Lecture 7. Political Economy in the Early Empires: Qin & Han

Founding of the Qin 秦 Empire (221-206 BCE)
--Following Shang Yang reforms, Qin emerged as most powerful state
--Conquests completed in 221 BCE; creation of unified empire

Operation of the Qin Government under the First Emperor
--Exaltation of ruler: emperor designated himself as “First of Radiant Theocrats of Qin”
(Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝)
--Bureaucratic organization (full elimination of patrimonial forms of governance)
--Standardization: (1) weights & measures; (2) writing system; (3) coinage; (4) roads

Excavated documents and Qin governance
--Shuihudi 睡虎地 archive: personal library of Qin local official who died c. 235 BCE
(1) Regulation of economy according to exacting standards
(2) Hostility to commerce
(3) Control of population & labor resources (statutory and convict labor)
(4) Social order based on military ranks
--Allegiance to Shang Yang’s principles and militarist-physiocratic model

Qin-Han Transition
--Founding of Han 漢 Empire (202 BCE-220 CE); durable imperial government
--Han retained essential features of militarist-physiocratic state based on Qin precedents

Emperor Wen 漢文帝 (r. 180-157 BCE): turn to laissez-faire policies
--Abolished land tax; allowed free coinage; rescinded state monopoly on mineral and forest resources
--Growing economic inequality (especially in landholding)

Mercantilist State under Emperor Wu
--Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 141-87 BCE): reasserted supreme authority of emperor
--Foreign wars and budget deficits prompted state intervention in trade and industry
--“Balanced Standard” (junshu 均輸): state involvement in commodity trade
--Salt & iron monopolies: lucrative enterprises placed under direct state management
--Restored state monopoly on coinage (Wuzhu 五銖 coin as new monetary standard)
--Mercantilist State: new model of political economy, expressed in “Light and Heavy” chapters 輕重篇 of Guanzi (Pseudo-Guanzi)