

Seminar unravels cultural landscape of Han Dynasty

By ZHANG QINGLI

NANYANG—The First Nanyang Seminar on Han Cultural Research was held in late July in Nanyang, Henan Province. Scholars at the seminar presented the rich historical and cultural landscape of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220) from political, ideological, and artistic perspectives.

History of Nanyang

Nanyang, situated in the Han River basin, holds a significant place as one of the birthplaces of the Chinese civilization. According to Bu Xianqun, president of the China Qin-Han History Association and director of the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the development of the Chinese civilization has always been influenced by distinct regional cultures. Nanyang boasted a developed economy, splendid culture, and outstanding talent during Han. Particularly, in the fields of science and technology, medicine, literature, and art, Nanyang held a leading position in the country. Abundant historical relics and unearthed artistic treasures, such as Han stone and brick reliefs, serve as a testament to the prosperity of Nanyang at the time. The diverse and inclusive regional culture of Nanyang exemplifies a remarkable level of cultural development in Han.

Liu Rui, a research fellow from the Institute of Archaeology at CASS, discovered through an examination of the historical records of territorial governance during the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han dynasties, that Nanyang had experienced a prolonged period of stable governance prior to the unification of China by the Qin empire. After the unification, Qin brought about a period of even more stability in the region. After Emperor Wu of Han, Nanyang made non-negligible contributions to the stability and development of the southern areas of Han.

Intellectual and institutional development

The Han Dynasty marked a significant era in the emergence and evolution of traditional

Chinese ideology and culture, as well as the establishment of ancient Chinese political foundations. It is generally accepted within academic circles that “Han inherited Qin systems.” However, in the view of Li Zhenhong, a professor from the School of History and Culture at Henan University, Han not only inherited the imperial autocracy established by Qin, but also drew lessons from its collapse. At the outset, Han began constructing a corresponding system of ruling ideology. The process took shape throughout Lu Jia’s *Xinyu* [*New Discourses*], Jia Yi’s *Xinshu* [*New Writings*], Dong Zhongshu’s *Chunqiu Fanlu* [*Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals*], until *Baihu Tongyi* [*Symposium in the White Tiger Hall*] during the reign (75–88) of Emperor Zhang of Eastern Han (25–220).

According to Zang Zhifei, vice president of the China Qin-Han History Association and a professor at Soochow University, scholars have devoted considerably more attention to the Western Han period (202 BCE–8) than the Eastern Han period. Founder of Eastern Han, Emperor Guangwu’s emphasis on Confucianism truly lead to a synthesis of systems, ideologies, and cultures since the pre-Qin era (prior to 221 BCE). Confucianism was integrated into the employment system of primary-level administrative operations and guided Confucian scholars in establishing public service value systems.

Since Qin and Han, China has established a unified national system and concept, regarded by many scholars as an embodiment of “precocious” national development. In 2020, Xu Yong, a professor with Central China Normal University, published an article discussing the “precocity theory” of China’s state growth. According to Xu, the inherent conditions of Chinese civilization and the country itself have contributed to the relatively early emergence of administrative bureaucracy, a phenomenon that did not appear in Western countries until the 19th century.

Liu Taixiang, a professor from the School of History at Nanyang Normal University (NYNU), meticulously investigated the ad-

ministrative execution system of Qin and Han by examining ancient records on bamboo slips. Back then, execution by laws and decrees was already commonplace. The quality and efficiency of administrative execution were held to high standards and served as an important criterion for assessing officials. Qin and Han formed an administrative execution mechanism featuring relatively standardized behavioral norms and rules, clear obligations, and a commitment to high-quality and efficient execution.

Han stone reliefs

Stone reliefs, as a distinctive cultural artifact of the Han Dynasty, offer valuable insights into the comprehensive understanding of ancestors regarding their way of life and belief systems. Consequently, they have become instrumental for the study of Han historical culture. According to Zhu Cunming, director of the Institute of Han Dynasty Culture at Jiangsu Normal University, the abundance of sun and moon elements found in Han stone reliefs serve as historical reflections of sun and moon myths and legends during and before Han, demonstrating the wisdom derived from ancient observations of the sky and earth amid the formation of the ethnic Han identity. As mythological expressions of the Chinese people’s concept of time, these mythic images provide profound insight into pre-Qin mythological thought and the archetypal connotation of Chinese culture.

According to Gao Erwang, dean of the School of History at NYNU, Han stone reliefs can be likened to “fossil specimens” of the social life during that time. They depict various scenes, including multiple perspectives of ritual sacrifices—sacrificial objects, offerings, venues, and ceremonies. The sacrificial rites revealed in the reliefs offer a valuable glimpse of the material and inner world of the Han people, supplementing the limited available literature from the period, and confirm the continuity of these practices of rituals. By preserving and passing down many pre-Qin rites and customs, Han sacrificial activities became an integral part of the lifestyle of that era.

Since the turn of the century, the rise of image-based historical studies has provided theoretical and methodological support for research on Han stone reliefs. Liu Zhongyu, director of the cultural history research office of the Institute of History at CASS, suggested that the study of Han stone reliefs should extend beyond artistic aesthetics. It should be situated within the cultural context at that time and investigated from the perspective of social and cultural history, deriving modern value from the evolution and development of traditional Chinese culture.

The seminar was co-sponsored by the China Qin-Han History Association and NYNU.



A stone relief displayed at the Nanyang Stone-Carved Art Museum in Han Dynasty in Nanyang, Henan Province. Photo: Zhang Qingli/CSST

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Future ‘Chinese model’

Some Western scholars criticize the Chinese government for its extensive control over various sectors of the economy, arguing that this hampers efficiency and optimal economic performance and predicting this perceived inefficiency would slow China’s economic growth. In this regard, Tsuyuguchi holds a different view.

He believed that economic theories and policy measures cannot be mechanically applied to the development of a country. “China selected stable and rather high growth while the United States selected unstable but as high as possible growth, and so far, as a result, China succeeded

better than other countries,” he said. In fact, at a conference in 2017, Tsuyuguchi proposed that if China can overcome the middle-income trap and continue to develop under its current system, a distinct “Chinese model” could emerge and gain recognition worldwide.

First floated by China’s leadership in 2020, the new development paradigm of “dual circulation” features domestic and overseas markets reinforcing each other with the domestic market as the mainstay, which represents a major adjustment and improvement of China’s economic development strategy. According to Tsuyuguchi, the concept of “dual circulation” entails greater emphasis on domestic demand than in the past. Additionally, achieving high quality innova-

tive development is closely tied to enhancing productivity, Tsuyuguchi said. The former aims at the demand side, while the latter aims at supply-side improvement. He further highlighted the importance of supply-side improvements, as China is expected to experience a decline in the labor force in the future. To maintain a reasonable growth rate, it becomes crucial to enhance productivity.

As Chinese manufacturing transitions towards high-quality technologies, factories that rely on relatively inexpensive labor may relocate to other developing countries. Tsuyuguchi commended this win-win practice, as it not only boosts productivity in China but also contributes to the development of those countries.



A Collection of Lanxi Fish Scale Maps

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A study of ancient land registration systems

By ZHONG WEIMIN

Yulin Tuce [fish scale map registers] represent critical historical literature for the study of primary-level social and economic systems in late imperial China. Under the chief editorship of Zhang Yongquan, a senior professor of liberal arts at Zhejiang University, and others, the publication of *A Collection of Lanxi Fish Scale Maps* is of immense academic value.

As a basis of ancient national economic systems, taxation and conscription relied on the effective management of land and population. It required the state to establish primary-level social order through household and land registration. Land tax was the major source of national revenue in ancient China, which was still predominantly agrarian. To ensure the collection of land tax, it was essential for the government to conduct comprehensive surveys to accurately record the amount of land in different locations.

Since the establishment of the yulin tuce system in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), it remained the basic national system throughout Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), Qing (1644–1911), and the Republican Era (1912–49). However, few fish scale maps and books survive to this day, and those that have survived are frequently found interspersed with other contract documents. The ancient system has not attracted extensive attention from scholars, many of whom doubt the authenticity of its existence.

The discovery of yulin tuce in Lanxi, Zhejiang Province, completely dispelled these doubts, while this major publication further provides the essential conditions to probe into ancient land tax systems, even enabling the detailed reconstruction of the yulin tuce system, including the dimensions and quantities of land when these maps were made. More importantly, the fish scale maps of Lanxi during the reign (1861–75) of Tongzhi Emperor of Qing represent the most systematic and complete land registers preserved to date at the county level, thereby offering an ideal sample of what was actually used by the government at that time.

The Lanxi fish scale maps comprise information systems of land, households, and collateral materials. They serve as an encyclopedia for understanding ancient primary-level society, offering a wealth of information ranging from land property rights, farmland systems, irrigation and water conservancy, tenancy relations, land transactions, tax collection and conscription, clans, environmental changes, religious beliefs, folk associations, and even local customs. These materials provide a fresh perspective on state governance during the late imperial period, and the relationships between the central and local authorities, as well as the government and the public.

Zhong Weimin is a professor from the Department of History at Tsinghua University.