History 170E
Political Economy in the Early Empires: Qin & Han
Qin Conquests, 230-221 BCE

- Initial Qin conquests aimed southward into Sichuan c. 300 BCE
- Defeated remaining rival states in quick succession after 230 BCE
- Qi last to fall, in 221 BCE
The Qin Empire (221-206 BCE) and its Great Wall

- Qin capital located at Xianyang 咸陽 (modern Xi’an 西安)
- White circles show locations of Qin commanderies (regional military governments)
The First Emperor

- Born in 259 BCE; ruled as King Zheng of Qin 秦政王
- Unified empire founded in 221 BCE; King Zheng took new title of Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝, “First of the Radiant Theocrats of Qin”
- Died in 210 BCE at age of 49
Qin Measure of Weight

- As part of its effort to impose unity on the Chinese empire, the Qin government issued standards for weights and measures.
- Local officials used these models to verify measures used in the marketplaces.
“Clerical Script”

- The “Clerical Script” devised by the Qin Dynasty became the standard written form of Chinese down to the present.
- Fragment of a Qin official document.
Unification of Currency

- Qin bronze Banliang 半兩 or “Half-Ounce” coin (center) replaced the wide variety of knife and spade currencies issued by the various Warring States.

- The round coin with a square center hole became the standard form of Chinese money throughout the imperial era.
Qin Imperial Road System

The Qin road system facilitated transmission of government documents, troop movements, and delivery of taxes to the capital
Reconstruction of Grave of Qin Official at Shuihudi 睡虎地

- Interred circa 235 BCE
- Body of official is surrounded by rolled-up documents related to his official duties in addition to pottery and lacquer wares
Qin Legal Texts

- Shuihudi documents contain large portions of the Qin administrative code concerning the duties of local officials
- Surprisingly, no documents concerning criminal law were included
Militarist-Physiocratic State

- Farmer-soldier ideal (agriculture and war as the twin pillars of the state)
- Social rank determined by military accomplishment (21 merit ranks, 7 for commoners and 14 for officials)
- Capitation taxes in coin and labor service assessed uniformly on all adults, including women
- Discouraged commerce; much industry (especially armaments) under direct state control
“...Inquire about the orphans of those who died in war: are there any who do not have arable lands and dwellings? Inquire how many young and able-bodied men have not yet performed military service. Inquire about the widows of those who died in war: do they receive the grain allowances to which they are entitled?...

Make inquiries to determine the numbers of unmarried men, widowed women, and destitute or sick persons. Inquire about those exiled from the realm: to what clans do they belong? Inquire about the honorable families in the countryside: how many people do they support? Inquire about the poor townfolk: how many of them have gone into debt to feed themselves? Inquire how many families tend gardens to feed themselves. How many have cleared lands and cultivate them? How many officers (shi 士) cultivate land themselves? Inquire about the poor in the countryside: which lineages have they descended from?...

Inquire about the men and women who possess skills: how many can be usefully employed to make sturdy equipment? How many unmarried women remain at home engaged in domestic labor? How many merely depend on the state to fill their bellies? How many people are fed by the labor of a single individual? Inquire about the numbers of war chariots. How many privately-owned draft horses are there, and how many privately-owned carts?...”
Convict Laborer’s Identification (Han Dynasty)

- Bricks like this one were buried with dead convict laborers for identification.
- The brick specifies the convict’s name, native place, crime, date of sentence, and type of punishment.
Founding of Han

- Civil wars erupted in 206 BCE, leading to collapse of Qin dynasty
- Liu Bang 劉邦: commoner origin, rose through ranks as general
- After victory over rival warlord, Liu declared founding of Han dynasty in 202 BCE
- Known subsequently as Emperor Gaozu 高祖 ("Eminent Ancestor"); reigned 202-195 BCE
“Statutes and Ordinances of 186 BCE”

- Excavated from an early Han tomb, these documents contain 28 sections of the law code issued by the Han government during the regency of Empress Lü (widow of Emperor Gaozu).
- Laws show that Han closely followed Qin law.
Emperor Wen’s Laissez-Faire Policies

- Emperor Wen (r. 180-157 BCE) adopted policies premised on personal frugality, minimal taxation, withdrawal of state from private economic activity
- Ended state monopoly on coinage in 175 BCE
- Rescinded sovereign control over iron and salt resources
- Lowered land tax rate to 1/30, then abolished land tax altogether in 167 BCE
Emperor Wu

- The fourth Han emperor, Wu reigned for over half a century (141-87 BCE)
- Strong assertion of imperial control; launched costly wars against the Xiongnu nomads as foreign conquests (Korea, Vietnam) that required new revenues
- “Balanced Standard” (pingzhun 平準): officials bought/sold goods to raise/lower prices, ensure distribution among regions
- Salt and iron monopolies: lucrative industries placed under direct state control
Salt and Iron Monopolies

- To raise funds for military campaigns, Emperor Wu placed the two most lucrative industries under state control in 115 BCE.
Han Wuzhu 五銖 Coin

- Introduced in 118 BCE to replace variety of coins in circulation
- From 113 BCE, capital mints issued highly uniform and successful Wuzhu coins
- Became monetary standard for centuries afterward
Mercantilist State

- Focused on mobilization of economic resources rather than military manpower
- Ruler manipulates terms of trade and money supply to ensure inflow of goods and wealth
- Indirect money taxes in place of in-kind taxes on agriculture and labor/military service
- Bureaucratic entrepreneurship
- Key episodes:
  - Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141-87 BCE)
  - “New Laws” of Wang Anshi (1069-1127)