

Conference Report

Early State Formation: A Multi-disciplinary Conversation

**A Report of ‘International Symposium
on Early State Formation’
Held on November 4–5, 2009, Beijing, China**

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Early state formation has been one of the most enduring topics of study in history and continues to fascinate scholars and lay people alike. On November 4–5, 2009, the Institute of World History of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences held a two-day symposium on this topic. The following is a brief survey of the event.

Scholars from various fields and disciplines attended the symposium. Participants included Assyriologists (Wu Yuhong, Liu Jian), Egyptologist (Jin Shoufu), archaeologist of ancient Iran (Holly Pittman), historian of South Asia (Liu Xinru), historians of ancient China (Wang Zhenzhong, Wang Hui, Yi Jianping), archaeologists of ancient China (Wang Wei, Xu Hong, Liu Guoxiang), historians of ancient Greece (Wang Dunshu, Guo Xiaoling, Huang Yang), historians of ancient Japan (Suzuki Yasutami, Xu Jianxin) and anthropologists (Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev, Renée van Kessel-Hagesteijn). More scholars from different fields, such as Hittitology, Roman history, historical theory and ethnography, took part in the discussion.

The study of state formation in China is rooted in the study of ancient Chinese history (Guo Moruo 1977)¹ and archaeology (Su Bingqi 1999; Li Xueqin 1998 etc.). More recently, scholars from various disciplines have devoted their attention to the topic and relevant themes (Ri Zhi 1989; Shi Zhisheng and Liu Xinru 1993; Wang Zhenzhong

1994; Xie Weiyang 1995; Shi Zhisheng and Guo Fang 1998; Shi Zhisheng and Xu Jianxin 2003; Xu Jianxin n.d.; Yi Jianping 2004; Chen Chun 2007; etc.). Some of the recent works borrowed extensively from Western anthropological and archaeological vocabulary, using terms such as chiefdom, ranked-society, settlements and early state, *etc.* in explaining Chinese state formation to set against classical Marxist and materialist interpretations. However, these terms caused much controversy in Chinese academia. Are these terms applicable to Chinese history? How to explain the real phenomena in Chinese history with these terms? What are the exact meanings for each term? Yet these questions had never been examined with multi-disciplinary approach in China. The symposium provided a good opportunity to explore these problems.

In summary, the symposium intended to deal with the following themes:

- (1) Theoretical and Comparative Study on Early State Formation;
- (2) Patterns of Early States;
- (3) Religious and Social Institutions in Early States;
- (4) Social Structure in Early States.

Accordingly, the symposium was structured in 8 sessions: the first and second sessions as well as one speech of the third and one of the sixth sessions dealt with surveys of state formation study in ancient China, Japan and theoretical research in modern Western world. The other two speeches of the third session and a speech of the seventh session focused on anthropological aspects of state formation, with perspectives of politogenesis, state decline and urbanization. The other sessions and speeches sought to explore the historical processes in ancient Mesopotamia, China, India and Greece. Scholars paid attention to slavery and the role of writing in ancient Mesopotamian state, process of state formation in ancient Egypt, non-despotic elements and ritualizing system in ancient China, women's role in early Indian state, rise of Greek polis, as well as archaeological excavations in ancient Iran and the Western Liao valley civilization in China, etc.

Theoretical Research of State Formation

Many participants reviewed theoretical and factual researches on state formation in China. Guo Xiaoling reviewed the 2000-year research history of state in the Western world and that of contemporary China, discussing the views of classical writers, of Marxists and of anthropologists *etc.* However, he also pointed out that, so far, there has not been any systematical explanation of state formation which could

place the issue in the clearest light. Wang Dunshu showed several different views on city-states and distinguished the function of cities and some characters of early states in ancient Greece, and those of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China.

In addition, Suzuki Yasutami reviewed research history on state formation in Japan. He pointed out that, through applying Marxism and other anthropological theories, terms such as social evolution, early state, ranked-society and chiefdom have been borrowed by Japanese scholars to explain ancient state in Japan and therefore have improved the study on the topic.

How to define the term ‘state’? Several participants made remarks. They agreed that a state is a highly systemic political community (Guo Xiaoling, Wang Wei, Xu Jianxin), and its obvious symbols include social complexity, social stratification and administrative machinery/government. The functions of a state are to prevent social turbulence and organize activities of production, wealth distribution, promotion of culture and education, and maintaining sanitation, etc. Guo Xiaoling also referred to territorial and demographical characteristics of a state. Meanwhile, Xu Jianxin, Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev emphasized the role of coercion in maintaining privilege to the access of resources and in tackling extreme situations.

Accordingly, the criteria or the symbols of state formation were stressed by most participants. They discussed the emergence of the classes and establishment of a public authority (Wang Zhenzhong); massive productive economy, social stratification and the emergence of professional administrator (Xu Jianxin, Grinin and Korotayev); urbanization (Korotayev and Grinin); the ideology of rulers or of kingship (Jin Shoufu), etc. Whether writing system and development of writing records are the most substantial criteria of state formation became a focal point in discussion (Jin Shoufu, Liu Jian; Gong Yushu in discussion). Besides, material cultural traits such as bronze vessels, mortuary, and architecture are also mentioned by the participants (Wang Wei, Wang Zhenzhong).

Wang Zhenzhong challenged the using of ‘Four-tier Settlement State Theory’ in distinguishing chiefdom and state; he stressed that in order to understand the birth of state and civilization, the mechanism and path of evolution and characteristics of early states one should examine multiple aspects of a society. Meanwhile, Jin Shoufu stressed the multiple elements which stimulated the formation of ancient Egyptian state as reflected on pictorial materials.

Patterns and Developmental Routes of Ancient States

The patterns and developmental routes of state formation were fully discussed in the symposium. Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev suggested that politogenesis could be regarded as a component of general social evolution; meanwhile, the state formation process was a component of politogenesis. The politogenesis could not be reduced to a single – state formation process – line. Contrary to this, there were a considerable number of other lines of evolution. Some of them had no potential of to transform the community into a state; some communities did not become states because their politogenesis was forcibly interrupted. And these analogues could have been co-existed for a long period. Renée van Kessel-Hagesteijn analyzed the various ways that early states ‘declined’. She enumerated and studied the factors causing decline or collapse, and the downturn phenomena could also be considered as the components of state formation. She analyzed factors such as location, size of territory, natural resources, technological innovations, economy, trade, communication and interaction, etc. in order to explain the phenomenon of fragile states. These scholars’ arguments provided variant angles of studying patterns of state formation to Chinese scholars.

The early state or the earliest state was expressed in many faces. Wang Dunshu suggested that early states were universally small in size with a limited population and it was usually a combination of a central city with its environ. He provided a transforming line of the early state from a small-population city-state into a territorial kingdom; then into a large multi-ethnic empire. Guo Xiaoling considered that there were two lines for the formation of Greek *polis*, either deriving from a single community or from a unification of tribes and villages. Was there necessarily an interruption between primitive state and secondary state? Huang Yang discussed the question in the context of ancient Greece. He doubted the traditional view on ‘the discontinuity between Mycenaean social systems and those of the world of the *polis*’. According to him, the rise of the *polis* was a gradual, long-term transformation of society that began with the collapse of central power of the Mycenaean kingdoms.

Participants also discussed the forming process of genuine ancient states. Wang Wei described the three stages of state formation of ancient China, *i.e.* small states, royal kingdom, and empire, and summarized the main characteristics of early Chinese states. Alternatively, Wang Hui concluded four stages of state formation in early China,

i.e. primitive settlement (*Yi*) → religious center of tribes or clans (*Du*) → fortification city (*Guo*) → central state (*Zhongguo*). Likewise, Suzuki Yasutami and Xu Jianxin surveyed the stages of ancient state formation in Japan from early state to archaic state and finally to mature state. In addition, they all mentioned cultural interactions between early states in a large territorial scope.

There were also several specific researches on the process of state formation. Wu Yuhong discussed lists of slaves from inscriptions dated to Uruk III and Jemdet Nasr, about 3100–2900 BC which was the time of a turning point of ancient Mesopotamian state. Liu Jian reviewed the complexity of political authority from the viewpoint of writing records in ancient Mesopotamia. Moreover, Liu Xinru concentrated on individual's role (a woman named Ambapali) during the emergence of urban centers and new states on northern India's Ganges plain, around the middle of the first millennium BCE. Yi Jianping selected a topic on democratic ideology recorded in ancient Chinese classical works.

Origin of Civilization

Evolution of civilization was usually entwined with state formation. How to ascertain that a civilization was originated? Liu Guoxiang listed nine cultural elements in Western-Liao valley civilization, while Holly Pittman discussed the new findings in excavations at Konar Sandal, Jiroft, in the Halil Basin of Iran. According to their discussions, we found some similarities between emergence of civilization and state formation, including social complexity, economy and administration, sacrificial center, interaction with neighborhood, art and artifacts, *etc.* These are all mentioned by Wang Wei when discussing about the relationship between civilization and state. Xu Hong compared the two different ritual systems arising in ancient China, *i.e.* the ancestral-worship-centered and highly ritual-system cultures *vs.* non-ritual-system cultures, and stated that the flourishing of former and vanishing of latter in early China reflected that there were different social structures among the two kinds of early Chinese culture.

The archaeologists also provided the recent discoveries in China and Iran. Holly Pittman narrated a recently discovered civilization in the Jiroft region, Iran, with abundant illustrations. Wang Wei enumerated substantial symbols of ancient Chinese states from prehistoric period to royal kingdoms. Liu Guoxiang and Xu Hong gave us vivid pictures of Chinese prehistoric cultures in both core and periphery regions.

Future Research

Indeed, we found some themes for further research. For example, the term ‘early state’ utilized in title of this symposium still confused scholars, especially historians and archaeologists. Some participants referred it to the whole developing period from prehistoric stage to establishment of kingdom, while some dealt it as a stage in state formation, contrasting it with ‘archaic state’. How to define the term? We should further research on the definition of the ‘early state’.

We are glad that we set ‘Religious and Social Institutions in Early States’ as one of the themes for the symposium, as we were looking forward to learning new researches and views on the topic. However, though several participants mentioned the role of religions in state formation and ritual system in development of civilization, this topic has not been fully discussed. Our perspective is that we will work towards the direction and more research on this topic will appear in near future.

Speeches of the Symposium

Session One:

Wang Dunshu (History Department, Nankai University, China)

A Survey on Study of the Early State Formation in China: Perspective of City-state

Wang Wei (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

Formation of the Early State in China: An Outline

Session Two:

Suzuki Yasutami (Kokugakuin University, Japan)

Society of Leadership and Emergence of State in Japan

Wang Zhenzhong (Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

My View of the Criteria for the State Formation – A Challenge of the ‘Four-tier Settlement State Theory’

Session Three:

Leonid Grinin (Volgograd Centre for Social Research, Russia)

The Primary Politogenesis Period

Guo Xiaoling (Beijing Normal University, China)

Origins and Early Types of the State

Renée van Kessel-Hagesteijn (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, the Netherlands)

Dynamics in Political Centralization Processes – the Various Faces of ‘Decline’

Session Four:

Huang Yang (Department of History, Peking University, China)

Mycenae, the 'Dark Age' and the Rise of the Greek Polis

Yi Jianping (Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

Non-Despotism Elements in Mohism

Xu Hong (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

Two Ritual Systems in the State Formation in the East Asian Mainland

Session Five:

Holly Pittman (University of Pennsylvania, United States)

Excavations at Konar Sandal in the Region of Jiroft in the Halil Basin: First Preliminary Report (2002–2008)

Jin Shoufu (Department of History, Fudan University, China)

The Process of State Formation in Ancient Egypt

Wu Yuhong (Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, China)

The Earliest Slavery Documents of the World from Mesopotamia

Session Six:

Xu Jianxin (Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

On the Formation of Ancient Japanese State

Liu Guoxiang (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

Emergence of Western-Liao Valley Civilization: Its Pattern and Nature

Session Seven:

Andrey Korotayev (Russian State University for the Humanities, Russia)

Early State Formation, Urbanization, and Political Evolution of the World System

Wang Hui (Department of History, Shaanxi Normal University, China)

Expansion and Convergence in State Formation of China

Session Eight:

Liu Xinru (College of New Jersey, United States)

Ambapali the Public Woman of Vaisali

Liu Jian (Institute of World History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China)

Writing and Political Authority in Ancient Mesopotamia

NOTE

¹ See Guo Moruo 1977. This work was considered as the genesis study of state formation in ancient China. Guo accepted theories advocated by L. H. Morgan, K. Marx and F. Engels and provided a framework of social evolution and state formation in ancient China.

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