2 Limits of All-Under-Heaven: Ideology and Praxis of "Great Unity" in Early Chinese Empire*

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One of the most challenging tasks in studying the functioning of empires is the need to distinguish between the imperial discourse and the imperial praxis. On the level of discourse, there are many similarities among major imperial formations worldwide. For instance, boasting of territorial expansion, employing the language of inclusiveness and universality, or promising lasting peace and orderly rule to the empire's subjects may be considered a common denominator of the imperial propaganda. Yet the realities on the ground can differ tremendously. The same rhetoric of expansion and universal superiority can reflect the empire's real awesomeness, but also can be employed to conceal its perennial weaknesses; it can be utilized by an expansionist and militarist empire, but also by the one concerned with defense only. This is especially true in the case of China, where remarkable cultural continuity provided the imperial statesmen with the common repertoire of ideas, ideals, symbols, and legitimation devices, which could be employed under highly distinct circumstances. At times, lofty pronouncements appear so divorced from the realities on the ground that a student may feel tempted to dismiss them as nothing but a meaningless brouhaha.

Yet discourse of inclusiveness and universality in China and elsewhere was not just a smokescreen used to conceal a dynasty's weakness. It was also a powerful political force in its own right. Firmly entrenched values, perceptions, and ideals could at times direct the ruling elite toward a certain course of action that was hazardous from military, economic, or sociopolitical points of view, but which was required to bolster the dynasty's legitimacy at home and abroad. Moreover, the declared commitment to certain ideals – such as the dictum to preserve political unity in "All-under-Heaven" (*tianxia*) – could occasionally preclude alternative courses of action and limit the dynasty's

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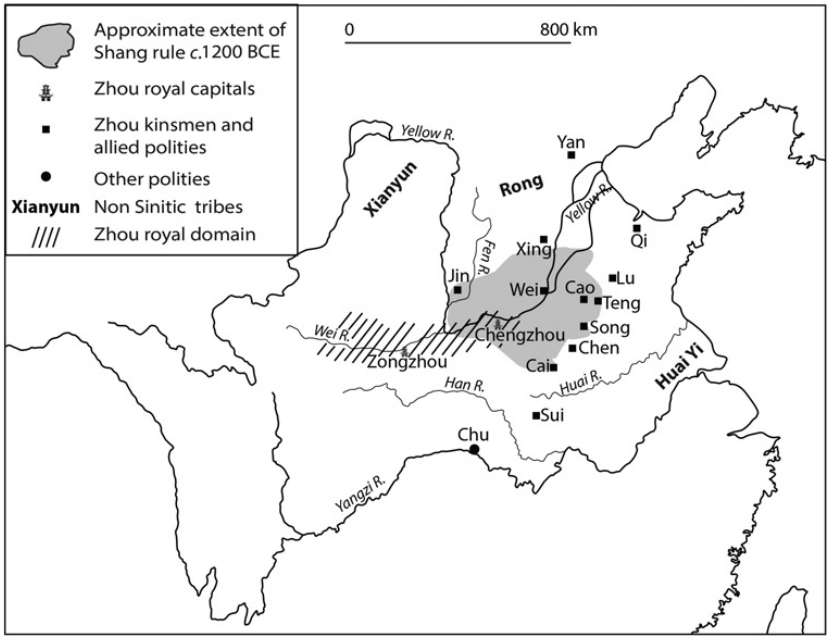
policy choices. Analyzing the interaction between the imperial discourse and the actual policies adopted in response to different circumstances is one of the most promising avenues in China's imperial history research.

In an earlier study, I have explored the ways in which the ideal of "Great Unity" shaped political, military, and administrative dynamics in China both under the unifying dynasties and during the periods of disunion (Pines 2012, 11–43). In this chapter I want to focus on the impact of this ideal on China's territoriality, especially under the early imperial dynasties, Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (206/202 BCE–220 CE). I shall analyze pre-imperial antecedents of the idea of unified rule, the formation of pro-unification discourse amid political disintegration of the Warring States era (Zhanguo, 453–221 BCE), the interplay between universalistic and particularistic visions of unity, and, finally, the ways in which these pre-imperial ideas influenced dynastic leaders' policy choices in the aftermath of imperial unification. I shall conclude by outlining tensions between the ideological commitment to the idea of universal rule and the manifold factors – ecological, military, economical, and cultural – which limited the empire's expansion.

2.1 Origins: The Primeval Unity of the Zhou House

The archaeological discoveries of recent decades have revolutionized our understanding of China's past. A previously widespread uncritical acceptance of Chinese political mythology, which postulated the existence of a single legitimate locus of power on China's soil since the very inception of civilization, gave way to a polycentric perspective. It is now widely accepted that multiple Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures interacted for millennia in the basins of the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers, and beyond, none of them obviously superior to the others (Shelach 2015). Even the first historical royal dynasty, the Shang (*c*.1600–1046 BCE), might have enjoyed only a relative cultural, military, and political superiority over its neighbors, but by no means ruled the territories beyond its immediate sphere of influence in the middle Yellow River valley (Keightley 1999).

The overthrow of the Shang by the Zhou dynasty (*c*.1046–255 BCE) became an important turning point. The victorious Zhou leaders utilized their success to rapidly expand the territory under their direct and indirect control, establishing a military and civilian presence beyond their original Wei River valley locus to the middle and low Yellow River basin, and even further to the south, to the Huai and Han Rivers area (Map 2.1). Notably, in contrast to the conquest of the Shang and the immediate crushing of the pro-Shang rebellion which were accompanied by considerable violence, the subsequent expansion of the Zhou rule, including the establishment of new settlements ruled by royal kin and allies, the relocation of the subjugated Shang population, and the imposition of the Zhou elite over the



Map 2.1 Shang and Western Zhou.

indigenous inhabitants of the eastern parts of the realm, appear to have been accomplished relatively smoothly (Li Feng 2006). Probably, the successful extermination of the Shang bolstered the new dynasty's prestige and prevented the formation of an effective opposition.

Having accomplished their immediate expansion, the Zhou rulers shifted decisively from military to civilian modes of rule. The dynasty's major asset was its religious legitimation. The Zhou kings succeeded in positioning themselves as exclusive mediators between the supreme deity, Heaven, and the people below; and in their capacity as "Sons of Heaven" (*tianzi*) they continued to enjoy obvious superiority over their allies and subordinates, the regional lords (*zhuhou*). Currently available textual and paleographic evidence suggest that even the leaders of non-Zhou polities, who appropriated the royal title, dared not proclaim themselves "Sons of Heaven," recognizing thereby the ostensible supremeness of the Zhou kings.[1] The combination of religious superiority, kinship ties to most of regional lords, as well as ongoing cultural

[1] For instance, in an inscription on the Guai Bo-*gui* vessel, the author, a leader of a non-Zhou polity, refers to his father as "king" but reserves the designation "Son of Heaven" for the Zhou monarch (see Li Feng 2006, 183–5).

prestige of the Zhou royalty, allowed the dynasty to maintain its rule in the Yellow River basin for almost three centuries, even after marked decline in its military, economic, and political prowess.

In retrospect, the Western Zhou period (*c*.1046–771 BCE) was re-imagined as an age of unity and order. This positive image notwithstanding, the eventual trajectory of the dynasty was less impressive. Within a century or so it started losing territories to external competitors or to erstwhile allies-turned-foes; and its ability to monitor subordinate regional lords declined as well. In 771 BCE, the dynasty was delivered a dreadful blow by the coalition of dissenting nobles and foreign invaders. Although the Zhou house survived in the crippled eastern part of its domain for five more centuries, its ability to exercise effective rule within the Chinese oecumene had drastically declined.[2]

It is difficult to assess to what extent the early Zhou kings developed the universalistic claims with which they were associated in retrospect. On the one hand, the exclusivity of their position as Sons of Heaven, as well as their clear superiority over neighboring polities might have encouraged the development of universalistic pretensions; on the other hand, these pretensions appear incomparably milder than in the case of later imperial polities. Zhou's territorial expansion peaked early in its history, and the readiness to resort to arms in order to project the dynasty's rule over the "barbarians of the four quarters" remained very limited.[3] The Zhou rulers continued to employ the Shang terminology of "the four quarters" (*si fang* 四方), which implied their centrality but not necessarily the inclusivity of their rule.[4] They clearly distinguished between the internal dependencies, which the kings could "inspect," and the external foes, who could be invaded or fought against, but who were not expected to be subordinate to the Zhou (Pines 2008, 70–1). The very notion of "All-under-Heaven," so central to the later universalistic discourse, remained underdeveloped in the early centuries of the Zhou. Even when this term is – very rarely – employed, it is unclear whether it refers to the entire known world (as was the case later), or only to the area under the Son of Heaven's direct control (Pines 2002b, 102). All these suggest a less inclusive and universalistic polity than the later texts want us to believe. When we add to this the kings' limited ability to monitor the activities of their nominal underlings, the regional lords, we may conclude that the Zhou were *not* an empire on a par with later Chinese imperial polities. They were a powerful primeval polity, which supplied the future empire-builders with certain symbolic capital,

[2] For new data regarding these dramatic events, see Chen and Pines 2018.

[3] The fiasco of the Zhou attempt to subjugate the southern polity of Chu in *c*. 957 BCE marked the end of Zhou's southward expansion, and to a large extent the end of its territorial expansion in general (Li Feng 2006, 93ff.).

[4] For a different view of the Zhou concept of *si fang*, see Wang 2000, 67–73. I believe that Wang's interpretation reflects a much later, markedly post-Western Zhou perspective.

but which fell short of establishing effective control even over its dependencies, not to say over outer territories.

2.2 Fragmentation and Integration in the Zhou World

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Western Zhou in 771 BCE, the political situation within the Chinese world had profoundly changed. The Zhou kings remained symbolically important, but lost the ability to dictate their will over regional lords, whose territories became independent polities in their own right. These polities were henceforth engaged in vibrant diplomatic and military activities: they concluded alliances, waged wars, and annexed weaker neighbors. The Sons of Heaven became hapless spectators of internecine struggles, in which they could occasionally intervene but the outcome of which they could not determine. The Zhou oecumene began disintegrating. The centrifugal tendencies were to a certain extent counterbalanced by the ongoing cultural unity of the aristocrats from rival polities, who routinely intermarried, continued to maintain common written and ritual culture, and adhered to common rules of diplomatic intercourse and to chivalry codes on the battlefield. These cultural factors, however, could not compensate for the absence of an effective political center, which could rein in aggravating interstate conflicts.

Throughout the Springs-and-Autumns period (Chunqiu, 770–453 BCE) various attempts were made to stabilize the multi-state order. At times a degree of stability could be temporarily achieved under the aegis of a powerful overlord, who would nominally act as an executor of the Son of Heaven's will to bolster his own legitimacy. At times two rival alliances competed for power; and twice (in 546 and 541 BCE) the beleaguered parties even initiated multi-state conferences to attain universal peace; but all was in vain (Pines 2002a, 105–35). On the ruins of the multi-state order of the Springs-and-Autumns period a new age of the war of all against all emerged, giving, in retrospect, the subsequent period its ominous name: the age of the Warring States (Map 2.2).

The centrifugal process of the Springs-and-Autumns period eclipsed not just the Zhou oecumene at large, but also most of its component polities. These polities were torn apart by rival aristocratic lineages that amassed sufficient political, military, and economic power to challenge their lords. By the 6th century BCE most political entities throughout the Zhou world had become entangled in a web of debilitating power struggles between powerful nobles and the lords, among aristocratic lineages, and among rival branches within some of these lineages, in addition to endless wars with foreign powers. In 453 BCE, the crisis reached its nadir, as one of the richest and militarily most successful states of the Springs-and-Autumns period, Jin, disintegrated and was divided among three major ministerial lineages. The entire sociopolitical system designed by the Zhou founders and their successors was on the verge of collapse.

Map 2.2 The Warring States world, *c*.350 BCE.

It is under these conditions that the seeds of radical change and of subsequent reintegration were sown. Incidentally, the "scheming ministers" who tore apart the state of Jin were the first to experiment with new administrative policies aimed at curbing the forces of disintegration within their domains. In due time these policies brought about administrative centralization, restoration of the ruler's effective control over his ministers, and eventual replacement of the hereditary aristocracy with a new broad elite of *shi*, "men-of-service," who owed their position to individual skills rather than pedigree. These profound political and social changes evolved in tandem with economic reforms, prompted by the "iron revolution," which allowed the creation of proactive agro-managerial state, and with parallel advances in military technologies, which brought about the replacement of aristocratic chariot-based armies with mass infantry armies staffed by peasant conscripts. A new highly centralized bureaucratic state was born. This state replaced the loose aristocratic polities of the Springs-and-Autumns era and laid the foundation for the future tightly integrated imperial regime.[5]

[5] See Lewis 1999 for the overall survey of the Warring States-period reforms; Wagner 1993 for the iron revolution; Pines 2009, 115–35 for the rise of the *shi*.

In the context of our discussion, what matters most is the territorial integration of the newly formed Warring State. This integration was a natural byproduct of the state's need to control all of its material and human resources. All the arable lands, which in the central Yellow River basin accounted for 60 percent and more of the state's territory (*Book of Lord Shang* 6.2), had to be measured, recorded, allocated to peasants, and taxed. All the inhabitants had to be registered to ensure efficient taxation, conscription, and general surveillance. In the densely populated agricultural heartlands of China, a non-demarcated land could not be tolerated. A well known anecdote of a war triggered by two women's rivalry over the right to collect the leaves of mulberry trees in a disputed borderland area (*Shiji* 31, 1426) may not be true, but it does reflect the importance of clear demarcation between rival polities. Not only arable lands mattered: a state had to control its "mountains, forests, marshes, swamps, valleys and dales" from which benefits could be extorted (*Book of Lord Shang* 6.2). Every piece of land had to be identified as either "ours" or "theirs."

The territorial integration of individual states eventually contributed toward the future integration of the entire realm, but in the short term, it also aggravated centrifugal forces by increasing separation among rival polities. The separation was promulgated through administrative regulations, which monitored movements of population and merchandise into neighboring polities; through legal distinctions between the native and foreign population; and, most visibly, through long protective walls which distinguished between the "inner" and "outer" realms. These walls were defensive in their nature, but they had far-reaching symbolic significance, changing not only the physical but also the mental landscape. The land outside the walls became a dangerous *terra incognita*, venturing into which was considered a most inauspicious event, which required a special exorcist ritual, similar to the ritual performed upon leaving one's native settlement.[6]

The combined result of these developments was somewhat equivocal: whereas individual states became better integrated, the Zhou world became even more fragmented. To the erstwhile political and military contest among rival polities one may add an increasing sense of cultural alienation. The ongoing divergence in the material and, to a lesser extent, written culture of the major states is well documented by material, paleographic, and textual evidence. The decline of the aristocratic elite of the Springs-and-Autumns period meant partial abandonment of the Zhou ritual culture, which once served as a common cultural denominator of the upper classes throughout the Zhou

[6] For inauspiciousness of departure from a native state, see Qin "Almanacs" ("*Ri shu*") in *Qin jiandu* 2, 392–3 (slips 145 and 144); for exorcist rituals, see Hu 1998. For an example of monitoring cross-state trade, see Falkenhausen 2005. For an example of legal distinction between natives and foreigners, see, e.g., a Qin legal regulation from the Shuihudi Tomb 11 hoard in *Qin jiandu* 1, 250 (slips 177–8). For the early walls, see Pines 2018b.

world. The new elite, some of whose members had risen from the lower social strata, was more diversified culturally than its predecessors. This diversification is particularly evident in the changing image of powerful "peripheral" states, Qin in the northwest (Pines 2004; Pines et al. 2014) and Chu in the south (Cook and Major 1999). Both originally were members of the Zhou oecumene; but by the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE they were treated as cultural strangers. Cultural separation followed the lines of political fragmentation, indicating that centuries of division might well have resulted in the complete disintegration of the Zhou world into distinct quasi-national entities.

This process of internal consolidation of large territorial states, and their political and cultural separation from the neighbors, unmistakably recalls similar developments in early modern Europe, where, as is well known, these resulted in the formation of nation-states. In China, however, the development trajectory was markedly different. The potential transformation of the competing Warring States into full-fledged separate entities never materialized. Instead, these polities were submerged by the unified empire in 221 BCE, becoming thereafter a focus of ethnographic curiosity rather than of political separatism.[7] To understand why and how this happened we should turn now to the realm of thought.

2.3 "Stability Is in Unity"

The Warring States period is one of the most fascinating ages in China's long history: the age of bloody struggles and devastating wars, but also of rapid economic growth and profound social transformation, of technological breakthroughs and of radical innovations in economy, warfare, and administrative techniques. This was the most creative age in China's intellectual history: the age of bold departures and remarkable ideological pluralism, which was unhindered by either political or religious orthodoxies. Thinkers of the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought competed for the rulers' patronage, moving from one court to another in search of better employment. They proposed distinct remedies to social, political, economic, and military maladies, their views ranging from harsh authoritarianism to anarchistic individualism, from support of a laissez-faire economy to advocacy of state monopolies, from blatant militarism to radical pacifism. Yet this immense pluralism notwithstanding, the competing thinkers held core beliefs in common. Among these, the commitment to the universal benefit of All-under-Heaven – eventually through political unification – stands as one of the most remarkable features of the Warring States-period intellectual discourse. An individual state never appears as the ultimate beneficiary of the thinkers' proposals, but, if at all, as a springboard for attaining the highest aim of resolving "universal" problems.

[7] See Lewis 2006, 189–244 and the review in Pines 2005b, 181–7.

This remarkable universalism ostensibly stands at odds with the dominant tendency of the Warring States-period states to strengthen their sociopolitical cohesiveness. The contradiction reflects a major difference between the lives of members of the educated elite, or at least its highest segment, and those of the rest of the populace. In an age when most states tried to prevent emigration, intellectually active elite members, the so-called *shi* ("men-of-service" or "intellectuals") were free to cross boundaries in search of better careers. Any known thinker of that age served more than one court; and this very flexibility of movement through the interstate "market of talent" broadened their horizons, causing their concerns to transcend the confines of individual polities. Eventually, this breadth of horizons became associated with high elite status, whereas localism – local customs and identities – was viewed as characteristic of culturally impaired commoners (Lewis 2006, 192–212). Lacking the intellectuals' endorsement, the local identities of the Warring States never developed into a politically meaningful factor, as happened elsewhere, for example, in modern Europe.

The proclaimed universalism of the Warring States-period intellectuals had immediate political implications. Attaining peace in All-under-Heaven became the major goal of conflicting policy proposals. In an age of escalating warfare, of endless bloodshed and inherent lack of stability, in an age when every state routinely tried to undermine domestic order in rival polities, it was all too clear that the internal problems of an individual state would never be resolved unless the entire oecumene was settled (*Lüshi chunqiu* 13.7 and 26.2). And, insofar as diplomatic means of stabilizing All-under-Heaven were inadequate, political unification became the only feasible way out of unending disorder. Therefore, the quest for unity became a peculiar intellectual consensus of the thinkers of the Warring States period, legitimating the universal empire long before it came into being.

I shall not discuss here in detail the pro-unification discourse of the Warring States period, as I have done it elsewhere (Pines 2000). Suffice it to summarize the major aspects of this discourse. Most immediately, one cannot but be impressed by a great variety of arguments put forward by competing thinkers to bolster the idea of political unification as singularly legitimate. Some, as Confucius (Kongzi, 551–479 BCE) connected it to the putative legacy of the early Zhou sage kings (*Lunyu* 16.2). Other, like Confucius's great rival, Mozi (*c*.460–390 BCE), traced it back to the very origins of organized society (*Mozi* III.11 ["Shang tong shang"]). Other, like the authors of an immensely influential text, the *Laozi* (*c*.4th century BCE), sought metaphysical justifications for political unity: the singularity of the monarch on earth should parallel the singularity of Heaven, Earth and, most importantly, of the cosmic Way (Dao) (*Laozi* 25). Yet the most compelling rationale for unification was provided by one of Confucius's most eminent followers, Mengzi (aka Mencius, *c*.380–304

BCE). When asked by a regional ruler "how to stabilize All-under-Heaven," Mengzi plainly replied: "Stability is in unity" (*Mengzi* 1.6).

Mengzi's reply reflects the consensus of the competing thinkers. The texts from the second half of the Warring States period seem no longer to be preoccupied with justifications for the future unification, since the need to unify the entire subcelestial realm became the unquestionable common desideratum. Henceforth, the debates revolved primarily not about why the world should be unified, but about how the unity should be achieved. Many thinkers hoped that this could be done through non-violent means. Mengzi, for instance, ridiculed those who wanted to subjugate All-under-Heaven militarily as daydreamers who "look for fish by climbing a tree" (*Mengzi* 1.7); elsewhere he stated that only he who has "no proclivity to kill, will be able to unify" the world (*Mengzi* 1.6). However, laudable as it was, Mengzi's and like-minded thinkers' vision of peaceful unification under a morally upright sovereign was impractical. Mengzi himself lamented that the True Monarch – the ultimate unifier – comes once in five hundred years, and his coming is long overdue (*Mengzi* 4.13). Yet there were other thinkers who preferred not to wait for a savior but to hasten unification practically. The most notorious – and most successful of these – Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE), plainly stated that the True Monarch is the one who commits himself to resolute war, in which he will subjugate his rivals and bring about the long-desired peace and tranquillity (*Book of Lord Shang* 7.2). The difference in means between Mengzi and Shang Yang could not be greater, but the bottom line remained all the same: "Stability is in unity."

Aside from explicit calls for unity, the philosophical discourse of the Warring States period facilitated future imperial unification in a variety of other ways. For instance, the political mythology of that age backdated the notion of unity to the remote past, implying thereby that political fragmentation is an aberration and not an acceptable state of affairs (Pines 2008; 2010). Ritual compendia postulated the existence of a universal sociopolitical pyramid headed by the Son of Heaven as the singularly appropriate arrangement, de-legitimating thereby the current situation of competing *loci* of authority. The very language of political discourse, with its repeated postulates of the superiority of universality to particularity (Lewis 2006) was conducive to the goal of unification. Yet perhaps the most interesting aspect of pro-unification discourse is not in what was said but in what the thinkers did not say. That not a single individual or text is known ever to have endorsed a goal of a regional state's independence is most remarkable. Even in the texts unearthed from the supposedly culturally distinctive state of Chu we find a clear commitment to the "universal" perspective, which postulates the superiority of "All-under-Heaven" over its component parts (Pines 2018a). Thus, denied ideological legitimacy, separate polities became intrinsically unsustainable in the long term.

2.4 Limits of *Tianxia* Before the Unification

The absolute priority of the ideal of political unity in pre-imperial ideological discourse is undeniable; now it is time to ask what were the limits of "All-under-Heaven"? Did it include the Zhou oecumene alone, namely the areas of shared elite culture (written language, mortuary rites, ritual gradations), or did it encompass the "barbarian" periphery as well? Was the vision of unity truly universal, or was it of more limited nature, something which may be defined, somewhat anachronistically, as "the unity of China"?

The answer is equivocal. On the one hand, an exclusive view is duly present in a variety of texts that emphasize the gap between the cultured Chinese and the "barbarian" periphery. This emphasis is particularly strong in the texts related to the Springs-and-Autumns period, when China's Central States (*zhongguo*) faced a series of incursions from neighboring ethnic groups. The latter are resultantly depicted as insufficiently human, as "wolves and jackals who cannot be satiated" (*Zuozhuan*, Min 1.2). Although these harsh pronouncements about the "barbarians" impaired humanity represent only one strand of pre-imperial discourse, and are qualified by many statements that emphasize the mutability of the aliens and the possibility of their eventual acculturation (Pines 2005a), the emphasis on "Sino-barbarian" dichotomy in a variety of early texts cannot be easily dismissed. This dichotomous view was conducive to the emergence of a spatial outlook that placed the aliens outside the pale of civilization, on the fringes of *tianxia* and beyond the immediate concern of the Son of Heaven.

The Sino-centric spatial view is represented in several ritual texts, of which the "Yu gong" ("The Tribute of Yu") chapter of the *Canon of Documents* is singularly representative. This text, which was probably composed in the middle Warring States period, narrates the merits of the legendary demiurge Yu. Having subdued the flood, Yu arranged the world into Nine Provinces (*jiu zhou*). The Nine Provinces (the precise location and names of which vary from one text to another) are fundamentally congruent with the territories of China proper, i.e., with the Zhou civilization. This terrestrial organization implies that the entire known world is a complete and closed system, organized in a three-by-three grid, which cannot be meaningfully altered (Dorofeeva-Lichtman 2009). The immutability of this scheme becomes even clearer from a parallel "field-allocation" (*fen ye*) astrological system, which divides the sky into nine partitions associated with each of the Provinces below. As noticed by Paul R. Goldin this association meant that "no tenth region [to the Nine Provinces] could ever have been added. There would simply have been no tenth part of the sky to identify with it" (Goldin 2015, 44). The Nine Provinces scheme (the origins of which may well precede the Warring States period) is purely Sino-centric, as it glosses over the areas associated with alien ethnic groups. If the

Nine Provinces are coterminous with the *tianxia* (and this is a big "if," since both terms are normally separated in the majority of texts),[8] they represent a vision of a spatially limited subcelestial realm.

The Nine Provinces system displays little interest in the alien periphery; but the latter is more prominent in a parallel system of Five (or Nine) Zones. An early account of this system is attached to the account of the Nine Provinces in the "Tribute of Yu," but the correlation between the two schemes remains unclear (*Shangshu* 3, 202–6). Having accomplished the Nine Provinces, Yu is said to have subdivided the earth into five concentric zones of five hundred *li* (approximately 200 km) breadth each. The zones start with the royal domain, for the dwellers of which different types of tribute obligations are defined; then come the zone of regional lords, the "pacified zone," the "zone of restraint," and the "zone of wilderness." The third zone is the last inhabited by Chinese; it is subdivided into the domain of "civilized learning" and that of "military defense." The two outer zones are inhabited by alien ethnicities and by Chinese criminals who undergo different types of banishment.

The Five Zones scheme, which is repeated with certain variations in several other pre-imperial texts (Dorofeeva-Lichtman 2009, 606–7), may be a later addition to the much more elaborate system of Nine Provinces. It might have been designed deliberately to incorporate the aliens into a universal design centered around the Son of Heaven. Yet alien areas remain only indirectly subordinate to the Son of Heaven in this system. In the "Tribute of Yu" version they are not supposed to submit tribute, and their contact with the civilized world is limited to the acceptance of the banished Chinese criminals. The same marginality characterizes later elaborations of the Five Zone scheme, such as the Nine Zone division in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 33, 863–4 ["Xiaguan-Sima"]). Spatial dimensions of concentric zones could be expanded, but the principle of separation between the civilized realm under the direct control of the Son of Heaven and the "realms of wilderness" inhabited by the aliens remained intact.

The above views present All-under-Heaven as fundamentally coequal to the Chinese Central States and their immediate periphery. They epitomize a conservative and particularistic vision, which is related, even if not directly, to the legacy of the Western Zhou. In this vision, the Son of Heaven's superiority remains effective only in the immediate vicinity of his domain, and diminishes gradually, vanishing in the "realm of wilderness." Yet this vision, which gained much influence in the imperial period, was not necessarily shared by the majority of the Warring States-period thinkers. On the contrary, a great variety of the texts from that period advocate the truly universal unification in which

[8] The only text in which the both terms are consistently used coterminously is the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*), a very peculiar text composed either in the late Warring States or the early imperial period (Elman and Kern 2010). For different variants of the Nine Provinces model and for the provinces' location, see Dorofeeva-Lichtman 2009.

the dividing lines between Chinese and the aliens are blurred, and the Son of Heaven exercises effective rule over the entire subcelestial realm.

Universalistic worldview has manifold manifestations in the Warring States-period texts. Some justify universalism by attributing it to ancient paragons. For instance, Mozi, himself a cultural relativist, who dismissed pejorative views of the aliens as an unjustifiable bias (Pines 2005a, 75–7), was keen to emphasize how encompassing the rule of early paragons was. In his discussion of "universal love" or "care for everyone" (*jian'ai*), Mozi extolled the demiurge Yu and the Zhou dynastic founders for benefiting aliens and Chinese alike in their activities (*Mozi* IV.15 ["Jian'ai zhong"]). Clearly, for Mozi the universality of love/care meant to encompass all the people under Heaven, not just the residents of the Central States. A slightly later text, a recently discovered manuscript, *Rong Cheng shi* (Mr. Rong Cheng) (composed *c*.300 BCE), uses a different angle in emphasizing the universality of the paragons' rule:

> [The people] from beyond the four seas arrived as guests, and those from within the four seas were corrected. Birds and beasts came to court; fish and turtles submitted [tribute]. (Pines 2010, 507)

Here the universality reaches its apex: even the beasts and birds are incorporated into the all-encompassing framework of the ancient monarchs' control. Undoubtedly, this framework should include the alien periphery as well. By associating universality with the sage-monarchs of antiquity, the authors employed the common means of "using the past to serve the present." Namely, if the ancient paragons' rule was truly universal, so should be the rule of the future unifier. Yet other thinkers disagreed. They criticized the former monarchs for failing to achieve comprehensive and lasting unity, and demanded of the future unifier to surpass his predecessors rather than merely emulating them. This view, which caused much indignation to the Confucian philosopher, Xunzi (d. after 238 BCE),[9] became particularly important in the immediate aftermath of the imperial unification of 221 BCE (see section 2.5).

Other thinkers avoided the difficulty of discussing the failures of former sage-monarchs; instead they insisted that universal rule reflected the paragons' intentions rather than deeds. This approach is most clearly pronounced in the *Gongyang zhuan*, a *c*.300 BCE commentary on the canonical text *Springs-and-Autumns Annals* (*Chunqiu*) (Gentz 2015). The *Gongyang* commentary combines very strong emphasis on "Sino-barbarian" dichotomy with an equally unequivocal support for the ultimate incorporation of the "barbarians" within the unified realm of the Son of Heaven. The text reiterates that "nothing is external" to the Son of Heaven, and that the true goal of his activity is the

[9] *Xunzi* XII.18, 328–329 ("Zheng lun"). See more in Pines 2008, 83–4.

comprehensive unification of the entire subcelestial realm. A position of an "external subject" by an alien leader is just a temporary aberration:

> The *Annals* (*Chunqiu*) considers its state (Lu) as internal, and All the Xia ("Chinese") as external, it considers All the Xia as internal, and the Yi and Di ("barbarians") as external. – [But] the True Monarch wants to unify All-under-Heaven, so why talk of internal and external? – This means that he must begin with those who are near. (*Gongyang zhuan*, Cheng 15, 417)

The ultimate goal of the True Monarch, the would-be unifier, is the unification of all the lands under Heaven so that nothing remains external to his rule. Below we shall see how this view could contribute toward expansionist policies of early emperors. But before we turn to the actualization of the unification ideal, it is time to pause and ask: What were the sources of the optimism of pre-imperial thinkers with regard to the truly comprehensive unification? Did not they expect insurmountable difficulties in attaining this goal?

I think that this optimism reflects two peculiarities of pre-imperial Chinese thought: the thinkers' good historical and limited geographic knowledge. History provided multiple examples of erstwhile "barbarians" who became fully assimilated into a broader Chinese culture. During the Warring States period in particular, the Sinitic states expanded into peripheral areas inhabited by alien ethnic groups, and while this expansion was not necessarily peaceful, nor did it encounter prolonged resistance by the local populations. The successful incorporation of such areas as Sichuan Basin, Liaodong peninsula, or southern reaches of the Yangzi basin into the Zhou world proved the feasibility of assimilating the aliens. A similar conclusion could be drawn from an equally successful assimilation of multiple alien ethnicities, who inhabited enclaves within and among the Sinitic states during the Springs-and-Autumns period but who vanished from subsequent historical accounts. Moreover, even powerful polities established by non-Sinitic ethnic groups, such as the southeastern Wu and Yue during the Springs-and-Autumns period (Falkenhausen 1999, 525–42), or northern Zhongshan during the Warring States period (Wu 2017) became eventually absorbed into the written and ritual culture of the Central States, losing much of their "otherness" in the process. The resultant expansion of the Zhou civilization was conducive to the optimistic belief that the entire known world should eventually become "a single family" (*Xunzi*, "Wang zhi" V.9, 161).

Another possible reason for the thinkers' universalistic optimism is their relatively meager knowledge of the outside world. China never was hermetically isolated from civilizations in central, southern, and western Eurasia, as can be demonstrated by technological transfer and import of prestige goods from afar already during the Bronze Age (*c*.1500–400 BCE; see Shelach 2015, 257–62). Yet China's contacts with the outside world remained too limited to inform the elites of the existence of faraway loci of sedentary civilization.

Wherever pre-imperial texts mention the outside world, they invariably refer to the areas in the immediate vicinity of China proper;[10] even the steppe nomads do not merit particular attention. All this was to change in the aftermath of the imperial unification of 221 BCE. In the meanwhile, an optimistic expectation of comprehensive unification of the entire human habitat was still possible.

2.5 Reaching the Limits: Qin Unification

The year 221 BCE marks a momentous beginning in China's history. After a series of brilliant and bloody campaigns, the king of the northwestern state of Qin succeeded in eliminating or subjugating each of the six "hero-states" that comprised the rest of the Warring States world. The aspirations of generations of thinkers were finally realized: the entire subcelestial realm was unified. Proud of his unprecedented achievement the king of Qin adopted a new title of "emperor" (*huangdi* 皇帝, literally "the august thearch"). This was the start of a new, imperial era in Chinese history, the era which was to last for 2,132 years, until the last bearer of an imperial title, Puyi 溥儀, abdicated on February 12, 1912, in favor of the newly proclaimed Chinese Republic.

The court debates that preceded the adoption of the imperial title by the king of Qin reflect something of the mind-set of the new imperial leaders. The courtiers explained to the king why he should adopt a new and theretofore unheard-of title:

> In antiquity, the lands of the Five [legendary] Thearchs were one thousand *li* squared [ca. 160,000 km^2], beyond which was the zone of regional lords and that of the aliens. The lords sometimes attended the court and sometimes did not, and the Son of Heaven was unable to regulate this. Now, your Majesty has raised a righteous army, punishing the savage criminals, has pacified and stabilized All-under-Heaven, turning the territory between the seas into commanderies and counties; and laws and ordinances have a single source. From antiquity it has never been so; the Five Thearchs could not reach this! (*Shiji* 6, 236; Watson 1993, 43)

Hubris aside, this statement encapsulates two major differences between the newly emergent Qin model of a "real" empire and an earlier model of a powerful quasi-universal polity associated with the Zhou dynasty and with the age of the legendary paragons of the past. First, the Qin rule is perceived as effective and highly centralized ("laws and ordinances have a single source"). In effect, this means the expansion of the Warring States-period model of a centralized territorial state to encompass the entire known world. This was not an empty declaration. From the newly available archeological and paleographic materials, of which the Imperial Qin archive from Qianling County

[10] For a good example, see the depiction of outside peoples in *Lüshi chunqiu*, a major compendium composed on the eve of the imperial unification (*Lüshi chunqiu* 20.1).

(modern Liye) in the mountains of northwestern Hunan is most notable, we learn of amazing effectiveness and profoundness of Qin's incorporation of these remote corners of its new realm: unifying weights and measures, laws and administrative regulations, script and administrative vocabulary; conducting meticulous population census; registering land and other natural resources; imposing government control over tiny hamlets; tracing fugitive debtors; monitoring local officials down to the tiniest monetary transaction[11] – all epitomize the ability of the Qin government apparatus to reach, paraphrasing Hobsbawm (2000, 80) "down to the humblest inhabitant of the least of its villages." As such, Qin differed fundamentally from the loose entity of the Western Zhou type. The empire was an effectively unified territorial state. For sure, the effectiveness of Qin's rule on the ground may have been hindered by large distances from the imperial center, by insufficiency of administrative personnel, and by local resistance (Korolkov 2020); but at the very least the desideratum – and often the practice – was of a centralized and fully bureaucratized polity whose officials wielded real and not just symbolic power.

The second distinction between Qin and its predecessors emphasized in the above memorandum is the territorial scope of Qin's rule. Qin courtiers derided the particularistic visions of rule as embedded in the Five Zones system; and they ignored the Nine Provinces scheme altogether. Instead, they emphasized that Qin governs All-under-Heaven in its broadest meaning, that is, it rules the entire known world. This inclusiveness is fully visible in a series of inscriptions on the steles, which the First Emperor (r. 221–207 BCE) erected on sacred mountains in the newly acquired territories of his realm (Kern 2000). One of these inscriptions, that on the Langye 琅邪 stele (219 BCE), merits citation:

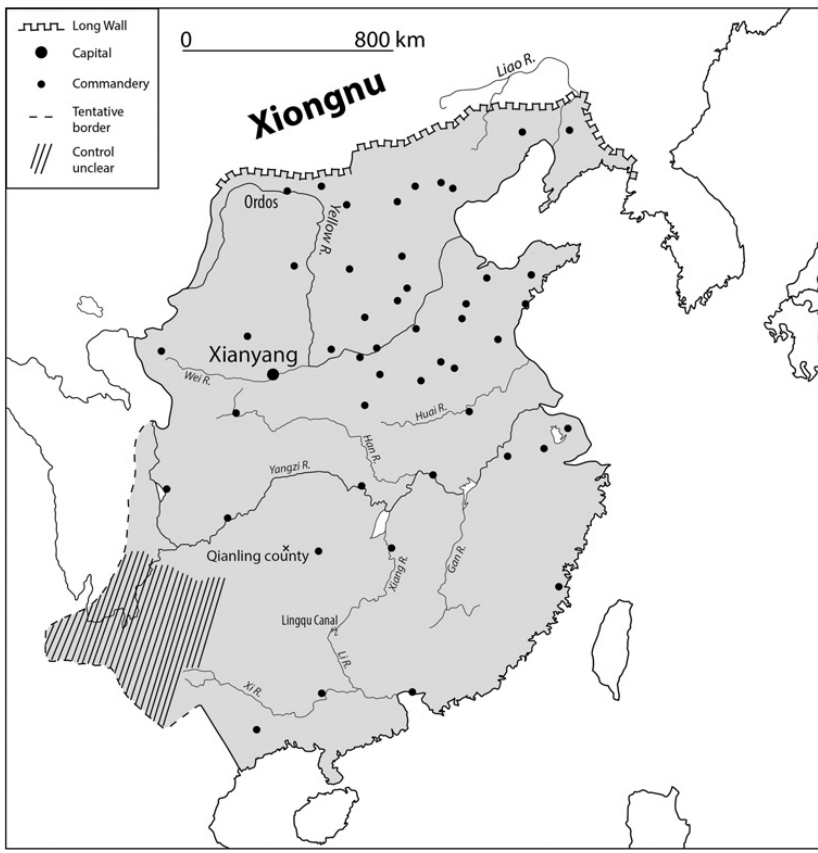
> Within the six combined [directions],
> This is the land of the August Thearch:
> To the west it ranges to the flowing sands,
> To the south it completely takes in where the doors face north.
> To the east it enfolds the Eastern Sea,
> To the north, it goes beyond Daxia.
> Wherever human traces reach,
> There is none who does not declare himself [the August Thearch's] subject.
> His merits surpass those of the [legendary] Five Thearchs,
> His favor extends to oxen and horses. (*Shiji* 6, 245; Kern 2000, 32–3)

The rule of the First Emperor as presented here includes all the known human habitat: from the sea in the east to the deserts of the west, from northern steppes to the areas to the south of the Tropic of Cancer, where people allegedly "opened

[11] For Liye documents and the degree of Qin's rule in the Liye area, see, e.g., Yates 2012/13; Sanft 2015. For the magnitude of Qin's impact on the remotest corners of the new realm, see also Feinman et al. 2010.

their door north to face the sun" (Kern 2000, 33n76). Not only the entire humankind, but even "oxen and horses" are encompassed by the emperor's munificence. The idea of a comprehensive unification promulgated by pre-imperial thinkers reaches here its apex. However, at the second glance we can discern certain tension behind this propaganda: whereas geography provides convenient limits for the expansion in three cardinal directions (provided that Qin did not want to advance south of the Tropic of Cancer), the northern part of the realm is ambiguously depicted as "beyond Daxia," possibly referring to the areas beyond the northern loop of the Yellow River (Ordos) (Map 2.3).

This implicit tension over the empire's limits reflects tough policy choices that faced the First Emperor. Having annexed the territories of each of the rival states,



Map 2.3 The Qin Empire.

down to their remotest periphery, Qin was now facing the unknown: the possibility to expand further southward to the lands of those whose "doors face north," and northward into the steppe. Politically speaking, all the enemies worthy of concern were subjugated; and, as a later observer noticed, "this was the moment to preserve authority, stabilize achievements, and found the lasting peace" (*Shiji* 6, 283). Yet the Qin emperor was not satisfied. Ruling over "the state organized for war" (Lewis 2007, 30), he was prone to attain an even higher glory of the truly universal unifier. Another series of highly successful campaigns followed, allowing Qin to incorporate territories far to the south (current Guangdong, Guangxi, and North Vietnam), and simultaneously move northward, into the steppe, the realm of the Xiongnu tribes. New territories were duly integrated into the empire, with additional commanderies and counties established (Map 2.3).

Qin campaigns can be seen as manifestation of its ruler's ongoing commitment to the idea of universal unity. Surely, they were audacious: recall that shortly before the Qin unification, a leading thinker, Han Fei (d. 233 BCE) noted that the southeastern areas of Yue are not coveted by the Warring States leaders because, despite their wealth, they are too difficult to control (*Han Feizi* IV.11 ["Gu fen"]). The Qin emperor had dismissed these fears, committing huge armies to expand to the far south, and he was successful, indeed. However, in the northern direction the expansion was not as easy. It was there that amid military successes, seeds of fundamental change were sown.

Qin's incursion into the steppe initiated a chain reaction, which eventually contributed toward the formation of a new political entity, the Xiongnu Empire, the first of the mighty nomad polities in Eastern Eurasia and the centuries-long rival of the Chinese Empire (Di Cosmo 2002). The entrance of the pastoral nomads into Chinese politics changed the rules of the game: militarily, socially, economically, and culturally, they proved to be a challenge with which only few Chinese monarchs knew how to deal. This was a long-term development; but the impact of the encounter with the Xiongnu could be felt almost immediately in the aftermath of Qin's successful campaign. In 214/213 BCE, the First Emperor ordered the construction of a new protective wall, the early version of the "Great Wall of China." By doing so, he tacitly dispensed with the idea of comprehensive universality proclaimed in Langye (and other) inscriptions just a few years earlier. Evidently, the difficulties of waging war in the inhospitable steppe terrain convinced the emperor to put a limit to his state's expansion.

The erection of the new Great Wall, just years after its numerous predecessors, the walls that separated one Chinese state from another, were demolished on the First Emperor's orders, marks, in my view, a turn away from universalism toward particularism: the idea of a spatially limited empire (cf. Hsing 2011). That this turn occurred under a dynasty with such a remarkably universalistic outlook as the Qin is singularly significant. It was the encounter with the nomads that challenged the inclusive worldview of the empire's custodians

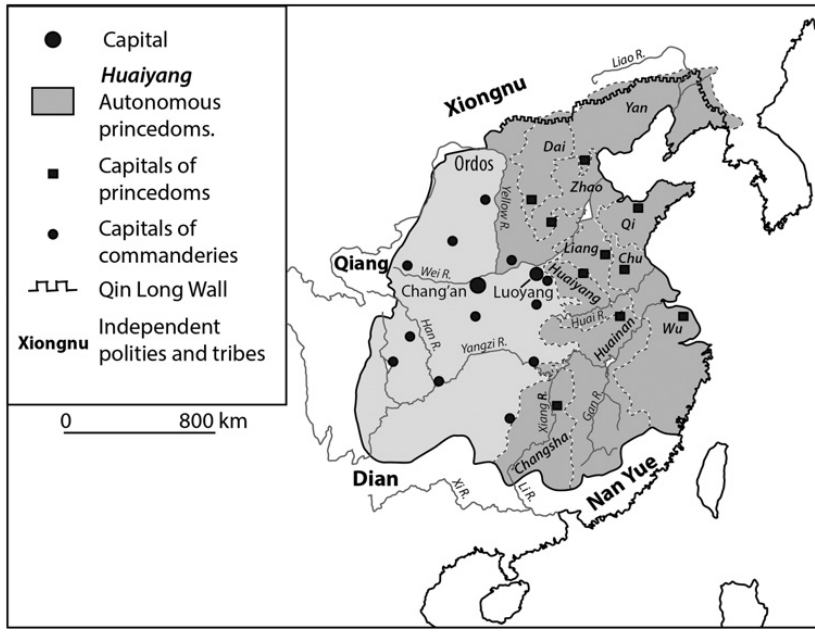
(Goldin 2011). New geographic and cultural realities necessitated profound reassessment of the erstwhile optimism of pre-imperial thinkers. The Qin dynasty was too short-lived to cope systematically with the new situation. It was up to its heir, the Han dynasty, to redefine profoundly the nature of the imperial polity and its territorial scope.

2.6 The Han Empire: Between Contraction and Expansion

The Han dynasty was established in the aftermath of prolonged civil wars that accompanied the fall of Qin, the wars that had radically weakened the empire for generations to come. Facing a plethora of domestic and external pressures, early Han leaders adopted the policy of appeasement. Internally, they allowed renewed formation of autonomous princedoms in the eastern half of the empire; externally, they acquiesced to the secession of manifold areas formerly under Qin's control in the south, southwest and northeast. Yet the most consequential setback was in the Han relations with the newly formed Xiongnu Empire. An attempt by the Han founder, Liu Bang (d. 195 BCE) to repel the Xiongnu assault into the Han territories ended in a fiasco: the emperor was besieged and barely escaped capture. It was the first time that the nomads demonstrated their formidable military prowess. The Xiongnu reoccupied much of the borderlands between the steppe and the sown, which were conquered by the Qin. They did not, however, try to occupy Han's agricultural heartland. Their goal was extracting Han's resources but not supplanting the dynasty. They were a menace, but not an existential threat.

The battered Han dynasty was quick to adapt itself to the new powerful neighbor. In the aftermath of Liu Bang's failure, Han recognized the Xiongnu as a "fraternal" or "rival" (*diguo*) state, that is, as Han's equal, and established with them relations based on the "harmony of the kin" (*heqin*). Practically this meant granting the Xiongnu leader, the *chanyu*, a Han princess, maintaining diplomatic equality, and subsidizing the Xiongnu with lavish Han "gifts," which were supposed to deter the nomads from renewed attacks. Alas, the "harmony of the kin" relations never became harmonious: in the next decades the Xiongnu repeatedly invaded Han lands, necessitating renegotiation of previous agreements on ever more favorable terms for the Xiongnu (Di Cosmo 2002, 190–227).

The early Han was a much smaller empire than the Qin (Map 2.4); it was militarily and economically weaker, and had to resort to diplomacy rather than war in settling relations with its neighbors, including not only the Xiongnu, but, notably, the state of Nan Yue, which seceded from the Han in the far south. Yet these setbacks notwithstanding, the Han statesmen did not abandon their universalistic posture. To the contrary, even those thinkers, such as Jia Yi (200–168 BCE) or Lu Jia (d. 178 BCE), who were highly critical of Qin's senseless expansionism and excessive reliance on the military, repeatedly proclaimed adherence to the empire's universality. Jia Yi explained:



Map 2.4 Early Han Dynasty, *c*.195 BCE. Adapted from the *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han Dynasties*, p. 125.

The correct meaning of the past [titles]: when to the east, west, south, and north, wherever chariots and boats have an access, wherever human traces reach, there is none who does not declare himself subject – only then one can speak of a Son of Heaven . . . Nowadays, the designations are most beautiful, but the real power does not reach beyond the Great Wall. These [the Xiongnu] are not just non-submissive, but are also greatly irreverent. (*Xinshu* 3, 131 ["Wei bu xin"])

Jia Yi was not a warmonger, but he was deeply concerned with the impaired legitimacy of the Han emperors due to their acceptance of the Xiongnu's equal standing. For him this meant incomplete unification of the realm: an aberration that should be corrected or else the Han's imperial title will become fraudulent. This sentiment was shared by many imperial statesmen, and it explains Han's change of course under Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE). Although prior to his ascendancy the Xiongnu incursions decreased (*Hanshu* 64A, 3765), the emperor was adamant: Han had to resort to arms in order to eliminate once and forever the Xiongnu menace.

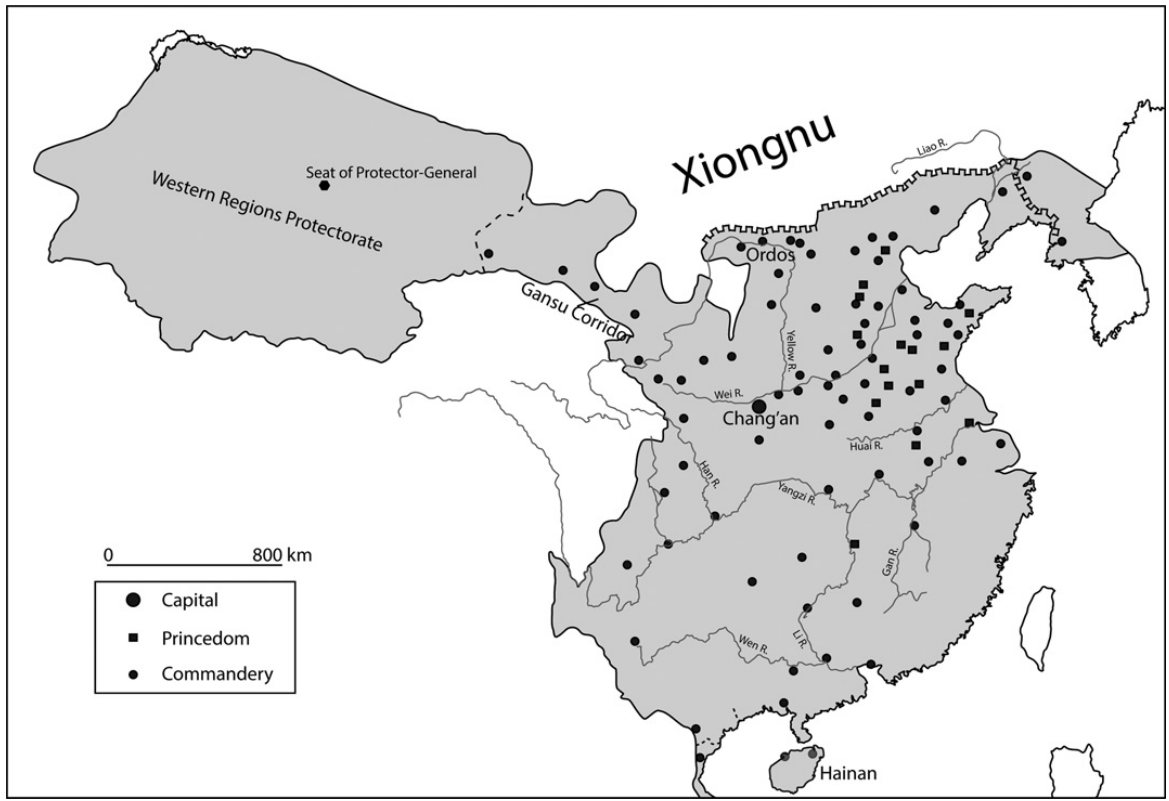
By the time of Emperor Wu's ascendancy, the domestic situation of the Han had stabilized, and the empire was incomparably more powerful economically

and militarily than sixty years before, during Liu Bang's inglorious campaign. Emperor Wu's decision to denounce peace relations with the Xiongnu and deliver them a blow might have been a well-calculated gamble, but the results were unpredictable. The eighty-year war that started in 135 BCE brought about a radical change in Han's geopolitical situation. Initially, the Han armies scored a series of great victories, which resulted in the empire's tremendous expansion not only northward into the steppes but also westward into the oases of the Gansu Corridor, which became a vital artery for Han's move into the theretofore barely known Western Regions. The Han discovery of sedentary civilizations in what is now Xinjiang and further west into Central Asia was one of the most spectacular outcomes of the epochal struggle with the Xiongnu, and the start of the celebrated Silk Road trade. It also expanded greatly Han's geographic horizons and eventually necessitated adjustment of its relations with the outer world.

Emperor Wu's northward expansion had a clear strategic motivation: to deprive the Xiongnu of the territories precariously close to the Han heartland, to cut off their major areas of agricultural supplies (such as the "Western Regions") and to preclude the Xiongnu alliances with other ethnic groups, such as the Qiang. Yet strategic considerations aside, we can discern an equally strong ideological impetus behind Emperor Wu's campaigns: to expand the empire anew to the areas previously occupied by the Qin and even beyond. Hence, parallel to wars with the Xiongnu, the Han resumed expansion into each of the cardinal directions.

Emperor Wu's campaigns were greatly successful. Within slightly more than twenty years, he succeeded in doubling the territories under Han's control (Map 2.5). Dozens of new commanderies and counties were established from Hainan Island in the south to the Ordos in the north, from Yunnan in the southwest to Korea in the northeast, from the southeastern coast to the northwestern deserts. Hundreds of thousands of paupers and convicted criminals were sent to the newly acquired lands to organize agricultural settlements, which allowed full incorporation of the new territories (Yü 1986). Once again it appeared that a universal empire is coming into being. The dictum of the *Gongyang* commentary (which, not incidentally, became the singularly important canonical text under Emperor Wu) that "nothing is external to the Son of Heaven" seemed to be close to actualization.[12] Some of Emperor Wu's courtiers even adopted an arrogant imperialistic discourse, which remained a rarity in Chinese history, arguing that the emperor's urgent task is to encompass the outlying barbarians within a moral universe radiating from the Son of Heaven (Dai 2001, 154).

[12] It should be mentioned here that despite the possible service of the *Gongyang* ideology to the policy of territorial expansion, several leading *Gongyang* exegetes were among the bitter opponents of this policy under Emperor Wu (Gentz 2015).



Map 2.5 The Han Empire after Emperor Wu's campaigns.

Yet impressive as they were, Emperor Wu's spectacular victories turned to be an extremely costly affair. Aside from direct military expenses, the Han dynasty had to stretch its resources to provide subsidies to the surrendered Xiongnu chiefs, to reward meritorious soldiers and generals, to support resettlement of farmers in the new areas, to provide administrative infrastructure to the newly incorporated territories, and so forth. Even such a minor issue as maintaining hostels for the officials travelling across the empire on their business could cause exorbitant expenditures in a new extra-large empire (Hou 2016). To cover the rising costs, the government had to increase its revenues, which meant, among other things, competing for profits with local elites who were the major beneficiaries of the previous laissez-faire policies. Not surprisingly, these elites formed a powerful opposition to the policy of further territorial expansion.

The resurrection of powerful local elites was one of the most consequential developments in the Han (and subsequent imperial) history (Cui 2003). Under Emperor Wu, these elites suffered from the state's renewed assault on their profits. They were compensated to a certain extent by opening the ways for their representatives into the government apparatus. Soon enough, some of these newcomers became a formidable opposition to the government's expansionist policies. Their dissatisfaction with Emperor Wu's legacy became fully visible shortly after his death, during the so-called Salt and Iron Debates of 81 BCE (Polnarov 2018) and intensified thereafter (Loewe 1986, 179–98). The opposition considered Emperor Wu's robust campaigns as the ultimate cause of socioeconomic disasters. The real outcome of the territorial expansion was "the people being impoverished," "bandits and criminals rising side-by-side," and "orphans howling on the roads" (*Hanshu* 72, 3077 and 64, 2833). Soon enough, the opposition scored its first success: the southernmost commanderies on Hainan were abandoned in 46 BCE.

Putting aside for the time being the complex question of the opposition's motives for assaulting the government's policies, we should acknowledge that at least on one point it was right: economically speaking further expansion of the Chinese Empire was no longer profitable. Most arable lands in East Asia were already under China's control during the Qin dynasty, and although some of the lands in the new territories could be reclaimed for agriculture, the costs were huge while the profits thin. Only a tiny segment of the military and civilian elite did benefit from the military victories, but the vast majority of the population and the elite did not. Actually, rather than benefiting from the new territories, the country's core areas had to subsidize these newly acquired lands. Considered from this angle, further expansion of the empire's territory was no longer attractive.

Politically speaking, the expansion also had to be limited. Whereas many of the campaigns under Emperor Wu aimed to annex enemy territory and

incorporate it into the empire, gradually the goal shifted. It became patently clear to the empire's leaders that neither in the vastness of the newly discovered Western Regions, nor in the depth of the steppe would it be possible to establish direct control over the local population. Henceforth, the northern and western campaigns became focused not on direct expansion but on attaining the foreign leaders' recognition of their status as "outer subjects" (*wai chen*) in accordance with the Five Zones spatial arrangement (Yü 1986, 379–83). The status of outer subjects was inferior to China's Son of Heaven, as buttressed in the similarities between their ritual obligations – such as delivering local products as tribute – and those of "internal subjects," that is, heads of internal princedoms and marquisates. Yet the so-called tribute system, within which the relations with "outer subjects" were maintained, was flexible enough: at times it allowed a degree of real control over the Han dependencies (e.g., through requiring periodic visits to the Han court, sending a local dignitary [usually the crown prince] as a hostage, or accommodating Han officials and military personnel), but it could also be maintained on a purely symbolic level of diplomatic intercourse or trade disguised as tribute (Yü 1986, 416). In any case, by adopting this system as the primary means of dealing with alien polities, the Han court gave up the desire of fully integrating them into the imperial polity, reverting to the means ridiculed by the Qin courtiers a century earlier: "The lords sometimes attended the court and sometimes did not, and the Son of Heaven was unable to regulate this."[13]

Of all the alien groups, the Xiongnu were the most stubborn in opposing the Han demands to submit as outer subjects. And when they finally did it – in the wake of fratricidal dynastic conflict between the candidates to the *chanyu* throne – they were lavishly rewarded by the Han Emperor Xuan (r. 74–49 BCE). Yet Xiongnu acceptance of the Han superiority proved an ephemeral victory. First, it caused deep cleavage between the pro-Han and anti-Han factions of the Xiongnu, necessitating ongoing and costly Han support for their protégés, the Southern Xiongnu. Second, even the pro-Han Xiongnu could under certain circumstances turn into China's formidable enemies, as happened to *chanyu* Yu (r. 18–46 CE). Third, even when military success was achieved, such as smashing the anti-Han Northern Xiongnu in 92 CE, the respite did not come: new enemies appeared in the steppe to fill in the void left by the Xiongnu, and their menace could not be fully eliminated (de

[13] Han made several attempts to solidify its rule over the Western Regions by establishing an office of protector-general, maintaining rudimentary military presence, and even establishing agricultural colonies deep into modern Xinjiang; yet all these measures were temporary, and were adopted primarily in response to the Xiongnu's attempts to secure their dominance in Central Asia. Whenever the Xiongnu pressure declined, Han interest in the Western Regions declined as well (Yü 1986, 405–21).

Crespigny 1984). In short, the indirect rule proved to be of limited value politically, even if satisfying on the symbolic level.

It can be asserted that insofar as the Han had something akin to "grand strategy" – namely, weakening the Xiongnu confederation and preventing re-emergence of a new powerful entity to the north of the Great Wall – this strategy was not translated into consistent policies. Many means were tried – starting with appeasement, through deep incursions into the steppe and into the adjacent areas of the Xiongnu real and potential dependencies, through establishment of a client Xiongnu polity (or several client polities), and the like. As generations passed, it became increasingly clear to many members of the Han elite, especially the Latter Han (25–220 CE) elite that the steppe predicament could not be adequately dealt with. This frustration is fully observable in the comments of the eminent Han historian, Ban Gu (32–92 CE). Ban Gu summarized his account of the ebbs and flows in Han's relations with the Xiongnu with a lengthy personal digression, in which he dismissed both the ideas of military commanders, eager to combat the Xiongnu, and of civilian officials who hoped to acculturate the enemy. Instead, he proposed the third course – that of segregation.

> Their [the aliens'] 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. The cultivation through proper government does not reach these people, proper calendar cannot be given to their lands; when they arrive, we must block and repel them; when they leave we must make preparations and be on guard against them. When they admire rules of propriety and submit tribute, we should accept it in accordance with the rules of ritual yielding; we should not sever the loose rein and leave for them the minute details. This is the constant Way applied by the sage kings to repel the savages.[14]

Ban Gu is unequivocal: the ecological division between the external and internal realm makes any attempt to incorporate the former or even to establish firm control over it unfeasible. The savage inhabitants of the outer lands would never become part of the cultivated Central States, and should not be enticed to do so. The separation is eternal and should be maintained forever; the connections between the two realms should be limited to an absolute minimum. This was, as Ban Gu readily admitted, a minority view in his time; but this was not a negligible minority. Actually, by Ban Gu's time a subtle but visible change occurred in the composition of Han's ruling elite. The power of the military declined, and the literati-dominated court felt strong aversion toward excessive military activism. Not incidentally, it was during the Latter Han that proposals were made to abandon the entire northwestern areas so as to put an end to the conflict there with the Qiang tribes (de Crespigny 1984; Tse 2018). These

[14] *Hanshu* 94, 3833–4.

voices were not heeded ultimately, but they are yet another manifestation of the change in the mood at the Han court. The days of robust expansion were over.

The three factors combined – a lack of effective military solution to the steppe problem, aggravating economic costs of assertive foreign policy, and changes in the elite composition in the Latter Han – explain the proliferation of particularistic and exclusivist vision of All-under-Heaven as seen in Ban Gu's words. Centuries of experimentation with different types of territorial expansion taught the empire's leaders a lesson: a smaller empire may be more viable than an ostensibly universal one.

2.7 Epilogue: Universalism Versus Particularism Revisited

The dictum of political unity of All-under-Heaven emerged in China as a response to the aggravating domestic crisis and the war of all against all, which started after the end of the Western Zhou in 771 BCE and accelerated in the subsequent centuries. The emergence of this quest for unity coincided with the formation of a territorially integrated Warring State and with relatively smooth expansion of the rival Sinitic polities into outlying alien periphery. As a result, unity was envisioned by many as comprehensive both territorially and administratively: a single centralized and uniformly ruled state in the entire known area of human habitat. The Qin unification of 221 BCE can be considered as the singularly important attempt to actualize this dream. However, Qin were also the first to compromise the ideal of universality. By erecting the Great Wall in 214/213 BCE the Qin rulers had tacitly recognized that they reached the ecological limit of unifiable All-under-Heaven.

In the aftermath of the short-lived Qin unification and after another round of successful military campaigns under Emperor Wu of the Han, the Chinese leaders realized that further expansion into outlying territories was neither feasible militarily, nor justifiable economically. From a purely economic point of view it was reasonable to limit the empire to the lands of China proper (mostly coinciding with the Qin Empire), as was the case, for instance, in the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties (notwithstanding differences in their territorial layout). However, a "lesser empire" was problematic both ideologically and strategically. An ideological commitment to the universalist vision of the empire, going back as it was to the legacy of the classical era, could not be easily dismissed. More significantly, the accumulated historical experience proved that a militarily passive empire would sooner or later encounter formidable enemies at its frontiers, most notably at the northern frontiers along which a series of powerful nomadic and semi-nomadic entities emerged, threatening the peace of China proper. This strategic consideration encouraged the empire's leaders to adopt from time to time activist military and diplomatic policies, which often led to territorial expansion and incorporation

of peripheral regions into the empire (see Robinson [Chapter 8] and Mosca [Chapter 9], this volume). The tension between economic and military rationale, on the one hand, and ideological dictums cum strategic considerations, on the other, determined much of the empire's spatial trajectory during the two millennia of its existence.

Dividing "All-under-Heaven" into inner and outer realms was often employed as a neat solution to the above tension: it allowed maintaining the empire's superiority beyond its ecological limits at a relatively low cost. The so-called tribute system was flexible enough to maintain the semblance of the Son of Heaven's universal singularity without overstretching the empire's military and economic resources. In practical terms, though, this system was of limited value. Symbolic superiority could not be maintained for long without adequate military and economic backing, which again required overstretching the empire's resources. Worse, tribute relations could be maintained with ease only with militarily insignificant polities in the west, east, and south, but not with the northern nomads. Those remained submissive only in times of relative weakness; whenever an opportunity occurred, their leaders would try to redefine the relations with the Chinese emperors striving for equality with or even superiority over their sedentary neighbors. Ban Gu's ideal of segregation behind the Great Wall never worked well.

To complicate the matters, the boundaries between the "inner" and the "outer" constantly fluctuated, reflecting the shifting balance of power between China and its neighbors, and the changing demographic and cultural composition of the extensive frontiers of China proper. At times, such as during the peak of territorial expansion under the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), the "inner" realm could include the steppe nomads; intermediate areas under military rule were established, expanding well into Central Asia; and the even broader "outer" realm was defined as an area of "loose rein" (*jimi*), where the superiority of the Chinese monarch remained primarily symbolic (Pan 1997; cf. Skaff 2012; Wang 2013). At times of weakness, the designation "outer" could be applied not only to border areas once under Chinese control, but even – scandalously – to the Chinese heartland itself, the Yellow River valley, ruled by the Jurchens since 1127 CE (Goncharov 1986). Regions once rendered "outer" could be firmly reincorporated into China proper, as happened to the Gansu and Yunnan provinces under the Ming dynasty (Robinson, this volume), while other areas could move in the opposite direction, as happened to North Vietnam (Annam), once an imperial province, which turned into an "outer subject."

Ironically, it was primarily under the alien dynasties, established by the nomadic and semi-nomadic conquerors of China proper that the ecological and cultural limitations on the empire's expansion could be meaningfully overcome. The conquerors' ability to incorporate peripheral regions within the territory of the empire proper bolstered their prestige and their legitimacy

(see Biran [Chapter 6] and Mosca, this volume). The Manchu Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723–35) of the Qing dynasty (1636/1644–1912) had proudly proclaimed:

> Unity of the Central Lands [China proper] began with Qin; unity beyond the border passes began with [the Mongol] Yuan [1271–1368], and peaked under our dynasty. Never before were Chinese and foreigners one family and the country so expansive as under our dynasty! (Cited in Liu 2000, 19)

These words, pronounced in the midst of bitter polemics with a dissenting Chinese subject over the legitimacy of Manchu rule,[15] are revealing. The Yongzheng Emperor was not a warmonger; actually at the beginning of his career he contemplated withdrawal from some of the territories acquired under his father, the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661–1722) , most notably Tibet (Dai Yingcong 2009: 92–100). Yet he might have apprehended that the remarkable territorial expansion of the Qing and their incorporation of the alien periphery into the empire proper would be hailed by many Chinese subjects as a hallmark of Qing's success. These sentiments were echoed by the Yongzheng's son, the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–95), who appealed to the "greatness of All-under-Heaven" to silent critical voices of those advisers, who feared that the Qing ongoing expansion would overstretch its human and material resources.[16] Insofar as the emperors' expectations that appeals to universality would be a convincing argument in domestic debates were correct (and we have no reasons to assume otherwise), they indicate that a latent desire for attaining truly universal unification remained intact – or was reproduced – a full two millennia after the First Emperor) ordered the construction of the Great Wall, which was supposed to set limits to "All-under -Heaven."

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[15] For the context of the controversy that spurred the emperor's statement, see Spence 2001, 116–34.

[16] For the Qianlong Emperor's polemic with his critics, see Millward 1998, 20–43, especially pp. 38–40. Millward illustrates there how in the process of the Qing territorial expansion the borders between "internal" and "external" realms were continuously redrawn. For more about the Qing expansion policy, see Perdue 2005; Dai Yingcong 2009.

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