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Introduction to Archeological Discoveries and Their Influence on Qin and Han Historiography

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The study of history relies on historical documents and sources, which is why the thorough exploration and utilization of new historical materials are of utmost importance to the field. Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896–1950), the 20th-century historian and classicist who helped create the Academia Sinica, once proposed that "historiography is simply the study of historical materials." Fu Sinian further emphasized the need for a "complementary relationship between newly discovered primary sources and secondary sources passed down since ancient times."[1] Modern scholar Luo Xin 羅新 of Peking University further classifies "anything that can be used to study the past" as historical materials,[2] an interpretation that greatly underscores the importance of historical materials.

Traditional Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) historiography has primarily relied on contemporary official histories, the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Hanshu* 漢書. Many academics have pointed out that this approach could potentially result in a "monistic and linear" understanding of history.[3] Fortunately, recent archeological discoveries of caches of bamboo slips and metal inscriptions have largely allayed these concerns, while greatly enriching the

1 Fu Sinian 傅斯年, *Shixue fangfa daolun* 史學方法導論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011), 34.

2 Luo Xin 羅新, "Yiqie shiliao dou shi shixue" 一切史料都是史學, in *You suo bu wei de fanpan zhe: pipan, huaiyi yu xiangxiang li* 有所不為的反叛者：批判、懷疑與想像力 (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2019), 17.

3 Chen Kanli 陳侃理, "Zixu" 自序, in *Wen shi xing li: Qin Han shi conggao* 文史星曆：秦漢史叢稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2024), 399.

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storehouse of evidence for Qin and Han historiography. Beyond academic research, these new discoveries have created the conditions for studying Qin and Han society from a more holistic, comprehensive perspective.

Attempts to integrate archeological discoveries into Qin and Han historiography began more than one hundred years ago. Authored by Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) and Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940) in 1918, *Liusha zhuijian* 流沙墜簡 heralded the beginning of research dedicated to bamboo slips in modern Chinese academia. The book's focus went further than the archeological significance of such discoveries: it offered discussions on governmental, geographical, and historical information contained within the bamboo slips. Wang Guowei ascribed great value to his work "in relation to matters of Han historiography,"[4] representing an early awareness of the paramount importance of archeological finds in advancing Chinese historiography. The dual confirmation approach (*erchong zhengju fa* 二重證據法), proposed by Wang Guowei in 1925, could trace its inspirations back to this earlier research.[5]

Historian Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890–1969) once stated that "every era of scholarship has its unique materials and questions. Any trend of an era would then be defined by how its unique materials are utilized to answer its questions."[6] Over the last one hundred years, archeological materials have consistently given rise to new questions that pushed forward Qin and Han historiography. This issue of the *Journal of Chinese Humanities* has selected five articles that are representative of Qin and Han historiography in recent years to present the latest developments in the field.

The article by Jin Wen 晉文 delves into the economic aspects of the Qin and Han dynasties' rule of a unified China. Jin notes that both dynasties prescribed a well-defined set of economic rights and obligations for each economic class, a practice that was reflected by the household registration system and the land system. The household registration system of the Qin and Han dynasties had its basis in the "four occupations" (*shi nong gong shang* 士農工商) hierarchy, maintaining extensive records in a highly standardized fashion. Private ownership of land was the prevailing economic trend of the time, creating an unbalanced concentration of land ownership among the gentry, bureaucrats, and landlords, to the detriment of the farming class. To offset this imbalance,

4 Wang Guowei 王國維, "Zhi Miao Quansun, 1914 nian 7 yue 17 ri" 致繆荃孫（1914 年 7 月 17 日）, in *Wang Guowei quanji: Shuxin riji* 王國維全集：書信日記 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 2010), 15: 54.

5 See Shen Songjin 沈頌金, *Ershi shiji jianbo xue yanjiu* 二十世紀簡帛學研究 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2003), 77.

6 Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, "Chen Yuan Dunhuang jieyu lu xu" 陳垣敦煌劫餘錄序, in *Jinming guan conggao er bian* 金明館叢稿二編 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1980), 236.

government policies during the Qin and Han era had clear and comprehensive rules regarding not only the purchase and occupation of private land by the wealthier classes, but tax and labor obligations as well. Jin Wen's article argues that emphasizing agriculture and restricting commerce (*zhongnong yishang* 重農抑商) was a hallmark of economic policies of the Qin and Han dynasties. This governing principle was aided by an extensive system of administrative reporting to ensure compliance by officials on the lower levels, and to ensure the efficiency of the overall system. Jin Wen further argues that economic policies during the Qin and Han era created a solid precedent for the foundation of subsequent dynasties, lending them the ability as centralized imperial governments claiming sovereignty over "all under heaven" to exert their control over matters concerning the economy.

In a departure from Jin Wen's macro discussion of the Qin and Han era, the two articles by Zhang Zhongwei 張忠煒 and Sun Wenbo 孫聞博 provide a discussion on bamboo slips pertaining to specific laws and regulations of the time. The discovery of *Ernian lüling* 二年律令 deepened the discrepancy between materials transmitted through history and those unearthed through archeological means. To further the understanding of the Han legal system, the reconciliation of these discrepancies and the explanation of such concepts as primary statutes (*zheng lü* 正律) and peripheral chapters (*pang zhang* 旁章) inherent within the "Statutes in Nine Chapters" (*Jiuzhang lü* 九章律) are imperative tasks.

Zhang Zhongwei attempts to do so in his article by referencing newly unearthed wooden tablets from Tuzishan 兔子山 in Yiyang 益陽. Contained within these wooden tablets are the names of Han dynasty laws, which provide an evidentiary basis for Zhang Zhongwei's argument. Zhang Zhongwei proposes the division of Han dynasty laws into two categories – those providing for criminal sentences, or prison statutes (*yu lü* 獄律), and those that did not, or peripheral statutes (*pang lü* 旁律). "Statutes in Nine Chapters" stood out from other legal texts in Chinese historiography largely thanks to the inherent scholastic value within "Statutes in Nine Chapters." As such, other mentions of primary statutes and peripheral chapters found within transmitted materials possess some historical basis and should not be regarded as wholesale forgeries. The use of Han dynasty laws by principalities of the Han Empire is discussed in the article as well. Zhang Zhongwei argues that, despite the relative autonomy enjoyed by Han principalities in the early Han dynasty, they did not have legislative powers. In other words, the Han legal system was applied uniformly throughout its commanderies and semi-autonomous principalities.

Sun Wenbo's article, on the other hand, utilizes "ordinances on merit" (*gongling* 功令) found on part of the bamboo slips unearthed from Tomb 336

at Zhangjiashan 張家山 to discuss the selection of bureaucrats in the early Han dynasty. Sun Wenbo argues that "ordinances on merit" represented a supplement to the "Statute on Appointment of Officials" (*Zhili lü* 置吏律), which itself was part of the "peripheral statutes." Furthermore, "ordinances on merit" were different from "selection and appointment ordinances" (*xuanju ling* 選舉令) of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Within "ordinances on merit," administrative merits and military merits together formed a comprehensive system of rewards. Many of the principles contained within "ordinances on merit" could be traced back to the Qin dynasty, where official merit records comprising "Format for Reports of Merit" (*shang gonglao shi* 上功勞式) and "Format for Merit Registers" (*gongjiang shi* 功將式) provide a historical basis for the later developments characterized by "ordinances on merit." Local officials were categorized by their respective *shi* 史 into two paths for promotion, both of which allowed for officials to rise from junior to senior officials. However, the path of *lingshi* 令史 allowed for more upward mobility. Overall, Sun Wenbo argues that meritocracy characterized much of the system for the selection of bureaucrats during the Qin and Han era, and that innovative precepts within "ordinances on merit" regulating the promotion of officials represented the origin of the later recommendation system.

Many materials attesting to the east-west transportation network can be found within the Xuanquan 懸泉 Han Slips, of which Zhang Defang 张德芳 serves as a curator. In Zhang's article, he analyzes materials from the Xuanquan Han Slips pertaining to the Han court's conquest of new territories and its management of the Silk Road. Zhang argues that routes of the Silk Road from east to west stayed constant throughout the Han dynasty. The imperial government enacted different policies for each route of the Silk Road to ensure a smooth flow of trade. Along the easternmost section of the Silk Road between Chang'an and Dunhuang, the inns at post stations served as the primary rest stops; along the middle section, largely contained within the Western Regions (*xiyu* 西域), the Protectorate of the Western Regions and military-agricultural colonies were set up to ensure the stability of local polities, allowing for them to serve as rest stops; beyond the Pamir Mountains, the Han government employed both military and diplomatic means to maintain its ties with contemporary polities in Central Asia, Western Asia, and South Asia. Thus, previously held ideas that the Silk Road was akin to a freely traversable "net" merit more discussion in light of these discoveries. As a final note, Zhang Defang stresses that the Silk Road was a testament to the ties between Chinese civilization and the western world, challenging the legitimacy of the saying of "few have traversed from Samarkand to Chang'an through the entirety of Central Asia."

Different from the other articles, Shen Gang 沈剛 utilizes stele inscriptions from the Eastern Han period to reconstruct interpersonal networks and analyze the socio-political purposes served by the steles. Shen notes that a shared awareness existed among those who erected steles, allowing for the emergence of a common set of rules regarding their construction. This phenomenon reflected the existence of an interpersonal network behind those who engaged in the practice. Local noble clans erected steles to ingratiate their households with local officials, further entrenching their power and influence. Protégés and former officials of aristocratic clans were the main beneficiaries of steles. In addition to seeking social ties with stele owners, officials and candidates alike used the inscriptions as a means of dissemination for their own political interests and ideologies. This allowed for them to extend their personal networks into the political arena, further influencing the political landscape of the time. The existence and proliferation of such interpersonal networks served to dilute the centralized power wielded by the imperial government, providing a pretext for the Cao Wei (220–265) and Sima Jin (266–420) dynasties to ban steles outright.