

The Imperial Network in Ancient China: The Foundation of Sinitic Empire in Southern East Asia. By Maxim Korolkov. London: Routledge, 2022. Pp. 316, £120 hardback, £36.99 eBook.

The Qin empire (221–207 B.C.E.) was one of the shortest political entities that ruled over all of the “China proper”;¹ but, arguably, it was the most influential in the long run. It bequeathed to subsequent imperial dynasties not just its basic territorial framework but also the contours of the governing apparatus, the notion of unified administrative control over localities, and, most importantly, the concept of emperorship (*huangdi* 皇帝, more accurately “August Thearch” becoming Qin’s singularly important invention). It also bequeathed to its heirs a set of problems and challenges that any regime which aspired to control the Sinitic “All-under-Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) had to deal with.

Until recently, the lion’s share of our information about Qin’s history derived from a single source—“The Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin” 秦始皇本紀 in Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 B.C.E.) *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記). Putting aside for the time being debates about the reliability of Sima Qian’s depiction of the First Emperor 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 B.C.E.),² we should immediately notice that this chapter—as almost all of the “Basic Annals” 本紀 in the subsequent dynastic histories—remained overwhelmingly focused on the imperial court with only minimum space dedicated to the empire’s local administration and its problems. Given the empire’s territorial scope and its immense complexity, this bias was inevitable; but inadvertently it skewed our perspectives of Qin’s history. For millennia—starting with the famous Jia Yi’s 賈誼 (200–166 B.C.E.) essay “Faulting the Qin” 過秦論³—the debates about Qin’s achievements and its subsequent failure focused overwhelmingly on the personality of the First Emperor and his successors rather than on a variety of problems faced by lower-level Qin administrators.

¹ Only the Xin dynasty established by Wang Mang 王莽 (45 B.C.E.–23 C.E.) lasted for the same fourteen years as the Qin. Other dynasties that succeeded to unify much or all of China proper were considerably longer, the shortest being the Sui (581–618).

² For example, Hans van Ess made a strong case that the First Emperor’s portrait in *Records of the Historian* was designed as a veiled criticism of Sima Qian’s employer and nemesis, Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 B.C.E.). See van Ess, “Emperor Wu of the Han and the First August Emperor of Qin in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*,” in Yuri Pines *et al.*, eds., *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 239–57. For a different view, see, e.g., Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 177–212.

³ See Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 and Zhong Xia 鍾夏, eds., *Xinshu jiaozhu* 新書校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2000), 1: 1–24.

Luckily, in recent decades this situation is changing dramatically. A series of archaeological discoveries, ranging from the world-famous Terracotta Army of the First Emperor to a huge variety of Qin's sites—from cemeteries, to remnants of roads and canals, to settlements and fortifications—allow us to understand the complexity of Qin's society, Qin's cultural trajectory, and the scope of Qin's imperial projects. To this one must add the palaeographic revolution. Qin's inscriptions appear on a dazzling variety of materials—bronze and iron, stone and jade, bamboo and clay—and cover an extraordinarily broad range of topics: local and national administration, legal issues, statutes, popular and official religion, political declarations, international relations, historiography, and many others. They represent views and concerns of different segments of the Qin population: from rulers to petty officials and to simple conscripts. The sheer length of the heretofore excavated documents, which exceeds more than tenfold that of Qin-related materials in the received texts, explains their exceptional role in reconstructing Qin's history.⁴

The richness of the new sources allows a number of impressive breakthroughs in studies of pre-imperial and imperial Qin. In particular, they allow us to reconstruct aspects of empire building “from below”—from the point of view of remote outposts in the recently conquered territories, which had to be integrated into the newly formed imperial space. This is the major task undertaken by Maxim Korolkov in his first monograph. *The Imperial Network in Ancient China* is based on parts of his recent doctoral dissertation, “Empire-Building and Market-Making at the Qin

⁴ For a partial summary of Qin-related palaeographic sources (all of which include sources from pre-imperial and imperial Qin alike), see Wang Hui 王輝 and Cheng Xuehua 程學華, *Qin wenzi jizheng* 秦文字集證 (Taipei: Yinwen chubanshe, 1999), and Wang Hui's additions in his “*Qin chutu wenxian biannian xubu* (1)” 《秦出土文獻編年》續補 (一), *Qin wenhua luncong* 秦文化論叢 9 (2002): 512–49; for most of the relevant bamboo and wooden documents, see Chen Wei 陳偉 *et al.*, eds., *Qin jiandu heji shiwen zhushi xiuding ben* 秦簡牘合集釋文注釋修訂本, 4 vols. (Wuhan: Jing-Chu wenku bianzuan chuban weiyuanhui and Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2016). Two largest discoveries of the imperial Qin documents are those unearthed in June 2002 in Liye 里耶, Longshan 龍山 county (Hunan) (of which heretofore two volumes had been published in addition to a separate publication of the slips and wooden boards in the possession of Liye Museum of Qin Documents 里耶秦簡博物館), and the cache of looted Qin materials acquired by the Yuelu Academy 嶽麓書院, of which heretofore seven volumes were published. Of another important discovery at Tuzishan 兔子山, Yiyang 益陽 (Hunan), only preliminary reports exist. Several important Qin documents from the looters were acquired in Hong Kong and published by Peking University; for the summary, see Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚 *et al.*, “Beijing daxue cang Qin jiandu gaishu” 北京大學藏秦簡牘概述, *Wenwu* 文物 6 (2012): 65–73.

Frontier: Imperial Expansion and Economic Change, 221–207 B.C.E.” (Columbia University, 2020). This dissertation itself was preceded by another PhD (or “candidate” in Russian parlance) dissertation, “Land-related Legislation and Control over the Lands in the *Zhanguo* [Warring States period] to the Beginning of the Early Imperial Era (on the Basis of Discovered Legal Documents),” published in Moscow in 2010.⁵ This highly unusual background (I do not know of any other colleague in the field who had written two PhD dissertations on related but actually quite different topics) explains extraordinary maturity of Korolkov’s monograph. This lucidly written, engaging, and superbly performed research will be a must-read for students and scholars of early China. It will also be a compelling reading for scholars interested in the comparative studies of continental empires.

There are at least four aspects of Korolkov’s study that make it a real gem. The first is the ability to combine in-depth research into Qin’s rule in a single minor county of Qianling 遷陵縣 in north-western Hunan with an overview of the longue durée of China’s pre-imperial and imperial history, adding to this, where appropriate, comparative ramifications. This combination of a broad synthesis and a focused analysis is well reflected in the book’s structure. Following the introduction, two chapters present the formation of the “Middle Yangzi interaction space” from the Neolithic to the Warring States period (453–221 B.C.E.) (chapter 2), and Qin’s “southward turn” in the fourth to third centuries B.C.E., which eventually laid the foundations for the formation of the Qin empire (chapter 3). The next three chapters (4–6) focus on the Qin empire’s functioning in Qianling county and its immediate environs; these are the core of the book. Two final chapters (7–8) trace the history of the empire’s southern borderlands after Qin’s collapse and well into the post-Han era, adding important insights about the immense complexity of cultural and political processes in the vast areas to the south of the Yangtze. This structure allows the reader to understand not just the minute details of Qin’s rule but also its broader implications for the social, political, economic, and cultural trajectories of China’s vast southern areas.

Second, Korolkov excels in integrating all the three major sources for Qin history—palaeographic (which is his primary expertise), material, and textual. His usage of archaeological data is particularly impressive. It includes analyses of mortuary assemblages, of the size and location of population sites, of the cereals consumed by local residents in Hunan highlands, and so forth. Without these materials, textual and palaeographic data—however rich—would never be sufficient

⁵ Земельное законодательство и контроль над землей в эпоху Чжаньго и в начале раннеимперской эпохи (по данным обнаруженных законодательных текстов) (PhD thesis, Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Oriental Studies, 2010).

to understand fully the backdrop of Qin's imperial policies. Korolkov furthermore stands out with his utilization of secondary research, as is testified by the forty pages of densely packed list of references which assembles hundreds of studies in all major sinological language—Chinese, English, French, German, Japanese, and Russian. Incorporating manifold insights from the colleagues' and predecessors' research allowed Korolkov to present an extraordinarily multidimensional picture of the formation of the Qin empire and of the problems it faced.

Korolkov's third achievement is related to the concept as indicated in the book's title: understanding the empires as comprising different networks. He explains:

I see the empire as yet another type of interaction web, connecting people and communities across long distances and offering them unique and important advantages to be drawn from participation, rather than as an oppressive redistributive regime imposed on the populations of outlying regions by force for the benefit of metropolitan elites—even though violence and redistribution did play crucial roles in the functioning of the empire. (p. 3)

He further explains that:

. . . the empire was only one of many interaction networks available to the populations in East Asia, and that their participation in this network, and the political and cultural identities generated through their participation, were volatile and contingent on the changing characteristics of the network. (p. 4)

This angle of analysis is heuristically convenient for understanding the patterns of the empire's expansion and contraction and analysing it simultaneously from the centre and periphery. This methodologically sound approach lays solid foundations for Korolkov's research.

The network analysis comes hand in hand with another laudable feature of *The Imperial Network*, viz. the author's attention to geographic dimensions of Qin's expansion. Until relatively recently, focusing on minute geographic details was a rarity in Anglophone studies of pre-imperial China's political history, the major exception being the monograph by Korolkov's dissertation supervisor, Li Feng.⁶ Korolkov laudably pays due attention to waterways, to the terrain's altitude, to routes of communication, and so forth. His study highlights, in particular, how waterways affected not just commercial routes and directions of military expansion, but also Qin's administrative structure to the south of the Yangtze. It also highlights the lasting

⁶ Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 B.C.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

impact of Qin's investment in water communications, most notably through the construction of the Ling Canal 靈渠 near the modern city of Guilin, which connected the Yangtze basin with southern (Lingnan 嶺南) waterways (p. 181). These observations are immensely helpful for the ongoing exploration of the ways in which geography shaped the contours of the imperial space on the one hand, and of the empires' strategies to overcome geographic hurdles on the other.⁷

The fourth and final aspect of the book that I want to praise is its focus on the dynamics of empire building and its immense complexity. Empires are not created by a mere conquest of the territory; nor do they disappear from the areas under their former control once their rule collapses. The incorporation of the territory is a long, challenging, and sometimes contradictory process. Qin's story in Qianling county is a perfect illustration of this complexity. As chapter 4 demonstrates, Qin's rule in the remote highlands of north-western Hunan was precarious. The bureaucracy was understaffed (or staffed in part by officials who were transferred to the "new territories" as punishment for dereliction of duty elsewhere). There were instances of local unrest and armed resistance, some of which were difficult to handle. The registered population of the county was tiny (the topic on which I shall comment later), and the officials had to rely on forced labour of convicts and conscripts, whose sizeable presence could pose further problems of unruliness. And if all this was not enough, then think of Qin's military campaigns further to the south (here referring to the areas of modern Guangxi and Guangdong) after 214 B.C.E., which "may have diverted resources needed for consolidating the imperial control over the recently conquered territories of the Middle Yangzi" (p. 99). Overall, it is easy to conclude, as Korolkov suggests: "What we should wonder at is not so much why this system collapsed as how it managed to endure as long as it did" (p. 109).

And yet, as chapters 5–6 demonstrate, Qin's presence in the empire's new borderlands was much more robust than the first impression suggests. Qin officials invested huge efforts in expanding agricultural production, mineral extraction, exploration of local flora and fauna, and the like. During just fifteen years of its rule, Qin promoted rapid monetization of local economy, reshaped local society through forced and voluntary resettlements, created new identities through carefully performed social engineering, changed the county's agricultural and commercial life, and so forth. Korolkov demonstrates how, despite their commitment to administrative uniformity, Qin's officials displayed considerable flexibility: "On the level of material resources,

⁷ This topic was at the focus of the recent volume, Yuri Pines, Michal Biran, and Jörg Rüpke, eds., *The Limits of Universal Rule: Eurasian Empires Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). See especially the editors' "Introduction: Empires and Their Space" on pp. 1–48.

the art of the empire was its adaptation to new environments” (p. 161). Korolkov concludes: “The decade and a half of the Qin Empire was the time of a gigantic experiment in integrating the newly conquered territories into a political entity of unprecedented territorial extent” (p. 137). This experiment failed insofar as the Qin empire collapsed. It succeeded, however, insofar as the areas once under Qin control remained committed to economic and administrative uniformity even during the decades of de facto (and sometimes de jure) independence from the imperial centre, as happened in the first decades of the second century B.C.E. (chapter. 7).

Korolkov has created a compelling study that raises a bar for future explorations in the field. There is only one point on which I think the presentation could be more cautious. It concerns Qianling’s registered population. Korolkov insists on the number of around 200 households only, on a par with the Han frontier counties on Korean peninsula or on north-western frontier (p. 117). This assertion may be correct, but it is equally possible that it is wrong. First, it is based on an assumption that a few records that present unbelievably high population figures as “aggregate households” (*jihu* 積戶) should be divided into the number of the days of the year (roughly 354 days) to get the real population size. Thus, when the Qianling county reports 55,544 aggregate households for the year 215 B.C.E. (卅二年，遷陵積戶五萬五千五卅四；slip 8-552)⁸ this refers to ca. 160 households only; and the number of 21,300 households in Erchun district in 212 B.C.E. means ca. sixty households (卅五年遷陵貳春鄉積戶二萬一千三百卍；slip 8-1716). The refusal to take the huge number of “aggregate households” as reflecting the real situation in Qianling and Erchun is fully understandable, because should the numbers be taken at their face value this would imply incredible population density, which is not attested at all in the archaeological record. But opting for a low number creates a different set of problems.

First, consider the scope of economic activities of Qin’s administration, as discussed in chapter 6. These could not be performed by a registered population of just a thousand to two thousand people (if we accept the two hundred households number). Of course, there were hundreds of convicts and conscripts, the latter are estimated as “one third” of the local population (p. 97). But even with their effort it is difficult to imagine how a small community would expand mines, hunt tigers, catch leopards, explore local fauna, and also actively open up new lands. For me, the level of activism depicted in chapter 6 suggests a population of a few dozen thousand people at least.

⁸ All the Liye slips are cited according to the numeration in Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 湖南省文物考古研究所, ed., *Liye Qin jian* 里耶秦簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, vol. 1 [2012, for layers 5–8] and vol. 2 [2018, for layer 9]); annotated in Chen Wei 陳偉 et al. eds., *Liye Qin jiandu jiaoshi* 里耶秦簡牘校釋 (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2012 and 2018). 卍 stands for broken slips.

Second, consider the number of Qin's officials who had to supervise the county. The number of positions allocated to Qianling was around 103–4, with only eighty-six positions filled (pp. 94–95).⁹ As noted by Sun Wenbo 孫聞博, this suggests an incomprehensible degree of bureaucratization which is a far cry from anything we know about from early Chinese empires.¹⁰ Is it reasonable to assume that Qin expected the ratio of one salaried functionary for two to three households? I think it is an incredible supposition even for modern, fully bureaucratized polities.

Third, and most importantly, the Liye slips contain occasional references to very high numbers of people, e.g.,

萬二千七百卅四人。四萬二千四百卅四
12,744 persons. * 42,444 [broken] (slip 8-684)

百六十一人。凡千七百八十九人。員凡四【萬】
[broken]... 161 person. Overall 1780 persons. * Personnel (?), overall
40,000 [broken] (slip 8–1136)

五萬一千八百卅八人
[broken] 51,848 persons [broken] (slip 8–964)

七千七百廿八人 (正)
七千六百七十八一人 (背)
7,728 persons [broken] (recto)
7,678 persons ... [broken] (verso) (slip 9–2196)

The number of persons mentioned in each of these broken slips by far exceeds the estimated number of Qianling dwellers, convicts and conscripts included. Admittedly, the context of the slips is unclear and they do not suffice to refute Korolkov's population estimates (which are based on the currently dominant view among Chinese and Japanese scholars).¹¹ However, at the very least it would be advisable to recognize

⁹ For the data itself and the offices' distribution, see slips 7–67 + 9–631 and slip 8–1137, cited from Sun Wenbo, "Shang Yang's Promotion of the County System and the County-Canton Relations: An Analysis Based on Official Titles, Salary Grades and the Size of the Employed Personnel," trans. Yuri Pines, *Bamboo and Silk* 3.2 (2020): 344–88, on pp. 374–75.

¹⁰ Sun Wenbo, "Shang Yang's Promotion of the County System," 373–81.

¹¹ See, e.g., Suzuki Naomi 鈴木直美, "Riya Shinkan ni mieru 'kenko' to 'sekiko': Shindai Senryōken shita ni okeru kosū no tegakari toshite" 里耶秦簡にみえる「見戸」と「積戸」:

(Continued on next page)

the complexity of Qianling's population numbers and allow some space for doubts, which may be resolved only with the publication of the (scandalously delayed) next four volumes of Liye bamboo slips and wooden boards.

My final comments are directed at the publisher. As is well known, Routledge books are often overpriced, and Korolkov's at GBP 120.00 is not an exception. This effectively precludes access by students. I hope that a paperback edition follows soon enough to allow much more readers to share the pleasure of reading *The Imperial Network*. The book fully deserves this!

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(Note 11—*Continued*)

秦代遷陵県下における戸数の手がかりとして, *Meidai Ajiashi ronshū* 明大アジア史論集 18 (2014): 1–13; Wang Wei 王偉 and Sun Zhaohua 孫兆華, “Jihu” yu “jianhu”: Liye Qin jian suojian Qianling bianhu shuliang” “積戸”與“見戸”: 里耶秦簡所見遷陵編戸數量, *Sichuan wenwu* 四川文物 2 (2014): 62–67.