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War and Historical China: Problematizing Unification and Division in Chinese History

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ABSTRACTS: This paper examines the unity paradigm which holds that unification has been the normal and natural course of Chinese history, and that unification has nurtured stability and prosperity while division has generated chaos and sufferings. I highlight that the Chinese term for China, “*zhongguo*,” originally meant “central states” in plurality. I develop a rigorous definition of unification and show that *zhongguo* was more often divided than unified. I also demonstrate that unification was not a natural development but a contingent outcome of war. Because unification had to be achieved by conquest, eras of division tended to be marked by conflicts and sufferings. Before Qin’s wars of unification, however, the classical era witnessed stability, liberty, and prosperity. In the post-Qin era, division remained favorable to liberty and prosperity while unification stifled both. This contrast is more pronounced if we extend the analysis from the Chinese heartland to the periphery.

KEYWORDS: China-Europe comparison; the great unity paradigm; unification and division; Chinese heartland and periphery; state formation; citizenship rights; Confucianism; democracy and federalism; international order; international trade

Introduction

Chinese take for granted China's "historical oneness."¹ They hold the belief that China or *zhongguo* refers to a natural territorial and cultural polity with five thousand years of history. Chinese leaders and intellectuals often insist that unification is a sacrosanct value and assert that "prosperity and development are associated with unity, while war and conflict come with separation."² Beijing's "One China" policy is a modern variant of the classical *da yitong* or "great unity" paradigm.³ As the *Lüshi chunqiu*, a Warring States text, puts it, "There is no turmoil greater than the absence of the Son of Heaven; without the Son of Heaven, the strong overcome the weak, the many lord it over the few, they incessantly use arms to harm each other."⁴ The modern argument refers to the interlocking claims that, although there were eras of division in Chinese history, unification has been the norm, unification after division has been the natural course of historical development, and unification has nurtured stability and prosperity while division has generated chaos and sufferings.

As the unity paradigm seeks authority in history, this paper examines its historical foundation. In tracing Chinese history in the *longue durée*, I follow the prospective approach and avoid the retrospective perspective.⁵ That is, I proceed from China's formative era and search forward for alternative paths and outcomes, instead of viewing the past through the

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¹ Gungwu Wang, *The Chinese Way: China's Position in International Relations* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995).

² Barry Porter and Vivien Pik-kwan Chan, "World Warned on Taiwan: Any Independence Move will Provoke War, Cautions Tang Jiaxuan," *South China Morning Post* (July 27, 1999), p.1.

³ Yuri Pines, "'The One That Pervades The All' in Ancient Chinese Political Thought: The Origins of 'The Great Unity' Paradigm," *T'oung Pao* 86, no. 4-5 (2000): 280-324. I thank Yuri Pines for elaboration of his views in private communications on Feb. 9-10, 2007.

⁴ *Lüshi chunqiu*, cited in Pines, "The One That Pervades The All," p. 316.

⁵ Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of the National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 3-83 at 14-15.

prism of the present. In addition, I follow R. Bin Wong's "symmetrical perspectives"⁶ and juxtapose Sinocentric perspectives against Eurocentric perspectives. This does not mean that I naively apply Eurocentric theories to judge (or misjudge) Chinese history. Rather, I analyze if insights from comparative and world history shed light on actual developments in historical China.

This paper is composed of two main sections. In the first section, I address the claim that unification has been the normal and natural course of Chinese history. I problematize the conventional understanding of historical China and develop a precise definition of unification. It is too often overlooked that the very term "China" or "*zhongguo*" has significantly evolved in Chinese history. Just as the term "Germany" (or any other country) involves a "troubled, contingent history" rather than a polity with "distinctive, enduring characteristics,"⁷ *zhongguo* does not entail an unchanging territorial space or a single culture. This term acquired the modern meaning of nation-state only in the late nineteenth century.⁸ *Zhongguo* originally referred to "central states" -- in plural form -- in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656-221 BC). Although Qin unified this international system in 221 BC, the Qin empire and subsequent dynasties invariably broke down. In the post-Qin era, *zhongguo* referred to dynasties that controlled the central plain in northern China.⁹

If we look beyond the conventional Chinese chronology and develop a rigorous definition of unification, then historical *zhongguo* was more often divided than unified.

⁶ R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 93.

⁷ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 5.

⁸ TAN Qixiang, *Qiusuo shikong* (An Exploration of Time and Space), (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi, 2000), pp. 2-3.

⁹ GE Jianxiang, *Putian zhixia: tongyi fenlie yu zhongguo zhengzhi* (All Under Heaven: Unification, Division, and Chinese Politics), (Changjun: Jilin jiaoyu, 1989), p. 21.

Unification was not only not the normal existence, it was also not the natural result of division. The unity paradigm holds that unification recurred because the people yearned for it. But all instances of unification in Chinese history were achieved by wars of conquest. As Ge Jianxiong observes, “Unification – this sacred term – has been repeatedly associated with war.”¹⁰ Ho Ping-Ti similarly remarks that “Every dynasty was founded on military strength... From the dawning of the first empire in 221 BC to the founding of the PRC in 1949, there has not been a single exception.”¹¹ It is no coincidence that the *Sunzi bingfa*, China’s famous military treatise written in the Warring States period, begins with this statement: “Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction.”¹² Mao Zedong’s assertion “Power comes from the barrel of the gun” is not at all revolutionary in the Chinese context.

In the second section, I analyze the claim that unification is the foundation for stability and prosperity while division is the recipe for chaos and sufferings. From the perspective of international relations theories, international systems may experience war, but they may also maintain stability and peace. From the Eurocentric perspective, international competition is the driving force for liberty, prosperity, and the rise of the West. Remarkably, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, which most closely resembled the early modern European period, in fact witnessed the emergence of international agreements that provided a modicum of order for several centuries. The classical era even witnessed the birth of citizenship rights and the expansion of international trade. However, Qin achieved unification

¹⁰ GE Jianxiong, *Tongyi yu fenlie: Zhonghuo lishi de qishi* (Unification and Division: Insights from Chinese History) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1994), p.184.

¹¹ Ping-Ti Ho, “Salient Aspects of China’s Heritage,” in Ping-Ti Ho and Tang Tsuo, eds., *China’s Heritage and the Communist Political System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968), p.15.

¹² *Sunzi bingfa*, ch. 1.

by stifling citizenship, suppressing trade, and violating international norms. All subsequent unifiers followed Qin's example, achieving unification by war and maintaining unification by repression. In contrast, division always meant much weaker central control over political, economic, and social life. Division also provided the "exit option" which allowed dissenters to "vote with their feet." Overall, this paper follows Michael Loewe's suggestion to carefully examine the presumption that a unified China "contributed more to human welfare than a multiplicity of political units."¹³ I close by discussing Sun Yat-sen's proposal for a federal-democratic system as a solution to break the cycle of coercion.

Problematizing Historical *Zhongguo*

Mainstream Chinese history books present Chinese history as a clean dynastic cycle. This cycle typically begins with Xia, Shang, and Zhou, through Qin, Han, Jin, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, and ends with the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. With few exceptions, a later dynasty immediately follows the previous dynasty. Such a presentation gives the impression of a seamless web of history in which unification is the norm and division is deviance to be corrected.

To assess if unification is the normal condition, we need a clear and precise understanding of what "China" entails so that we know what counts as unification. Despite the common view that *zhongguo* is a natural political entity with five thousand years of history, any historical atlas should show that the territorial reach of *zhongguo* fluctuated over time. As the *Zuo zhuan* (*Zuo's Commentary*), a Warring States text, puts it, "Territory is

¹³ Michael Loewe, "The Heritage Left to the Empires," in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.967-1032 at 1031-1032.

defined by battle. It belongs to one state at one time, to another state at another time... Where is the constancy?"¹⁴ In the post-Qin era, "China" continued to be "defined politically and enforced militarily."¹⁵ If *zhongguo* has always been a fluid political entity, then what is natural about China in the past and the present? The late Tan Qixiang, the chief editor of the authoritative "Historical Atlas of China,"¹⁶ argued that it is precisely because territorial boundaries were malleable in history that the definition of historical *zhongguo* should not be delimited by earlier dynasties or the People's Republic.¹⁷ He argued that historical *zhongguo* should be defined by the territorial reach of the Qing dynasty at its height in the period 1759-1840.¹⁸ Another scholar of historical geography Ge Jianxiong follows the same definition,¹⁹ but acknowledges that this yields only 81 years of unification.²⁰ Indeed, the expansive conception of historical *zhongguo* technically renders most of Chinese history as a cycle of multi-state systems rather than unified dynasties. As such a definition is biased against unification by fiat, Ge turns to a much more limited definition: the maximum territorial reach of the Qin dynasty. This territorial space – roughly bounded by the Yellow River in the northwest, the Yin Shan and the lower Liao River in the northeast, the Sichuan basin in the west, the eastern part of the Yunguai plateau in the southwest, the Guangdong and Guangxi regions in the south, and the coastline in the east²¹ -- is typically treated as the Chinese

¹⁴ Cited in Cho-yun Hsu, "The Spring and Autumn Period," in Loewe and Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, p.569.

¹⁵ Peter Lorge, *War, Politics, and Society in Early Modern China, 900-1795* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.1.

¹⁶ TAN Qixiang, ed., *Zhongguo lishi dituji* (The Historical Atlas of China), (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan, 1992).

¹⁷ Tan, "Lishishang de zhongguo (Historical China)," in *Qiusuo shikong*, pp. 2-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁹ Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie*, p.184.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 106, 179.

heartland as opposed to the periphery in Manchuria, Mongolia, Central Asia, and Tibet.²²

(See Map I.) With a minimal definition of historical *zhongguo*, can we conclude that unification was the norm? [Map I about here.²³]

It is important to note that even this modest definition would exclude the whole pre-Qin era. The conventional Chinese chronology refers to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou as “dynasties” comparable to the Qin through Qing dynasties, thus adding weight to the unity paradigm. But that is a mistake because China experienced an uninterrupted history of divided authority until Qin’s first-ever unification in 221 BC. Xia and Shang were merely the most powerful political chiefdoms that co-existed with many independent political entities. The Zhou era, which gave rise to the concept of *zhongguo* as a system of “central states,” deserves the most attention. The ancient Chinese system in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods shared a number of important similarities with the early modern European system.²⁴ Both emerged from the ruins of the prior feudal order. Zhou established a feudal hierarchy after defeating Shang around 1045 BC. The Zhou king established supremacy by virtue of his control over superior military strength and by his position as the head of an extended lineage. Nominally, “all lands under heaven belong to the Zhou king, all feudal lords ruling the lands are servants of the king.”²⁵ However, Zhou was not a unified and centralized dynasty. Feudal *guo* enjoyed de facto autonomy. Most feudal lords owed their

²² For this distinction, see David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.4; Michael D. Swaine, and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy* (Santa Monica, California: Rand, 2000), ch. 3.

²³ Tan, ed., *Zhongguo lishi dituji*, available at <http://web.zjdyzx.com/lasz/zrcx/Article/UploadPic/200610/20061016075601195.jpg>.

²⁴ For a comparison of the ancient Chinese and early modern European systems, see Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁵ *Shi jing*.

lands to the Zhou king in name only because they had to fight resistant populations to carve out their assigned fiefs. Although feudal *guo* had obligations to pay tributes and provide military service, the Zhou king had no right to interfere with their administration or to claim any revenues. After the Zhou court moved eastward from Gaojing to Loyang in 770 BC, the king was no longer treated as the leader of the Sinitic world, thus ushering in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. When regional conflicts escalated to system-wide conflicts in 656 BC, a full-fledged international system was born.²⁶ In the ensuing three centuries, *guo* waged wars against one another, made and broke alliances as they saw fit, and set up diplomatic offices to handle matters of war and peace. Although the multi-state era was ended by Qin in 221 BC, we should not overlook that this Chinese system lasted for almost the whole span of the early modern European system (1495-1815).

After Qin achieved unprecedented unification, did Chinese history then move on to a seamless web of dynastic cycle for two millennia? The conventional chronology recognizes the eras of the Three Kingdoms, the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. Beyond these obvious periods of division, the chronology shows smooth transitions from one dynasty to the next. However, if modern China experienced widespread rebellions and brutal civil wars before and after the formal collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, we should be cautioned against such an assumption of earlier times. Transitional periods between two dynasties were uniformly marked by armed struggles because all dynasties were brought down by rebellions or warlordism (sometimes coupled with invasion). Dynastic founders were often “willing to trade local autonomy for nominal recognition of their authority” so as to spare themselves “the trouble and expense of capturing every last

²⁶ See Hui, *War and State Formation*, pp.4-5.

country town and mountain fortress.”²⁷ In this context, the official founding of a new dynasty merely “marked a political milepost”²⁸ rather than consolidation of control over the Chinese heartland. Ge Jianxiong suggests that there was no genuine unification when there were armed forces fighting for the previous dynasty or for their own ambitions, when regional power-holders pledged nominal allegiance to the reigning dynasty but asserted semi-autonomous status and maintained armed forces, and when scattered peasant rebellions became organized, armed rebellions.²⁹ Ge’s criteria conform to the Weberian perspective that an effective state is one that monopolizes the legitimate means of coercion, and that a state suffers from incapacitation or even breakdown when challengers possess significant coercive powers within the territory that it claims to rule.³⁰

According to the above definition,³¹ the Qin dynasty established unification for only 6 years from 214 BC to 209 BC. Qin reached its maximum territorial control in 214 BC, after it conquered the Ordos in the north and modern-day Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi in the south. But the Qin court’s control over the empire quickly collapsed after the First Emperor died and rebellions sprang up across the empire in 209 BC. The following Han dynasty enjoyed longevity but did not achieve unification in its early and late years. The Han founder Liu Bang had to placate the ambitions of allies and relatives who had helped him seize the empire, thus creating a “modified form of the multi-state system of the Warring

²⁷ David A. Graff, “State Making and State Breaking,” in David A. Graff and Robin Higham, eds., *A Military History of China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), pp.39-56 at 52.

²⁸ Lorge, *War, Politics and Society*, p.106.

²⁹ Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie*, 85-86.

³⁰ Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.12, 24.

³¹ This discussion is largely based on Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie*, pp. 27-80; and GE Jianxiong, *Zhongguo lidai jiangyu de bianqian* (Territorial Changes Through China’s Successive Dynasties), (Beijing: Shangwu, 1997), chs. 2-8.

States period.”³² While the Han court controlled the western half of the empire, it left the eastern half in the hands of hereditary kingdoms which maintained their own armed forces. These armies were as large as 500,000 in the kingdom of Wu and 200,000 in Huainan.³³ It was not until 154 BC that the court could rein in these autonomous kingdoms. Moreover, indigenous populations in the south established the independent states of Minyue, Nanyue and Dongou during the Qin-Han transition. Han pacified southern China only in 108 BC. The Han dynasty was truncated when Wang Mang usurped the throne in AD 22. (Wang’s Xin dynasty broke up the Han dynasty into Western Han, 206 BC-AD 8, and Eastern Han, AD 25-220.) Western Han thus enjoyed 86 years of unification (i.e., 108 BC to AD 22). Eastern Han restored the court’s control over the Chinese heartland by AD 50. It reigned over 134 years of unification until it was severely weakened by the Yellow Turbans Rebellion that began in 184.

Thereafter, historical *zhongguo* returned to the plural form, with prolonged periods of division punctuated by brief periods of unification. Han’s final decline gave rise to the Three Kingdoms period (220-265). The Jin dynasty unified *zhongguo* in 280. But it commanded only 21 years of unification until 301, when the rebellion of the eight princes tore apart the empire. The Northern and Southern Dynasties period that followed lasted for three centuries from 317 to 589. The Sui dynasty unified the north and the south in 589 but was as short-lived as Qin and Jin. It maintained only 27 years of unification until it was brought down by mass rebellions which began in 616. The ensuing Tang quickly ended the Sui-Tang transition in 628 and then seized control over northern China from the Eastern Turks in 630. After the

³² Mark E. Lewis, “The Han Abolition of Universal Military Service,” in Hans van de Ven, ed., *Warfare in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp.33-75 at 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 43.

An Lushan rebellion of 755-763, however, Tang descended into warlordism. Tang thus prevailed over 125 years of unification (i.e., 630-755). Continued weakening of the Tang court later led to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-979). Thus, for most of the first millennium, “China” was “not a single imperial state, but a vast subcontinental region of Eastern Asia.”³⁴

The subsequent Song dynasty restored some semblance of unity. But it did not achieve unification because it never controlled the Yellow River region – the birthplace of historical *zhongguo*. The Mongol Yuan dynasty, in contrast, established a vast empire. It extinguished all remnants of Song resistance by 1279. But the Red Ribbon rebellion which began in 1352 ushered in another era of division. Hence, Yuan maintained 73 years of unification. The following Ming dynasty seized Beijing in 1368 and then restored control over the Yunguai region in 1382. Ming maintained control over the Chinese heartland for 247 years until domestic rebellions and Manchu raids intensified from 1629 on.³⁵ The last imperial dynasty, Qing, seized Beijing in 1644. Because the Manchu court relied on Ming defectors Wu Sangui, Shang Kexi and Geng Jingzhong to conquer the Chinese heartland, it granted to them much of the south as “feudatories” with autonomous armed forces. It was only after suppression of the Three Feudatories Revolt of 1673-1681 that Qing could exert control in southern China. Even more importantly, Qing finally eliminated the last remnants of Ming forces on Taiwan in 1683. Qing then moved on to subjugate Tibet, Mongolia and Central Asia, thereby expanding historical *zhongguo* to its greatest reach by 1759. But Qing began to lose control over the Chinese heartland as a result of the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-1864. Qing was also

³⁴ Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p.4.

³⁵ Ge dates the end of Ming unification in 1644 when Li Zhicheng entered Beijing. Ge, *Zhongguo lidai jiangyu*, p.79. To maintain consistency, I use 1629 when Manchu raids and mass rebellions began to escalate.

challenged in the periphery after it lost the Opium War. Thus, Qing achieved unification for 167 years if we follow the minimal definition (i.e., 1683-1850), and 81 years if we take the maximal definition (i.e., 1759-1840).

By consistently applying a precise definition of historical *zhongguo*, we obtain a revised chronology as shown in Table I. Overall, even the minimal definition yields only 936 years of unification throughout the long span of Chinese history. Unification was slightly more common in the second millennium (538 years) than in the first (398 years). If we take 221 BC when Qin established the first unified empire as the base year, 936 years represent only 40 percent of 2,221 years. If we make our judgment based on China's five thousand years of civilization, then unification becomes a fleeting phenomenon. [Table I about here.]

Table I: Chronology of Unification over the Chinese Heartland (up to 2000)-

<u>Dynasty/Period</u>	<u>Duration</u> ³⁶	<u>Unification</u> ³⁷	
Neolithic Period		5500-3000 BC	--
Longshan Period		3000-2000 BC	--
Xia?		2070-1500 BC?	--
Shang		1500-1045	--
Zhou		1045-256 BC	--
Western Zhou		1045-771 BC	--
Spring and Autumn period		770-453 BC	--
Warring States period		453-221 BC	--
Qin dynasty			221-206 BC
214-209 BC			
Han dynasty		202 BC-AD 220	--
Western Han		202 BC-AD 9	108 BC-AD 22
Xin		9-23	--
Eastern Han		25-220	50-184
Three Kingdoms period		220-265	--
Jin dynasty			265-420
--			
Western Jin		265-317	280-301
Eastern Jin		317-420	--
Sixteen Kingdoms		304-439	--
Northern and Southern dynasties		317-589	--
Southern dynasties		420-589	--
Song		420-479	--
Qi		479-502	--
Liang		502-557	--
Chen		557-589	--
Northern dynasties		386-581	--
Northern Wei		386-534	--
Eastern Wei		534-550	--
Western Wei		535-557	--
Northern Qi		550-577	--
Northern Zhou		557-581	--
Sui dynasty			581-618
589-616			
Tang dynasty		618-907	630-755
Five dynasties		907-960	--
Ten kingdoms		907-979	--

³⁶ Duration years are adopted, with some amendments, from Graff and Higham, eds., *A Military History of China*, p.ix.

³⁷ Years of unification are adopted, with some adjustments, from Ge, *Tongyi yu fenglie*, p.79.

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Song dynasties	960-1279	--
Northern Song	960-1126	--
Southern Song	1127-1279	--
Liao	960-1125	--
Western Xia	1032-1227	--
Jin	1115-1234	--
Yuan dynasty	1279-1368	1279-1352
Ming dynasty	1368-1644	1382-1629
Qing dynasty	1644-1911	1683-1850
Republic of China	1912-	--
Mainland China	1912-1949	--
Taiwan	1949-	--
People's Republic of China	1949-	1949-2000

Total: 936 years

The fact that there were more years of division than unification does not prejudice a related question: Has unification nevertheless been the natural course of Chinese history? Tan Qixiang recognized that his broad definition of historical *zhongguo* would result in very few years of unification. But he insisted that Qing's unification of both the heartland and the periphery was the "natural result of historical developments."³⁸ Tan is not alone. This view is shared by not only historians of imperial China who study the recurrence of unification in the post-Qin period, but also historians of the classical period who analyze the full play of international dynamics.³⁹ Is unification China's destiny so that periods of division were mere interregnum that would inevitably be unified?

The key to this question is: How was unification achieved? Yuri Pines argues that the "great unity" paradigm facilitated Qin's first-ever unification and "the resurrection of the Chinese empire after frequent periods of disunion, internal turmoil and foreign conquest" in post-Qin China.⁴⁰ Regarding the first unification, Pines highlights the "unanimous rejection of the Eastern Zhou multi-state system" and "the consequent advocacy of the ideal of unified rule" by all Confucian classics.⁴¹ In addition to written records by elites, Pines suggests that there was also "popular support" for unification.⁴² In an argument that is reminiscent of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, he believes that "[t]he masses hoped that they would obtain peace and security... [and thus] willingly accepted Qin's domination."⁴³ Because division created

³⁸ Tan, "Lishishang de zhongguo," pp.4-5, 7.

³⁹ See, for example, MU Zhongyue and WU Guoqing, *Zhongguo zhanzhengshi* (History of Wars in China), (Beijing: Jincheng, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 324-325 and vol. 2, p.28; YANG Kuan, *Zhanguo shi* (History of the Warring States), (Taipei: Gufon, 1986), pp. 463-470).

⁴⁰ Pines, "The One That Pervades The All," p.280.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.280. For his analysis of various Confucian classics, see pp.301-311.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.317.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

“ever-increasing international turmoil, wars and suffering,”⁴⁴ unification was a “rational response” to bring peace to “all under heaven.”⁴⁵

As Pines acknowledges, although Confucian thinkers advocated unification by *de* or virtue, Legalists and strategists who served Qin advocated unification by force.⁴⁶ I argue elsewhere that Qin achieved unification by comprehensive self-strengthening reforms which facilitated total mobilization for war, relentless divide-and-conquer strategies which broke up balancing alliances, ruthless stratagems of bribery and deception which enhanced chances of victory, and brutal measures of seizing territory and killing enemy soldiers *en masse* which demoralized and decapitated losing states.⁴⁷ After eliminating all other Warring States, Qin further resorted to a series of severe measures to prevent resistance, including mass killing of royal families as well as defeated armies, mass migration of noble and wealthy families to the capital, imposition of direct rule with collective responsibility and mutual surveillance, and establishment of settlements in frontier regions.⁴⁸ Qin’s wars of conquest would have terrified Mencius who believed that the Mandate of Heaven should go to “the one who has no proclivity towards killing.”⁴⁹ The rapid emergence of rebellions across the Qin empire in 209 BC is testimony against the view that there was “popular support” for Qin’s unification.

It may be argued that, although there was no unification before 221 BC, the unification idea became deeply ingrained in the post-Qin era. It is true that unification became a recurrent phenomenon afterwards, but it continued to be achieved by military means. As

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.308.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.282, 323.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.311-312.

⁴⁷ For an in-depth analysis of Qin’s unification, see Hui, *War and State Formation*, ch. 2.

⁴⁸ Yang, *Zhanguo shi*, pp. 455, 461-464.

⁴⁹ Mengzi, cited in Pines, “The One That Pervades The All,” p.309.

Peter Lorge observes, “However compelling the idea of a unified empire was in the abstract,” Chinese empires “did not reflexively or ‘naturally’ condense into a large, territorially contiguous... state following a period of disunity.”⁵⁰ It is not sheer coincidence that all dynastic founders were military men because they had to fight for the Mandate of Heaven by subjugating other power-contenders. It may be said that wars of unification typically “exhibited a bandwagoning pattern.”⁵¹ For instance, the magnitude of Tang’s victories over its major competitors, Xia and Zheng, led secondary power-holders to conclude that “Li Yuan had received Heaven’s Mandate.”⁵² But it was Li Shimin’s (Li Yuan’s son) military genius that triggered the bandwagoning pattern. This was not different from the phenomenon of widespread bandwagoning with Napoleon when he seemed invincible.⁵³ The fact that lesser competitors flocked to the emerging winner does not mean that they “made no serious efforts to protect their hard-won independence.”⁵⁴ During the Sui-Tang transition, local strongmen who came over to the Tang side were “almost invariably granted titles and offices that allowed them to retain control of their existing territories and military forces.”⁵⁵ More powerful contenders even established hereditary kingdoms in early Han and semi-independent feudatories in early Qing. From hindsight, we know that unified courts would not tolerate independent military power for long. But for actors who faced the alternative of total defeat at the hands of a superior force, such deals were rational in the short-term.

⁵⁰ Lorge, *War, Politics and Society*, pp. 27, 9.

⁵¹ Graff, “State Making and State Breaking,” p.48.

⁵² Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p.174.

⁵³ Hui, *War and State Formation*, ch. 3.

⁵⁴ Pines, “The One That Pervades The All,” p.323.

⁵⁵ Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p.183.

Stability, Liberty, and Prosperity in Unification versus Division

War was so critical to the formation and transformation of historical *zhongguo* that Gu Jiegang thought the Warring States text *Zuo zhuan* “should be renamed a ‘book of mutual attacks’,”⁵⁶ and Shi Shi views official dynastic records as “a history of mutual slaughters.”⁵⁷ Does the centrality of war confirm the conventional Chinese wisdom that division generated *tianxia daluan* or “great disorder under heaven” while unification brought about *tianxia datong* or “great unity under heaven”? As a result of this belief, even the notoriously brutal First Emperor is praised in history books for unifying the Warring States period. During the Qin-Han transition, *zhongguo* had a second chance to return to a system of “central states.” After the Qin court surrendered in 206 BC, rebel forces under the leadership of Xiang Yu originally sought to revive pre-Qin states. But Liu Bang defeated Xiang Xu and established the Han dynasty in 202 BC.⁵⁸ Yuri Pines argues that Xiang Yu’s agenda created “grave consequences” as “the vacuum of legitimate power eventually led to chaos, and the war of all against all devastated most of the Chinese world.”⁵⁹ Shi Shi disagrees with this mainstream view. He argues that it was Liu Bang’s ambition to seize *tianxia* that prolonged wars and brought about massive sufferings. Shi also faults Liu for using cunning stratagems and violating trust in his effort to seek victory. He conjectures that if Xiang Yu had checked Liu’s

⁵⁶ GU Jiegang, *Gushipian* (Ancient History Disputes), vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1982 [1926]), pp. 1-10 at 3.

⁵⁷ SHI Shi in an interview with LIN Zhibo: “Why Wasn’t There a Chu Dynasty During the Qin-Han Transition?” People Network, Jan. 22, 2007, available at <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/70671/5313377.html>, accessed on Jan. 30, 2007.

⁵⁸ Ibid. The conventional chronology dates the beginning of the Han dynasty in 206 BC when Qin collapsed. Shi suggests that Liu Bang did not declare the establishment of the Han dynasty until he had vanquished Xiang Yu in 202 BC.

⁵⁹ Pines, “The One That Pervades The All,” p.318.

ambition early on, historical *zhongguo* could have developed a loose federal system more conducive to regional autonomy and political freedom.⁶⁰

Shi Shi's argument may sound unorthodox to Sinocentric wisdom, but it is in line with world history. Scholars of international relations (IR) believe that it is possible to maintain stability and peace in international systems. Europeanists even take for granted that it was international competition that facilitated the emergence of democracy and capitalism and the rise of the West. It is notable that similar developments also occurred in *zhongguo* during eras of division, especially the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods that did not yet have a history of successful unification. First, shared norms and international agreements contributed to relative stability for over three centuries. Second, international competition also fostered the birth of citizenship and the expansion of trade. Unfortunately, the state of Qin eroded citizenship rights, suppressed commercial activities, and destroyed the international order in its drive for unification. After the Han dynasty institutionalized the imperial model, subsequent dynastic founders further heightened tyranny in the hope of preventing dynastic decline. Yet, division always meant a weaker state, thus leaving some scope for autonomy and freedom especially at the local level. I explore stability, liberty and prosperity in eras of division versus unification below.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Shi, "Why Wasn't There a Chu Dynasty?"

⁶¹ The ensuing discussion of stability, liberty and prosperity in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods is extracted from Hui, *War and State Formation*.

Stability versus Disorder

IR theories typically use the term “anarchy” to refer to international systems. This term means the absence of world government in international politics as opposed to the presence of central government in domestic politics.⁶² While the use of force is the *ultima ratio*, international politics is not a realm of disorder. As Kenneth Waltz, the icon of neorealism, explains, “[a]mong states, the state of nature is a state of war. This is meant not in the sense that wars constantly occur but in the sense that, with each state deciding for itself whether or not to use force, war may break out at any time.”⁶³ Waltz also argues that there is “an order without an orderer”⁶⁴ because “[t]he constant possibility that force will be used limits manipulations, moderates demands, and serves as an incentive for the settlement of disputes.”⁶⁵ Liberals and constructivists even believe that states can form an “international society” when they “have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.”⁶⁶ The post-WWII world, for example, has been regulated by extensive international laws, regimes, and organizations. In brief, states make war, but states can also make peace.

In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, there were elaborate Zhou rites, diplomatic protocols, alliance agreements, and international covenants to bring about some semblance of order for over three centuries. It was after Qin began to launch its drive toward

⁶² Helen Milner, “The Assumption of Anarchy in International Relations: A Critique,” in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.143-169 at 152.

⁶³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p.102.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.113.

⁶⁶ Barry Buzan, “From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School,” *International Organization* 47, no. 3 (1993): 327-352 at 330.

domination in 356 BC that international politics became brutish. This argument can be illustrated by significant differences in the frequency of war, severity of war (in terms of battle deaths), and death rates of great powers before and after 356 BC.⁶⁷ Regarding the frequency of war, “wars involving great powers”⁶⁸ occurred once every 1.86 years in the period 656 to 357 BC (a total of 161 wars), but once every 1.42 years in the period 356 to 221 BC (a total of 95 wars). Although Qin initiated only 11 out of 161 “wars involving great powers” in the earlier period, it initiated 51 out of 95 wars in the later period. As for battle deaths, they were generally limited to several thousands per war in the pre-356 BC era. But after the system witnessed a “shift from wars seeking advantage in a balance of power to the campaigns of all-out conquest launched by Qin,”⁶⁹ wars became increasingly marked by “unlimited carnage and brutality.”⁷⁰ With a policy of “attacking not only territory but also people,”⁷¹ Qin killed over 1.5 million defeated troops between 356 and 236 BC. During the final wars of unification from 236 BC to 221 BC, Qin further killed a large number of adult males in vanquished states so as to minimize the potentials for rebellion. The last indicator – the death of sovereign states – is the most dramatic. In the pre-356 BC period, most great powers generally respected the independence of one another and would annex only minor states and “barbarian” chiefdoms. Wu, which fell victim to annihilation in 473 BC, was the only exception. In the period 356 to 221 BC, by contrast, all states – except the unifier – fell by the wayside.

⁶⁷ These quantitative data are adopted from Hui, *War and State Formation*, pp.149-156.

⁶⁸ That is, wars with the participation of at least one great power on either side.

⁶⁹ Mark E. Lewis, “Warring States Political History,” in Loewe and Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, pp.587-650 at 627-628.

⁷⁰ Ralph D. Sawyer, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), p.286.

⁷¹ Lewis, “Warring States Political History,” p.639.

If international politics was increasingly unstable in the late Warring States period, it was even more so in subsequent eras of division. While state rulers in the pre-Qin era had no historical memory of prior unification, power-contenders in the post-Qin era understood that it was possible to take “all under heaven.” To seize the empire, competitors would resort to “the ruthless use of force” and “canny political maneuvering.”⁷² Yuri Pines argues that “China never developed adequate means of peaceful coexistence between contending regimes” and that “no serious attempt to create a viable multi-state order was ever made after the [Spring and Autumn] period.”⁷³ This is hardly surprising. As Pines observes, when nearly every power-contender sought to rule *tianxia* under his own aegis, the results were “wars of mutual extermination.”⁷⁴ Even Alexander Wendt, the icon of constructivism, argues that cooperation is “nearly impossible” where international politics is a strictly zero-sum game.⁷⁵

It may be countered that dynastic founders nevertheless brought ultimate peace to “all under heaven.” It is true by definition that battle deaths and casualties *from wars* did not occur in areas under unification. However, we should not gloss over state violence against societal actors. Hard labor, harsh punishments for light crimes, and tortured death for crimes against the emperor were commonplace. Moreover, indigenous populations in southern China rebelled against imperial conquest, land seizure, and cultural assimilation from Qin through Qing. Armed rebellions, in turn, led to brutal crackdown and more sufferings. In addition, if we extend historical *zhongguo* from the heartland to the periphery, then wars did not stop under unification. The imperial courts of Han, Jin, Tang, and Qing, once they had

⁷² Lorge, *War, Politics and Society*, p.9.

⁷³ Pines, “The One That Pervades The All,” pp.324, 322.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, 2 (Spring 1992), pp.391-425 at 400.

consolidated control over the Chinese heartland, launched campaigns against Central Asia, the Mongolian steppe, Korea, Tibet, northern Vietnam, or Yunnan/northern Burma.⁷⁶ Such wars of conquest inevitably generated battle deaths and other casualties on both sides. When conquest was successful (most were unsuccessful until the Qing dynasty), the subsequent policies of mass migration and forced assimilation caused further sufferings among subjugated populations.⁷⁷

On the whole, wars were endemic in Chinese history whether under unification or division. Remarkably, *Zhongguo lidai zhanzhen nianbiao* (*Chronology of Wars in China's Successive Dynasties*), an authoritative military history published by the People's Liberation Army press, lists a total of 3,790 campaigns from the beginning of Western Zhou in 1100 BC to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911.⁷⁸ Given such recurrence of war, it is no wonder that Chinese have a "chaos phobia" or "a deep-seated cultural fear of chaos and turmoil."⁷⁹ If international anarchy does not have to mean a state of war of all against all, it is puzzling that division indeed meant *tianxia daluan* in Chinese history. We should consider the possibility that it was the drive to seize *tianxia* that pushed up the intensity of war which, in turn, caused chaos and sufferings. In the image of Wendt's oft-cited quote "anarchy is what states make of it," we may say that "*luan* is what unifiers make of it."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Yunnan maintained independence from the Northern and Southern dynasties period until the Yuan dynasty. As late as 1599, the Ming court faced a 100,000-strong rebellion by Miao tribesmen.

⁷⁷ For an alternative view that imperial China was peaceful, see David Kang, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: China Peacefully Reshapes East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁷⁸ Editorial board, *Zhongguo lidai zhanzheng nianbiao* (*Chronology of Wars Through China's Successive Dynasties*), 3rd ed. (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 2006). See also Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," *International Security* 20, no. 3 (1995/96): 5-42 at 27.

⁷⁹ Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, p.36.

⁸⁰ Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It."

Liberty versus Tyranny

War was central to not just the territorial reach of historical *zhongguo* and the rise and decline of dynasties, but also the nature of state-society relations. If there is one point that conventional Sinocentric and Eurocentric wisdoms share, it is that the autocratic tradition is deeply ingrained in Chinese civilization⁸¹ while the democratic tradition is deeply rooted in European civilization. While many people continue to believe that liberal democracy is a natural outgrowth of medieval constitutionalism and Enlightenment thought, scholars of European state formation have restored the military basis – that is, the contingent nature – of citizenship and democracy.⁸² They point out that citizenship rights and democratic representation emerged because European rulers were compelled by international competition to share power. When kings and princes mobilized the wherewithal of war, they had to encroach on societal actors who held the needed resources – men, arms, supplies, and money to buy them. Resource-holders typically resisted extraction. Faced with resistance, rulers could use brute force to seize the wherewithal of war. But the use of coercion itself would require resource mobilization and might stimulate rebellions. So European rulers were compelled to bargain with societal actors. Out of bargaining then “emerged increased involvement of subjects in national affairs... and enforceable claims on the state so extensive we can begin to speak of citizenship rights – even, in some cases, of democracy.”⁸³

⁸¹ Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic Tradition and Chinese Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸² Brian M. Downing, *The Military Revolution and Political Change: Origins of Democracy and Autocracy in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.25; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*.

⁸³ Charles Tilly, “Futures of European states,” *Social Research* 59, no. 4 (1992): pp.705-717 at 708, 711.

If “free constitution emerged only where a number of states existed next to each other on equal terms,”⁸⁴ then it is instructive to examine if division similarly nurtured citizenship rights – defined as recognized enforceable claims on the state that are by-products of state-society bargaining over the means of war⁸⁵ -- in historical *zhongguo*. Chinese classics written in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods – whether Confucian writings, Legalist texts, or military treatises – are concerned with the question of how to motivate the people to fight and die in war. The Confucian texts *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*), *Zuo zhuan*, and *Mengzi* are full of accounts of how benevolent rulers established the great-power status and hegemony. The Legalist text *Guanzi* admonishes that “the rise of a state depends on the support of the people” while “the decline of a state lies in desertion by the people.”⁸⁶ The military treatise *Sunzi bingfa* similarly argues that the way to kingship is to cherish one’s people because the degree of harmony between rulers and ruled is one of the key indicators of national strength.⁸⁷ Except for texts associated with the state of Qin, classical writings largely presume reciprocal state-society relations. Because “rulers had no choice but to make various concessions to obtain the cooperation of their people,”⁸⁸ three major state-society bargains resulted.

The first bargain was peasant welfare. Driven by the exigencies of war, ambitious rulers began to introduce national conscription and national taxation in the Spring and

⁸⁴ Otto Hintze, “The Formation of States and Constitutional Development: A Study in History and Politics,” in Felix Gilbert ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.157-215 at 164.

⁸⁵ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, pp.101-102.

⁸⁶ Cited in Guanzi xuekan editorial board, *Qi wenhua zonglun* (A General Discussion of Qi’s Culture), (Beijing: Huaming chubanshe, 1993), pp.99, 107.

⁸⁷ Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p.115.

⁸⁸ XU Jinxiong, *Zhongguo gudai shehui* (Ancient Chinese Society), (Taipei: Taipei shangwu, 1988), p.543.

Autumn period. This development means that the security of the state rested with the well-being of peasant-soldiers who paid taxes and fought wars. As landless, hungry peasants could not afford grain tax or military service, various states distributed land grants to ensure subsistence. To improve productivity, states introduced intensive farming with iron tools, ox-drawn plows, irrigation, fertilization, crop rotation, multiple crops, and hybrid seeds. More advanced states also built large-scale irrigation projects. To stabilize the livelihood of peasants amidst inevitable annual fluctuations in yields, different states established grain stores, provided disaster relief, and introduced a counter-cyclical policy. Confucian and Mencian scholars regarded the state's provision of material welfare as representing a conditional state-society relationship: If the basic economic needs of the people were met, loyalty would ensue, and the state would be strong; if not, resentment would ensue, and the state would be weakened.⁸⁹ These measures constituted the so-called *minben* (people as basis) policy.

The second bargain was a justice-based definition of citizenship. As Xu Jinxiong observes, “rulers gradually promulgated laws which were meant to bind rulers and ruled alike... Laws were originally tools used by aristocrats to arbitrarily suppress the people. They gradually became the contractual basis on which the people would accept a given rulership.”⁹⁰ Bruce Brooks calls this development “the new legal quid” in exchange for “the new military quo.”⁹¹ In the mid-fifth century BC, Wei's minister Li Kui codified the then current laws of various states to form Wei's *Fajing* (*Cannon of Law*). In 356 BC, Qin's

⁸⁹ E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, “The Nature and Historical Context of the *Mencius*,” in Alan K. L. Chan, ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), p.250, 259.

⁹⁰ Xu, *Zhongguo gudai shehui*, p.543.

⁹¹ E. Bruce Brooks, “Evolution Toward Citizenship in Warring States China,” paper presented at the European-North American Conference on “The West and East Asian Values,” Victoria College, University of Toronto (July 31-August 2, 1998), p.6.

reformer Shang Yang introduced the principle of equal punishment before the law. He also urged rulers to follow the law so as to establish faith with the people. Transmitted texts and unearthed legal documents show that the right of access to justice and the right of redress before higher judges existed at least in the states of Qin, Chu, and Qi by the late fourth century BC.

International competition further nurtured freedom of expression akin to the Enlightenment. Ambitious rulers competed for not just the support of peasant-soldiers, but also the assistance of talented generals and strategists. In the interest of the state, senior court ministers were expected to freely criticize rulers' mistaken policies. Free scholars of the time were even less hesitant to speak their minds. Progressive thinkers articulated the liberal doctrine of popular sovereignty. They argued that the people formed the basis of government and that rulers were mere servants of their people. In this view, rulers would enjoy the Mandate of Heaven only if they served the people; they would lose the Mandate if they abused the people. The conventional Chinese wisdom holds that the Mandate of Heaven rests with the dynastic emperor. But, according to the *Mengzi*, the Mandate rests with the people because "Heaven does not speak; it sees and hears as the people see and hear."⁹² Mencian scholars even pushed the doctrine of popular sovereignty to the logical conclusion. They argued that the people had the warrant to depose and execute tyrannical rulers because tyrants ceased to be rulers properly speaking. This justification for tyrannicide is similar to the one developed by French Huguenots during the Reformation and John Locke during the Enlightenment. Classical Confucianism is so "modern" and "liberal" that one wonders what would have happened had the Chinese Enlightenment been able to run its full course.

⁹² *Mengzi*, ch. 5A5.

Together, the three bargains of material welfare, legal protection, and freedom of expression marked the emergence of citizenship rights in classical China. Of course, many rulers remained abusive of the people. But the very existence of a multi-state system provided the exit option. Scholars, peasants, and traders alike could “vote with their feet” to states with the most open policies. In Europe, this “right of exit” served as “an implicit rein on arbitrary power”⁹³ and a “substitute for formal representation.”⁹⁴ Citizenship rights could then provide the foundation for constitutional democracy. Thus, if ancient China had remained divided, societal actors might have had a similar chance to push *minben* (people as basis) into *minzhu* (rule of the people or democracy). However, unification fundamentally altered state-society relations and rolled back the early state-society bargains.

The transformation of King Zheng (246-221 BC) of the state of Qin into the First Emperor (221-210 BC) of the Qin dynasty provides the most vivid illustration of the difference between the presence and absence of international competition. On the eve of unification, the state of Qin collected the best administrators, strategists, and generals of the time who left their home states to serve in the Qin court. To realize his formidable ambitions, King Zheng would humbly heed advice and even make apologies to his senior officials. The king also continued the traditional policies of providing material welfare to peasant-soldiers and granting handsome rewards for military contributions. All these changed, however, after King Zheng crowned himself the First Emperor in 221 BC.⁹⁵ The principle of justice was eroded – punishments became so severe that there were about 1.4 million convicts to provide

⁹³ Eric L. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.118.

⁹⁴ Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513-553 at 518.

⁹⁵ On the First Emperor’s policies, see LIN Jianming, *Qin Shi* (A History of Qin), (Taipei: Wunan, 1992), pp.548-601; Yang, *Zhanguo shi*, pp.484-485.

forced labor for building the Emperor's palaces and tomb. Freedom of expression was similarly stifled – all books except Qin's court records and those on medicine and agriculture were seized and burnt, and 460 scholars who expressed doubts about the Emperor's policies were persecuted. Peasant welfare was likewise abandoned – the imperial court increased already high tax burdens and further drafted over 800,000 men to expand the northern and southern frontiers. The First Emperor essentially entered a state of war with the society. Eventually, the people turned to the last resort in tyranny – rebellion – from 209 BC on.

When Liu Bang founded the Han dynasty, he destroyed not only the prospect of reviving *zhongguo* as “central states,” but also that of restoring citizenship rights. When he first seized Qin's capital, Liu apparently promised to abandon Qin's harsh system. After he had consolidated his emperorship, Liu seemed to conclude that tyranny did not necessarily lead to rapid collapse; rather, tyranny should be better packaged to generate some degree of legitimacy. The Confucian “great unity” paradigm that advocated “stability in unity” suited him perfectly. During the reign of Emperor Wu, an imperial version of Confucianism was promoted as the official doctrine. The *Shiji (Records of History)*, which projects the vision of a single ruler and a unified state back to the legendary Yellow Emperor, was held as the canon of ancient history. Chinese history books profusely praise Han for lessening the level of extraction, resurrecting the classical *minben* principle, and restoring Confucian values. Han's rule was indeed relatively benevolent in the early years, when the court had effective jurisdiction over only the western half of the empire. After Emperors Wen, Jing, and Wu gradually eliminated all independent kingdoms in the east, however, the Han dynasty began to resemble the Qin dynasty that it had once condemned.

It is true that Liu Bang revived “a strong interest in peasant welfare... because an economically viable peasantry was understood to be the basis for a politically successful government.”⁹⁶ However, because unification meant that “all under heaven” was the emperor’s private property, there was no effective sanction to prevent him from enslaving *his* subjects in the long-term. Similar to the social science argument that rulers are predators (unless they are restrained by rivals or institutional checks),⁹⁷ Chinese scholars contend that dynastic founders were in essence bandits who succeeded.⁹⁸ Qin’s First Emperor was not alone in extracting heavy taxations and hard labor to build luxurious palaces and tombs. Han’s Emperor Wu used one third of the court’s annual revenues to build his tomb for most of his reign, and part of the other two-thirds to construct and maintain a number of imperial palaces, gardens, and temples.⁹⁹

Subsequent unified dynasties did not bring more benefits to peasants. At the theoretical level, a unified court should be more capable of constructing large-scale public infrastructure to promote social welfare. The north-south canals that connect the Yellow River and Huai River systems is a good example. These canals were built and maintained for transporting grains and other supplies from the south to the capital. Because the court wanted to ensure that the canals had enough water to transport imperial supplies (they were typically short of water), it would not allow peasants to use canal water for irrigation even when there were droughts, and would not dam the Yellow River even when the lower river valley was

⁹⁶ Wong, *China Transformed*, p.77.

⁹⁷ Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.169-186.

⁹⁸ Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) criticized the imperial court for serving only its selfish interests in his 1663 treatise. See Wm. Theodore de Bary, trans. *Waiting for the Dawn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). See also Shi, “Why Wasn’t There a Chu Dynasty?”

⁹⁹ Ge, *Tongyi yu fenlie*, pp.196-197.

flooded.¹⁰⁰ Unification also facilitated the establishment of imperial granaries which, in theory, should allow the central court to transfer grain from surplus regions to disaster-stricken regions. In practice, officials were often reluctant to distribute relief grain even when granaries in the capital region were overstocked.¹⁰¹ The prevalence of peasant uprisings in imperial Chinese history should make us rethink the conventional wisdom that unification promoted peasant welfare. In fact, it was during eras of division that competing regimes would construct irrigation systems, improve agricultural productivity, and develop originally underdeveloped regions in their efforts to enlarge tax bases.¹⁰²

In addition, the Confucianism that was promoted involved important deviations from classical Confucianism. The endorsement of imperial Confucianism came with the banning of other “hundred [many] schools of thought” that had once flourished in the classical era. Based on Dong Zhongshu’s interpretation, the Mandate of Heaven now rested with the imperial emperor who was the *tianzi* or Son of Heaven. Despite Confucianism’s prescription for benevolent rule, the Han criminal code largely followed the severely harsh Qin Code. As John Fairbank observed, although “the first Han emperors took great pains to claim that their rule was based on the Confucian teachings of social order,” “they used the methods of the Legalists as the basis for their institutions and policy decisions.”¹⁰³ Shi Shi even suggests that the key difference between Qin and Han was pure coercion versus coercion masked by

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp.151, 223.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp.194-195.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp.194, 221-222, 227-228.

¹⁰³ John K. Fairbank, “Introduction: Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience,” in Frank A. Kierman, Jr. and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp.1-26 at 11. See also ZHAO Dingxin, *Dong Zhou zhanzhen yu rufa guojia de dansheng* (Eastern Zhou Warfare and the Birth of The Confucian-Legalist State), (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue, 2006).

deception.¹⁰⁴ This model of “Legalism with a Confucian façade”¹⁰⁵ was so successful that it was followed by all subsequent unified dynasties. Over time, Chinese were led to believe that China’s autocratic tradition was Confucian. As Hsiao Kung-chuan wryly remarked, the label “Confucian state” “would have puzzled Confucius himself, horrified Mencius, and failed even to please Xunzi.”¹⁰⁶

Fortunately, classical Confucianism did not completely die out in imperial China. The very existence of an elaborate body of Confucian scholarship “prevented the government from ever fully controlling the ideological levers of Chinese society.”¹⁰⁷ From time to time, courageous Confucian scholar-officials would insist on the moral duty to judge the actions of the emperor, even at the risk of tortured death. Other neo-Confucian thinkers from Wang Anshi (1021-1086) to Liang Qichao (1873-1929) also sought to revive classical doctrines “as a critique of imperial power’s encroachment upon the locality and community.”¹⁰⁸ Of course, this does not mean that Confucianism maintained “something of the status of a ‘constitution,’ ... limiting the exercise of dynastic rule.”¹⁰⁹ Although emperors who openly upheld Confucianism could not burn Confucian classics as Qin’s First Emperor did, Ming’s founder Zhu Yuanzhang did not hesitate to extirpate offensive passages in the *Mengzi*, such as “The people are the most elevated, next comes the state, the sovereign comes last.”¹¹⁰ Zhu

¹⁰⁴ Shi, “Why Wasn’t There a Chu Dynasty?”

¹⁰⁵ Kung-chuan Hsiao, “Legalism and Autocracy in Traditional China,” in Yu-ming Li, ed., *Shang Yang’s Reform and State Control in China* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1977), pp. 125-143 at 137.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Lorge, *War, Politics and Society*, p.172.

¹⁰⁸ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.153.

¹⁰⁹ Ron Guey Chu, “Rites and Rights in Ming China,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary and TU Weiming, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp.169-178 at 174.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp.172-173.

also persecuted scholars and officials whose literary verses could potentially be interpreted as criticisms of the *tianzi*. Not even Qin's First Emperor would punish scholars who made no actual criticisms of imperial policies!

In sharp contrast, division meant that there were no absolute emperor and no official doctrine. Of course, not all periods of division nurtured “hundred schools of thought” because warfare could easily disrupt philosophical pursuits. After the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, China had to wait until the May Fourth Movement (1919) two thousand years later for another Chinese Enlightenment. Nevertheless, whenever *zhongguo* existed in plurality, the pressure of international competition would always compel rulers to look for new talents and new ideas. Dissenting opinions could also find shelter in neighboring *guo*. Thus, even Yuri Pines acknowledges that “in terms of intellectual history China benefited from periods of division much more than from periods of unified government.”¹¹¹ As Guo Shunchun (a mathematician who translated Liu Hui's *Nine Chapters of Mathematical Procedures* from the Three Kingdoms period) puts it, “The presence of a powerful central government in combination with a single ruling philosophy has always brought great damage to the progress of mathematics. Technology may still improve, but scientific endeavors that require independent, critical thinking stop dead. Most of the Chinese mathematical heritage was lost in the Qin, Han, Tang, Ming and Qing dynasties.”¹¹²

It is also worth noting that even unified *zhongguo* always coexisted with steppe regimes in the periphery. As Christopher Beckwith suggests, “The early Chinese accounts of the [Xiongnu]... reveal that ... those living in frontier areas were fully aware of the fact that

¹¹¹ Pines, “The One That Pervades The All,” p.324.

¹¹² Gao believes that the *Nine Chapters* was “about 1,000 years ahead of the rest of the world” in logical thinking. Interview in Stephen Chen, “Unveiling a Masterpiece of Ancient Logical Thinking,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), Jan. 28, 2007, p.7.

life in the nomad-ruled states was easier and better than life in the... agricultural states, where peasants were treated little better than slaves.”¹¹³ In addition to material welfare, steppe populations could also breathe some air of freedom because nomadic regimes were based on more egalitarian rule. In early Han, kings of independent kingdoms such as Liu Xin of Han and Lu Wan of Yan defected to the Xiongnu when they were accused of treason against the emperor. In Western Wei (which later gave rise to the semi-alien Sui and Tang dynasties), Yuwen Tai treated his generals and officials as “social equals” and ruled in an informal, collegial style.¹¹⁴ Even the Qing court, which imposed the harshest criminal code in Chinese history, originally evolved from a semi-nomadic Jurchen/Manchu regime based on relatively egalitarian authority. As if to confirm the dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, steppe rulers uniformly adopted the Chinese autocratic tradition once they conquered the *zhongguo* heartland. Such sinicization eliminated the remaining space for peasant well-being and political equality. At the same time, the cultural belief in Chinese superiority -- along with heavily garrisoned borders -- ruled out the exit option for most Chinese. Again, one has to wonder what would have happened if the Chinese heartland had been more divided and if Qing had not achieved unification of both the Chinese heartland and the periphery.

Prosperity versus Stagnation

The development of trade and prosperity largely follows the same script. Technically speaking, unification should promote trade expansion because a central government could

¹¹³ Christopher Beckwith, “Barbarians,” manuscript (2007), p.333.

¹¹⁴ Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p.103. Scott A. Pearce, “The Yu-wen Regime in Sixth-century China,” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University (1987), pp.394-403.

provide nation-wide infrastructure, improve ease of transportation, and standardize or eliminate internal customs.¹¹⁵ During eras of division, there were always multiple systems of customs, measurements, and transportation. Hostile enemies would even ban inter-state trade altogether. However, in reality, unified courts routinely stifled trade. Chinese rulers were not unique. European rulers also “impeded or hindered” commerce,¹¹⁶ but the coexistence of independent states limited rulers’ ability to do harm. In historical China, trade flourished only when *zhongguo* came in the plural form or when central authority was weak, though division did not always bring about prosperity because war could disrupt commerce.

Most notably, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods represent a golden era of prosperity as well as liberty. Douglas North and Robert Thomas point out that, in Europe, “the development and expansion of a market economy during the Middle Ages was a direct response to the opportunity to gain from the specialization and trade made feasible by population growth.”¹¹⁷ A similar dynamic occurred in classical China, as migration of populations into virgin areas brought about growing differentiation across regions, hence, the opportunity to trade. Increase in productivity from intensive farming and improvement in means of transportation promoted trade expansion. Development of credit and of media of exchange – from sea shells to silk to metal coins – facilitated commercial transactions. With burgeoning trade, capital cities grew in size, and new cities and towns emerged. While many merchants of the time operated on relatively small scales and were often artisans themselves, a growing group of long-distance traders made profits out of price differentials across

¹¹⁵ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹¹⁶ Douglass North and Robert P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p.70.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26.

regions. There were also “industrialists” who engaged in mining and processing of metals, minerals and salt. The richest businessmen accumulated wealth that rivaled state treasuries. In short, “war was not the sole business” of the time and the people had the “leisure to get rich and enjoy it.”¹¹⁸

As a result of Qin’s drive for unification, however, “war with its increasing demands on the budget” began to have adverse impact on people’s livelihood.¹¹⁹ Moreover, in the state of Qin, the court introduced severe measures to suppress commerce and traders: It restricted the categories of merchandise that could be legally put on sale and imposed sale taxes higher than costs; it banned the private use of national resources in mountains, forests and swamps, which provided raw materials for many commercial products; it also registered merchants as “inferior people” who were subject to extended terms of garrison duty at the frontier. On the eve of unification, trade continued among other states. But, after unification, the First Emperor moved 120,000 merchant households of conquered states to Qin’s capital to facilitate surveillance.

Although Han’s founder Liu Bang had promised to abolish Qin’s harsh system, Emperor Wu compulsorily moved rich men – along with local elites and ranking officials – from the provinces to the capital area in 127 BC. The court also sought to undercut merchants by taxing them heavily, by state management of intra-regional trade, and by salt and iron monopolies. The rationale for Emperor Wu’s policy is laid out in the *Discourse on the Salt and Iron Monopoly*: “If some people become over-wealthy, they are not seeking for office after emolument. If some people become over-powerful, they are not subject to the threat of

¹¹⁸ Bruce Brooks, personal communication, November 27, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

being punished.”¹²⁰ This argument largely mimics the Qin statecraft text, the *Shang jun shu*: “If the people... are poor, they prize rewards... If the people have private honors, they hold rank cheap and disdain office, if they are rich, they think lightly of rewards”¹²¹ Ming’s founder Zhu Yuanzhang was as repressive of commerce as freedom of expression, reviving Qin’s policy of “promoting agriculture and suppressing trade.” Relying on land taxes as its main source of revenues, the Ming court restricted private movement or migration, closed border gates and custom houses, banned mining of minerals, and even degraded the status of merchants by making it illegal for them to wear silk. Although Emperor Yongle sponsored Zheng He’s blue water fleets which went as far as eastern Africa between 1405 and 1421, there were no efforts to capitalize on the opportunities for international trade thus generated.¹²² In the mid-sixteenth century, the Ming court imposed such strict bans on the sale of silk, iron products and copper coins abroad (especially Japan) that even legitimate merchants were “forced to become pirates.”¹²³ The court responded with a heavy crackdown and a total ban on shipping, whether for maritime trade or fishing. Commerce revived only when the Ming court gradually lost its grip on the society.

Indeed, trade had flourished earlier in Tang and Song when the central court was relatively weak. Although Tang tightly constrained commercial activities in its early years, it lost effective control over most of the empire after the An Lushan rebellion. The emergence

¹²⁰ *Han Shu*, cited in HSU Cho-yun, “The Changing Relationship Between Local Society and the Central Political Power in Former Han: 206 B.C.–8 A.D.,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7 (4): 358-370 at 363.

¹²¹ *Shang jun shu*, ch. 5.20.

¹²² Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p.161.

¹²³ Peter Lorge, “Water Forces and Naval Operations,” in Graff and Higham, eds., *A Military History of China*, p.92.

of autonomous and semi-autonomous provincial warlord regimes “had a stimulating effect on the economy.”¹²⁴ The increasing use of mercenary troops – who had to be paid in cash – created incentives for warlords to foster a more vigorous commercial economy and a free market in land. When the cash-trapped Tang court introduced the salt monopoly to increase tax revenues, it filled the new bureaucracy with experienced merchants, thus providing an additional impetus for trade. The subsequent Song dynasty similarly promoted commerce. It is probably not sheer coincidence that Song was the most prosperous dynasty and, at the same time, the only dynasty that failed to achieve unification of the Chinese heartland. Deprived of access to land taxes in northern China, the Song court could increase revenues only by turning to commercial taxes. As a result, traditional handicrafts (e.g., weaving, pottery) flourished and new industries (e.g., metallurgy, printing) developed. With more and more people seeking employment in private workshops and factories, old towns expanded and new cities emerged. Trade expansion, in turn, stimulated the development of bills of exchange, use of credits, and invention of brand names and advertisements. When Song was driven further south (Southern Song), it “was forced to augment its declining land tax revenues by levying taxes on seaborne trade.”¹²⁵ The weakness of the Song court facilitated not just commercial activities, but also world-class innovations including the compass, movable printing press, and firearms. In the post-Qin era, late Tang and Song probably provided the most conducive environment for commerce: On the one hand, there was some semblance of central authority to avoid wars of annihilation common in eras of division; on the other hand, the heavy hands of the imperial court could not reach the local levels, thus leaving the Chinese society to function as best as it could.

¹²⁴ Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p.240.

¹²⁵ Swaine and Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, p.31.

If we extend the analysis from the Chinese heartland to the periphery, then commerce appeared even more promising. According to Christopher Beckwith, steppe regimes were above all interested in the development of the economy, both local and international. From Chinese, Greek, and Arabic historical sources, he concludes that Central Eurasian regimes consistently insisted on “free trade at border markets—through the millennia, across the length and breadth of Central Eurasia, regardless of ethnolinguistic identity.”¹²⁶ When Mongols launched raids on Ming garrisons, “the source of the conflict” was “the deliberate Chinese prohibition of trade.”¹²⁷ Similarly, the “real problem” between the Zunghars and the Qing dynasty was “the latter’s periodic restriction or even prohibition of trade.”¹²⁸ In both cases, peace ensued as soon as trade restrictions were removed. If Beckwith’s argument is correct, then the vast periphery would have been a driving force for prosperity as well as liberty for modern *zhongguo* -- had it not come under subjugation by the Qing dynasty.

Conclusion and Implications

Is this cycle of anarchy and autocracy China’s destiny? It is regrettable that Chinese rulers repeatedly followed Qin’s example, establishing unification by coercion and maintaining unification by repression. This vicious cycle has persisted in modern China. After the Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911, China witnessed several decades of bloody dog-eat-dog struggles – first among warlords and then between nationalists and communists. After restoring unification of the Chinese heartland in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party

¹²⁶ Beckwith, “Barbarian,” p.344.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.346.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

(CCP) followed a policy package dated to the Qin dynasty. The CCP has expanded its territorial reach to the periphery in Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Taiwan by force or the threat of force. It has also maintained internal order by severe punishments, especially for crimes against the state. The Cultural Revolution is perfect testimony to the argument that “*luan* is what unifiers make of it.”

Can unification – this sacred goal for Chinese – be achieved without war? Can China make the transition from Legalist *tianxia daluan* to Confucian *tianxia datong*? Unification *per se* is not inherently problematic. What had haunted Chinese history is the means by which unification was achieved and maintained – the use of force. Sun Yat-sen, who led the revolution against the Qing dynasty, proposed a federal and democratic “United States of China” formed by consensus on the model of the United States of America.¹²⁹ Democracy could limit the returns of power, thus reducing the temptation of forceful wholesale takeover. Federalism could combine unification of the whole with division of constituent units, thus facilitating “diversity in unity.” Democratic-federalism could accommodate local autonomy in the non-Han periphery, thus replacing forced assimilation with multiculturalism. However, opponents equated federalism with separatism and argued that a divided China would be vulnerable to foreign encroachment.¹³⁰ Chinese intellectuals should have taken a more critical look at Chinese history and world history. It was divided Europe – with some countries that were the size of China’s provinces – that came to dominate a united China. Historical China

¹²⁹ JIANG Yongjing and CHEN Jinjin, “Minguo yilai zhengquan tonghe de fangshi yu zhuzhang (1912-1949) (Methods and Proposals for Unification of Political Authority Since the Republic),” in Editorial Board, *Zhongguo lishishang de fenyuhe xueshu yantaohui lunwenji (Collection of Essays from the Seminar on Unification and Division in Chinese History)*, (Taipei: Lianjing, 1995), pp.415-428. For a recent argument, see Michael C. Davis, “The Case for Chinese Federalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (1999): 124-137.

¹³⁰ HU Chun-hui, “Lianbang zhuyi yu minguo chunian de fenyuhe (Federalism, Division and Unification in the Early Republican Era),” in Editorial Board, *Zhongguo lishishang de fenyuhe*, pp. 317-332 at 329. See also Andrew Nathan, *Peking Politics, 1918-1923: Factionalism and the Failure of Constitutionalism* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976).

was once light years ahead of historical Europe in developing the arts of war, stability, liberty, prosperity, and technology. But the Qing dynasty, which achieved unprecedented unification of both the heartland and the periphery in the eighteenth century, quickly sank to “the sick man of Asia” in the nineteenth century. In Europe, repeated failures at comparable unification – from Charles V through Louis XIV to Napoleon – brought about “the rise of the West.” After another failure by Hitler, divided Europe abandoned the imperial model of unification by coercion and adopted the normative model of unification by consensus.

It may still be argued that the democratic-federal model is Western and so alien to Chinese history and Chinese culture. Students of the May Fourth Movement (1919) took for granted that “Mr. Democracy” and “Mr. Science” were Westerners. Students of the June Fourth Movement (1989) continued to presume that democratization required all-out Westernization. This belief has allowed Beijing to argue that China can only develop democracy “with Chinese characteristics.” I hope the above analysis shows that the seeds of liberty and stability are as Confucian as they are Western; indeed, they sprouted on Chinese soil long before they blossomed on European soil. Moreover, Chinese have lived under division or partial unification for most of Chinese history. Paradoxically, it is divided Europe that leads the world in realizing *tianxia datong*.¹³¹ It is time for *zhongguo* to live up to its own Confucian ideal.¹³²

¹³¹ The European Kantian ideal and the Chinese Confucian ideal are quite similar.

¹³² If *tianxia dalong* becomes a reality in China, it can also serve as a blueprint for world peace. See KIM Dae Jung, “Is Culture Destiny?” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 6 (1994): 189-194.