notionally free cities and allied kingdoms. In many of Roman provinces, governance was exercised through the nodal network of city-states, which continued to enjoy considerable autonomy under the imperial supervision. More significantly, the political unity at the very top of the empire was not conceived as inviolable. Facing multiple simultaneous challenges, the empire could establish two or even four emperors simultaneously, each of whom would deal with one or more challengers, e.g., the Germans in the north and the Parthians or the Sasanians in the southeast. The legitimacy of this bifurcation of rulership can be traced to the Roman republican constitution with two simultaneous consuls as supreme military commanders.

From the angle of Chinese political experience, such dispersal of rule would inevitably mean turmoil: “Oneness brings orderly rule; doubleness brings chaos.”<sup>1</sup> For the Romans, by contrast, the system appeared feasible, even though multiple examples, such as the failed triumvirates of the first century BCE and the repeated outbursts of struggles among the rival co-emperors thereafter, could, theoretically, lead to insistence on strict monarchism.

Polycentrism is deeply embedded in European political experience. It can be traced to the Greek city-states that staunchly defended their autonomy. It went through the Roman experiments discussed in the previous paragraph, through the Germanic tribal polities that mushroomed after the Western Roman Empire’s collapse, to the feudal kingdoms with numerous semi-independent castles of the early Middle Ages, to the Italian city-state republics – such as Venice and Genoa – in the late Middle Ages, and well into the age of nation-states based on an unattainable desire to

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<sup>1</sup> *Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals* (吕氏春秋), 17.8 (“Zhi Yi,” 执一).

have a single political entity for a single ethnic group. Although Europe did not lack attempts to create larger and more inclusive entities – from the Holy Roman Empire, through the Napoleonic era, to, arguably, the current European Union – the polycentric logic was never abandoned. Let's take, for example, Napoleon, whose military and administrative genius made him singularly fitting to become Europe's unifier. Yet even at the apex of his success, he preferred to exercise direct administrative control only over his French homeland and a few adjacent territories, while ruling much of the rest of Europe through a variety of client kingdoms. This was the logic of polycentrism.

This logic is not just reflective of accumulated historical experience, but is validated in the European political thought. It can be traced to the valorization of small-scale self-governing political communities which was fully observable in the Greek political thought. While Alexander the Great, Aristotle's most famous disciple, was one of the most avid empire-builders in human history, Aristotle himself remained staunchly

committed to taking the *polis* as the normative political entity, never entertaining the idea of an empire.<sup>1</sup> We can find more support for ethnic or communal independence from many later thinkers and historians, from Cornelius Tacitus' admiration of the freedom-loving "barbarians," to much later Montesquieu's praise of the "free and independent" Germanic peoples.<sup>2</sup> Similar ideas remained powerful well into the modern era, such as Guizot's argument that the spirit of representative government originated from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of local self-rule,<sup>3</sup> and Tocqueville's research on village and township autonomy that became the backbone of the democracy of the United States.<sup>4</sup> A powerful government which exercises robust

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<sup>1</sup> See a brief summary in Fred Miller, "Aristotle's Political Theory," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Zalta, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-politics/>.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, chapter xxx, "Agricola" and chapter xxxvii, "Germania," *Agricola. Germania. Dialogue on Oratory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914; Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 535.

<sup>3</sup> François Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002, pp. 227-228.

<sup>4</sup> Tocqueville pointed out that laws and mores helped keep a democratic

centralized control is, by contrast, commonly associated in European thought with despotism. Not accidentally, ever since the European Enlightenment, China itself was firmly seen as an epitome of despotism by many thinkers – from Montesquieu to Hegel, and to the 20th-century scholars, such as Karl A. Wittfogel.<sup>1</sup>

Let us turn back to China now. It experienced several protracted periods of polycentric system, the most notable of which was the Eastern Zhou (770-256 BCE). During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), or the first three centuries of the Eastern

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state free. The laws and mores of the Anglo-Americans were regarded as the special causes and decisive factors that made them powerful. The core of the Americans' mores is township autonomy: "I find the second in the town institutions that, by moderating the despotism of the majority, give the people at the same time the taste for liberty and the art of being free" (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002, p. 466 and p. 497).

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu was among the first Enlightenment thinkers to develop a strongly critical view of China, postulating that "China is a despotic state whose principle is fear" (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 128). For Hegel's derisive views of China as a country "without history" and without the spirit of freedom, see the "China" section in his *The Philosophy of History*. Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* published in 1957 was designed to prompt the US to fight the USSR and China, and it reflects a trend of viewing China as a despotic state in the Western political thought.

Zhou, efforts were made to ensure lasting coexistence among the states of the fragmented Zhou world. It was the failure of such efforts that led the thinkers of the subsequent Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) to the unanimous pursuit of great unity: Only the reunification of the realm under a single ruler could put an end to the ever aggravating wars and turmoil.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the desired unity was not meant to be purely symbolic – akin to what existed through much of the Eastern Zhou era when the “Son of Heaven” retained symbolic superiority over the regional lords, but was unable to constrain them. Rather, the realm had to be under centralized rule and effective top-down control.

As has been discussed in my previous study, the unity achieved by the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) was indeed highly effective in terms of uniform rule over the huge realm through the *junxian* system.<sup>2</sup> But it was

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<sup>1</sup> See Yuri Pines, “‘The One that Pervades All’ in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: Origins of ‘The Great Unity’ Paradigm,” *T’oung Pao*, Vol. 86, 2000, pp. 280-324.

<sup>2</sup> Pan Yue, *Comparative Studies on Chinese and Western Civilizations: The Qin and Han Dynasties and Ancient Rome*, Beijing: New World Press, 2022.

also much too effective, perhaps. Eager to create a new uniform order, the rulers tried to penetrate society down to the grassroots level and establish direct control over even remote hamlets in the borderlands. This was a very costly attempt though, and it was probably among the factors that led to the Qin's speedy collapse. The Qin's replacer – the Han Dynasty – chose a more relaxed mode of control. Initially it acquiesced in the restoration of autonomous principedoms in the eastern part of the realm, but gradually such autonomy was curtailed and the *junxian* system was fully reinstated. Thenceforth, large-scale autonomous units appeared in China primarily in the early days of a dynasty as an expedient measure to guarantee territorial control after a long period of turmoil that usually preceded dynastic changes. Yet regional autonomy, if uncurbed, would lead to renewed turmoil. The default choice was the *junxian* system.

The autonomy was tolerated at the community level, where the practice with self-selected leaders continued through much of Chinese history, from the

Three Venerable (*sanlao*, 三老) system in the Han to the Community Pact (*xiangyue*, 乡约) in the Ming. The government often directly encouraged community self-rule, especially at the level of lineage organizations which were patronized by officials; lineage heads even could possess judicial power over their kin. However, the degree of communal autonomy was constantly negotiated. It was tacitly understood that relaxation of government control would eventually empower the local elites, who might abuse their power, dispossessing the commoners, shielding their dependents from tax and corvee, or impairing the state's fiscal interests. The need to rein in these elites, whose power could bring about political and social turmoil, required periodic reinforcement of the centralized apparatus at the grassroots level. Throughout the imperial history, statesmen and thinkers had debated the desirability of greater centralization versus relegation of more power to local elites.<sup>1</sup> Their debates could generate at times deep

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<sup>1</sup> The question on the degree of the government's desired penetration of society was repeatedly aired by some of China's most eminent thinkers. See for instance the debate between Wang Anshi (1021-1086) and Sima

cleavages, but one thing remained clear to all: Autonomy was welcome, if at all only at the lower levels; large-scale autonomy that could result in the restoration of a polycentric world was not acceptable. It was clear to all – and reinforced through countless historical examples – that dispersal of unified control would lead to renewed internecine warfare and bloodshed.

The polycentric world in Europe and the centralized rule in China followed two different kinds of civilizational logic. From the European point of view, China could be seen despotic. From the Chinese point of view, perennial conflicts among minor and major polities that accompanied the European history after the end of *Pax Romana* would be an intolerable choice. Countless and mostly undecisive campaigns, such as those during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) between England and France, aggravated by internecine conflicts in each of these countries, could remind a

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Guang (1019-1086). In the Ming Dynasty, the most notable defender of elite interests was the maverick Gu Yanwu (1613-1682). In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Chen Hongmou (1696-1771) expressed a contrary inclination to support the government's expanded grassroots-level role.

Chinese observer of similarly perennial and undecisive campaigns in the Spring and Autumn Period. Similarly, a much bloodier Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) in Europe would resemble devastating large-scale conflicts in the Warring States Period. But the historical lessons from these conflicts differed in the two civilizations. In China, the centuries of wars strengthened the realization that “stability [of All-under-Heaven] is in unity.”<sup>1</sup> By contrast, no similarly powerful trend toward unification ensued in Europe. Both civilizations made their choices, and each followed its own path.

What were the advantages of the Chinese choice? Let me refer here to Samuel E. Finer's summary of different governmental modes in history. Finer considered the Roman model as superior to that of the Han Dynasty, but acknowledged one of the Han advantages: the civilian mode of rule. He stated:

*Unlike most of the preceding and succeeding empires and states, and notably Rome, the Han*

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<sup>1</sup> *Mengzi* 1.6.

*Empire despised martial glory. It was profoundly anti-militaristic. Its virtues were the civil ones – wen, in Chinese.*<sup>1</sup>

The fact is that the Han Dynasty did not “despise martial glory,” nor was it exclusively based on civilian virtues. China, even in its unity, could not dismiss the army, nor could it entirely avoid bloodshed: Border conflicts and domestic unrest recurred in any dynasty. It is true that, first, through most of its history, China was ruled by civilian elites who prized education over martial prowess, which was not the case in Europe. Second, preserving peace in the realm was the default choice of the vast majority of these elites. Third, the overwhelming majority of Chinese emperors also lacked expansionist zeal; even the most robust Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty had regretted his excessive pursuit of military successes.<sup>2</sup> And finally, the

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times, Vol. 1: Ancient Monarchies and Empires*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 525-526.

<sup>2</sup> For Emperor Wu’s self-criticism, see chapter 60 of *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, pp. 3913-3914.

unified dynasties in China ensured much longer periods of peace and stability for a much larger population than was the case in Europe or elsewhere. It was the long periods of peace that made China the most populous country on earth through much of its history, and this peace would not be possible without the realization of great unity.

What were the advantages of the European choice? Many Western scholars, such as B. M. Downing, Charles Tilly, William McNeill and Michael Mann, argued that political fragmentation and resultant interstate struggles in the West were the necessary precondition for its progress.<sup>1</sup> The wars necessitated formation of standing armies, gave birth to a rationalized bureaucracy, spurred technological progress, and eventually led to the formation of a modern state, to

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<sup>1</sup> Brian M. Downing, *Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe*, Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1992; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990-1992*, Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1992; William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Forces, and Society since A.D. 1000*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982; Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Vol. 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

the industrial revolution, to the rise of modernity and Europe's ultimate global success. They implied that China's prolonged political unity was coterminous with stagnation. Facing no competition from peer polities, the leaders of China chose to preserve stability at the expense of progress. It was for these reasons that China fell behind the West during the early modern era.

In the typical Western discourse, multi-polity competition in the situation of political fragmentation is a driving force to stimulate these improvements. Periods of prolonged peace and tranquility may result in stagnation, corruption, and self-defeating relaxation. This narrative usually views China as a negative example, holding that Chinese history provides a lot of cases, the most notable one of which is that of the Qing Dynasty. Having subjugated its rivals by the middle 18th century, the Qing Dynasty, then in the reign of the illustrious Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796), lost some of its erstwhile vigor and entered a prolonged period of stagnation. This stagnation resulted in the Qing's under-performance during

the Opium Wars and, worse, in an unforgivably slow response to the Western challenge in the wars' aftermath. Therefore, one may reach a conclusion that prolonged peace may lead to stagnation, whereas violent conflicts may contribute to advancement in various fields. However, most Chinese historians would hardly agree with this view.

The question is, what then is a prudent choice? Peace or war? Stagnation or progress? These meta-questions cannot be given a definitive, universally valid answer. But from the perspective of Chinese historical experience, a tentative answer is possible. Should we be able to ask the subjects of the Han or the Tang, the Ming or the Qing about whether or not they would prefer to tolerate a millennium of a renewed Warring States era and a multipolar world for the sake of progress toward capitalism, industrial revolution, and advancement in military technology, the answer, I think, would be resounding "No." Because any reader of Chinese dynastic histories (or just of vernacular literature and drama) knows all well the immense price

that accompanies interstate competition. This price is so high that no intellectual, artistic, or technological benefits could probably outweigh it. Whatever the Europeans' preferable choice is, China's civilizational choice is unequivocal: "Stability is in unity."

## 2

By the end of the 20th century, a new trend emerged in the US academic studies of the Qing history. Bolstered in part by the increasing access to and interest in Manchu-language documents, and in part by the new academic trends in the West, which sought “decentralizing” historical research, a group of scholars proposed a profound reappraisal of the nature of the Qing Dynasty. Instead of explaining the Manchu success through the prism of their Sinicization, these scholars interpreted the Manchu as good at multicultural rule, who adapted themselves to

different segments of their subjects in different ways. The Manchu emperors were Confucian paragons for the Han literati, but warrior khans for the Mongols, patrons of faith and even reincarnations of Bodhisattva Manjusri to the Tibetans, and so forth. This approach was dubbed the New Qing History.<sup>1</sup> It gave rise to a broader “Inner Asian turn” in the Western studies of Chinese history. These scholars held that the dynasties established by the steppe and forest peoples from Mongolia and Northeast China should be studied as representing a distinctive “Inner Asian” culture with its own traditions, political toolkit, values, and models of rule. The emphasis on these dynasties’ Sinicization was seen by the adherents of the “Inner Asian” angle as reflective of uncritical usage of Chinese-language

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<sup>1</sup> The symbolic birth of the New Qing History approach is usually traced to the heated exchange between the Evelyn S. Rawski, then the president of the American Association for Asian Studies, and its former president, Ho Ping-ti. See Rawski’s “Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History,” and Ho Ping-ti’s “In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski’s ‘Reenvisioning the Qing.’” For subsequent debates about the New Qing History (and about the problematic nature of this label), see, eg., Mario Cams, “Recent Additions to the New Qing History Debate,” *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Volume 47, Issue No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-4.

sources, which should be counterbalanced by resort to other languages (when possible) and to material evidence.

Over the past decade, the Chinese academic circles strongly criticized the New Qing History and the “Inner Asian turn.” The reason for this strong criticism is in part political: As Chinese scholars realize well on the basis of past and present experiences, this academic discourse reflects to a great extent political manipulations by those eager to divide China culturally – and eventually politically – into “China proper” and “Inner Asian” territories.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, we should recognize some academic aspects in the above approaches. For instance, the usage of multiple languages in studying China’s history is a reminder to historians of China that it is necessary to overcome

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<sup>1</sup> The attempts to separate “outer” (what is now called “Inner Asian”) areas from China started in the waning years of the Qing Dynasty and accelerated in the Republic of China period (1912-1949), when first British and Czarist Russian, and later Japanese imperialists tried to create puppet states in Xinjiang, Xizang, Mongolia, and Northeast China. Today not a few anti-China groups in the US and elsewhere dream of China disintegrating as the USSR did in 1991. Some of these groups readily resort to the “Inner Asian” paradigm in their propaganda.

exclusive reliance on Chinese-language sources. The rejection of a Sinocentric view, current in many of the 20th-century studies, is justifiable in a pluralistic view: The existence of sophisticated indigenous cultural traditions in the steppe is irrefutable, and their impact on China's northern rulers should be taken into consideration. In particular, the contribution of the steppe traditions to the realization of great unity, in particular during the Yuan and the Qing dynasties, should be recognized. Attention should be paid to the complex trajectories of ethnocultural identities among the Northerners. Academically speaking, there is yet a fundamental problem with the "Inner Asian turn." Eager to overcome erstwhile biases, the proponents of the "Inner Asian" angle absolutize the difference between "Inner Asian" and Han political and cultural patterns and, eager to defend the "minorities' cultural identities," they tend to overlook the powerful integration encompassing "Inner Asian" and Han cultures. Their bias is not only politically problematic, but also academically misleading.

Let me start with a clear validation of one aspect of the “Inner Asian” thesis: The peoples of the steppe belt and of the adjacent ecologically mixed area of Northeast China (from which most of the dynasties founded by the Northerners rose) had their distinctive cultures, socioeconomic structures, and norms of political behavior that differed from those of the agricultural areas of the Central Plains. That they brought with them their norms when entering the Central Plains is undeniable. Actually, much of what is called “Sinicization” refers precisely to the adaptation of the steppe norms to what suited ruling the sown areas. Notwithstanding political Sinicization, the Northerners often maintained their indigenous customs for generations, and these could even influence the Han population. The most notable example is the Manchu queue, which was imposed on the Han amid much resentment in 1645, but then became so common that many Han people – including the renowned historian Wang Guowei (1877-1927) – refused to cut off the

queue in the wake of the Revolution of 1911.<sup>1</sup> Other notable cultural traits coming from the steppes included the mastery of mounted archery, the importance of hunting, the prevalence of shamanistic rituals, and the like. They are surely important identity markers, but they are less relevant to my discussion focusing on the *political culture*, at the level of which, as I hope to demonstrate shortly, the steppe and the sown, and the Han and the Northerners, actually converged.

Speaking of politically meaningful identity markers, the most notable is the adoption of a separate written language for the northern ethnicities. The Northerners discussed in Chapter I did not have their own scripts; when they had to write their native terms and names, they used Chinese characters as phonetic loans. Later on, the invention of a new script became the hallmark of a new dynasty-building in the steppes: one of the first steps accompanying the transformation of a tribal confederation into a full-fledged state with developed

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<sup>1</sup> There were other less successful attempts to impose the steppe norms on the Han population, such as the Mongol promulgation of the levirate marriage, and the Manchu attempt to ban female foot-binding.

civil administration. Between the 10th and early 13th centuries, separate scripts were adopted by the Khitan, Dangxiang, Nüzhen, and Mongol peoples; in the 17th century, the Nüzhen people (who soon renamed themselves Manchus) adopted yet another new script. However, it should be noted that the Dangxiang, Khitan, and Nüzhen peoples all created their own ethnic scripts by imitating Chinese characters. For example, Nüzhen characters were created based on Khitan characters and Chinese characters. These new scripts were created so that the native elites could conduct administration in their own languages instead of over-relying on the Han officials. In a few cases (most notable of the Dangxiang and the Manchus), considerable efforts were made to translate a vast amount of canonical, historical, and philosophical literature from Chinese into their own languages. To a certain extent, scholars are justified to consider the usage of native scripts as a singularly important identity marker of the northern ethnicities.

This being said, we should also note that the

adoption of new scripts normally came together with the increased literacy in Chinese among the Northerners. The speed of adaptation to Chinese differed from one case to another, but usually in a few generations it became normative among the steppe rulers of China, at times replacing the literacy in their native tongues. The dynasties founded by the Mongols and the Manchus were usually bilingual or multilingual and were proudly so. Beijing and its surrounding areas today still have some bilingual (Chinese and Manchu), trilingual (adding Mongol), quadrilingual (adding Tibetan), and even penta-lingual (adding Uygur) inscriptions. This linguistic polyphony served as a testament to the unified dynasty's breadth and inclusiveness.<sup>1</sup> It is true that this polyphony differed from the Qin Dynasty's insistence on adopting a uniform script. But it fitted perfectly the Chinese ideal of inclusiveness, namely "All-under-Heaven is one

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the greatest manifestation of this inclusiveness is the Yuan Dynasty Cloud Platform of the Juyong Pass, in the north of Beijing, which includes inscriptions in six scripts (Chinese, Phags-pa Mongolian, Sanskrit, Tangut, Tibetan, and Uygur).

family” (*tianxia yijia*, 天下一家). This ideal is shared by Han and “Inner Asian” cultures alike. Its actualization may differ from one case to another, but the ultimate goal of maintaining unified rule remains the same.

To demonstrate how much the Chinese language became part of the Northerners’ cultural identity, let me give one more example. The Khitans ruled vast areas in Northeast China and relatively small but politically significant parts of the Central Plains, most notably around modern Beijing, for two centuries (the Liao Dynasty, 916-1125). So powerful were they that until now China is known in Russian as *Kitai* (Китай; see also “Cathay” of Marco Polo). In 1125, when the Liao Dynasty was eliminated by the Nüzhen people, Yelü Dashi (1087-1143), the scion of the Liao ruling family, fled westward and established the new Qara Khitan (or Western Liao) Dynasty in the vast territories extending from western Xinjiang to much of Central Asia. Notably, the dynasty continued to use the Chinese language together with Khitan and local languages in its administration despite a negligible number of Han

people under its rule. Clearly, literary Chinese (in which Yelü Dashi himself was well versed) had become by then as much part of the Khitan identity as their native tongue. Thus, while adopting a local title of *gürkhan* (universal khan), Yelü Dashi and his descendants continued to maintain the Chinese imperial title and reign-era names. In his administration as well, Yelü Dashi retained much of the Han administrative experience, opting for a more centralized political system than the common practice in Central Asia. He abandoned the prevailing *iqta* system (an assignment of revenues of a certain area of land in return for services rendered)<sup>1</sup> and replaced it with the system practiced in the Central Plains: centralized administration, in addition to a civil service system in the territories directly under his control, and centralized control over the military power.<sup>2</sup> Yelü Dashi was for sure “Inner Asian,” but he was no less “Chinese.” Any attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> See Vassily V. Bartold, *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, Vol. 1, Chin. ed., Lanzhou: Lanzhou University Press, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

assign a single identity to him is unfeasible.

Some scholars often argue about the Northerners' avoiding imposition of the Han-style *junxian* system on the nomadic population. The Khitans, for instance, maintained dual administration throughout the Liao's history, ruling the nomads through the means more attuned to their traditions. The Qing maintained the *zhouxian* system, similar to the *junxian* system, in most of the areas formerly under the Ming's control, but it also adopted a separate administrative system for the bannermen and ruled vast parts of Mongolia and Xinjiang through the *jasagh*-banner system. This is often seen as a proof of the Qing's "Inner Asian" nature, which may be the case, but note that similar adaptation of administrative norms to the geographically remote areas was practiced by most of the dynasties established by the Han people. The dense Central Plains-like administrative network would not be easily adaptable to the steppes in the north, oases in the west, or mountain valleys in the southwest. Thus there was experimentation with alternative administrative

models, starting with the “vassal states” (*shuguo*, 属国) in the Han to the “native chieftains” system (*tusi*, 土司, a system of appointing hereditary ethnic headmen as local officials) in the Yuan, the Ming and the Qing dynasties. Adapting administrative methods to local conditions was essential for the smooth running of a dynasty under any ethnic group – be it “Inner Asian” or “Chinese.” What mattered was that the central government must control the localities, which remained the common desideratum of all the dynasties on the Chinese soil, from the Qin to the Qing.

To demonstrate once more how the “Chinese” and “Inner Asian” modes of rule are intermingled, let me discuss one of the most important administrative innovations of the Yuan Dynasty: the provincial-level (*sheng*, 省) administrative unit. Prior to the Yuan, Chinese dynasties favored two-tier (*junxian* or *zhouxian*) administration. Gradually, as the number of prefectures and counties increased, several experiments were made to establish a higher, supra-prefecture tier (a province) to monitor the prefectures. As the monarchs were

fearful of provincial leaders becoming challengers to the throne, they avoided institutionalizing the power of provincial administration. The Mongols, by contrast, started experimenting with provinces (which were called “secretariats” [*sheng*]) early in the age of their expansion into Central Asia; and after consolidating their rule over China under Kublai Khan (r. 1260-1294), they adopted the system throughout much of the realm. Their experiment was successful, convincing the Ming emperors to continue the provincial system; but it was only in the Qing that provinces became a crucial component of the dynasty’s administration. Should we consider the provinces (which are an essential administrative unit in current China) as an “Inner Asian” type of administration or a “Chinese” one? Clearly, they are both. In terms of the search for efficient local administration, “Inner Asian” and “Chinese” rulers were the same.

Or let us look at another “Inner Asian” legacy in current China. Its capital Beijing is located on the northernmost reaches of the Central Plains, very

close to the ecological border between the steppe and the sown. It was the capital of the State of Yan, the northeastern principality established early in the Zhou Dynasty (11th century BCE), but for much of the subsequent two millennia it remained a relatively minor political center, too far from the Central Plains' heartland. It became the imperial capital first of the Liao Dynasty, then of the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234), and finally of the Yuan Dynasty. After the fall of the Yuan, the Ming initially made its capital in the south, but after over 50 years moved the capital to Beijing, which has remained as the capital until today despite a short interval. Should it be considered an "Inner Asian" capital? Probably so in terms of its origins; but surely not in terms of its design which, despite several reconstructions, remained firmly attuned to "Chinese" architectural and cosmological traditions. Is it possible to separate "Inner Asian" and "Chinese" here?

The above examples suffice to explain why I reject the artificial "Inner Asian-Chinese" dichotomy. This dichotomy, grounded as it is with the Western scholars'

fascination with “identity politics,” does not grasp fully the complexity of Chinese civilizational patterns. It is true that there were separate ethnocultural identities in China, and these identities could under certain conditions be politicized and even weaponized, as discussed in the next section. But more often than not, the political impact of separate ethnocultural identities was incomparably weaker than what the adherents of the “Inner Asia model” claim. Applying ethnocultural identities as a major analytical tool for studies of Chinese history creates a highly distorted perspective of China’s historical trajectory.

In this context, we should be reminded again that the separation between “Huaxia” (Han) and “Inner Asian” cultures is a relative but not absolute one. Their cultural interpenetration started at the very dawn of Chinese history. Take, for instance, the late Neolithic site of Shimao located in the loess hills of northeastern Shaanxi, close to the ecological border between the steppe and the sown. The site contains carvings with designs quite similar to the motifs that a few centuries

later would appear on the bronze vessels of the Shang Dynasty. Or take the seventh century BCE tomb of the nomadic Rong (戎) people excavated in Xuyang Village, Yichuan County, Henan Province. The tomb, located not far from the Eastern Zhou capital of Luoyang, contains artifacts that reflect a complex cultural blend. In the same site we encounter purely nomadic-style ornaments side by side with the sets of bells and chime stones reflective of the Zhou culture.

The examples of interpenetration and mutual enrichment of Han and “Inner Asian” cultures abounded in every single dynasty, every period in Chinese history. For instance, in 2015, numerous funerary gold artifacts and horse ornaments with various patterns, including a silver horse ornament with the nomadic pattern of a sheep turning its head, were unearthed from the mausoleum of Liu He (92-59 BCE), the deposed Western Han emperor known as the Marquis of Haihun. Alternatively, two gilded silver dragons made in an artistic style typical of the Western Han were unearthed in 2019 from the tomb of a king

of the Xiongnu in Gol Mod, Arkhangai, Mongolia. So, in the final analysis, were “the people from outside the Great Wall who drew the bows” and “the people from inside the Great Wall who wore official garments” total strangers or close relatives who shared a similar civilization?

I shall end with one final example to show how the narrow “Inner Asian” focus misses the point. In 1234, Kaifeng, capital of the Jin Dynasty, fell to the Mongol armies. Amid carnage and devastation, Yuan Haowen (1190-1257), the Jin’s most renowned poet, wrote a letter to Yelü Chucai (1190-1244), one of the leading officials in the courts of Genghis Khan (1162-1227) and his son Ögödei (1186-1241). Yuan did not ask anything for himself but urged Yelü Chucai to speedily intervene and save 54 Confucian scholars, who survived the siege of Kaifeng and could be employed to benefit the Mongol rulers. Yuan Haowen wrote:

*Now, these men survived both weapons and cold  
and hunger. Maybe the Creator of Things plans to*

*support them and bestow them on the new dynasty? Or maybe it is not his plan?... Yet even if these men are not to be used, they are still able to contribute with their writings and serve as models of moral integrity. They should never perish in silence and rot like grass and trees.<sup>1</sup>*

Yuan Haowen was a descendant of the Xianbei Tuoba clan, the ruling clan of the Northern Wei. Yelü Chucai was a man of letters of Khitan origins. A learned descendant of the Xianbei, formerly in service of the Nüzhen, wrote to a learned Khitan in service of the Mongols – they were unified by the common respect for the Confucian tradition. Did they belong to “Inner Asian” culture or to Huaxia culture? Of course, they belonged to both, just as their dynasties. This is what I mean when I speak of these two cultures’ profound interpenetration.

Here I would like to summarize what I have observed: The fundamental aspect of Chinese culture

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<sup>1</sup> Yuan Haowen, chapter 39 of *Collected Works of Yishan*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1937, p. 524.

is not rituals, customs, or modes of artistic expression, but the political system established in the Qin and the Han dynasties, and, despite countless adaptations, retained its fundamental values intact. Any ruler who maintained the Confucian-Legalist system of unified rule and rejected a polycentric world, who relied primarily on civil officials rather than on tribesmen or clerics, who treated his subjects as one rather than gave differential treatment according to ethnic belonging, would be recognized as China's "Son of Heaven."

The Western civilization is accustomed to the profound impact of ethnic, religious, or racial identities on the political life. In China, by contrast, as was recently observed, "it was not collective (national or otherwise) identity that determined politics; it was politics that determined one's collective identity."<sup>1</sup> It is not my intention to address here the touchy issue of "cultural symbols" and "identity politics," to which somewhat excessive importance may be assigned in

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<sup>1</sup> Yuri Pines, "Ancient China," *The Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 77.

the Western academic research. But it may be suitable to cite Francis Fukuyama's polemical article "Against Identity Politics." Having observed that "Democratic societies are fracturing into segments based on ever-narrower identities.... This is a road that leads only to state breakdown and, ultimately, failure,"<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama called for "creedal national identities," which

*... are built not around shared personal characteristics, lived experiences, historical ties, or religious convictions but rather around core values and beliefs. The idea is to encourage citizens to identify with their countries' foundational ideals and use public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers.*<sup>2</sup>

There is a huge difference between pre-modern or modern China and the current West. But it is difficult not to feel that Fukuyama's desire to shape identity

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue No. 5, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

according to the “country’s foundational ideals” is aligned with what the Chinese civilization excelled in achieving. The only important difference is that in Chinese history the term “assimilation” is patently inaccurate. Rather we should speak of integration, in which each group contributed something toward the creation of a new and richer “China.” People of different ethnocultural backgrounds became “Chinese” the moment they embraced the foundational ideals of the Chinese civilization. “Identity politics” were not entirely alien to China, but they were never powerful enough to tear the country apart.

## 3

Beginning in the late 19th century, as ethnicity became an increasingly important analytical tool for historians in Europe and elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the centuries-old debates about Sino-alien dichotomy (called in Chinese *Hua-Yi zhi bian* [华夷之辨] or *Yi-Xia zhi bian* [夷夏之辨]) gained additional importance in China itself. Back then, as the country was humiliated by imperialist powers, and later, during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression (1931-1945), many scholars tended to

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 1-35.

absolutize this dichotomy and even viewed Hua and Yi as fundamentally antagonistic. Whereas such voices are less common in China nowadays, they are still relatively widespread among scholars and observers in other places. The crux of the question is how the Chinese identity was viewed in the past: as inclusive (what is often called “the culturalist paradigm”) or exclusive (ethnicity-based). The topic continues to attract considerable attention from scholars in China and abroad.<sup>1</sup>

I want to propose here that the inclusive view was clearly dominant. The exclusive views for sure existed, and one can easily find examples of derisive views of the Other, and even outright enmity; but one should avoid the habitual picking up of a few citations or focusing on a few events in China’s long history at the expense of a more comprehensive picture. Two points are essential here. First, it is necessary to be alert to the “rhetorical bias.” The nature of political rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Yuri Pines, “Ancient China,” *The Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 76-95.

is such that abusive voices – e.g., strongly pronounced derision of the aliens – were much louder than voices of accommodation. Actually, in countless cases in which the political actors' ethnicity did not matter, we cannot expect explicit statements about this. Second, it is essential to understand the political context of periodic outbursts of Sino-alien dichotomy. As my very brief survey below will show, the enmity was usually a product of political turmoil and fragmentation. In a well-functioning unified dynasty, the inclusive view clearly prevailed – in China as elsewhere.

Let me start with one of the strongest manifestations of the Sino-alien dichotomy in the entire corpus of preimperial texts. It is voiced in the *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Gongyangzhuàn*, 公羊传), and focuses on the State of Chu.

*Chu is the last to submit when there is a True Monarch, and the first to rebel when there is none. They are barbarians (yidi, 夷狄) who intensely harass the Central States. When southern savages*

*and northern barbarians launch attacks in turns, the  
Central States will be like a thread due to be cut.*<sup>1</sup>

This statement presents Chu as the ultimate cultural Other, the perennial enemy of the Huaxia civilization. It was made in the context of the conflict between the State of Chu and the northern Zhou states led by Lord Huan of Qi (r. 685-643 BCE). This conflict coincided with incursions by the nomadic groups, the Rong and the Di (狄), into the Zhou heartland, which imbued the *Gongyang* authors with a sense of acute “national emergency.” But this statement was later found to be based on profound misunderstanding. Archeological and paleographic discoveries from the State of Chu show clearly that it was an integral part of the Zhou cultural realm.<sup>2</sup> However, politically speaking, the kings

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<sup>1</sup> *Gongyangzhuan*, Xi 4: 203; translation borrowed from Yuri Pines, “Chu Identity as Seen from Its Manuscripts: A Reevaluation,” *Journal of Chinese History*, Vol. 2., Issue No. 1, 2018, p. 4, with some modifications.

<sup>2</sup> This point is becoming clearer in recent years with the publication of a great variety of manuscripts discovered in the Chu tombs. These manuscripts contain many texts closely related to the later canonical collections such as the *Book of Songs* (诗经), the *Book of History* (尚书 or 书经), ritual texts, and many sayings of Confucius, which would eventually be

of Chu challenged the Zhou-centered political order. Gradually, as the competition between Chu and its northern peers accelerated, Chu was imagined as the cultural Other. However, once the internecine wars ended and the previous Zhou world was reunified in the Qin and the Han dynasties, the enmity evaporated and Chu's "Otherness" became a matter of ethnographic curiosity rather than political antagonism.

Take another example of antagonistic rhetoric which is frequently referred to by the supporters of the dichotomous view of Sino-alien relations. The Han historian Ban Gu ended his account of the ebb and flow of the Han Dynasty's relations with the Xiongnu with the pessimistic evaluation that neither appeasement toward the Xiongnu nor military campaigns against them could stabilize the northern frontier. He concluded:

*They [the savages] are separated [from us] by mountains and gorges, and barred by the desert:*

*thereby Heaven and Earth sever the internal from the external. Therefore, the sage kings treated them as beasts and birds, did not make treaties with them and were not engaged in offensive expeditions: if you make a treaty with them, they will accept your gifts of money and goods and then deceive you; if you attack them, then the army is exhausted and you induce banditry. Their lands cannot be tilled for living; their people cannot be treated as subjects; therefore, they must be regarded as external and not internal, as strangers and not as relatives.<sup>1</sup>*

The above statement is very harsh indeed, and it reflects the difficulties the Han Dynasty faced in dealing with the nomads, whose way of life differed dramatically from that of the Han people. But this piece of rhetoric should be read in the context of what appeared to Ban Gu as an endless conflict with the Xiongnu. In fact, Ban Gu himself did take part in

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 94 of *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, pp. 3833-3834; translation borrowed Yuri Pines, "Ancient China," *The Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, p. 93.

the Han campaigns that ended the Northern Xiongnu polity and cemented the Han alliance with the Southern Xiongnu, going much against his own conclusion above. Ban Gu's brother, the renowned general and diplomat, Ban Chao (d. 102), spent his life in pursuing exactly those aims to which Ban Gu so firmly opposed: expanding the Han rule and consolidating the Han protectorate over the Western Regions. But Ban Gu was not a die-hard "Han nationalist," as we can find in his most positive view of the Xiongnu leader, Jin Midi (134-86 BCE), who surrendered to the Han and later became a loyal and filial exemplar.<sup>1</sup> Once again, when read in a proper context, the harshness of Ban Gu's rhetoric evaporates.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 68 of *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997, pp. 2959-2967. As Ban Gu praised, Jin Midi's "devotion to duty and respectful demeanor won recognition from the ruler and his loyalty and trustworthiness became manifest to all. His meritorious deeds are recorded among the stars and his fief was handed down to his heirs, who were known throughout the realm for their loyalty and filial piety and who for seven generations served within the palace. How splendid an achievement!" See *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China: Selections from the History of the Former Han by Pan Ku*, translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University, 1974, p. 157.

Throughout later periods of history, we can observe time and again how the anti-alien rhetoric heated in the age of wars, turmoil, and political fragmentation, and perished once the conflicts were settled and unity restored. Take for instance, mutual abuse among the Northerners and their southern counterparts depicted in Section 7 of Chapter II (both sides considered themselves rightful heirs to the Han, and their opponents “barbarians”). This enmity perished completely by the time of the Tang Dynasty, whose most illustrious ruler, Emperor Taizong (r. 626-649) proudly proclaimed that he was superior to the former monarchs: “From ancient times, [the rulers] esteemed the Huaxia people and despised the aliens, whereas only I treat them as one.”<sup>1</sup> The ethnic harmony in the Tang was shattered anew in the aftermath of the An-Shi Rebellion (755-763), when many Northerners’ military commanders turned against the throne. Yet once relative peace was restored, and ethnic tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Sima Guang, chapter 198 of *History as a Mirror* (资治通鉴), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 6247.

receded anew. Notably, after the downfall of the Tang, three of the short-lived Five Dynasties (907-960) were established by the Shatuo people. This did not impair whatsoever their legitimacy; their problem was in their failure to reunify All-under-Heaven.

In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), there were numerous statements that emphasized Sino-alien dichotomy and even refused the aliens the right to be part of the Huaxia civilization. And again we should contextualize these statements and sentiments in the contemporaneous political situation. Having reunified significant parts of the Tang realm, the Song failed to accomplish the reunification because of the challenges posed by powerful northern polities: first the Liao, then the Western Xia, and later the Jin and the Yuan. Each of these polities was not just militarily strong but also culturally sophisticated; their leaders adopted crucial components of the Han political culture and considered themselves the true heirs to the previous glory. The Song leaders knew well that the failure to reunify All-under-Heaven impaired the dynasty's

legitimacy, but they were not able to break the military stalemate. This explains the proliferation of an exclusive worldview among some of the Song elites. And once again, the exclusive discourse receded soon upon the realm's reunification under the Mongols.

When the Mongols established the Yuan Dynasty, fearful of being swallowed by the Han majority, they instituted a discriminatory division of the subjects into four groups, with Mongols at the top, followed by different minorities, then the “Han” (the inhabitants of the former Jin realm, including the Han people in the north, the Nüzhen, and the Khitans, who subsequently were amalgamated into a single entity), and the “Southerners” (dwellers of the Southern Song realm, who were numerically the majority of the population, but whose access to political power was severely curtailed). Scholars continue to debate to which extent this segregation worked in practice, but what is clear is that it ran contrary to Chinese norms of inclusiveness. Nonetheless, after the downfall of the Yuan Dynasty, Kublai Khan was actually praised by the

Ming rulers who hailed his achievement in reunifying All-under-Heaven. Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), the Ming founding emperor, declared: “There should be no estrangement between Hua [Han] and Yi [aliens]; although their surnames differ, I will treat them the same way.”<sup>1</sup> Zhu Yuanzhang entitled Kublai Khan to the state sacrifices along with the mythical sage kings of antiquity and along with the founders of the Han and the Tang dynasties. This inclusiveness of the early Ming was shattered, however, after the Ming armies were defeated by the Mongols in 1449 (the Tumu debacle). The defeat (which included the imprisonment of Emperor Yingzong by the Mongols) caused the Ming to lose its confidence and shift toward conservatism and self-closure. One of the consequences was adopting the anti-Mongol discourse and dismissing Kublai Khan from the Temple of Ancient Monarchs.

My final example comes from China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing. Its conquest of southern China,

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 53 of *Record of Emperor Taizu of the Ming Dynasty* (明太祖实录), Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1962, p. 1048.

especially the culturally and economically prosperous area south of the Yangtze River, was accompanied by much bloodshed and generated plenty of bad memories. Gradually, however, especially under the rule of Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722), the Qing succeeded in building bridges to the minds of the Han literati. In particular, Kangxi's worship of Confucius and his active patronage of the Han culture helped him win the recognition of the educated Han people. But two centuries later, as the Qing entered its prolonged crisis, the anti-Manchu feelings reappeared, especially in southern China, where they were weaponized by the Taiping rebels (1851-1864). These anti-Manchu sentiments were weaponized again, on a much larger scale, in the early 20th century, when, under the impact of the Western nationalistic discourse, some of the Han intellectuals raised the banner of anti-Manchu nationalism. Even Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, had once called for a revolution to expel the Manchus from China. Yet once again, once the overthrow of the Qing was accomplished,

the racial and divisive discourse quickly died out. The new Republic, just as its imperial predecessors, was predicated on inclusiveness, not ethnic fragmentation.

The above survey, if inevitably sketchy, indicates that the dominant trend in Chinese self-perception was that of inclusivity, which, unsurprisingly, matched the universal desire toward political unity. Inclusivity and unity did not mean uniformity, to be sure. Diversity of ethnocultural groups was readily recognized, and it rarely bothered the statesmen. What mattered was the shared “foundational ideals” (to borrow Fukuyama’s above-cited statement). Once the leaders of any ethnocultural background adopted these ideals, they became legitimate claimants to the throne of China. And whereas cleavages – including those based on ethnicity – could become very acute at times of crises, they disappeared once unity was restored. Rulers of different ethnicities were equally determined to minimize the divisive Sino-alien dichotomy and promulgate the inclusive view.

This was also the case of Rome. During the heyday

of the empire's power and prosperity, cosmopolitan and inclusive views proliferated. It was then that Tacitus could openly admire the freedom-loving, martial, and simple-minded Germanic tribes. The Roman Empire in its later period had quite a few emperors of "barbarian" blood, such as Maximinus "the Thracian" (r. 235-238), Philip "the Arab" (r. 244-249), and Claudius II "the Goth" (r. 268-270). Many of the empire's famous generals were of "barbarian" stock, such as Gaius, Saul, Bacchus, Aetius and Odoacer. Even Flavius Aetius, the famous Roman commander who resisted the Visigothic invasion, was of Vandal origin. After the empire's disintegration in the fourth century, though, the people of Rome felt a strong sense of resentment against foreign invaders,<sup>1</sup> leading them to adopt a less favorable view of the Other. In due time, historians could even criticize Constantine the Great for admitting too many "barbarians" into the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 173.

empire,<sup>1</sup> although back in the age of Roman prosperity this was not necessarily considered bad. Eventually, the “barbarians” themselves learned to be proud of their meritorious ancestors; for instance, in his last (post-Boethius) years, Theodoric the Great ordered court historians to compose the *History of the Goths*, which hailed the 17 generations of his illustrious ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

Let me summarize with an observation that may be of some value for both China and other civilizations. Within each civilization, there are certain commonalities and also intrinsic diversity. Diversity is good as it contributes to civilizational vitality. But at times of conflicts, it can be magnified, weaponized, and eventually tear the civilizational unity apart. Neither recognized common ancestry, nor unity of language, memories, customs, and beliefs would avoid the tragedy of disintegration once the centrifugal forces are not reined in. Any means – religion, ethnicity, or

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<sup>1</sup> Hartwin Brandt, *Das Ende der Antike. Geschichte des spatromischen Reiches (Beck Wissen)*, München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2001, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Heather, *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 5.

even dialectical differences – could then be utilized by those eager to split the unity. In a polycentric world, the political contest can exacerbate the existing divisions and turn them into the means of advancing ethnocultural antagonism. The result will be regrettable to all.

For extra-large political communities, such as China, preserving political unity is the prerequisite not just for peace and security but also for maintaining internal diversity in a manageable way. It was strong political unity in a variety of dynasties – from the Han, to the Tang, to the Qing – that allowed cultural diversity and cultural openness. Weakness of political unity, by contrast, brought about lack of self-confidence, suspicion of the Other, segregation, and ultimately fragmentation and disintegration.

The relationship between political unity and cultural diversity is not contradictory. They either thrive together or perish together. Without understanding this dialectical relationship between unity and diversity, we are bound to deepen the division across the world, and ultimately bring trouble to ourselves.

## *Conclusion*

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At some point of time, probably in the 18th century (some will say in the 17th century or even earlier, some will postpone it to the early 19th century), the “Great Divergence” between the West and the East occurred.<sup>1</sup> The West started advancing rapidly, powered by the industrial revolution, scientific revolution, and adoption of new social, economic, and political models. The East initially failed to respond. China in particular was slow in adapting to the changing world. It entered the 20th century as one of the world’s most conservative

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<sup>1</sup> For the classical presentation of the “Great Divergence” thesis, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. Scholars agree that the “Great Divergence” was in place around 1800, but its starting point is bitterly contested.

countries, run by Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), who had just suppressed the reform movement of 1898.

The cost of awakening from the prolonged lethargy was huge. After China was repeatedly invaded and humiliated by the Western imperialist powers and Japan, the new generation of its intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century decided to resolutely endorse modernity. For most of them (just as for most of their peers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America), modernization meant wholesale Westernization. They believed that Western industrial, scientific, and military superiority reflected its comprehensive superiority in any field – from political and social systems to music, literature, and arts, and the only way for China to get out of this misery was to embrace the West.

There is no doubt that endorsing the Western experience benefitted China in many ways. Industrialization, gender equality, the idea of popular rather than monarchic sovereignty, scientific education, and the like – all were the blessed results of learning from the Western success. But the enthusiasm to learn from the outside

had also negative consequences. The country lost its cultural confidence. The West seemed a model to be emulated in any field – from social and political system to dress, esthetics, and even studies of the country's own past. New methodology, terminology, and new value systems came to dominate Chinese scholars' studies of history, philosophy, political sciences and so forth. The country's own achievements in these fields were denigrated. The Western prisms prevailed throughout.

In retrospect, this acceptance of the Western models as singularly correct and as standards according to which China's performance should be judged seems to be haphazard. Eager to study from the West, either directly or through intermediaries (first Japan, then the USSR), Chinese scholars lost sight of the undeniable achievements of their native civilization. Worse, they lost sight of a simple point, which I have tried to make clear throughout this book. Each civilization's choices are rooted in its peculiar experience, and each has advantages and disadvantages. There is no and perhaps cannot be a universally valid political, social,

philosophical, and religious system. Our food, music, and literature are shaped by our ancestors' choices and experiences, so are our political values. I do not mean that the past determines everything. We are constantly learning from each other, enriching each other, and improving ourselves in light of others' achievements. Learning requires critical evaluation of the pluses and minuses of different models rather than slavishly following falsely "universal" discourse or "universal" (Western) value system. Casting away one's own civilizational experience is, to put it mildly, imprudent. Worse, it can be suicidal.

In the previous chapters, as in my earlier publications, I have focused on the rationale behind China's civilizational choices. These choices were not made due to Chinese intellectuals' lack of imagination or lack of experience with the polycentric world, polycentric mode of rule, or "small government." It is just that China's experience with weak states and political fragmentation had taught its leaders and its people at large that "stability is in unity," and that

the goal of “All-under-Heaven is one family” was preferable to valorizing separate identities and identity-based policies. Europe made a different choice, which should be respected. India, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America each had their own choices. Trying to impose China’s historical models on them would be ridiculous and dangerous. It would be equally ridiculous and dangerous to try to impose European (or Indian, Islamic, and so forth) models on China. Each civilization has its own path. We should always learn from each other, from the position of self-confidence and self-awareness, not of self-denial.

Today’s China differs dramatically from China at the beginning of the 20th (not to say the 19th) century. Gone is the monarchic rule, gone is the idea that China’s emperor is superior to other rulers worldwide, gone are patriarchal social norms, and gone is the literati educational curriculum. Even the language in which I wrote the Chinese original of this book has differed considerably from what my great-grandparents used. However, despite all these changes, there are

several important lessons from the past that are still valid in the present.

First, stability is in unity. Any disintegration of China would be a disaster on a scale that dwarves other recent political collapses, such as the collapse of the USSR. Preserving a powerful unitary state is the only way to ensure personal security and prosperity of our citizens. It is also the essential precondition to ensure a confident, peaceful, and culturally open China. If there is one major point of consensus among the 1.4 billion of Chinese citizens, it is that we should never allow the reappearance of the Warring States (or the Northern and Southern Dynasties, or the 20th-century Warlords) era.

Second, the Chinese nation is not equal to the Han ethnicity. It is a broader entity that includes the citizens of China of whatever ethnic (linguistical, religious, social) backgrounds. It is an entity unified by commonly accepted civic values, by common past, by common challenges, and by common determination to overcome these challenges and realize the common aspiration for a prosperous state. China will remain forever a diverse

country. Uniformity is neither attainable nor desirable in this country of 1.4 billion citizens. But diversity must be maintained within the common political framework. It should never be allowed to undermine this common framework, without which our future (and the future of our region, and perhaps the world at large) will be gravely endangered.

Third, any country of China's size and complexity cannot be run by a weak government. Whereas excessive centralization has its obvious minuses, as the Qin experience had demonstrated, excessive decentralization all too often leads to turmoil and political collapse. A weak government cannot fulfill its responsibility to the people. This responsibility is not limited to ensuring personal security. It also requires ensuring economic prosperity, fairness in access to education and social welfare, and providing every citizen with the adequate possibilities to realize themselves. Without an efficient and proactive government, the citizens would not be able to lead a dignified life. An alternative of a timid government

which rules by non-action (as was experimented with by some of the Southern Dynasties' courts) is a dead end.

My final point is more contentious from China's civilizational point of view. It is the degree of openness to the outside world. This was a point of considerable disagreement among traditional Chinese statesmen and thinkers. Some, particularly during the periods of weakness and insufficient self-confidence, advocated seclusion and minimization of ties with the outside world. Others, by contrast, prized openness and pluralism. Here, I believe that the historical verdict clearly favors the latter choice. It is obvious that the Tang Dynasty's example is incomparably more attractive than that of the Ming Dynasty after the Tumu debacle. It is also obvious that the openness of Emperor Kangxi benefitted the country immensely, whereas the conservatism and inward orientation of Emperor Daoguang and Emperor Xianfeng (who ruled the country during the Opium Wars) were self-defeating. Hence, when I and like-minded scholars

call upon the Chinese public to restore cultural self-confidence, we by no means advocate discarding the experience of the rest of the world. On the contrary, I hope that this book will encourage deeper cultural dialogue not only between China and the West, but also between China and other world civilizations. From such dialogues and increased interaction we will all benefit.

I have written this book in Chinese because my foremost goal is to draw attention of fellow Chinese scholars to the need of rediscovering China's civilizational logic when dealing with the country's problems. The translation of my book (and my previous publications) into English is aimed at the Western audience. It is a call to decentralize European experience and to embrace a more pluralistic view of the world's past and present. It is not enough to recognize the world's pluralism in such fields as artistic history, religions, and anthropology. It is time to adopt a pluralistic view in history, philosophy, and political sciences. In these fields, unfortunately, the recognition

of the world's plurality still faces an uphill battle. The eminent scholar Amitav Acharya has recently emphasized:

*Western scholarship often holds up Greece and Rome as the definitive sources of concepts and approaches to political science, history, philosophy, and I[n]ternational R[elations] ... This Greco-Roman centrism is the forerunner and foundation of modern Eurocentrism ... The Greco-Roman heritage is seen as more progressive, scientific, advanced, and democratic and its practices and ideas as universal and applicable to all. Such assumptions serve as the bedrock for modern social sciences and humanities.<sup>1</sup>*

Acharya is right in his diagnosis (note that the illness of Eurocentrism is palpable even in the fields of social sciences and humanities in China itself). I hope that

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<sup>1</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Setting the Stage, Part II: Why Compare the Classical Political Thought of China and India?" *Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft in India and China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023, pp. 22-24.

my book will help not just Chinese but also Western readers to transcend both the Greco-Roman centrism and the Euro- (or Euro-U.S.) centrism. Each civilization – Greco-Roman, Indian, Islamic, and many others, and, of course, Chinese – has its own remarkable achievements. Each charted its own development path and each has its own way of dealing with a variety of challenges. Each of these multiple ways has its attainments and failures. Each deserves being studied and understood, not as a “universal” paradigm but just as an interesting example of a different civilizational choice. When we realize this, we can live in a better and more pluralistic world, a world in which self-respect is the foundation of respecting others and vice versa.

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