

Session I: The Ancient History of China

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Some Features of Contemporary Research on Ancient Chinese History

China has an ancient civilization and its historiography in Pre-modern period is well-established. Chinese historians have observed the history in the perspective of “Jiu tianren zhiji, tong gujin zhibian (exploring the relationship between the nature and the society, to have a thorough knowledge of the changes from ancient times to the present)”; since ancient times, China has established a tradition that historians are required to have “Shide, shicai, shishi” (historical virtue, talent and knowledge) at the same time. Chinese historians have been innovative on how to compile historical books, and also have achieved a lot in historical theories. Since the early twentieth century, Chinese scholars have made a great contribution to the research of ancient Chinese history, especially in the practice of positivist historiography, by adhering to national historical traditions and learning from Western historiography. As one of many schools, the methods of Marxist Materialistic Interpretation of History were introduced to China in the early twentieth century and soon largely spread. With these methods, Chinese scholars re-observed and studied Chinese ancient history, which brought great changes to Chinese historiography. In the contemporary research on ancient Chinese history, Marxist Historical Materialism is not the only theory and method, but the prevailing one, which is the most valuable and convincing theory and has made the most profound analysis of ancient Chinese history.

Contemporary China dates from 1949 to the present, and roughly covers a history of sixty years. In these almost sixty years, Chinese historians have made marvelous achievements in the research on ancient Chinese history. I wish by my introduction the scholars from other nations could have some ideas of contemporary researches on ancient Chinese history.

Part One: Discussions on the Features and laws of the Development of Ancient Chinese History

After 1949, Chinese historians, in the field of ancient Chinese history research, have adhered to Chinese historical tradition, and inherited the methods of Chinese Modern Positivist Historiography, but the difference is that under the guidance of historical materialism, Chinese historians have paid much more attention to the exploration of the laws of the development of their own national history. Therefore, the topics under discussion are more far-ranging. Here, I will select some for the introduction.

I. Researches on the Origins of Ancient Chinese Civilization and State

“State is the epitome of a civilized society”. The appearance of state is the beginning of civilized society for human beings. Based on archaeological discovery and literature research, Chinese scholars think there are three possibilities for the emergence time of the ancient state in China: Pre-Xia Dynasty, Xia Dynasty, Post-Xia Dynasty. There are also different interpretations among those scholars who believed that the ancient state in China came into being before Xia Dynasty. But most of them think that the ancient state in China formed during Longshan Culture Period. So, ancient China has a history of more than five thousand years. Erlitou Sites, Yanshi, Henan whose excavation started at the end of 1950s belong to Xia Culture. According to the studies of the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project, Xia Dynasty on the chronology dates from B.C. 2070 to B.C. 1600. Surely, Xia Culture in archaeology does not directly correspond with Xia Dynasty in historical documents, which needs further proofs. Those who insist that the ancient state in China originated after Xia Dynasty are not in the mainstream. What I have to add here is that archaeological findings have enabled most scholars to realize: the origin and

development model of ancient Chinese civilization is "Multiple origins, Zhongyuan (Central China) at its core, unified structure".¹ The fact that Xia Dynasty originated in Zhongyuan area does not necessarily mean ancient Chinese civilization only existed in this area. Yellow River Basin, Yangtze River Basin, Liao River Basin are all the birthplaces of Chinese civilization. Furthermore, there were cultural exchanges among those areas. The emergence of Xia Dynasty was only the outcome of the fastest development of Zhongyuan Culture. In the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels claimed that the signs of the state emergence were people subject to boundaries and the establishment of public force above society. With this standard in mind Chinese scholars for quite a long time searched for the signs of the state emergence. But there are different viewpoints. Some scholars thought that the transition of ancient China from clan society to civilized society happened before the production of iron tools. After it entered into the civilized society, the kinship had not been completely broken. And people subject to boundaries was not the case for China. So the standard proposed by Engels shall be revised as the existence of classes or strata and the establishment of coercive power system as its signs.² On the formation of the state, before 1980s most Chinese scholars thought the ancient state in China was transformed from the confederacy of tribes. After 1980s, there were different ideas, among which the most influential one was the "chiefdom" theory by Elman R. Service.³ However, some scholar thought chiefdoms were not a universal phenomenon, which had too much logic reasoning. If the archaeological information was taken into consideration, the evolution of the settlement pattern theory was more proper for the interpretation of the origin of the state in China.⁴

II. The Division of the Social Formation in Ancient China

Are there any laws of social development of human beings? If the answer is yes, what are they? By what standard human history was divided into different stages? These are the hot topics which have drawn the attention of Chinese scholars for quite a long time in the past sixty years. The majority of the scholars believed that it is a scientific method to divide historical development stages by the changes of social economic formation. According to this standard, ancient China had successively experienced primitive society, slave society and feudal society. But there are still many debates, even very hot ones, on their details. For example, does the Asian mode of production accord with the reality of ancient Oriental nations? Did the Asian mode of production ever exist in ancient China? If it did exist, what was its real formation? Was there any slave society in the history of China? When did the feudal society in ancient China begin? Can the term "feudal society" be used to summarize the ancient China from Qin to Qing Dynasties? What were the similarities and dissimilarities between the eastern and western feudal societies? Whether or not the sprout of the Capitalist mode of production appeared in China before the Opium War? Certainly, besides the historical development stages could be divided by social economic formation, there are many other ways to divide them such as means of production and political organizations and so on. In a word, Chinese scholars not only admit that there are certain laws in the development of human history, but also recognize the diversity of the development of human history, since the laws of historical development exist in its diversity. Different civilizations have their own characteristics of formation and evolution. This helps us to fully understand the colorful history of ancient China.

III. Research on Economic History of Ancient China

In the past sixty years, the research on economic history of ancient China has been quite fruitful. Both in theory and practice Chinese scholars have disclosed the characteristics of the development of ancient Chinese economy with macroscopical analysis as well as microcosmic demonstration. Moreover, there are new breakthroughs in the research of regional economic history. These researches have helped us know more about the economy in ancient China. Firstly, on the characteristics of Chinese feudal economic structure, most scholars think since its very beginning Chinese feudal society had a landlord mode of production. The basic form of feudal land system in China was that the

landlord ownership of the land was prevailing; the legal land deals had appeared at the early stage of feudal society, which brought the concentration of lands and the polarization between the rich and poor, causing the escalation of social conflicts, which was one of the main factors of the turmoil and even revolution in Chinese dynasties. The inheritance of land in Chinese feudal society was equally divided among sons, not inherited only by the oldest son. Individual household production had reflected a solid combination of small-scale farming and household industry, which constructed the basic manufacturing structure of the feudal economy. Secondly, on commodity economy in ancient China, most scholars think natural economy of ancient China had a dominating role, with an economic policy of “encouraging the farming while repressing the commerce” (Zhongnong yishang) in most feudal dynasties. But after the Warring States Period, the commodity economy was on the rise. From the Warring States to Ming and Qing dynasties, the commodity economy in ancient China was under constant evolution, no matter in commodity production, or commodity circulation and exchange. During Ming and Qing periods, in Chinese feudal economic structure the buds of capitalist mode of production sporadically appeared in some areas. Thirdly, since the 1980s, the research on regional economic history became quite influential and the frontier of economic history research. Lastly, Chinese scholars have different ideas on the “China-centered approach” raised by western scholars in recent years. They think this approach lacks positivist evidences. It is inappropriate to take China as the leading economy in the ages preceding capitalism where the international economic system had not yet come into being. It is necessary to recover the truth of history, but history shall not be magnified nor even glorified.⁵

IV. The Concept of “Feudal” and Some Reflections on the Related Theories

After 1990s, the debate on the concept of “feudal” reappeared. There was a climax in recent years with the publication of *On Feudalism* (Fengjian kaolun)⁶ by Feng Tianyu as its mark. He claimed that the term “feudal society” shall be replaced by “patriarchal-autocratic society”. But others thought whether or not feudal society ever existed in the history of China depended on whether the basic feature of economic formation of feudal society ever existed in Chinese history. This basic feature was the feudal mode of production, not necessarily the European vassal-lord system and the manorial production organizations. Also some scholars reviewed the evolution of the concept “feudal” in ancient and modern China, which laid emphasis on the reversed cognitive process of the Western European concept “feudal” after it had been introduced into modern China. They concluded it was footless to deny there existed feudal society in the history of China on the basis that the term “feudal” in today’s use was different from the “feudal” used in ancient China.

The above brief introduction cannot cover all the Chinese scholars’ discussions on the historical development laws and features in ancient China in the past sixty years. There are so many related topics. But this indicates that Chinese scholars can analyze and summarize the laws of national history more objectively and rationally on the basis of detailed historical research.

Part Two: Research on the History of Ancient China with Multi-perspectives and Multi-angles

Modern Chinese scholars not only have paid attention to the research of such major topics as the laws and features of historical development, but also to the observation and analysis of the history of ancient China with multi-perspectives and multi-angles. The following are its characteristics:

I. Further Development of Positivist Historiography

Positivist historiography is one of the features of Chinese traditional historiography. In the first half of the twentieth century, compared with traditional historiography, the

research method and objects had new developments in positivist historiography, which not only inherited traditional positivist historiography but also learned new theories from western positivist historiography. After the foundation of People's Republic of China, the positivist historiography with textual criticism (kaoju) as its basis was still prominent in the ancient history research, which had made great achievements. After 1980s, the basic theories and methods of positivist historiography reemerged. This time its emergence had special background.⁷ But it was not a simple return, which was closely related with "fever on Chinese Classical Studies (guoxue re)" and Chinese cultural recovery.

II. Emergence of Social History and Cultural History

In the early twentieth century, Chinese scholars had noticed the research method of social history and had obtained remarkable achievements.⁸ In the past sixty years, the research of social history in ancient China could be roughly divided into two stages. Before 1980s, social history was mostly one part of the research in social economic history. Its main research fields were class structure, forms of property and patriarchal system and so on. After 1980s, besides these traditional topics there are new fields. Its characteristics are the following: firstly, there are a team of researchers and a series of hot topics in this field; secondly, there have been a lot of related academic activities; thirdly, the researches have been quite fruitful; fourthly, there are new attempts in the fieldwork and oral history. From the perspective of social history, the research fields of ancient history have been largely extended. Regional social history has also drawn the scholars' attention. The conduct of fieldwork and oral history has offered new data for the historical research. Although there are many disputes on the theoretical methods and contents of social history research and there exists a phenomenon of blindly introducing new theories without being digested, this research trend will still go on, representing the research on history of ancient China in the new era. The new branches derived from the field of social history, such as environmental history, ecological history and disease history, have drawn more scholars' attention, bringing up a new world for the research on the history of ancient China. After 1980s, with the social transition and social reform, it was urgent to re-discover the values of Chinese culture. There was a so-called "fever on culture (Wenhua re)" in the research of cultural history. After almost thirty years of exploration, cultural history has become an important branch in the research of ancient Chinese history. The research of cultural history is more and more popular, with the compilation of general cultural history and writings of specialized cultural history, the publication of regional cultural history and the establishment of many research centers of cultural history in universities and academic institutes.

III. State and Society

In the recent years, the research model with "state and society" as its frame for theoretical analysis has been widely used in the research of ancient Chinese history, which becomes more and more influential. Its pre-designed premise, core contents, logic and discourse are eyes-catching in constructing new historical interpretation model and research paradigm, then breaking the former thinking mode and historical perspective, and discovering new problems. It has directly pushed both macrocosmic and microcosmic research on the long periods in ancient Chinese history, social organizations at grassroots level and evolution of social structure and so on. This trend has been reflected in the seminars of related topics and a series of written discussions sponsored by some influential journals. The so-called long periods refer to the comprehensive research of the historical phenomenon during the transitional periods of Han and Tang, Tang and Song, Song and Ming dynasties, which have helped the scholars to broaden their vision.

The research on grassroots society is very hot in recent years. It involves the topics about grassroots political organizations, civil society organizations, regions, culture and life and so on. These researches covered all the periods from Pre-Qin to Ming and Qing dynasties, and have used various research methods. Its characteristics are the following: firstly, there is some new progress in the research of traditional grassroots regime

organization structure and the design of public bureaucracy as well as their changes in county and village (Xiang, Li, Cun); secondly, there are more thorough and detailed discussions on civil social organizations and their construction; thirdly, the scholars have tried to break single thinking mode and pay attention to state and grassroots society as well as the more complicated relations within grassroots society, and then have had their own interpretation of the power structure of grassroots society and the true situation in those societies, and finally have drawn new conclusions and worked out new theory.

Part Three: New Material: An Impetus to Modern Research on Ancient Chinese History

The material record is the basis of historical research. In the past sixty years, the new progress in many fields of the research of ancient Chinese history is inseparable from the discovery and processing of the new materials. These new materials mainly include Jiaguwen script (the inscription on animal bones and tortoise shells), bronze inscriptions (Jinwen), bamboo and silk scripts (Jianbo), Dunhuang and Turfan Manuscripts, the Huizhou Documents, Ming and Qing Archives, inscriptions of the epitaph (Muzhi beike). Here I will select several materials for the introduction.

I. Jiaguwen Script and Bronze Inscriptions

Jiaguwen script and bronze inscriptions are the most important first-hand material for the research of the history of Shang and Zhou dynasties in ancient China. The content of Jiaguwen script is quite rich and diverse, including sacrifice, hunting, agriculture, astronomy and military and so on, almost all sides of the social life in that period. The achievements of the research on Jiaguwen script are remarkable. Firstly, the discovery, processing and filing of Jiaguwen script have made great achievements. Secondly, Jiaguwen script has been quite useful and helpful in the research of the history of Shang Dynasty, which has made real progress and an unprecedented leap. Jinwen is a general term for the inscriptions on the bronze in ancient China, approximately dating from Shang and Zhou to the Warring States Period, but mainly West Zhou dynasty. The topics covered by Bronze inscriptions are wide-ranging, including sacrifice, ordination (Ciming), warfare, hunting, covenant and so on. Bronze inscriptions are the first-hand materials for the actual recording of the social life at that time. To take bronze inscriptions as a reference and combine them with historical documents is one of the basic ways of the research on the history of Shang and Zhou dynasties. It is inseparable for the exploration of many new fields and the new achievements in the research of the history of Shang and Zhou dynasties from the discovery of bronze inscriptions.

II. Research on Bamboo and Silk Scripts

Bamboo and silk scripts (Jianbo) are one of the most important archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century. As the material record of the ancient documents after bronze inscriptions, bamboo and silk scripts had recorded almost one thousand years of the history from Warring States Period to Wei and Jin dynasties. Scientific excavation of bamboo and silk scripts started in the early twentieth century, but the findings in the following thirty years after 1970s were especially remarkable. From these new findings the scholars have summarized a series of features of the Jianbo material: firstly, formerly unearthed bamboo and silk scripts and newly unearthed ones had formed a complete timeline from Warring States Period to Wei and Jin dynasties, nearly one thousand years. Secondly, they were rich in content. The content of bamboo and silk scripts had nearly covered all the sides of the history of Warring States, Qin, Han, Wei, Jin dynasties, which have helped us from the perspective of bamboo and silk scripts to explore many major topics independently and do the research systematically on the basis of the material record. Thirdly, different from the characteristics of finding other ancient material records, the excavation places of bamboo and silk scripts material in the past thirty years have been largely expanded, and the found types have been on the increase. Jianbo historiography has become an international field of study.

III. Dunhuang and Turfan Manuscripts

The discovery of Dunhuang manuscripts at the end of nineteenth century was quite an event in Chinese cultural history. Dunhuang manuscripts totaled in more than forty thousand, which were rich in content and important in the research of the history of Jin, Tang and Song dynasties. Besides a great deal of Buddhism Sutra, Dunhuang manuscripts included many valuable private and official documents. Turfan manuscripts refer to those ancient documents between A.D.4 and A.D.14 which were unearthed in the ancient graves of Turfan area, Xinjiang, China, including religious classics and private and official documents. In the second half of the twentieth century, Chinese scholars had made great achievements in the historiography of Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts. Firstly, they had done a lot of work in the collection and filing of Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts material. Secondly, they had made use of Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts for the historical research. Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts had greatly enriched the research of the history of Sui and Tang dynasties, which were quite helpful in filling many historical blanks. Chinese scholars have published many related monographs and collections of papers, which have made China one of the leading nations in the research of Dunhuang and Turan manuscripts.

IV. Huizhou Documents

Generally speaking, Huizhou documents refer to private and official documents of those periods from Song dynasty to Republic of China discovered in Huizhou, the southern area of Anhui province (including today's parts of Jiangxi, Zhejiang provinces). Most of them are the private documents of Ming and Qing dynasties, which have amounted to thirty thousand. They are the fifth discovery in the twentieth century following the discoveries of Jiaguwen scripts, Jianbo of Han and Jin dynasties, Dunhuang manuscripts and Grand Secretariat archives of Ming and Qing dynasties. After the mid-1980s, the scholars started to attach great importance to the filing of Huizhou documents and have published their research results one after the other. The research based on Huizhou documents was called Huixue after 1980s, and has become a prominent learning (xianxue) in the current research of ancient Chinese history.

These new materials are significant in the following three sides: firstly, to make up for the shortage of research material; secondly, to redress the misunderstanding and mistakes in the past studies; thirdly, to explore new areas of the research, and to promote the establishment and development of new disciplines and research team. The studies of Jiaguwen script, bamboo and silk inscriptions, Dunhuang and Turfan manuscripts, and Huizhou documents are the important frontiers of contemporary research on ancient Chinese history as well as the new growing points of the discipline.

Part Four: Retrospect and Prospect

The above overview of course cannot summarize all the contemporary research work of ancient Chinese history. Such as history of Sino-foreign relations, history of historiography, ideology history, historical geography, as well as many achievements of dynastic histories and special history have not been touched here. But from the above brief introduction, it is still possible for us to find some traces of the future development of contemporary research of ancient Chinese history. Next, I will try to give a brief sum-up and some expectations.

Firstly, some major topics in the traditional research of Chinese history will still be paid enough attention to by the scholars. For example, on the origin of civilization and the state, the scholars have scored remarkable achievements in breaking the former single theoretical mode and conducting further research on the origin of Chinese civilization and the formation of the state in ancient China, which is helpful in explaining the universality and particularity of the origin of ancient Chinese civilization and the state. However, the scholars have not reached a consensus on these topics and more work has to be done.

To look into the historical transition of long periods within the perspective of the state and society will continue. On the basis of past research, the scholars will have more interests in the major topics of the economic history such as economic structure and level of early modern China and forms of land ownership. The research on the concepts of social formation will also be under way.

Secondly, under the influence of new approaches of historiography and social development and changes of modern China, the perspective and scope of the research on ancient history will be further broadened. There is a great deal of work yet to be done in such subjects as family and marriage history, clan history, gender history, disaster history, disease history, environmental history and population history. Analysis of the construction and function of grassroots political organization and social organization will have a bright future.

Thirdly, the research of the new topics which are brought up by the new materials will not only be hot in the research of contemporary history of ancient China, but also for quite a long time a very important growing point for the discipline of dynastic and special histories in the research of ancient Chinese history.

1. Ren Shinan, "Zhongguo shiqian wenhua he wenming qi yuan" [Pre-history Culture and the Origin of Civilization in China], in *Cong wenming qi yuan dao xiandaihua*, [From the Origin of Civilization to Modernization] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2002).
2. See Wang Zhenzhong, "Wenming yu guojia: dongyi minzu de wenming qi yuan" [Civilization and the State: the Origin of the Civilization of East Yi Nationality], in *Zhongguoshi yanjiu* [Journal of Chinese Historical Studies], no.3, 1990.
3. See Xie Weiyang, "Zhongguo guojia xingcheng guocheng zhong de qiubang" [Chieftdoms During the Formation of the State in China], in *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* [Journal of East China Normal University], no.5 (1987); Tong Enzheng, "Zhongguo beifang yu nanfang gudai wenming fazhan gui ji zhi yi tong" [Similarities and Dissimilarities of the Developmental Track of the Ancient Civilizations Between the North and the South in China], in *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [Social Sciences in China], no.5 (1994).
4. Wang Zhenzhong, *Zhongguo wenming qi yuan de bijiao yanjiu* [Comparative Studies on the Origin of Chinese Civilization], (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1994).
5. "Cong 'ouzhou zhongxin lun' dao 'zhongguo zhongxin lun': dui xifang xuezhe zhongguo jingji shi yanjiu xin quxiang de sikao" [From Europe-centered Approach to China-centered Approach: Reflections on the Trend in the Research of Chinese Economic History among Western Scholars], in *Zhongguo jingji shi yanjiu* [Researches in Chinese Economic History], no.2 (2006). "Shiji zhijiao zhongguo gudaishi yanjiu zhong de jige redian wenti" [Some Hot Topics of the Research on Ancient Chinese History at the Turn of the Century], in *Ershiyi shiji zhongguo shixue zhanwang* [Prospect of Chinese Historiography in the 21st Century] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003).
6. (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2006).
7. See Hou Yunhao, "Ershi shiji zhongguo sici shizheng shixue sichao" [Four Waves of Positivist Historiography in the Twentieth Century China], in *Shixue yuekan* [Journal of Historical Science], no.7 (2004).
8. Such as Yang Shuda, *Handai hunsang lisu kao* [On the Rites of Marriage and Funeral in Han Dynasty], (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1933); Deng Yunte, *Zhongguo jiu Huang shi* [History of Famine Relief in China], (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937); Pan Guangdan, *Mingqing liangdai jiaxing de wangzu* [Prominent Families of Jiaxing in the Ming and Qing Dynasties], (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1947); Qu Tongzu, *Zhongguo falv yu zhongguo shehui* [Law and Society in China] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1947).