

# Ancient China

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## Introduction

Through much of the twentieth and well into the twenty-first century, scholars in China and in the West debated the nature of Chinese nationhood. In the West, the once dominant view was promulgated by Joseph R. Levenson and like-minded scholars, who depicted Chinese identity in terms of “culturalism,” that is belonging to a universalizing and inclusive civilization, defined by a common Confucian culture. A concept of national identity conceived in ethnic or racial terms was considered a modern phenomenon, closely related to China’s entrance into the world of nation-states.<sup>1</sup> In the last decades of the twentieth century, though, this view was criticized by scholars who demonstrated the existence of traits of exclusive ethnocentric Chinese identity back in the past. Some went as far as to postulate racism as pertinent to Chinese civilization from its earliest stages.<sup>2</sup> Among Chinese scholars, the trend was different: the exclusive “nationalist” interpretation of Chinese identity gained popularity in the twentieth century but was later largely rejected in favor of the “culturalist” view.<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of both inclusive and exclusive views of Chinese identity find abundant evidence to support their interpretations. Recall that we have at

<sup>1</sup> See Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, vol. 1: *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 95–108. For a succinct and critical summary of the “culturalism to nationalism” paradigm, see J. Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 27 (1992), especially 98–103.

<sup>2</sup> For the most radical (and obviously manipulative) postulate of China’s primeval racism, see Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), especially 1–30.

<sup>3</sup> See a brief summary in Shao-yun Yang, “‘Their Lands are Peripheral and their *qi* is Blocked up’: The Uses of Environmental Determinism in Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) Chinese Interpretations of the ‘Barbarians,’” in Rebecca Futo Kennedy and Molly Jones-Lewis (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2015), 390–391.

our disposal an enormous corpus of historical, philosophical, and literary texts from imperial (221 BCE–1911 CE) and to a lesser extent pre-imperial China. One can easily find in this corpus either pronouncements that denigrate the “barbarians” as beastlike savages, or statements that emphasize the relativity of “Sino-barbarian” dichotomy and even reject this dichotomy altogether. Similarly, in China’s lengthy history we can find bitter ethnic-based clashes that could reach genocidal proportions, but also the amalgamation of different ethnicities and, most notably, manifold political occurrences in which the participants’ ethnicity did not play any discernible role. Trying to reduce this rich evidence to a single conceptualization of “Chineseness” (either exclusive or inclusive) is untenable.

A more promising line of analysis would be a contextual one. In China, as elsewhere, one can find a great variety of collective identities: ethnic, cultural, social, regional, linguistic (recall that many of the so-called dialects of Chinese language are mutually unintelligible), religious (albeit less prominent in China than in other parts of Eurasia), and so forth. Under different circumstances, different collective identities could become more prominent, for instance being utilized as a mobilizing device during wars, rebellions, or domestic conflicts. What is quite remarkable, though, is that once utilized for the sake of mobilization or legitimation, the identity-oriented discourse would then be discarded, leaving only a negligible long-term impact. We may cautiously surmise, paraphrasing Karl Marx, that in China it was not collective (national or otherwise) identity that determined politics; it was politics that determined one’s collective identity. Whether or not this observation is peculiar to China or can be applied to other Eurasian empires remains to be seen.

Given the limited scope of the present chapter, in what follows I shall demonstrate my points by focusing on just one – albeit lengthy and exceptionally important – period in Chinese history. My discussion will highlight the complexity of identity construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction during the formative age of Chinese imperial civilization – namely the centuries preceding and following the establishment of the Chinese Empire in 221 BCE. My discussion will revolve around two issues. First, I shall explore the interplay between the overarching “Chinese” identity (back then identified as Xia 夏 or Huaxia 華夏) and what can be called the proto-national regional identities formed during the lengthy age of political fragmentation that preceded China’s imperial unification. Second, I shall explore fluctuations of Sino-alien (or, as it is frequently dubbed “Sino-barbarian”) dichotomy before and after the imperial unification. In both cases I shall show that

there was no neat progression toward ever more cohesive “Chineseness.” Rather identities were repeatedly negotiated and renegotiated, shaped by multiple political circumstances, and were not uniformly endorsed by members of different social strata. Finally, I shall briefly address the relevance of my findings to the understanding of the interplay between ethnic identities and political life in later periods of Chinese history.

### Aristocratic Elites of the Bronze Age

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 there, gave way to a polycentric perspective. It is widely accepted nowadays that multiple Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures interacted for millennia in the basins of the Yellow River, the Yangzi, and beyond, none of them obviously superior to the others.<sup>4</sup> The situation started changing with the advent of the Bronze Age (c. 1500–400 BCE). By then, in the middle to low reaches of the Yellow River a singular focus of political gravity emerged, the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE). The Shang clearly enjoyed military, political, and most importantly cultural superiority over other political entities in northern China. In particular, their bronze production was most advanced, and they in all likelihood were the only literate culture in East Asia. Since possession of ritual bronze vessels and literacy became hallmarks of elite cultural identity for centuries to come, the Shang period may be considered the first stage of formation of a distinct Chinese identity.<sup>5</sup>

The overthrow of the Shang by the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–255 BCE) became an important turning point in China’s history. Having overcome the Shang and having quelled the rebellion of the Shang loyalists, 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 vast areas along the Yellow River basin and further to the south, to the area of the Huai and Han rivers. Lacking the ability to control this vast territory directly, the Zhou leaders opted to establish in strategic locations new settlements ruled by royal kin and allies.

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Shelach-Lavi, *The Archeology of Early China: From Prehistory to the Han Dynasty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See details in Li Min, *Social Memory and State Formation in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 175–311.

Somewhat surprisingly, both the relocation of the subjugated Shang population to the new settlements, and the imposition of the Zhou elite over the indigenous inhabitants of the eastern parts of the realm, appear to have been accomplished relatively smoothly. Probably, the successful extermination of the Shang bolstered the new dynasty's prestige and prevented the formation of an effective opposition.<sup>6</sup>

The Zhou's reliance on a web of subordinate and allied regional lords, who ruled an area incomparably larger than the dynasty's royal domain, had far-reaching impact on the formation of elite Chinese identity. Many indigenous polities were eventually incorporated into the Zhou realm through gaining recognition from the Zhou kings and establishing affinal (or fictitious consanguineous) ties with the Zhou house. The regional lords maintained a high degree of autonomy in their domains, but they recognized the superiority of the Zhou kings, who arrogated to themselves the prestigious title of "Sons of Heaven," placing themselves as the mediators between the supreme deity, Heaven, and humans. This symbolic power proved to be the dynasty's most valuable asset. Long after its erstwhile military prowess waned, the Zhou house continued to maintain its symbolic prestige and its position as the unrivaled cultural center of the *oikouménē*. It shaped the cultural norms of the aristocratic elites throughout vast areas of northern and central China. In particular, the ritual system formed c. 900–850 BCE (i.e. in the last century of the Zhou's effective rule) provided the social, political, and cultural framework for the aristocrats' lives well into the end of the Bronze Age.<sup>7</sup>

In 771 BCE, the Zhou dynasty was dealt a grave blow by the coalition of disgruntled regional lords and alien invaders, the Quanrong ("Canine belligerents"). Although the dynasty survived for another five centuries in the crippled eastern part of its domain, the kings were dramatically weakened. Their nominal underlings, the regional lords, turned their domains into 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. Yet regional lords were not the beneficiaries of this situation either. By the

<sup>6</sup> See more in Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> For the Zhou ritual reform and its impact, see Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2006).

seventh century BCE, many of them started losing power to their own ministers, who amassed economic, political, and military power on a par with their nominal rulers. The hereditary ministerial lineages became the major political force. An increasing number of regional lords were assassinated, expelled, or otherwise sidelined by the powerful aristocrats. Soon enough, the Zhou world was engulfed in a web of debilitating struggles among the rival polities, between rulers and their ministers, and among major ministerial lineages in each polity. The political system established by the early Zhou leaders was disintegrating.

The political crisis of the aristocratic Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu, 770–453 BCE) was extraordinarily severe, but forces of political disintegration did not tear apart the cultural unity of the *oikouménē*. To the contrary, aristocrats from the rival polities maintained a remarkable degree of social cohesiveness and cultural uniformity, political cleavages notwithstanding. This ongoing cultural unity at the elite level is reflected in the aristocrats' common adherence to the Zhou ritual culture. Elaborate rites, developed in the first centuries of Zhou rule, permeated all imaginable spheres of the nobles' activities – from weddings and mourning to court ceremonies and even warfare. The ritual culture became a source of transregional aristocratic identity. Its perpetuation despite the ongoing political fragmentation is most easily discernible from the material evidence: tombs of the nobles from the entire Zhou realm conform to the common rules regarding their size, the sets of mortuary goods, and even the shape of the bronze vessels. Whereas sharp-eyed archeologists can discern certain local idiosyncrasies, which, at least in the case of the southern state of Chu, may reflect the evolution of nascent local identity, overall the vessels do conform to the common Zhou ritual norms. Even the inscriptions on the bronze vessels reflect the common set of values (and common language) of the elites throughout the Zhou world.<sup>8</sup>

From textual sources – most notably the *Zuo Tradition* (or *Zuo Commentary*, *Zuo zhuan*), our major source for the history of the Spring and Autumn period – we may understand the background for the ongoing cultural unity of Zhou aristocrats. Bitter interstate and inter-lineage conflicts notwithstanding, the nobles from the Zhou realm perpetuated close ties and a strong sense of belonging to the common superior stratum. The aristocrats from different polities routinely intermarried, but never married the commoners of their own state. They shared a common textual culture and spoke a mutually intelligible language (which was in all likelihood significantly removed from

<sup>8</sup> See more in *ibid.*

the colloquial language of the commoners). They performed common ceremonies during the frequent interstate meetings. A noble who had to flee from his state could expect to be given in a new host state a rank commensurate with his original position. Even the violence of frequent wars was mitigated owing to the widespread adherence to the codes of chivalry on the battlefield. Actually, ritual norms were supposed to regulate warfare as well, and although it is clear that these norms were often discarded, they were not entirely meaningless either. As in medieval Europe, military conflicts during the Spring and Autumn period were first and foremost competitions among the peers.<sup>9</sup> To a certain extent they served to strengthen rather than undermine the aristocrats' common identity.

### We and the Other: Ritual Culture as Dividing Line

That the Zhou world remained culturally united amid political fragmentation does not require further discussion; but how did it interact with the non-Sinitic tribes and polities? Alien ethnic and cultural groups existed not only on the periphery of the Zhou *oikouménē* but also in its heartland, in the hilly areas in between Zhou polities. Sometimes, relations with the aliens soured. The *Zuo Tradition* and other texts record dozens of incursions of Di and Rong tribesmen into the Zhou realm, and even extermination of important polities such as Wei 衛 in 660 BCE. These clashes and the resultant animosity were conducive to strengthening the separate "Chinese" (Xia) identity. Thus, in 661 BCE, when a leading statesman, Guan Zhong (d. 645 BCE), asked his lord to save a beleaguered state of Xing from the Di invasion, he argued:

The Rong and the Di are jackals and wolves and cannot be satiated. All the Xia are close kin and cannot be abandoned.<sup>10</sup>

This and similar statements are often used to demonstrate the existence of exclusive Chinese identity back in the Bronze Age. All the Xia are close kin; the aliens, in distinction, are beastlike; they are impaired humans. The enmity toward the aliens and the feeling of Xia (Chinese) solidarity are clearly pronounced. Yet before we jump to conclusions, it should be advisable to consider Guan Zhong's and similar statements in their immediate context. In

<sup>9</sup> See Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 15–52.

<sup>10</sup> Translation modified from *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals,"* trans. Stephen W. Durrant, Li Wai-yee, and David Schaberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 229 (Min 1.2).

the above citation, it was a call for war: an attempt to build a broad coalition against the Di (which indeed materialized). Elsewhere, pejorative comments against beastlike and immoral aliens are often made to dissuade one of the Xia leaders from allying with them against other Xia polities. For instance, when the Zhou king himself allied in 636 BCE with the Di against the fraternal polity of Zheng, his advisor promptly reminded that Di embody “four iniquities”: they are “deaf and blind” (meaning unable to appreciate the ritual culture of the Zhou), and are also “wayward and perfidious.”<sup>11</sup> These arguments were not effective though: the king continued his alliance with the Di, and even elevated a Di concubine to the position of a queen. Argumentation based on ethnicity could work at times, but it was far from being compelling. Nor should we exaggerate the importance of the periodic invocations of the aliens’ bestiality. The notion of bestiality was not necessarily related to one’s inborn qualities but rather to one’s disregard of ritual norms. A fourth-century BCE ritual compendium asked rhetorically: “So, although a man who lacks ritual can speak, his heart is also one of a bird and a beast, is it not?”<sup>12</sup> Not a few thinkers asserted, accordingly, that the commoners – and not just aliens – do not differ much from birds and beasts.<sup>13</sup> Actually, the bestiality of the Rong and Di was perceived as the direct result of their disregard for ritual norms: “they enter hastily [into a Zhou court banquet] and despise order, they are greedy and unwilling to yield, their blood and breath is unmanageable, just like that of birds and beasts.”<sup>14</sup>

What happened when aliens adapted themselves to the Zhou ritual? In that case they could cross the line and become fully absorbed in the Xia community. The road could be bumpy, though. The *Zuo Tradition* tells of an interstate meeting of 559 BCE. The leaders of the state of Jin, the major northern power, suspected that their erstwhile ally, a Rong leader Juzhi 駒支, was plotting against them, and forbade him to participate in the meeting. In response, Juzhi delivered a long speech in which he surveyed the Rong services to Jin in the past, absolved the Rong from Jin’s accusations, and finished with the following passage:

The food, drink and clothing used by us, various Rong, are not the same as those of Chinese (Hua); gifts [presented at diplomatic meetings] do not pass

<sup>11</sup> *Zuo Tradition*, 383 (xi 24.2b).

<sup>12</sup> *Liji jijie* 禮記集解 [*Records of the Rites with Collected Glosses*], compiled by Sun Xidan 孫希旦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 11 (“Qu li shang” 曲禮上).

<sup>13</sup> E.g. *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 [*Mencius, Translated and Annotated*], annotated by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 191 (8.19).

<sup>14</sup> *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解 [*Discourses of the States with Collected Glosses*], annotated by Xu Yuangao 徐元誥 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002), 58 (2.7, “Zhou yu 周語 2”).

back and forth; our languages are mutually incomprehensible. How could we do any evil?<sup>15</sup> Yet, if you do not want us to participate in the meeting, we shall not be distressed. – He recited the “Blue Fly” [ode] and left.<sup>16</sup>

Not a few scholars take Juzhi’s speech at its face value as an important survey of ethnic differences between Chinese and the aliens. Yet consider the irony of the *Zuo Tradition* account. Not only did Juzhi deliver a speech (presumably in entirely comprehensible Chinese) that was constructed in the best tradition of Zhou rhetoric, but he also enhanced its effect by reciting the ode from the *Canon of Poems*, which implicitly criticized the Jin leader for trusting slanderers. This recitation was a hallmark of Juzhi’s high diplomatic skill and of his profound adoption of the Zhou culture. The “uncouth barbarian” proved to be a highly civilized “Chinese,” and his declarations about his people’s savagery should not be taken too literally.

Juzhi’s case may reflect not only adaptation of the aliens to Zhou culture but also the complexity of this process: conceivably, his emphasis on the Rong otherness implied criticism of the widespread denigration of aliens *qua* aliens. That ethnic prejudices existed in China as elsewhere is certain, but overall, their impact on political life remained minuscule. Not incidentally, the very topic of Sino-alien dichotomy occupies a marginal place in the *Zuo Tradition* and in related historical texts. The aliens’ otherness is more often than not ignored altogether. Nothing can demonstrate this better than the case of Hu Yan (aka Zifan), one of the most celebrated statesmen of the late seventh century BCE. Only a very careful reader who could juxtapose genealogical information from several different places in the *Zuo Tradition* would discover that Hu Yan was actually a Rong person. Throughout the text (and in countless later texts) he is treated unequivocally as a cultivated member of the Xia community, and his alien origins are never mentioned. Actually, his portrait as a Xia noble seems to be historically reliable: an inscription on a set of bronze bells cast on Hu Yan’s behalf in 632 BCE portrays him as a conservative Zhou aristocrat, not as an outsider.<sup>17</sup> This is an excellent example of the permeability of cultural boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese.

<sup>15</sup> Juzhi implies that since the languages of the Rong and the Xia are mutually incomprehensible, he could not plot with other Jin allies against Jin.

<sup>16</sup> *Zuo Tradition*, 1009–1011 (Xiang 14.1).

<sup>17</sup> For this inscription, see Constance A. Cook and Paul R. Goldin (eds.), *A Source Book of Ancient Chinese Bronze Inscriptions* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 2016), 263–265.



This permeability is observable not only on an individual level but on the level of different ethnic and cultural groups, which became absorbed into Zhou culture. This absorption started early in the Western Zhou period. For instance, recently excavated burial complexes of the non-Sinitic Peng polity, located surprisingly close to the Zhou eastern capital, show how Peng's rulers navigated their course between affinity to northern non-Sinitic cultures and to their Zhou neighbors with whom they intermarried and whose written and ritual culture they adopted.<sup>18</sup> This adaptation to Zhou norms was not necessarily a sign of weakness. For instance, two powerful southeastern powers of Wu and Yue absorbed aspects of Zhou culture (and even forged appropriate genealogies), primarily as a means of bolstering their prestige en route to subjugating parts of the Zhou realm. Another interesting example is the state of Zhongshan, established by a branch of the Di people in the sixth century and reestablished in the fourth century BCE. Its elites became so versatile in the niceties of Zhou ritual culture, without abandoning, however, strong cultural ties with the semi-nomadic people to the north, that scholars still debate whether this polity was ruled after its reestablishment by a Sinitized Di elite or by a Xia elite that adapted itself to non-Sinitic customs.<sup>19</sup> Adopting the dichotomous view of Xia "Chinese" versus "barbarians" in these and many similar cases is self-defeating.

The relative marginality of identity questions in Zhou politics is observable also in the texts from the Warring States period (453–221 BCE), which is frequently dubbed the age of the Hundred Schools of Thought. Although not a few thinkers pay due attention to the existence of alien ethnicities, the topic of "us" versus "them" remains marginal in all but a very few texts. Actually, even the names of alien groups, such as Rong and Di, disappear from most historical accounts of this age. It seems that many of these people became incorporated into expansive Sinitic states of this era. However, parallel to this diminishing of tensions with outsiders, Zhou culture faced a different challenge: formation of strong regional identities that threatened to tear the Zhou world apart culturally, and not just politically.

<sup>18</sup> See Maria Khayutina, "The Tombs of Peng Rulers and Relationships between Zhou and non-Zhou lineages in Northern China (up to the early 9th c. BC)," in Edward L. Shaughnessy (ed.), *Imprints of Kinship: Studies of Recently Discovered Bronze Inscriptions from Ancient China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2017), 71–132.

<sup>19</sup> See Wu Xiaolong, *Material Culture, Power, and Identity in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

## Regional and Universal Identities in the Warring States World

The Warring States period – as its name suggests – was an age of perennial interstate warfare and ever escalating bloodshed. Yet it was also an age of economic and military revolution, of profound political and social restructuring, of unprecedented social mobility, and of fascinating new departures in the intellectual realm. Among other changes, it brought about administrative centralization, restoration of the rulers' effective control over their 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 developed in tandem with economic reforms, prompted by the “iron revolution,” which allowed the creation of the 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 model of assertive bureaucratic state was born. This state replaced the loose aristocratic polities of the Spring and Autumn era, laying the foundation for the future tightly integrated imperial polity.<sup>20</sup>

In the context of our discussion, what matters most is the territorial integration of the newly formed Warring States. This integration was a natural byproduct of the state's need to control all its land resources and all its inhabitants. All the arable lands had to be measured, recorded, allocated to peasants, and taxed. All the inhabitants had to be registered for the sake of taxation, conscription, and general surveillance. Not only arable lands mattered: a state had to control its “mountains, forests, marshes, swamps, valleys and dales” from which benefits could be extorted.<sup>21</sup> Every piece of land had to be identified as either “ours” or “theirs.”

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

<sup>20</sup> For the overall survey of Warring States period reforms, see Mark E. Lewis, “Warring States: Political History,” in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 587–650. For the iron revolution, see Donald B. Wagner, *Iron and Steel in Ancient China* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> *Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China*, trans. and ed. Yuri Pines (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 159 (6.2).

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 boundaries became a dangerous *terra incognita*, departure 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.<sup>22</sup>

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 a new sense of cultural alienation. The increasing divergence in the material and, to a lesser extent, written culture of major states is well documented by archeological, paleographic, and textual evidence. The decline of the aristocratic elite of the Spring and Autumn period meant partial abandonment of Zhou ritual culture, which had once served as a common cultural denominator of the upper classes throughout the Zhou world. The new elite, some members of which 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 and Chu in the south. Both had once been considered members of the Zhou *oikouménē*, but by the fourth to third century BCE were treated as cultural strangers. The case of Qin is the most revealing. For centuries, this state, which occupied the abandoned lands of the Western Zhou royal domain, was a culturally conservative part of the Zhou world. In the mid-fourth century BCE, however, it underwent a series of radical reforms associated with the major statesman Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE). Shang Yang replaced the pedigree-based aristocratic order with a new system of ranks of merit, which were granted primarily for military valor (such as cutting off enemies’ heads on the battlefield). This resulted in a complete overhaul of Qin’s social system. The demise of hereditary aristocracy and the rise of a new elite, in which commoners played a prominent role, was accompanied by the abandonment of traditional ritual norms. As a result, Qin’s cultural image profoundly changed. This, in addition to escalating conflicts between Qin and other states, brought about the proliferation of

<sup>22</sup> For the early walls and their manifold impact, see Yuri Pines, “The Earliest ‘Great Wall’? Long Wall of Qi revisited,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 138/4 (2018), 743–761.

strong anti-Qin sentiments throughout the Zhou world. All of a sudden, Qin was reimagined as an ultimate cultural other.<sup>23</sup>

Texts composed prior to Shang Yang's reforms contain no hint of Qin's cultural otherness. By contrast, those composed in the late Warring States period abound in anti-Qin pronouncements. Qin is equated with the Yi ("barbarians") or with the Rong and Di ("savages"). "[It is] a state with tiger's and wolf's heart: greedy, profit-seeking and untrustworthy, which knows nothing of ritual, propriety and virtuous behavior." Another speaker plainly identifies Qin as "the mortal enemy of All under Heaven."<sup>24</sup> Whereas these statements can easily be dismissed as mere anti-Qin propaganda (which they surely were), there are additional indications of Qin's estrangement from the rest of the Zhou world. Thus, Qin's legal codes from the late Warring States period distinguish between Qin's natives and not only the Rong but also the Xia (i.e. the dwellers of other Zhou states but not natives of Qin). A few pronouncements of Qin statesmen suggest self-images as cultural outsiders of the Zhou world. Although the evidence is not unequivocal, it suffices to indicate strong cultural alienation between Qin and its neighbors.<sup>25</sup>

Some of the reasons for Qin's alienation from the rest of the Zhou world are probably byproducts of the bitter conflicts of that age. Think of bloody wars, which included frequent mass beheadings of POWs, expulsion of non-combatant populations, and even their outright extermination. Think of universal conscription, which turned every Qin peasant into a soldier in Qin's army that often had to stay for months and years in the newly occupied territories surrounded by hostile local populations. Yet it is also possible that the new Qin identity was consciously bolstered by the country's rulers, eager to strengthen the domestic cohesiveness of the Qin population and enhance therewith the martial spirit of Qin's conscripts. In China as elsewhere war and identity-building were closely related.<sup>26</sup>

A similar process of cultural estrangement from the Zhou world is observable from another example, the state of Chu. Chu became politically

<sup>23</sup> See Gideon Shelach and Yuri Pines, "Secondary State Formation and the Development of Local Identity: Change and Continuity in the State of Qin (770–221 BC)," in Miriam T. Stark (ed.), *Archaeology of Asia* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 202–230.

<sup>24</sup> See *Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan yizhu* 春秋公羊傳譯注 [*Gongyang Tradition on the Spring and Autumn Annals, Translated and Annotated*], annotated by Liu Shangci 劉尚慈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), Zhao 5; *Zhanguo ce zhushi* 戰國策注釋 [*Stratagems of the Warring States, Annotated*], annotated by He Jianzhang 何建章 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 907 (24.8, "Wei ce" 魏策 3) and 508 (14.17, "Chu ce" 楚策 1).

<sup>25</sup> See more in Yuri Pines, "The Question of Interpretation: Qin History in Light of New Epigraphic Sources," *Early China*, 29 (2004), 1–44, especially pp. 23–35.

<sup>26</sup> See Shelach and Pines, "Secondary State Formation."

alienated from the Zhou royal house early in its history. Since its rulers were among the first to arrogate to themselves the royal title (*wang* 王), which should have been exclusively used by the Zhou kings, they were treated as potential usurpers. Nonetheless, political alienation aside, Chu elites continued to adhere to Zhou ritual norms throughout most of the Spring and Autumn period, and back then Chu was never dubbed a “barbarian” polity. In the Warring States period this situation changed. Texts from this age routinely identify Chu with southern “barbarians.” This new image perhaps reflected Chu’s conscious adoption of a new cultural outlook, which is observable in the distinctive “flamboyant” style of Chu mortuary goods. Once again, we witness a process of carving out a separate cultural identity by at least some segments of the Chu elites.<sup>27</sup>

The process depicted above of internal consolidation of large territorial states, amid political and cultural separation from their 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 developmental 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.<sup>28</sup> Why did this happen?

To answer this question, we should focus on the new elite of men-of-service (*shi*), which replaced (and absorbed) the aristocratic elites of the Bronze Age. The men-of-service were not only the occupants of all positions of importance in the rapidly expanding civilian and military bureaucracies; they also succeeded in establishing themselves as society’s moral and intellectual leaders. All known intellectually active individuals from the Warring States period came from this stratum. The intellectual leaders of the *shi*, the so-called Masters (*zi*), were the men who shaped Chinese political culture for millennia to come. And it was they who promulgated the idea of the unity of All-under-Heaven as a singular solution to the situation of perennial war of all against all. In this unified world, regional states and regional identities had no place.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For the Chu cultural trajectory, see the articles collected in Constance A. Cook and John S. Major (eds.), *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Early China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

<sup>28</sup> See Mark E. Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 189–244, and Yuri Pines’s review of this book in *Early China*, 30 (2005), 181–187.

<sup>29</sup> See Yuri Pines, “‘The One that Pervades the All’ in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: The Origins of ‘The Great Unity’ Paradigm,” *T’oung Pao*, 86/4–5. (2000), 280–324.

The “universal” outlook of the Warring States period men-of-service reflected their peculiar career patterns. In marked contrast to the Bronze Age nobles, who normally occupied hereditary positions in a single polity and emigrated only under duress, the men-of-service frequently moved from one state to another. In an age when most states tried to prevent emigration, these elite members 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.<sup>30</sup> Lacking the intellectuals’ endorsement, local identities of the Warring States never developed into a politically meaningful factor, as happened elsewhere, for example, in modern Europe.

This observation explains the complexity of the cultural trajectories of, for example, Qin and Chu. For instance, whereas Qin may have benefited from stronger cohesiveness of its conscripts, it would also have had to maintain bridges with the rest of the Zhou world, so as to facilitate incorporation of the newly conquered territories and to attract immigrants, whose presence was strongly desired by Qin leaders.<sup>31</sup> Of these immigrants, particularly important were guest statesmen who could climb to the very top of Qin’s administration (and even its military). These guest ministers and their retinue served as a cultural bridge that prevented Qin’s further estrangement from its peer polities. Whereas some members of the ruling lineage were unhappy with the employment of guest ministers in key positions and appealed to nativism to quell it, and whereas members of lower strata may have had a stronger sense of Qin native identity, insofar as the intellectually dominant stratum of the men-of-service is concerned, their goal was to stem the forces of cultural disintegration rather than to fan cultural divisions.<sup>32</sup>

A similar observation can be made with regard to Chu. While Chu’s leading aristocrats did maintain a distinctive cultural identity, and this identity may have had strong appeal among lower strata as well, this was not the case with intellectually active men-of-service. Their attitude can be gleaned

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *Construction of Space*, 192–212.

<sup>31</sup> For Qin’s need for immigrants, see Yuri Pines, “Waging a Demographic War: Chapter 15 (‘Attracting the People’) of the *Book of Lord Shang Revisited*,” *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung*, 43 (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> Shelach and Pines, “Secondary State Formation.”

from Chu's locally produced historical texts. Surprisingly, these texts never employ history to strengthen Chu's local identity. They neither eulogize the country's military achievements, nor lament its failures so as to bolster the readers' identification with their homeland. Their outlook is decisively cosmopolitan and identity-neutral.<sup>33</sup> Once again, we may discern a common pattern: local identities existed and were endorsed by the uppermost segment of the nobility (members of the ruling lineage who continued to have a stake in their natal state) and were probably shared by many commoners. Yet without the endorsement of intellectually active men-of-service, these identities did not develop into a politically potent weapon like in modern Europe. Under the soon-to-be-established unified imperial regime, local identities ceased to be a politically divisive factor.

### China and the World: The Impact of Imperial Unification

In 221 BCE, the expectations of generations of preimperial thinkers were realized, albeit not necessarily in the way they hoped. King Zheng of Qin (r. 246–210 BCE), having subjugated all the rival states, put an end to centuries of war and bloodshed. Proud of his unprecedented achievement, the king changed his title to the First Emperor and proclaimed the new beginning. He promised his subjects that “warfare will not arise again” and that the era of “Great Peace” (*tai ping* 太平) had arrived.<sup>34</sup> This was a hasty promise though. Within just a few years of unifying the realm, the First Emperor had to take up arms again.

Among manifold explanations for Qin's swift abandonment of its promises of eternal peace, one is pertinent to this chapter. Having declared “mission accomplished” in 221 BCE, the First Emperor could not entirely ignore one important problem: there were still areas beyond his direct control. Whether or not these areas should be incorporated in the unified realm was a thorny question. Preimperial discussants of the would-be imperial unification (and of its legendary and semi-legendary antecedents) had rarely addressed the

<sup>33</sup> See Yuri Pines, “Chu Identity as Seen from its Manuscripts: A Reevaluation,” *Journal of Chinese History*, 2/1 (2018): 1–26.

<sup>34</sup> For the First Emperor, his image, and his propaganda, see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000); Yuri Pines, “The Messianic Emperor: A New Look at Qin's Place in China's History,” in Yuri Pines, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Gideon Shelach, and Robin Yates (eds.), *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 258–279.

question of the empire's territorial limits. Some of the texts focused on the "nine provinces" (*jiu zhou*), which were more or less coterminous with what may be dubbed "China proper," leaving the alien periphery beyond their interest. Other texts put forward the so-called Five (or Nine) Zones scheme, in which the outlying areas inhabited by the alien tribes should be at least symbolically (but not practically) incorporated into the unified realm.<sup>35</sup> Yet most other texts promoted a much broader and inclusive vision of unity. They insisted that the future unifier, the True Monarch, should put in order not just "Central States" (China), but also the alien periphery, eventually extending his blessed impact even to beasts and birds. The unity should be truly universal.<sup>36</sup>

Notably absent from preimperial discussions of unity were ideas of unity *against* the barbarian other. Quite to the contrary, whenever the aliens figure in debates over unification, it is implied that they should be its beneficiaries, the would-be subjects of the morally impeccable True Monarch. This optimism was not ungrounded. It reflected the relatively smooth expansion of Sinitic states into the alien periphery during the Warring States period, which proved that alien polities and tribes could ultimately be assimilated into the culture of the Central States. The First Emperor was clearly committed to truly universal unification. In one of his stele inscriptions he boasted that "wherever human traces reach, there is none who does not declare himself [my] subject." The same stele (erected in 219 BCE) outlines the confines of the new realm. On three of the cardinal directions the territory under the emperor's control reaches natural limits (the flying sands in the west, the sea in the east, and the areas beyond the Tropic of Cancer, where the people's doors "faced north" toward the sun, in the south).<sup>37</sup> In the north, however, the definition is notoriously vague, reflecting perhaps the emperor's lack of clarity as to where to stop the expansion there. Soon enough, the First Emperor duly dispatched his troops northward, toward the steppe. The campaign was successful, but it had unanticipated consequences for China's political history and to a certain extent for its sense of identity.

<sup>35</sup> See Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, "Ritual Practices for Constructing Terrestrial Space (Warring States–Early Han)," in John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (eds.), *Early Chinese Religion, Part 1: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), vol. 1, 629–636.

<sup>36</sup> Yuri Pines, "Limits of All-under-Heaven: Ideology and Praxis of 'Great Unity' in Early Chinese Empire," in Yuri Pines, Michal Biran, and Jörg Rüpke (eds.), *Universality and its Limits: Spatial Dimensions of Eurasian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 79–110, especially pp. 89–93.

<sup>37</sup> Kern, *Stele Inscriptions*, 32–33.



Qin's aggression prompted the steppe tribes, who until then had been only minimally engaged in the political affairs of the Chinese world, to reorganize. The newly emerged Xiongnu confederacy immediately turned into the formidable rival of China. Soon after the Han dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE) replaced the short-lived Qin, Xiongnu intervened in the ensuing civil war, and inflicted a major blow on the Han founder, Gaozu (r. 206–195 BCE). Startled, the beleaguered Han leaders had to opt for peace. They promised a princess to marry the leader of the Xiongnu, the *chanyu*, and added lavish subsidies for the erstwhile foes, so as to maintain "harmony of the kin." Alas, the appeasement policy failed to prevent recurrent Xiongnu incursions. Worse, it infuriated many Han statesmen who considered it humiliating to Han imperial prestige. When the assertive Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) came to power, he opted for war.<sup>38</sup>

Emperor Wu's armies scored several impressive victories, dramatically expanding the territories under the Han control, but soon enough it became clear that decisive victory remained elusive. The Xiongnu's major advantage was their inhospitable terrain, which could not be meaningfully absorbed by Chinese agriculturalists. This was tacitly understood already by the First Emperor, who ordered the erection of the Great Wall to protect the newly conquered Xiongnu territories, putting therewith a self-imposed limit on China's further expansion. The Han leaders also learned the lesson. Campaigns against highly mobile Xiongnu proved to be costly and ultimately ineffective. Even major victories brought about only limited benefits. Whereas semi-arid areas to the south of the steppe belt could be effectively incorporated into the empire, the deserts and steppes to the north of the Great Wall forever remained the abode of the Xiongnu.

After decades of war that devastated the Han economy, a breakthrough was achieved. The internal strife among the Xiongnu caused the *chanyu* to adopt a peaceful stance. He recognized Han superiority and entered into so-called tribute relations. In exchange for Xiongnu's tribute, the Han emperors bestowed on them lavish gifts, which benefited the nomads enormously. Once again, relations reverted to those of tense peace; yet once again, stability failed to materialize. When the balance of power tilted in the Xiongnu favor (e.g. in the early first century CE), they tried to renegotiate their inferior status. And when, in the late first century, the Xiongnu confederacy was finally destroyed, this did not bring respite either. Rather, new

<sup>38</sup> See details in Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

nomadic players filled the vacuum on the steppe, continuing to press the Han.<sup>39</sup>

After generations of ebbs and flows in relations, the Han leaders realized that there was no magic weapon that would bring about the Xiongnu's permanent submission. Neither peaceful nor military methods allowed maintenance of lasting stability along the frontiers. Attempts to lure the Xiongnu into the orbit of Chinese civilization through lavish gifts were of limited effect as well. For the first time in its history, China encountered a rival which could be neither conquered nor transformed into a part of the Chinese cultural *oikouménē*.<sup>40</sup> This awareness resulted in profound reevaluation of the Sino-alien divide. An increasing number of statesmen and thinkers came to the conclusion that the inborn nature of the nomads, determined by their peculiar environment, made them inassimilable and fundamentally ungovernable.<sup>41</sup> This understanding crystallized in the writing of a great historian, Ban Gu (32–92 CE). Having surveyed the centuries-long futile attempts of the Han rulers to get rid of the Xiongnu menace, Ban Gu concludes:

They [the savages] are separated [from us] by mountains and gorges, and barred by the desert: thereby Heaven and Earth sever the internal from the external. Therefore, the sage kings treated them as beasts and birds, did not make treaties with them and were not engaged in offensive expeditions: if you make a treaty with them, they spend the gifts and then deceive you; if you attack them, then the army is exhausted and you induce banditry. Their lands cannot be tilled for living; their people cannot be treated as subjects; therefore they must be regarded as external and not internal, as strangers and not as relatives.<sup>42</sup>

Ban Gu is unequivocal: neither military conquest nor imposition of tribute obligations on the aliens is feasible or even desirable. The dream of universalism embedded in the concept of “All-under-Heaven” is dismissed here.

<sup>39</sup> Rafe de Crespigny, *Northern Frontier: The Policies and Strategy of the Later Han Empire* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> See more in Di Cosmo, *Ancient China*; cf. Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989).

<sup>41</sup> See Paul R. Goldin, “Steppe Nomads as a Philosophical Problem in Classical China,” in Paula L. W. Sabloff (ed.), *Mapping Mongolia: Situating Mongolia in the World from Geologic Time to the Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2011), 220–246.

<sup>42</sup> Ban Gu's discussion from the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (*Hanshu* 漢書) is cited here from Yuri Pines, “Beasts or Humans: Pre-Imperial Origins of Sino-Barbarian Dichotomy,” in Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (eds.), *Mongols, Turks and Others* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 79–80.

Geographic conditions and historical lessons alike drive Ban Gu to the conclusion that the separation between Chinese and the aliens is the only reasonable choice.

### Afterword

Ban Gu's statement could easily be interpreted as reflecting a fundamental shift from inclusive views of Chineseness that dominated pre-imperial discourse to a new, exclusive view in which the Great Wall served as the dividing line between "us" and "them." In practice, however, things were much more complex: the inclusive and exclusive views of Chinese identity continued to coexist throughout the imperial millennia. The exclusivist arguments were often promulgated by opponents of military expansion,<sup>43</sup> or, in the late imperial period, by those literati who refused to acquiesce to potential or actual alien rule over China proper.<sup>44</sup> During periods of prolonged weakness vis-à-vis foreign powers, e.g. the Song dynasty (960–1279), exclusive views could gain prominence to the degree that they resemble modern national identity.<sup>45</sup> Inclusive views, in distinction, were often endorsed by supporters of robust territorial expansion (e.g. under the Tang dynasty, 618–907), as well as by those eager to serve the conquest dynasties.<sup>46</sup> Each of these opposite views could be adopted and articulated in response to specific political circumstances by different groups. None formed the basis of a permanent consensus, although the inclusive view generally enjoyed higher intellectual prestige.

As for the centrifugal tendencies of regionalism, these were quelled in the unified empire but never disappeared entirely. Particularly under periodic disintegrations of the realm (e.g. in the third to sixth century CE), regional identities could become stronger and more meaningful politically.<sup>47</sup> Even in the unified empire they were often present as the backdrop of inter-elite competition for political and economic benefits. On a lower social level, local (or linguistic) identities could become a source of powerful political

<sup>43</sup> Yang, "Their Lands are Peripheral."

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, "Proto-Nationalism in Twelfth-Century China? The Case of Ch'en Liang," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 39/2 (1979), 403–428.

<sup>45</sup> See Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., John D. Langlois, "Chinese Culturalism and the Yüan Analogy: Seventeenth Century Perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 40/2 (1981), 355–398.

<sup>47</sup> See Andrew Chittick, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History: Ethnic Identity and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

mobilization, as was, for instance, the case of the Hakka in the nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Yet, time and again, the principle of “great unity” prevailed. Regionalism remained a powerful force, but it never evolved into political secessionism. The desideratum of the political unity of China remained unquestionable. Moreover, the ongoing cultural and ideological unity on the elite level remained a powerful antidote against the disintegration of what we call today the “Chinese nation.”

### Further Reading

- Chittick, Andrew, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History: Ethnic Identity and Political Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
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<sup>48</sup> See Sow-Theng Leong, *Migration and Ethnicity in Chinese History: Hakkas, Pengmin, and their Neighbors*, ed. Tim Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).