

A COMPANION TO CHINESE HISTORY

Edited by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Early China in Eurasian History

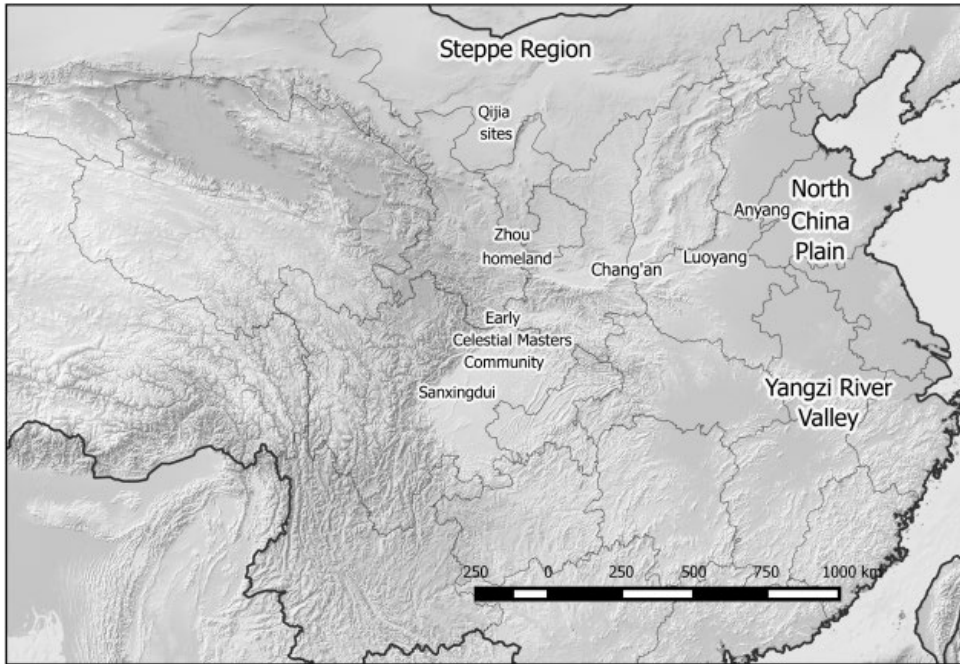
MICHAEL PUETT

Narratives of modernity have long haunted the study of early China. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, China was in many ways the most significant Other for narratives of the rise of the west. China was seen as a civilization that for much of its history was quite comparable to Europe, but that for some reason or set of reasons had failed to enter the modern world on its own as Europe had. And early China was often interpreted accordingly. Early China was commonly seen as the foundation of Chinese civilization, as the place where many of the critical institutional, political, and cultural features of Chinese civilization emerged—features that both created the extraordinary growth of China and yet also ultimately held China back.

Much of the scholarship focused on questions such as: What was the origin of Chinese civilization? What does this tell us about the resulting development of China? What are the distinctive features of Chinese civilization? How and why did these features take shape in the early period, and how did they define (for better and worse) later Chinese history?

There was a clear pattern to many of the answers to these questions. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the answers were negative. Chinese civilization was presented as derivative from and/or lesser than western civilization. Certain distinctive features of Chinese civilization were seen as having inhibited the emergence of modernity in China. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, a reaction set in, and the emphasis shifted toward emphasizing both the indigenous origins of Chinese civilization and the positive qualities of features that defined the civilization. The very features that had been singled out for critique in the earlier scholarship were now instead praised as those that might potentially lead to a better modernity. A few brief examples will demonstrate the pattern.

To begin at the beginning (as such a paradigm would define the beginning): What was the origin of Chinese civilization? For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a common answer was that Chinese civilization emerged through diffusion from the west. Chinese civilization was thus presented as inferior to and derivative from western civilization. By the 1970s, this had been replaced by a model emphasizing the



Early China – major regions and sites. Map by Lex Berman.

indigenous origins of Chinese civilization. China was presented as forming a “cradle of the East,” giving birth to a distinctive East Asian civilization, much as the Near East, Greece, and Rome had formed a cradle for the birth of western civilization. (For an analysis of the full debate, see Puett 1998.)

Discussions of the specific features designated as distinctive for China went through a similar paradigmatic shift. Cultural values of harmony, for example, were variously ascribed to early religious practices such as shamanism or to later philosophical movements such as Confucianism. Again, the normative interpretation shifted from largely negative (an emphasis on harmony, e.g., being seen by Weber as having led to the lack of the tension with the world that had been crucial for the emergence of capitalism in the west) to largely positive (harmony being presented as an antidote to the alienation from fellow humans and nature in the modern world). Despite the shift in normative valuation, however, the general paradigm remained remarkably stable.

Over the past two decades, however, this paradigm has been shaken dramatically. This is in part a result of the significant questioning of the paradigm that has occurred for the study of Chinese history in general. But, more specifically for the early period, an explosion of recent archaeological discoveries has opened up the possibility for rethinking many of our long-held assumptions.

We now have a great deal of evidence concerning the regional differences of the areas of what would ultimately become China, as well as the ways in which these regional cultures interacted over time. This has largely rendered moot any discussions of the fundamental features of “Chinese civilization,” as scholars have instead turned to analyses of regional cultural spheres.

Archaeologists have also discovered an extraordinary range of texts from a wide variety of genres, including divination texts, inscribed bronze vessels, legal codes, legal cases, and administrative documents. These documents span from the Bronze Age world of the late Shang through the early imperial period. Much of the most important scholarship of the past two decades has focused on explicating these paleographic materials. Many of what were once thought to be defining assumptions in early China are now seen as at most positions in a set of complex social and cultural debates.

In addition, we now possess large amounts of archaeological evidence from the rest of Eurasia as well. This has allowed us to rethink issues such as “cradles of civilization” versus diffusion. We are finally able to think not of China as a singular entity that either did or did not emerge autochthonously, but rather of the different ways in which the regions that make up what is now China were interacting with and became part of a larger Eurasian history.

The goal of this chapter will be to focus in particular on the latter issues: how these new materials may allow us to begin to rethink and reformulate the larger comparative issues from the past. One of the goals for the next generation, along with continuing the work of interpreting the new paleographic materials, is to think through how to return to larger comparative questions, but in a different way than the implicit (and often explicit) modernity narratives that have dominated earlier scholarship.

The geography of Eurasia

To rethink early Chinese history, it is helpful to move to both higher and lower levels of analysis. Lower, in the sense that we need to think in terms not of “China” but rather of regions; and higher, in the sense that we need to see the connections between these different areas and the rest of Eurasia.

The borders of contemporary China include a number of diverse geographical regions. For reasons we will be exploring, these regions ultimately came to be controlled by a series of empires emanating from the North China plain. But, when we explore the earlier history of these areas, it is important that we begin by looking at the regions as distinct, albeit interacting. These interactions included the larger interaction spheres that made up Eurasia. Instead of simply asking how, for example, the states in the North China plain connected to what is now southern China, we should also be asking how the states in the North China plain connected to the rest of Eurasia.

The North China plain is on the same latitude as the stretch of Eurasia that includes, on the other end of the continent, the Near East and the Mediterranean regions. This was an area that proved to be highly conducive to agriculture. Moreover, since all of these regions are roughly on the same latitude, sharing similar climates and soil conditions, technologies and practices that worked well at one end of this belt of Eurasia tended to work equally well in the other. (For an excellent discussion of these processes, see Diamond 1997.) This was as true of domesticated foods and animals as it was of military technologies such as chariot warfare and, later, the use of mass infantry armies. A recurrent theme we will see throughout the early period is that technologies that took off at one end of Eurasia were often equally effective at the other end.

The region in between the North China plain and Near East or Mediterranean is a belt of semi-arid deserts that runs across central Asia. This region could support agriculture, but not at the levels one finds at the two ends of Eurasia. Beginning in the last

century before the Common Era, this is the region through which the trade networks that would later come to be called the Silk Road emerged. Goods, of course, traveled across these trade networks, but so did religious movements.

Directly to the north is the huge band of grasslands known as the steppe region. Since agriculture is extremely difficult in the steppe, human domestication turned toward pastoral nomadism, in which humans would live off domesticated animals who themselves would live off the grass. After the development of horse riding, the populations throughout the steppe region became highly mobile, dramatically expanding the scope of where they could travel. It is impossible to understand the history of Eurasia without looking in detail at how the agricultural civilizations were interacting with, trading with, and at times warring with the nomadic populations in the steppe regions.

South of the North China plain was the Yangzi River valley. This area is densely forested, mountainous, and far wetter than the North China plain. The radically different environment meant that the technologies and innovations that worked so well across Eurasia in the latitudes of the North China plain worked poorly in the south. If everything from domesticated wheat to chariot warfare to mass infantry formations could move easily across the east–west latitudes that connected the North China plain to the Mediterranean region, those same technologies were much less conducive to the terrain in what is now southern China. The dominant crop in this region was rice, rather than millet or wheat. And the types of military formations that proved to be so effective in the North China plain were relatively ineffective here.

In all likelihood, the peoples of this area were speakers of languages ancestral to those now spoken in Southeast Asia. This changed slowly, as immigrants from the North China plain gradually moved into these areas.

Continuing to move south and eastward, one reaches the southeastern coast. This has long been an area defined by maritime trade. It is likely that this is the area from which the peoples now known as Austronesians spread. The spread of the Austronesians was probably not unlike later diasporas from this same area: the spread probably occurred across the maritime trade routes that in all likelihood began at a very early period.

One of the key sets of questions facing the field of Chinese history is to work out how these areas interacted with the rest of Eurasia over time, from the earliest period to the present. Instead of the old debate of diffusion versus indigenous origins, we are finally in a position to rethink these questions from a historical perspective. Ultimately, this will help us to rethink our entire narratives of modernity and the rise of the west.

Animal and plant domestication

After the end of the last Ice Age, the human domestication of plants and animals began in a number of areas across Eurasia. One of the exciting issues for archaeological research is to work out not only when and where the various grains, animals, and fibers that have been crucial to Eurasian cultures were domesticated, but also how these various domestications were appropriated and utilized in various regions across Eurasia. The concern, in other words, is not to work out what is “autochthonous” and what is “diffused,” or which culture made which domestication first. The concern is rather to explore the historical implications of the various ways such domestications played out in Eurasian history.

Millet, soybeans, hemp, pigs, chickens, and silkworms were among the domesticated products of populations living in the North China plain. All of these would ultimately spread across the east–west belt of mid-Eurasia, just as wheat and barley, originally domesticated in the Near East, spread to the North China plain (see the excellent summary by Shelach-Lavi 2015).

Rice, on the other hand, was a domesticated product that worked poorly in the east–west belt of mid-Eurasia. Instead, it would spread further south, becoming a major crop in what is now South China and Southeast Asia.

The Bronze Age states of Eurasia

As these domesticated products were appropriated and utilized by cultures across the fertile belt of Eurasia, populations began to grow and social hierarchies began to set in. This marked the beginning of what would become a pattern in the agricultural areas of Eurasia. Except when other institutions would come into play, the agricultural areas of Eurasia tended to be dominated by hereditary elites.

Many of these hereditary aristocracies made use of another technology that began spreading across Eurasia: bronze. Bronze was an alloy of tin and copper that was relatively expensive to make. It tended to be associated with aristocracies—so much so that this entire period of aristocratic rule has come to be known as the Bronze Age. Explorations of the larger interaction spheres of the Bronze Age remain one of the more exciting areas for future research (Sherratt 2006).

Bronze metallurgy began to spread throughout Eurasia during the third millennium BCE, appearing in Xinjiang by the beginning of the second millennium BCE, and in Qijia sites in Gansu and Qinghai soon thereafter.

The first site in the North China plain that started using bronze to significant degrees was Erlitou, in the first few centuries of the second millennium BCE. But the ways that bronze was appropriated and the uses to which it was put in the North China plain were distinctive. Among the most important uses of bronze in Erlitou was the making of bronze ritual vessels. Moreover, the bronze-casting methods employed involved the use of piece-mold techniques, allowing for a more complex form of casting than that which developed elsewhere.

In stories from the Warring States period, the beginning of the Bronze Age aristocratic states in China was associated with Yu, who, among other things, was said to have cast bronze vessels. Unlike the previous rulers Yao and Shun, Yu, as he grew older, did not yield the kingship to the most virtuous figure in the realm. He on the contrary gave the kingship to his own son. This began the first dynasty, called the Xia.

According to the tradition, therefore, the beginning of the Xia was both the beginning of hereditary monarchy and associated with bronze. Several scholars have accordingly tried to identify Erlitou with the Xia dynasty. But attempts to link archaeological sites with the later written record are still only speculation at this point.

Other bronze-using societies also appeared in what is now China. One of the most famous of these is Sanxingdui, in modern Sichuan (Bagley 2001). We know little about the culture of Sanxingdui, other than that the culture was clearly distinctive from that of the North China plain. For historical reasons we will trace shortly, it is the Bronze Age societies of the North China plain that would become so important for later Chinese history.

Chariots

Returning to Eurasia, we continue to see the spread of other technologies, including the chariot. The chariot was invented in the western portion of the steppe around 2000 BCE. Over the subsequent four centuries, it became a major war vehicle in the western end of Eurasia (Anthony 2010).

Paleographic evidence demonstrates the spread of war chariots across Central Asia over the subsequent few centuries. Although the mechanisms of the transmission are not clear, it presumably involved a process of neighboring groups adopting a military technology that was becoming increasingly dominant. The first appearance of the chariot in the North China plain is in Anyang in 1200 BCE (Piggott 1974; 1978; Shaughnessy 1988).

Unlike Erlitou, we can clearly correlate Anyang with our historical record.

The Bronze Age dynasties of the North China plain

Anyang was the last capital of the Shang dynasty—the dynasty that, according to later stories, followed the Xia. The reason we can say this with confidence is that Anyang is the first site from which we have written documents. The documents are in the form of inscriptions on turtle plastrons and ox scapulae. The inscriptions are records of divinations made to the ancestors of the Shang kings. (For an excellent discussion of these materials, see Keightley 2000.) Intriguingly, the Shang ancestors closely match the list of Shang kings that we have in Han dynasty historical accounts. So, at least the Shang was a historical dynasty. And Anyang is the first time we have an unambiguous correlation of the later historical record with an archaeological site.

Even if it were not connected to the historical record, Anyang is a telling site in terms of larger Eurasian patterns. By 1200 BCE, the Shang state looked quite similar to agriculturally based states across Eurasia. When comparing it to, for example, the Mycenaean kingdom in Greece at roughly the same time, one notes a society dominated by an aristocracy using bronze weapons and chariots, and marked, among other things, by the use of writing. States across the east–west band of Eurasia were beginning to look very similar.

But, given this general similarity across the east–west band of Eurasia, what is particularly interesting were the permutations of differences between them. Detailing the nature of the polities in the North China plain and the ways that these polities made use of the pan-Eurasian technologies will help us to understand some of the religious practices and political theories that would later become so important.

One of the key uses of bronze, along with weapons for the aristocracy, was for the creation of ritual vessels. Bronze vessels were used to make offerings to deceased humans, calling on them to behave as proper ancestors and therefore to support the living. They would also be called upon to support each ancestor in each higher generation, ultimately moving up the hierarchy to the highest deity called Di.

It is clear from the divination rituals that the ancestors were seen as highly capricious. The goal of the rituals was to attempt to determine the intentions of the ancestors and to determine what sacrifices would gain their support or at least convince them to be less antagonistic.

The general political and ritual complex one sees in Anyang seems to have been shared among other groups across the North China plain. One of these, the Zhou, lived to the

west of Anyang. The material culture of the Zhou was extremely similar to the Shang: in general we see similar burial practices, similar use of ritual bronzes for sacrifice, similar use of writing to record divination rituals, and a similar (although apparently more extensive) use of chariotry in warfare.

In the mid-eleventh century BCE, the Zhou launched an attack on the eastern state. The Zhou conquered the Shang state and took control of the North China plain.

The primary deity of the Zhou was called Heaven (Tian). The Zhou equated Di and Heaven. In texts that would later be collected into the *Book of Documents (Shujing)*, the Zhou claimed that Heaven had supported the Shang while they were good rulers, and then withdrew that support after they failed to maintain their virtue. This doctrine they claimed to be the “Mandate of Heaven”: Heaven would grant the mandate to a good ruler, who would then found a dynasty. When the lineage failed to live up to its duties, Heaven would withdraw the mandate and instead offer it to the most deserving figure, who would then begin a new dynasty. In the Zhou interpretation, this is what had happened when the Shang defeated the Xia, and in turn what happened when the Zhou defeated the Shang.

The leading lineage would thus control the kingship. The king would theoretically control all of the land and resources of the kingdom. He would then parcel out this land to his close relatives and supporters, who would rule the land as long as the leading lineage remained in power. One of the exciting fields of research for the Zhou is to use excavated and received materials to explicate how this Western Zhou form of governance worked. Li Feng (2008) has argued that the Western Zhou state was more bureaucratic than we have previously recognized, while Lothar von Falkenhausen (2006) has instead argued that the governance system was largely kin-based.

These three Bronze Age dynasties—the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou—would come to be known as the Three Dynasties. They would later be associated in Chinese history with relatively decentralized kingdoms (compared with what was to develop later in the North China plain). And, because of the Mandate of Heaven, they would also be associated with a rule of virtue.

As is perhaps implied in the name of the “Three Dynasties,” this period came to a close. To explain the transformations over the next several centuries, it will be helpful to return to a larger Eurasian perspective.

The rise of pastoral nomadism in the steppe

The Bronze Age aristocratic states that dominated the agricultural areas of Eurasia in the second millennium BCE were all destroyed over the course of the ensuing several centuries. The changes were again pan-Eurasian.

Let us begin with the steppe region. Sometime around 1000 BCE, horse riding became more prominent on the steppes. Horse riding allowed for the possibility of a full flourishing of pastoral nomadism across the steppe region. It also had significant military implications. Once groups started riding horses and domesticating them for endurance and speed, significant cavalry forces began to emerge. By the eighth century BCE, highly effective cavalry formations started developing across the steppes (Drews 2008). This began a pattern that would ultimately be crucial for later Eurasian history.

Given the nature of the steppe region, populations were relatively low. Small groups would travel with their domesticated animals. However, when a large number of groups could be brought together under a charismatic leader, the resulting cavalry forces were

often militarily overwhelming. At various times in world history, such alliances would occur, and the nomadic groups would attain a position of extreme dominance over the armies of the agricultural states. The most famous such occurrence happened in the thirteenth century with the emergence of the Mongol empire. But there were several other periods in Eurasian history when the steppe region became militarily dominant as well—including the period that witnessed the breakdown of the great agricultural empires in the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. And, in other periods, the rise of powerful nomadic empires occurred in direct correlation with the emergence of powerful agricultural empires.

First millennium BCE

If steppe warfare was developing toward cavalry formations in the first millennium BCE, the agricultural areas began developing in different ways. These developments are often referred to as the Iron Age, which is shorthand for a number of shifts that occurred across the agricultural regions of Eurasia at this time.

If bronze was an expensive substance to create, and was therefore associated with aristocratic culture, iron was on the contrary a widely available natural substance. Moreover, iron is, at least potentially, a far easier substance to work with than bronze. The difficulty of using iron comes simply from the fact that a high temperature is needed in order to cast iron effectively. But, once the technology was known, iron implements—both weapons and tools—could be easily mass-produced.

For agricultural work, the implications were enormous. Farmers throughout much of Eurasia—including China—were still using wood and stone implements well into the first millennium BCE. With the invention of iron, however, it became possible to supply farmers with iron tools. The result was a tremendous population growth throughout the agricultural areas of Eurasia.

This population growth had implications as well for the nature of warfare in the agricultural areas of Eurasia. The form of warfare associated with the Bronze Age had been predominantly aristocratic. The chariot riders were aristocrats, armed with bronze weapons. With the population surge, however, it became possible to start creating mass infantry armies. Moreover, iron technology made it possible throughout much of Eurasia (with the exception of, as we will see, the North China plain for a few more centuries) to mass-produce iron weapons with which to equip these expanded armies.

The emergence of mass infantry armies was directly related to the creation over the first millennium BCE of well-organized states to arm and train these mass infantry armies. And, with the formation of strong states and mass armies, social mobility of those born below the aristocracy started becoming possible.

These developments had other far-reaching implications as well. One of the consequences of the breakdown of the earlier hereditary states was a dramatic questioning of the religious practices associated with those aristocratic worlds. Beginning in roughly the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, and continuing for two to three centuries thereafter, a number of new philosophical and religious movements emerged in the agricultural states of Eurasia. This is the period that witnessed the emergence of the Orphics, Pythagoreans, the Platonic movement, Jainism, Buddhism, and, in China, Mohists, Confucians, and a figure named Laozi, who would later be credited with beginning Daoism.

China in the first millennium BCE

If these are the overall developments occurring across Eurasia, let us again turn to the specific permutations occurring in the North China plain. And, to do so, let us pick up where we left off—the Western Zhou dynasty.

As noted earlier, the Western Zhou was a relatively decentralized aristocratic kingdom. As later political theorists in China would point out, there was an inherent tendency toward fragmentation in the Zhou form of political arrangement. When the Zhou king would initially make a land grant to a close supporter, it would be to someone whom he at least thought could be controlled. Over the generations, however, this control would tend to lessen; in each generation the respective lineages would have less connection with each other. Over time, therefore, the lineages would tend to become increasingly independent.

The implications of this are easy to imagine. After two or three centuries, one of the other lineages might begin to grow in power and start gaining more support from other lineages. Eventually, if the Zhou became weak enough, one of the other lineages might be able to overthrow the Zhou, claim the Mandate of Heaven, and begin a new dynasty—the fourth aristocratic dynasty.

But this did not happen. Or, rather, only some of this happened. The Zhou did indeed start declining in power. But, instead of another aristocratic lineage emerging to overthrow the Zhou and begin a new dynasty, the developments occurring across Eurasia instead came into play.

The first such impact occurred in the eighth century BCE. The emergence of effective cavalry formations in the steppe region created massive dislocations, as groups that successfully began developing cavalry units started driving off those who did not. One of the losers in this was the Quanrong, a group of non-horse-riders that seems to have been driven from the steppes. The Quanrong pushed into the Zhou homeland and forced the Zhou eastward. The Zhou set up their new capital in Chengzhou (modern-day Luoyang), a city founded by King Cheng. The next phase of the Zhou is accordingly referred to as the “Eastern Zhou.”

The weakened Zhou certainly would have seemed ripe for overthrow by this time. But then the other developments from Eurasia began impacting the North China plain. Instead of another lineage emerging to overthrow the Zhou, the entire social hierarchy of the aristocracy itself began to be undermined.

The most extreme example occurred in the state of Qin. In the mid-fourth century BCE, the state of Qin undertook a series of reforms aimed at centralizing state control, breaking down aristocratic rule, creating a series of laws and punishments that applied to everyone (commoners and aristocrats alike) equally, and creating a bureaucracy based upon principles of merit rather than birth. The goal of these reforms was to have the state take direct control over land and resources and utilize these resources for war. The Qin succeeded in creating an enormous, and extremely well-trained, mass infantry army that eventually overwhelmed the other states. Although most of the weapons used were bronze, the Qin reforms were clearly a permutation of the larger developments occurring in the agricultural areas of Eurasia at this time.

These reforms created two main avenues for possible social mobility. The first was the army: excellent skills demonstrated on the battlefield could lead to advancement in the ranks. The second was the bureaucracy: those who could prove their bureaucratic efficiency were in a strong position to be promoted.

There was also a built-in bias that worked to promote social mobility. For these reforms to be successful, it would be necessary for the state to be able to take direct control of as many resources as possible. But of course, each locality was controlled by aristocrats, who certainly had no desire to give up control. There was thus a strong incentive to hire people born below the aristocracy. Such people would owe their position entirely to the state and would have every reason to work on behalf of the state's growth.

The reforms successfully achieved many of the state's primary goals: breaking down the aristocratic families in the state of Qin and creating a strong, centralized state that was able to run an effective, well-trained mass infantry army. Some of the most exciting research being undertaken for the Warring States period consists of utilizing archaeological evidence to shed light on this breakdown of the aristocracy (see, e.g., Falkenhausen 2006).

A further result of the reforms is that they forced the other states to start undertaking similar measures. Indeed, much of the history of the ensuing century reflects a clear pattern: those states that did not initiate similar reforms and did not develop the kind of mass infantry armies being created elsewhere were swallowed up by those that did. Eventually, the entire North China plain came to be controlled by a small number of highly centralized states. By the latter part of the third century BCE, only one of the states still survived.

This period—which spanned the fifth through third centuries BCE—has come to be known as the Warring States period, for the obvious reason that it was characterized by the political strife that resulted from newly centralized states competing for dominance.

The Warring States period is also significant for another reason. Although the reforms achieved the state's goals, they also resulted in several unintended consequences. Figures born below the aristocracy began being educated, hoping that, by gaining training in reading, writing, and the art of debate, they too might be able to gain employment in the newly formed bureaucracies. Some, of course, did succeed in gaining positions in government, but many did not. And this created an entire group of people who were both highly educated and extremely dissatisfied with the new societal landscape.

Out of this group emerged a number of radical movements. One of these, the Mohists, began under the leadership of a charismatic founder named Mozi. The Mohists were organized around the claims that Heaven was a purely good deity who ruled over a pantheon of ghosts who in turn always acted to reward the good and punish the bad. Since the cosmos was flawlessly moral, humans were called upon to create an equally moral realm on earth as well. Among the many things this entailed was the formation of paramilitary units that would stand in defense of any city that was being attacked—the goal being to bring an end to offensive warfare. Although the Mohists would eventually die out, many of the characteristics of the Mohists would be repeated in later millenarian movements.

Other movements would also have far-reaching implications in later Chinese history. One of the more influential of these emerged out of the teachings of a figure named Confucius. Confucius's teachings emphasized the importance of returning to the rituals of the early Western Zhou—a series of rituals he then reinterpreted to be about moral cultivation.

Yet another figure that would ultimately be highly influential was Laozi. Whether or not Laozi was in fact a real person is unclear. (The name simply means "Old Master.") Regardless, the work associated with him, the *Laozi*, would become one of the most influential texts of Chinese history. It would be read as a guide to effective rule, as a text of military strategy, and, in later Daoist movements, as a revelation from a god.

The age of empires

The emergence throughout the agricultural areas of Eurasia of highly centralized states geared toward creating well-trained mass infantry armies came to a head by the last few centuries before the Common Era. Those states that were the most effective in developing these armies defeated those that were less effective, until, in each major agricultural region of Eurasia, one huge empire remained. In the Mediterranean world, that empire was Rome. In South Asia, it was the Mauryan empire. And in China, it was the Qin-Han.

This unification did not, however, result in submissive populations in each area. On the contrary, the first few centuries of the Common Era witnessed another wave of religious movements every bit as powerful as the wave that had occurred midway through the first millennium BCE. During this period, a series of salvationist religions swept across the agricultural areas of Eurasia. Christianity, Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism, and, a bit later, Islam, all emerged out of this context.

As always, the permutations of this larger historical development that occurred in the eastern part of Eurasia are particularly interesting.

During the Warring States period, the state of Qin had clearly become the dominant power. Although all of the other remaining states by this time were using an institutional system like that of the Qin, the Qin was nonetheless doing it better. The Qin armies were the best trained and best armed, and the institutions of the Qin succeeded in placing more troops on the ground than any of its competitors, allowing it to defeat state after state. In 221 BCE, Qin defeated the last state standing and began a new dynasty.

But this would not be a dynasty like the Three Dynasties of the past. The Qin ruler, instead of taking the Zhou title of “king” (*wang*), instead took the title of “First Emperor” (*huangdi*—more literally, “august god”). In stone inscriptions celebrating his rule, the First Emperor also celebrated the fact that he had created a state far greater than any that had preceded.

The First Emperor had a different vision of a dynasty from that which had existed during the Zhou. At no point did the First Emperor claim to have received the mandate of Heaven. Therefore, there would be no moment when the Qin might lose the mandate and thus allow another dynasty to be formed. Such a vision was built into the imperial title itself: the First Emperor was the “first,” and his son would be the “second,” and this would continue for ten thousand generations. The Qin portrayed itself as having brought an end to the dynastic cycle that underlay the aristocratic world of the Three Dynasties. The Qin was to be an enduring empire that would never fail.

The First Emperor immediately began a number of major public infrastructure projects to unify the land. Roads were built connecting the empire, and the wheel gauge of wheeled vehicles was standardized (thus ensuring that the tracks in the roads would be the same throughout the empire). Weights and measures were also unified. (For an excellent study of the Qin that fully incorporates a full utilization of existing archaeological evidence, see Pines et al. 2013.)

Although the Qin fell within fifteen years, the ensuing Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) was able to build on the Qin system to consolidate imperial rule in the North China plain. The east–west agricultural band across Eurasia that we have been exploring was at this time divided between two massive empires—the Roman empire on the western end of Eurasia, and the Han on the eastern end. An extremely fruitful avenue for future research is to compare the forms of empire that developed at this time (see Scheidel 2010; 2015).

Concurrent with the redevelopment of a strong empire in the North China plain was the emergence of a powerful empire among the pastoral nomads to the north and west—the Xiongnu. The parallels in time between the emergence of the agricultural and nomadic empires in the last few centuries before the Common Era raises the very likely possibility that they are related. This will be an important area for future scholarship as we continue to explore the contours of Eurasia history (see Di Cosmo 2004; Wang Mingke 2009).

Geographical limits to the empires of the North China plain

The institutions that were created by the Qin and developed under the early Han would remain highly important thereafter in the North China plain. Maintaining a strong bureaucracy focused on building mass infantry armies, building public infrastructure, and running a clear legal system would prove to be highly effective in governing this region. Indeed, the success of subsequent empires in this area depended to a significant extent on the degree to which they were able to develop these institutions effectively. (For an outstanding use of paleogeographic materials to analyze the workings of the legal system in the early Han, see Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015.)

When these institutions were particularly strong, the empires would be able to expand dramatically into regions beyond the North China plain. But they would also face recurrent geographical limitations on that expansion.

For instance, Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) of the Han launched a major military campaign against the Xiongnu, the nomadic empire to the north. Although the wars would ultimately be successful in that the Xiongnu were driven westward, they would come at great cost and would ultimately weaken the empire in the North China plain as well. Moreover, the Han would never succeed in actually controlling any part of the steppe. The grasslands always served as an effective barrier against armies from the North China plain: mass infantry armies need to be fed and supported, and, since food could not be grown in the steppe, the armies could at best be stationed in the grasslands for only brief periods of time.

A different sort of geographical barrier existed to the south. The Qin and Han launched a series of successful campaigns into the south, ultimately bringing under their control not only what is now southern China but also what is now northern Vietnam. But keeping the southern regions under control would prove to be a recurring problem for empires emanating from the North China plain. If building extraordinarily strong mass infantry armies was effective in the North China plain, it would often be less effective in the highly forested, mountainous, wet south—an extremely inhospitable terrain for a mass infantry army.

The south on the contrary tended to be decentralized, and not readily controllable by strong institutional structures. In the southern coastal regions, the differences were even starker. Not only was the coastal region an area relatively poorly controlled by the types of institutional structures being developed in the north, but the culture had long tended to operate according to very different rhythms. The economy and livelihood of the area revolved around maritime trade. Recent archaeological work is demonstrating how extensive were the trade networks that spread throughout Southeast Asia from an early period (see Jiao 2007). This region also tended to seek autonomy from the forms of regulation associated with the centralized states of the North China plain.

The tension that one begins seeing in the Han period, between an empire in the north devoted to using centralized forms of statecraft to control all resources, and a southern coastal region focused on maritime trade and seeking autonomy from the imperial north, is one that would continue throughout the remainder of Chinese history.

Reactions against empire

In part because of the ultimately successful but nonetheless extraordinarily costly wars against the Xiongnu, a reaction set in at the court at the end of the first century BCE against the strong imperial expansions that had defined much of the previous two centuries. Several court officials began calling for the Han to abandon the legacy of the Qin and to return to the teachings they claimed had been developed by Confucius, teachings that promoted a more decentralized, moral rule. A number of texts ascribed to Confucius were by this time consolidated as the Five Classics—the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), which was seen as having been written by Confucius, and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*), *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*), *Book of Documents*, and *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), which were seen as having been edited by Confucius.

The scholars also called for the entire ritual system that had been created by the First Emperor and consolidated under Emperor Wu to be replaced by the ritual system that had supposedly existed in the Western Zhou dynasty. The ruler was to be called “Son of Heaven” (the Zhou royal title) and once again to rule under the Mandate of Heaven.

In the 30’s BCE, the court finally accepted many of these recommendations. The imperial ritual system was abolished.

But this was not enough. Calls for a fuller return to the Western Zhou would only grow more intense over the next century. In 9 CE, Wang Mang, one of the ministers of the Han, staged a coup and created a new dynasty. Claiming that the late Western Han ritual reforms were insufficient, Wang Mang called for a repudiation of the Qin-Han period and a full return to the Western Zhou. Wang Mang modeled himself after the Duke of Zhou, the minister of the Zhou who was particularly respected by Confucius. The Duke of Zhou had stepped in as regent to rule the Zhou when the king at the time—King Cheng—was too young to do so. Wang Mang was, in a sense, presenting himself as doing what the Duke of Zhou would have had to do if the Zhou rulers had not been good—he was not simply serving as a regent but in fact beginning a new dynasty.

To further his claims to be restoring the vision of the Duke of Zhou, Wang Mang changed the administrative titles to match those described in the *Rituals of the Zhou* (*Zhouli*)—a text attributed to the Duke of Zhou that purported to provide the institutional and ritual structure of the Western Zhou kingdom.

Wang Mang’s usurpation was not successful. But when the Han was finally restored in 25 CE, it very much continued the claims of returning to pre-imperial visions of rule. The main capital was moved from Chang’an—the capital of the grand empires of the Qin and Western Han—back to Luoyang, the Zhou capital that had been founded by King Cheng during the regency of the Duke of Zhou. And the court supported the study of the Five Classics.

These two modes of governance would continue thereafter in varying forms in the North China plain. On the one hand were the strong forms of imperial governance practiced by the Qin and Western Han and associated with the title of “Emperor.” On the

other were the claims that rulers should, purportedly like those of the Western Zhou, govern by virtue, claim to rule only insofar as they were deserving of the Mandate of Heaven, and follow the teachings of Confucius. This mode of governance was associated with the Zhou title “Son of Heaven.”

These two major modes of rulership were rarely clearly differentiated—as seen, most immediately, by the fact that rulers would keep both titles: “Emperor” and “Son of Heaven.” Moreover they would be endlessly worked upon, altered, and combined. Scholars have often adopted the term “imperial Confucianism” to describe this intermixing of imperial bureaucracies with moral policies attributed to Confucius, but the term may imply a greater uniformity than actually existed.

Salvationist religions

The salvationist religions that emerged in the first few centuries of the Common Era had their counterpart in the eastern end of Eurasia as well.

In 142 CE, Laozi, now seen as a god, gave revelations to a figure named Zhang Daoling. Zhang Daoling would go on to found the Celestial Masters, based upon the teachings of Laozi. (The *Laozi* itself was read by the Celestial Masters as an earlier revelation by the god Laozi.) Very much like the Mohists before them, the Celestial Masters were committed to the view that the high god—Heaven for the Mohists, Laozi for the Celestial Masters—was a good deity who had created a moral universe. The people were then called upon to follow the doctrines of this higher, good deity—the perceived current disorder of the world being a result of humans failing to follow these teachings. The institutions of the state should be organized as a meritocracy in which those who best followed the teachings would be promoted to higher positions of power.

The Celestial Masters saw the Han as a corrupt regime. Indeed, the reason that Laozi gave further revelations in 142 was because the world was in such chaos that Zhang Daoling needed to create an alternative community in which people would properly follow the teachings of the *Laozi* and work to generate a better world after the coming cataclysm. The Celestial Masters declared their independence from the Han and created an autonomous organization in what is now Sichuan. The attempts by the Han to bring the Celestial Masters back into its orbit failed completely. (On the Celestial Masters, see Kleeman 1998. For translations of some of the key texts, see Bokenkamp 1997.)

Yet another millenarian movement along these lines also emerged in the northeast. Called the “Great Peace” (Taiping), the movement also claimed that a higher deity—here called Heaven, like that of the earlier Mohists—was good and provided divine revelations for humanity. The Han had failed to follow these teachings, and had now brought the world to chaos. Unlike the Celestial Masters, who created an autonomous community to wait out the coming apocalypse, the Taiping movement on the contrary tried to overthrow the Han state. The ensuing revolt was ultimately put down by the Han, but at great cost. The court essentially ceded power to the military generals who were called upon to end the revolt, and, after the revolt was finally put down, the Han was never again able to gain control over its armed forces. The generals themselves started vying for power, and their ensuing wars helped bring about the end of Han. Finally, Cao Pi declared an end of the Han dynasty and proclaimed the beginning of a new dynasty—the Wei.

The significance—or lack thereof—of these developments can best be seen if we return to a larger Eurasian perspective.

Late antiquity

The fall of the Han is often compared to the fall of the Roman empire. In both cases, the argument goes, the fall of the respective empires resulted in a fall into disunity. But, in fact, this is a misleading comparison. It is true that, after the Han fell, another empire that would be able to control the south as the Qin or Western Han had done would not emerge for several centuries. However, if we think in terms of empires in the North China plain, the fall of the Han is actually not comparable to the fall of the Roman empire. After the Han fell, a new dynasty, called the Wei, was formed in the North China plain. It was modeled on the same use of centralized state institutions that had been developed in the Qin-Han period, and it was every bit as dominant over the North China plain as the Qin and Han had been. The same was true for the ensuing Western Jin dynasty. In sum, dominant empires in the North China plain continued throughout this period.

But the reason that the Wei and Jin would be seen by later historiography as a fall into disunity is that they failed to control the south. This failure to control the south was seen as disunity by later historians simply because the south would in later eras come to be seen as an inherent part of China. (By the same token, for later historical reasons, northern Vietnam would not come to be seen as an inherent part of China, so the failure of empires in the North China plain to control northern Vietnam would not come to be seen as a sign of disunity.)

The real parallel with the fall of the Roman empire actually comes later.

I have mentioned that there have been moments when the steppe region has been militarily dominant over the agricultural areas in Eurasia. The most famous such moment came in the thirteenth century, when the Mongol empire came to dominate much of Eurasia. Another moment occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries. The dominance was less extreme than in the thirteenth century, and, unlike the thirteenth century, there was not a single group that became dominant throughout Eurasia. But this was nonetheless a period when the agricultural civilizations were overrun by steppe peoples.

The exact causes of this dominance are still unclear. In the thirteenth century, it was due to a combination of highly charismatic leaders as well as various technological breakthroughs. In all likelihood similar factors were of significance during the fourth century.

Even if the causes are not yet fully understood, the results were nonetheless clear. In the early fourth century, the Jin fell to a series of invasions from the steppe region. And a century later, the Roman empire fell as well.

It might therefore be worthwhile to question the periodization that would mark the fall of the Han as the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Wei as the start of “early medieval” China. Another approach would be to think of the Eastern Han, Wei, and Western Jin (i.e., first through fourth centuries) as one period, directly comparable to the Roman empire over the same period of time. If we choose to maintain the periodization of “antiquity” for the larger span of time under consideration in this chapter, then the period from the first through fourth centuries of Chinese history would be termed “late antiquity,” in direct comparison with the same period on the western end of Eurasia. “Early medieval,” then, would be used for the periods after the fall of the Roman empire (in the western end of Eurasia) and after the fall of the Western Jin empire (in the eastern end of Eurasia).

The Silk Road

We have been tracing throughout this chapter the degree to which cultures in Eurasia were linked. These links were growing only stronger over time. If bronze technology took some 1,500 years to spread, the chariot took 500. By the time one moves midway through the first millennium BCE, phenomena at either end of Eurasia were appearing almost simultaneously: the appearance of religious-philosophical movements in the sixth and fifth centuries, the emergence of mass infantry armies and then empires in the last few centuries of the first millennium BCE, and the emergence of salvationist religions in the first few centuries of the Common Era.

Also in the first few centuries of the Common Era, the links became even more direct as a series of trade networks began opening up across Eurasia. In other words, instead of a process of technologies or innovations occurring in one part of Eurasia and then spreading from one culture to a neighboring culture over a period of centuries, one now finds materials traveling directly across Eurasia through trade routes. Indeed, the two dominant agriculturally based empires in Eurasia—the Han and the Roman empires—even knew of each other's existence. The Romans referred to the Han as "silk" (silk being a major export item from the Han), and the Han referred to the Roman empire as the "Great Qin"—knowing it only as a great empire to the west.

With these trade networks, the salvationist religions began spreading as well. Over the next several centuries, Mahayana Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity, and, later, Islam all spread across these trade networks.

The legacies of the early period

By the end of the early empires, several key sets of institutions and orientations were clear. One of the most significant of these was the development of centralized statecraft institutions that proved to be extremely successful in governing the North China plain and, when run well, in building mass infantry armies that could expand beyond the North China plain.

A second was associated with calls to return to the values of the Three Dynasties, and more specifically the Western Zhou. The calls would be to maintain a more decentralized form of statecraft. This mode of governing was associated with the title "Son of Heaven," and with claims of legitimacy based upon a Mandate of Heaven.

And a third, associated with millenarian movements, was based upon claims that a just deity had created the cosmos, that humans should model themselves on the moral cosmos so created, and that they should therefore build a perfectly meritocratic society. Even when these claims did not take the form of a full movement, they would remain a powerful language of protest.

These three modes were rarely seen as cleanly separated. On the contrary, they would be constantly reworked and intermixed. But the result was a series of institutions and cultural schemes that would be built upon thereafter.

As we have seen, these developments were permutations of larger trends occurring across Eurasia. As we continue to see Chinese history as an integral part of a larger global history, questions concerning the "rise of modernity," or why certain civilizations did or did not achieve modernity, will finally cease to be asked. We will on the contrary be able to turn our attention to analyzing how the areas we would ultimately come to call China were an inherent part of a larger set of global developments.

Suggestions for further reading

- Li Feng. 2013. *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An excellent survey of early Chinese history from a leading scholar in the field.
- Loewe, Michael, and E.L. Shaughnessy, eds. 1999. *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. An outstanding overview of current scholarship on early Chinese history.
- Nylan, Michael, and Michael Loewe, eds. 2010. *China's Early Empires: A Re-appraisal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An excellent discussion of how archaeological evidence is altering our understanding of early Chinese history.
- Yuan Xingpei, Yan Wenming, Zhang Chuanxi, and Lou Yulie, eds. 2012. *The History of Chinese Civilization*, vols. 1 and 2. English text edited by David Knechtges. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An excellent overview of current scholarship from the People's Republic of China, with an extensive discussion of existing archaeological evidence.