

State Transformation in Early China

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ABSTRACT

State transformation was the most important event in the Chinese classical period, 0770-0221. It consisted of the conversion of the old palace states, with their land mostly distributed among their hereditary chariot warriors, into resource bureaucracies. Economically, it brought the whole wealth of the state under the control of the ruler. Administratively, it created a new civil servant class to administer the system and to collect revenues. Militarily, it replaced the old elite chariot force, which could conquer tiny states but not large ones, with a far more powerful citizen infantry army. The army was the point of the change. Until its appearance, the competition among the large states, to achieve the military unification of China, was at a standstill. Unification was finally achieved in 0221, inaugurating the Chinese Unified Empire which is still with us today.

The sources differ on when the transition took place. One group of 04th century texts refers it to the 07th century, and credits it to Gwǎn Jùng, a minister of Chí. The Chūn/Chyōu or “Spring and Autumn,” the court chronicle of Lǚ for the years 0721-0481, shows no sign of these changes. Modern readers accept the 07c date, but the rule in history is that the earliest evidence, in this case the Lǚ chronicle, should be accepted. We may also ask, If this change did take place in the 07c, why are the 04c theorists spending so much time implementing that very system?

I will briefly survey the competing text sources, and then ask: What difference does time make? Why is it better to locate this change where it really happened? The answer is that wrong historical facts lead to wrong inferences for modern policy, and that taking the mainstream view as correct has led to tragic failures of policy in our time.

[300 words]