12 Qin and Han Evidence

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12.A Transmitted Texts

I Introduction

Society obviously must have farmers before it can eat, foresters, fishermen, miners, etc., before it can make use of natural resources; craftsmen before it can have manufactured goods; and merchants before they can be distributed. But once these exist, what need is there for government directives, mobilizations of labor, or periodic assemblies? Each man has only to be left to utilize his own abilities and exert his own strength to obtain what he wishes. Thus, when a commodity is very cheap, it invites a rise in price; when it is very expensive, it invites a reduction. When each person works away at his own occupation and delights in his own business, then, like water flowing downward, goods will naturally flow forth ceaselessly day and night without having been summoned, and the people will produce commodities without having been asked.

故待農而食之，虞而出之，工而成之，商而通之。此寧有政教發徵期會哉？人各任其能，竭其力，以得所欲。故物賤之徵貴，貴之徵賤，各勸其業，樂其事，若水之趨下，日夜無休時，不召而自來，不求而民出之。¹

This advice was not written by some eighteenth- or nineteenth-century classical economist. The fact that it might well be is astounding in itself, considering that it was an ancient Chinese historian, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145 or 135–ca. 87 BCE), who recorded it more than 2,000 years ago. Not quite without reason, this passage has often been described as an ancient precursor of Adam Smith's (1729–1790) 'invisible hand.' It has even been suggested, albeit wrongly, that it was his knowledge of Sima Qian's ideas that inspired Adam Smith in developing this notion.² The question of how far the ancient author's ideas are in fact comparable to modern theories of competitive, self-regulating markets is, to be sure, much more complex than this isolated quotation could possibly suggest. But apart from this particular question, the quotation illustrates very well the high degree of interest and sometimes sophistication that several ancient Chinese works reveal with regard to economic considerations. In early imperial China, economic circumstances as well as policies such as currency reforms, price stabilization schemes, or the introduction of state monopolies, were acknowledged as important factors for a state's well-being, and contem-

1 *Shiji* 129.3254, trans. Watson 1993, 434.

2 Young 1996; McCormick 1999; Chiu and Yeh 1999.

Note: I would like to thank Armin Selbitschka for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

porary writers felt no compulsion to keep their silence in this regard. In general, therefore, sinologists can hardly complain about a lack of sources dealing with economic matters. As for the generic categories of texts to be considered, there are historical narratives as well as descriptive, documentary, and normative texts. They contain economic theories, historical events (such as the implementation of economic measures by the state), officials' criticisms of contemporaneous economic policies, and economically relevant figures (such as state budgets, government expenditure, tax rates, and commodity prices). Excavated texts in particular provide further information on imperial laws (including those on currencies and market-places) and on local economic administration (such as the local management of conscript labor and of agricultural frontier garrisons).

This chapter will introduce the most important early imperial texts for economic history that have come down to us via traditional transmission. These are texts that were verifiably written during ancient times, and were then subsequently copied. But their earliest full extant copies usually date from the Song 宋 (960–1297 CE) or later periods. These books became part of China's rich literary tradition, some of them having accumulated commentaries whose dates of composition range from Han 漢 (206 BCE–220 CE) times to the modern age. The following introduction to these texts will proceed by traditional genres, starting with the mostly narrative, but partly also essayistic historiographic sources covering the Han period. It will then move to politico-philosophical works falling under the traditional literary category of 'masters' (zi 子), before finally turning to technical manuals.³

II The Standard Histories

II.1 The Nature of the Standard Histories

The history of the Han period is covered by three historiographic works which later came to be acknowledged as belonging to the quasi-canonized so-called 'standard histories' (*zheng shi* 正史) of imperial China.⁴ Sima Qian's *The Scribe's Records* (*Shiji* 史記), which founded this genre, covers a long period from mythological rulers such as the Yellow Emperor (*Huang Di* 黃帝), who supposedly ruled during the third millennium BCE up to and including the Han emperor Wu's (武) reign (141–87 BCE).⁵

³ For the non-transmitted texts, excavated from tombs and deposits, see Ma, ch. 12.B, this volume.

⁴ The last of these standard histories, whose basic structures remained largely consistent with Sima Qian's and Ban Gu's early models, covers the Ming 明 period (1368–1644) and was compiled during the Qing 清 period (1644–1911).

⁵ Whereas the *Shiji* is different from its successors in not being confined to one single dynasty, its larger part is concerned with the Han dynasty up to Emperor Wu with an even stronger focus on the latter's reign (under which Sima Qian served and, possibly, died).

Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92 CE) *Documents of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書)⁶ covers the entire Former (or Western) Han period (206 BCE–9 CE) and Wang Mang's 王莽 Xin 新 dynasty (9–23 CE). Fan Ye's 范曄 (398–445 CE) *Documents of the Later Han* (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書)⁷ covers the Later (or Eastern) Han period (25–220 CE). As for the *Hou Hanshu*, a fairly large time gap separates the period covered by the work and the time of its compilation in the first half of the fifth century CE. Its author Fan Ye did, however, base his work on earlier histories that had been compiled under circumstances more comparable to those of the *Shiji* and *Hanshu*.

All standard histories are of a predominantly biographical nature. Their largest sections consist of officials' and other individuals' biographies or memoirs (*zhuan* 傳 or *liezhuan* 列傳).⁸ Each of these standard histories further includes a first section that contains the emperors' annals (*ji* 紀 or *benji* 本紀). They are more annalistic in style but may also be called biographical in the broadest sense. In addition, each of the three Han histories contains a section of so-called treatises (*shu* 書 or *zhi* 志) in partly essayistic, partly narrative style. They are concerned with particular objects of government, institutions, and other politically relevant matters – such as, for example, imperial rituals, astronomy, the administrative and judicial systems, literature, geography, and economy. Moreover, both *Shiji* and *Hanshu* each include a section consisting of 'tables' (*biao* 表),⁹ while the *Shiji* alone has another section on 'hereditary households' (*shijia* 世家), a homage to the older aristocratic system that Emperor Wu eventually dismantled.¹⁰

Unlike many later standard histories, neither of the three Han histories was written by imperial order. All of them arose – at least initially – from their authors' private initiative. Nevertheless, all three authors were officials of the central court. This proximity to the emperor and to central government institutions is important to keep in mind as it has particular implications for the nature of their works: Firstly, the authors had access to the palace archives, and they made extensive use of them. Quotations of official documents such as imperial edicts and memorials to

6 Alternatively translated as *Book of (the) Han*.

7 Alternatively translated as *Book of (the) Later Han*.

8 The translation 'biography' for *zhuan* makes sense in most cases, but it must be noted that a few *zhuan* are not concerned with individuals' lives, but with foreign peoples and polities (see below). A more literal translation of *zhuan* would be 'tradition' or 'record.'

9 The *biao* provide information in a chronological and tabular form on, e.g., each year's enfeoffments and assignments to high government posts.

10 As for the general writing style, within individual chapters (except for the largely essayistic treatises), the historians are inclined to rarely interrupt their narratives by inserting personal remarks or evaluations. Yet, the majority of chapters do include – specially denoted – final evaluative passages (or, to a lesser degree, introductions) of varying length, in which the authors classify events and place them in larger historical contexts, judge people's behavior and evaluate their personalities. On the early development of the historiographic genre, see Leese-Messing 2016, 52–114.

the throne¹¹ make up a considerable part of their historiographic works. They can be regarded as being informed by official documents to a large extent, even though the historians are likely to have manipulated these in one way or another. Secondly, their positions at court not only made their authors adopt a focus on the center of the empire and its history, but also came along with direct participation in court factionalism. This had a strong impact on the authors' depiction of particular events and people. At the same time, the historians' attitudes toward the court's current policies and ideological trends were by no means uncritical. For example, and quite to the contrary, Sima Qian was one of the most passionate critics of the prevailing political trends of his time and of his ruler, Emperor Wu, in particular. The degree of delicate involvement in political affairs of all three authors may also be indicated by the fact that each of them eventually came to be charged with capital crimes. Sima Qian was the 'luckiest' of the three by getting off with castration, whereas both Ban Gu and Fan Ye were executed.¹²

One peculiarity of imperial Chinese historiography is that it was to some extent shaped by an ideal of 'transmitting but not creating' (*shu er bu zuo* 述而不作).¹³ The extensive reproduction of official documents in historiographic works may be seen as one aspect of this tendency. A more disturbing outgrowth of this may be perceived in the extreme extent to which Ban Gu modelled his *Hanshu* on Sima Qian's *Shiji*. He not only fundamentally adopted the form of individual chapter types and the overall structure of the *Shiji*, but he even largely copied the latter's contents for the time period on which both works overlap, that is, the second and early first centuries BCE. But the superficial similarity of the accounts can be profoundly misleading. By rearranging the sequence of sentences or passages, by subtly changing the wording, or by concluding a largely reproduced chapter with a strongly divergent evaluation, Ban Gu manages to express views that are diametrically opposed to those of his predecessor. Without taking a very close look at the details of both texts and the historical contexts in which they were written, these significant differences are prone to be overlooked. Generalizing attributions of allegedly typical ideological or political attitudes of Han historians are therefore to be taken with a grain of salt.¹⁴

11 Memorials to the throne were an official way of communicating with the emperor in written form. They could theoretically be submitted by any of his subjects across the empire and were formally presented to the emperor by government officials.

12 For basic information on the *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu*, their authors, and their composition, as well as for references to classical studies of these works, see Hulsewé 1993a; 1993b; Knechtges 2010a; 2010b.

13 The expression is found in *Lunyu* 論語 7.1, where it is attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE). See *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, 251. Even though the original context of the expression was a different one, Han authors related it (in varying manners and interpretations) to textual qualities.

14 See van Ess 2014 for a comprehensive and detailed comparison of the overlapping contents of *Shiji* and *Hanshu*. With regard to a more specific topic, Chin 2010 offers an intriguing analysis of the differences between Sima Qian's representation of frontier relations in his account on the Xiongnu 匈奴 in comparison to other Han authors such as Ban Gu.

Pieces of information on various aspects of economic history are scattered all over the three ‘standard histories’ of the Han period,¹⁵ but there are several chapters that are more generally concerned with economic matters. These will be introduced in the following subsections.

II.2 The Economic Treatises (*Shiji* 30 and *Hanshu* 24)

One of the eight treatises that Sima Qian decided to include in his pioneering work bears the title “Treatise on the Balanced Standard” (*Pingzhun shu* 平準書).¹⁶ The chapter deals with economic challenges and policies from the beginning of the Han period up to Emperor Wu. The period of the latter’s rule, which Sima Qian experienced in person, makes up the larger part of the chapter. The concrete economic challenges to the Han government that Sima Qian refers to in his chronological account include depleted state funds (especially due to military spending), price inflation (partly resulting from the private casting of coins), social and regional inequalities regarding the distribution of wealth and goods, tax evasion, high transportation costs for tax collection, and regional hunger crises (caused by natural disasters).

The government measures taken in response and recorded by Sima Qian include tax reforms (especially tax increases for merchants, but also tax exemptions for newly reclaimed land or newly conquered territories), repeated currency reforms (including moderate changes in weight and design of bronze coins, but also introduction of highly overvalued currencies), the sale of honorary titles and official posts, and the resettlement of impoverished people. He further writes about the introduction of state monopolies (coin casting, salt and iron production), the establishment of a state-run transportation or logistics system called ‘equitable delivery’ (*junshu* 均輸) for a more effective and rational distribution of tax revenues, and the establishment of a ‘balanced standard’ (*pingzhun* 平準) system, under which government agencies were to buy up goods when cheap and sell them when expensive in order to control prices and to replenish the treasury.

The following passage discusses the introduction of a government monopoly on the casting of coins under Emperor Wu. It may serve as a vivid example of how the

15 In addition, contents relevant to the history of the Han period (including economic matters) are also to be found in other historiographic works that were not quasi-canonized as ‘standard histories’ – such as Xun Yue’s 荀悅 (148–209 CE) *Hanji* 漢紀 and Yuan Hong’s 袁宏 (328–376 CE) *Hou Hanji* 後漢紀. Furthermore, Chen Shou’s 陳壽 (233–ca. 297 CE) *Sanguo zhi* 三國志, a ‘standard history’ mainly covering the period of disunion following the Han dynasty’s downfall, also stretches back to the Later Han period and includes a highly important chapter on foreign relations (*Sanguo zhi* 30).

16 For an English translation of this chapter (*Shiji* 30), see Watson 1993, 61–85; for an English translation of Ban Gu’s equivalent chapter (*Hanshu* 24), see Swann 1950, 109–359.

chapter tends to treat economic problems and policies, and what kind of information one can expect to find therein:

In the commanderies and kingdoms there was so much illegal coin casting going on that the cash had become extremely numerous and light in weight. [In 116 BCE,] the high officials therefore asked that the officials in the capital who were in charge of casting metal be ordered to cast coins with red rims, each of which would be worth five of the five-*shu* cash presently in circulation. No taxes or other payments to the government were to be accepted unless made in these coins ... Two years later, the red-rimmed coins had become worthless, the people having managed to use them while cleverly evading the intention of the law. They were declared impractical and withdrawn from circulation. With this an order was issued forbidding any further casting of coins in the commanderies and kingdoms. All casting was to be done by three offices set up in the Shanglin Park. Since there were already a number of coins in circulation, it was ordered that no cash other than those cast by the three offices should be accepted as legal tender anywhere in the empire. All copper coins previously cast in the commanderies and kingdoms were withdrawn from circulation and melted down, the copper being turned over to the three offices. After this there were fewer and fewer people who attempted to cast their own cash, since the cost of making a passable imitation did not repay the effort. Only highly skilled professional criminals continued to produce counterfeit coins.

郡國多姦鑄錢，錢多輕，而公卿請令京師鑄鐘官赤側，一當五，賦官用非赤側不得行。[...] 其後二歲，赤側錢賤，民巧法用之，不便，又廢。於是悉禁郡國無鑄錢，專令上林三官鑄。錢既多，而令天下非三官錢不得行，諸郡國所前鑄錢皆廢銷之，輸其銅三官。而民之鑄錢益少，計其費不能相當，唯真工大姦乃盜為之。¹⁷

Ban Gu's "Treatise on Food and Commodities" (*Shihuo zhi* 食貨志, *Hanshu* 24), while generally sticking closely to the contents of Sima Qian's treatise concerning the second century BCE, is different from the latter in that it splits these contents up into two sections, i.e., 'food' (*shi*) and 'commodities' (*huo*), and in that it prefaces them with several passages on pre-imperial economic policies. To the economic history of the time period between Emperor Wu's rule and the end of the Former Han period (for which, of course, Sima Qian's treatise did not provide a model), Ban Gu dedicated only one single passage, which is followed by an again detailed (and critical) account of the economic policies under Wang Mang. The differences in arrangement of the two texts are not to be regarded as unimportant subtleties. Sima Qian's account of the economic policies undertaken during Emperor Wu's reign reads like the depiction of a downward spiral. Ban Gu's rearrangement of passages, in contrast, smoothes out much of his predecessor's underlying criticism.¹⁸

II.3 The Biographical Chapters on the 'Money Makers' (*Shiji* 129 and *Hanshu* 91)

Both Sima Qian and Ban Gu incorporated into their histories a chapter called "Memoirs of Money Makers" or, more literally, "Memoirs of [Those Whose] Goods In-

¹⁷ *Shiji* 30.1435, trans. Watson 1993, 76–77 (with modifications).

¹⁸ Van Ess 2014, 567–587. Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* does not contain an economic treatise.

creased” (*Huo zhi lie zhuan* 貨值列傳).¹⁹ Although Ban Gu took over the chapter from his predecessor, he sharply criticized Sima Qian for having “praised benefit and profit” (*chong shili* 崇勢利) when dealing with these people.²⁰ So while the biographical details on wealthy people are almost identical in both authors’ chapters, their interpretations reveal two very different attitudes toward the value of profit seeking and wealth. Sima Qian’s multifaceted chapter – of which the individuals’ biographies only make up a minor part – reads like a plea for the pursuit of wealth. It acknowledges profit seeking as a fundamental human quality not to be oppressed, while depreciating mediocre people’s behavior of “praising poverty and lowliness while talking big about humaneness and righteousness” 長貧賤，好語仁義 as a disgrace.²¹ Sima Qian appears to have envisioned wealthy merchant families – with some of whom he maintained personal and kinship connections – as a potential replacement of the former aristocracy. Considering them as prospective pillars of society and counterweights to imperial power, he floats the idea of them being the “uncrowned nobles” (*su feng* 素封).²² As the introductory quote to this chapter, taken from the ‘money makers’ account, demonstrates, he was opposed to strong governmental interference in trading activities. Ban Gu, in contrast, shows a much more positive attitude toward state intervention. His family played an active role in the military defense of Later Han presence in the northwest and therefore endorsed the government’s measures to increase treasury funds. He expresses strong moral concerns over private profit seeking, implicating wealthy business people in criminal activities.²³

The chapters on the money makers provide plenty of information about the range of means by which people of the second century BCE were able to accumulate fortunes.²⁴ Among the people mentioned in the chapters, the most common generator of wealth was the engagement in iron ore production during the pre-monopoly era. Others accumulated fortunes by trading in salt and fish, speculation in grain, investment in land, and money lending. Still others made their fortunes by what Sima Qian regarded as rather unconventional means to that end, that is, agricul-

¹⁹ An English translation of *Shiji* 129 is provided by Watson 1993, 433–453. A new and thoroughly annotated translation of this chapter by Stephen Durrant is now available in Nienhauser 2019, pp. 261–307. An English translation of *Hanshu* 91 (in combination with *Shiji* 129) is provided by Swann 1950, 413–453. For two overviews of earlier interpretations of *Shiji* 129, see L’Haridon 2015; Ruan 1996. Fan Ye’s *Hou Hanshu* does not include a chapter on ‘money makers.’

²⁰ *Hanshu* 62.2738.

²¹ *Shiji* 129.3272, trans. Watson 1993, 449 (with modifications).

²² *Shiji* 129.3272, 3283. Cf. Watson 1993, 447, 454.

²³ For a comprehensive comparison of Sima Qian’s and Ban Gu’s chapters on the ‘money makers,’ see van Ess 2014, 587–618.

²⁴ Apart from wealthy people of the early Han period, both the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* accounts also include pre-imperial examples.

ture,²⁵ selling fat, sauce, or dried sheep stomachs, working as mobile traders, blade sharpeners, horse doctors, or even as gamblers or grave robbers.²⁶ On a more general level, both authors describe a society in which economic profit seeking among the populace played a considerable role. According to their description, private business ventures had the potential of accumulating immense wealth. This is also manifest in two other passages in which Sima Qian lists dozens of particular possessions²⁷ and annual sales,²⁸ which he associates with the expectation of twenty percent profit and of making people economically equal to “a marquis enfeoffed with 1,000 households.”²⁹

A considerable part of Sima Qian’s chapter is devoted to the description of different regions of the empire and their economic potential.³⁰ This, for instance, is how Sima Qian describes the area of the Sichuan Basin:

South [of the capital area] are the commanderies of Ba and Shu, which also contain rich fields and produce large quantities of gardenias [for making dye], ginger, cinnabar, copper, iron, and bamboo and wooden implements. In the south these commanderies control the [recently subjugated] regions of Dian and Po, the latter noted for its young slaves. Nearby on the west are the regions of Qiong and Zuo, the latter famous for its horses and oxtails. Though the area is hemmed in on all four sides by natural barriers, there are plank roadways built along the sides of the mountains for 1,000 *li* so that there is no place that cannot be reached. All these roads are squeezed together into one in the narrow defile running between the Bao and Ye rivers. By means of such roads, areas which have a surplus may exchange their goods for the things which they lack.

南則巴蜀。巴蜀亦沃野，地饒施、薑、丹沙、石、銅、鐵、竹、木之器。南御滇黔，樊僮。西近邛笮，笮馬、旄牛。然四塞，棧道千里，無所不通，唯褒斜綰轂其口，以所多易所鮮。³¹

In a similar manner, Sima Qian provides descriptions of other regions, typically mentioning major cities, natural resources and handicraft products, soil quality, population density, and the role of merchants. In some cases, he also includes re-

25 Sima Qian does acknowledge agriculture (the ‘root’, *ben* 本) as the primary means to make a living at low risk. When it comes to sources of considerable wealth, however, he sees engagement in trade and handicrafts (the ‘branches,’ *mo* 末) as the most promising, albeit riskier, activities (*Shiji* 129.3272; 3274, trans. Watson 1993, 449).

26 *Shiji* 129.3282, trans. Watson 1993, 453–454.

27 Such as the possession of “pasture lands producing fifty horses, 100 head of cattle, 500 sheep, or 500 marshland swine a year,” or of “1,000 chestnut trees in Yan or Qin,” “1,000 citrus trees in Shu, Han, or Jiangling,” or “1,000 *mu* of mulberries or hemp in Qi or Lu” (*Shiji* 129, trans. Watson 1993, 448).

28 Such as “1,000 jars of pickles and sauces,” “100 slaves,” “1,000 rolls of embroidered or patterned silk,” or “30,000 catties of salted fish” (*Shiji* 129, trans. Watson 1993, 449–450).

29 *Shiji* 129; Watson 1993, 448.

30 Ban Gu shifted large parts of these contents to his “Treatise on Geography” (*Dili zhi* 地理志, *Hanshu* 28), of which there is no precursor in the *Shiji*.

31 *Shiji* 129.3261–2, trans. Watson 1993, 441 (with modifications).

marks on roads and interregional trading connections.³² It is interesting to note that similar to the case of the Sichuan Basin quoted above, several descriptions of other frontier regions mention lucrative trade with ‘barbarian’ peoples whose territories had recently been conquered by Emperor Wu. For example, regarding the region north of the capital area, there were supposedly “profits to be gained among the Qiang people” 西有羌中之利, and as for the northeastern region, it is pointed out that “on the north [it] adjoin[ed] the Wuhuan and Fuyu tribes, and on the east it control[led] the profits derived among the Huimo, Chaoxian, and Zhenpan peoples [of the recently subjugated regions of southern Manchuria and northern Korea]” 北鄰烏桓、夫餘, 東綰穢貉、朝鮮、真番之利.³³ The northwestern Hexi corridor and the so-called Western Regions (*Xiyu* 西域) of the Tarim Basin, including the routes to and from Central Asia, are not included in these accounts of regional economic potentials. Yet if we regard one of the primary goals of Sima Qian’s chapter as providing a guide to where to find uncrowned nobles, that is, wealthy families that had the potential of becoming the future pillars of the empire, then the omission of these sparsely populated and only partially integrated steppe and desert regions is less surprising. It does not reflect the potential importance of trading activities in these regions to the empire.

II.4 The Treatises on the Waterways (*Shiji* 29 and *Hanshu* 29)

Both *Shiji* and *Hanshu* contain one chapter on imperial water management projects entitled “Treatise on the Waterways” (*Hequ shu* 河渠書 and *Gouxu zhi* 溝洫志, respectively).³⁴ The two chapters are almost identical for the period covered by the *Shiji*, after which the *Hanshu* account continues until the end of Wang Mang’s reign.³⁵ They provide accounts of both successful and abortive hydraulic projects on a major scale, several of which were realized by labor forces of several tens of thousands of workers.³⁶ The overlapping purposes of the projects included facilitation of the transport of taxes in kind, agricultural irrigation, and flood control. The accounts testify to major public works having been conducted both near to and far away from the capital.

³² Furthermore, Sima Qian’s descriptions of regions typically include geo-deterministic remarks on their inhabitants’ prevalent character traits.

³³ *Shiji* 129.3262; 3265; Watson 1993, 441, 443 (with modifications).

³⁴ For an English translation of *Shiji* 29, see Watson 1993, 53–85. Needham (1971, 211–378) provides a study of the history of premodern Chinese hydraulics, including translations of several passages from *Shiji* 29 and *Hanshu* 29. Fan Ye’s *Hou Hanshu* does not comprise a treatise on water management.

³⁵ Both chapters do include several passages on pre-imperial times, but the bulk of each account is dedicated to projects undertaken during the Han period.

³⁶ For the time after Emperor Wu’s reign, the *Hanshu* does not mention any public works of such scale, but rather minor projects initiated by local administrators.

Considerable parts of the chapters' accounts on Han dynasty projects are made up of quotations from high officials' memorials to the throne recommending particular public works. Among other matters, these elaborate on transaction costs to be minimized, such as the amount of time and risk involved when shipping tax grain from a certain region to the capital. The following account of the construction of a transportation canal running south of the Wei River may serve as a case in point:

At this time [133 BCE] Zheng Dangshi, who was serving as superintendent for agriculture, said to the emperor, "Up to now grain from east of the pass has been brought to the capital by being transported up the Wei River. The operation requires six months to complete and the course is over 900 *li* (about 375 km) and beset with dangerous places. Now if we were to dig a canal from the Wei River, beginning at [the capital] Chang'an and following along the Southern Mountains [eastward] to the Yellow River, the distance could be reduced to something over 300 *li* (about 125 km). We would have a much easier route for transporting grain, and the trip could be accomplished in three months. Moreover, the people living along the canal could utilize the water to irrigate over 10,000 *qing* of farmland. Thus we would reduce the time and labor required to haul grain and at the same time increase the fertility of the lands within the passes and obtain a higher yield." Approving the plan, the emperor ordered Xu Bo, a water engineer from Qi, to plot the course of the transport canal and called up a force of several ten thousands of laborers to do the digging. After three years of labor, it was opened for use in hauling grain and proved extremely beneficial. From this time on grain transport to the capital gradually increased, while the people living along the canal were able to make considerable use of the water to irrigate their fields.

是時鄭當時為大農，言曰：「異時關東漕粟從渭中上，度六月而罷，而漕水道九百餘里，時有難處。引渭穿渠起長安，并南山下，至河三百餘里，徑，易漕，度可令三月罷；而渠下民田萬餘頃，又可得溉田：此損漕省卒，而益肥關中之地，得穀。」天子以為然，令齊人水工徐伯表，悉發卒數萬人穿漕渠，三歲而通。通，以漕，大便利。其後漕稍多，而渠下之民頗得以溉田矣。³⁷

Several further projects were concerned with the transportation costs for tax grain reaching the capital from the east. Another official under Emperor Wu, Pan Xi, suggested that it would be more efficient to construct a system of canals irrigating a formerly uncultivated region along the Yellow River north of the capital area and use its yields instead of transporting masses of grain from the east to the capital. He argued that

Every year over 1,000,000 piculs (about 20,000 cubic meters) of grain are transported [to the capital] from the area east of the mountains. It must be shipped through the dangerous narrows at Dizhu Mountains [i.e., Sanmenxia], where much of it is lost, and the cost of transportation is very high.

漕從山東西，歲百餘萬石，更砥柱之限，敗亡甚多，而亦煩費。³⁸

37 *Shiji* 29.1409–1410, trans. Watson 1993, 55–56; cf. *Hanshu* 29.1679, trans. Needham 1971, 273.

38 *Shiji* 29.1410, trans. Watson 1993, 56 (with modifications); cf. *Hanshu* 29.1680.

Passages such as this are important, among other reasons, because they provide certain quantitative data, such as the volume of annual grain transported from the North China Plain to the capital. Pan Xi's irrigation project is said to have failed because the Yellow River changed its course. Consequently, "the water did not flow into the canals properly and the farmers who worked newly opened fields were unable to produce enough to repay the cost of planting" 渠不利，則田者不能償種。 Considering the information that "several tens of thousands of laborers" 卒數萬人 had worked on this project "for several years" 數歲,³⁹ the example further illustrates the risk that was involved in large-scale public undertakings, as well as the expenditure involved for the state's treasury.

The unpredictability of the Yellow River had even greater effects on the area of the North China Plain in the east, where breaking banks and dikes repeatedly caused flood disasters of literally historic dimensions. The *Shiji* and *Hanshu* accounts of these incidents reveal a good deal of the complexities involved in flood control measures: Local or personal interests could at times be at odds with and prevent public action for the common good, just as interests of flood protection could be at odds with those of irrigation. The accounts further attest to the complexity of economic considerations – regarding, e.g., budgetary policies, estimation of labor forces, distribution of tax revenues for emergency relief, and migration management – that were at play when the central government faced the task of dealing with flood disasters in the eastern part of the empire.

The historiographic accounts of imperial water management offer fascinating and detailed insights into the ways the Qin and Han Empires dealt with their massive challenges regarding infrastructure and resource extraction.⁴⁰ It is interesting to see, moreover, how these challenges were reflected in historiographic writing. The two parallel chapters in *Shiji* and *Hanshu* belong to those rare examples in which Sima Qian and Ban Gu convey a fundamentally congruent view. Both of them clearly acknowledged the importance of the state's efforts in expanding waterways and finding effective measures of flood control.⁴¹ Both the practices and their historiographic reception further invite comparisons with other imperial polities. The Mediterranean Sea, for example, was a highly important space for trade, communication, and travel in the Greek and Roman worlds. The Greek and Roman states spent much effort to make it safe and navigable, if rather in the form of fighting piracy and hostile powers that impinged on the secure transport of goods and peo-

³⁹ *Shiji* 29.1410, trans. Watson 1993, 56 (with modifications); cf. *Hanshu* 29.1680.

⁴⁰ On the more general implications of these challenges for the Qin and Han Empires, see Lewis 2015.

⁴¹ The subtle changes that Ban Gu made with regard to the time period covered in both chapters and with regard to his evaluative comments do not touch upon this general view, but rather consist of personal side blows against Sima Qian. On the parallels and subtle differences between the two chapters, see van Ess 2014, 563–567.

ple across the sea. And as in the Chinese case these efforts provided themes for historiographic accounts that praised the beneficial effects of these efforts.⁴²

II.5 The Accounts on Foreign Peoples

All three Han histories contain several chapters on foreign peoples, including both ethnographic descriptions and chronological accounts of diplomatic relations and military conflicts. These chapters are relevant to economic history in that they include information on the economic bases and commodities of neighboring regions and polities, their interest in Han products (and vice versa), and frequent references to gift exchange or extorted payments in the context of diplomatic relations. They also comprise remarks on tax relations, border markets, customs barriers, legal restrictions on foreign trade, and contraband. Furthermore, they include the central historical accounts of the Han envoy Zhang Qian's 張騫 (185–114 BCE) missions to Central Asia and the empire's expansion toward the northwest, as well as accounts of long-distance connections to polities reaching as far as the Roman Empire, India, and Japan, including occasional references to economic activities.⁴³

These chapters have been at the center of debates over the reasons why the Han Empire expanded its contacts, areas of influence, and territories toward Central Asia and other directions. Opinions on this matter range from assuming economic motives as being crucial for all sides to the view that they were mutually of a truly diplomatic nature, with economic motives playing a marginal role and private trading activities being hardly more than a side effect. Others have stressed ideological purposes with regard to the Chinese side, while arguing that diplomacy served as a “cloak for trade” for some polities of the Western Regions.⁴⁴ Rather than jumping

⁴² For the Roman efforts, see Weaverdyck, ch. 7, sections III.1 and III.3.1, this volume.

⁴³ Both *Shiji* and *Hanshu* include accounts of the Xiongnu (*Shiji* 110 and *Hanshu* 94), the southern peoples of the Southern Yue (in modern Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan in southern China, and parts of northern Vietnam), Eastern Yue (in modern Zhejiang and Fujian in southeastern China), and Southwestern Yi (in modern Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou), as well as Chaoxian on the northern Korean peninsula (*Shiji* 113–116 and *Hanshu* 95), and the so-called Western Regions of the Tarim Basin and beyond (*Shiji* 123 and *Hanshu* 96). The account on Zhang Qian, which is incorporated into *Shiji* 123, was remodeled by Ban Gu as an individual biography (in *Hanshu* 61). The *Hou Hanshu* contains a different set of accounts, i.e., on the Eastern Yi 東夷 (Korean peninsula, including a short account of Japan), the Southern Man 南蠻 and Southwestern Yi 西南夷, the Western Qiang 西羌, the Western Regions 西域, the Southern Xiongnu 南匈奴, and the Wuhuan 烏桓 and Xianbei 鮮卑. An English translation of the individual *Shiji* chapters on foreign peoples is provided by Watson 1993, part 2. For an English translation of *Hanshu* 61 and 96, see Hulsewé 1979. An English translation of the account on the Western Regions of the *Hou Hanshu* is provided by Hill 2015. For extensively annotated accounts of the chapters on the Western Regions in *Shiji*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu*, see Yu 2005. For an analysis of these chapters, see Yu 2013.

⁴⁴ The latter view has been highly influential ever since Yü Ying-shih published his pioneering work on the relationship between Han foreign policies and external trade (Yü 1967). For the “cloak

to general conclusions about long-term motivations, it is better to read these chapters closely and ask what they have to say about the motivations of particular actors, or groups of actors, in particular situations with regard to particular regions, and under particular (and changing) historical circumstances. Approaching the texts from a micro-perspective reveals a rather complex ensemble of individual factors and historical situations rather than an all-encompassing picture about Han ideology.

For example, Emperor Wu's initial interest in several polities of the Western Regions was clearly connected to his hopes to get hold of their fine horses. Rather than being just a personal fancy or a desire for 'heavenly horses' (*tian ma* 天馬) that had some ideological value as tributary gifts, his interest might have largely resulted from a loss of allegedly more than 100,000 horses in a battle against the Xiongnu in 119 BCE, which must have rendered the Han army virtually unable to fight.⁴⁵

Another example is a passage which reveals the social motivation of envoys for making an expedition. Sima Qian tells us the following:

After Zhang Qian achieved honor and position by opening up communications with the lands of the west,⁴⁶ all the officials and soldiers who had accompanied him vied with one another in submitting reports to the emperor telling of the wonders and curiosities, profits and harms of the foreign states and requesting to become envoys ... The envoys were all sons of poor families who handled the government gifts and goods that were entrusted to them as though they were their private property, intending to make a cheap deal [out of them] in order to privately bag the profit (in the foreign states).⁴⁷ The foreign states on their part were disgusted

for trade" argument, see 59, 144. Liu Xinru argues that after the first military confrontations between the Han and the Xiongnu, "[t]he interests of both sides shifted to trade and protecting trade routes," and that Emperor Wu decided to occupy the Hexi corridor "in order to protect a newly established trade route" (Liu 2010, 9, 11). Earlier, Frederick J. Teggart had even argued that Han expansionism had been fueled by a desire to find new outlets for the empire's overproduction of silk (Teggart 1939, 148–233). For the view that most Han endeavors were neither ideologically nor economically motivated, but that they were primarily based on realpolitik and diplomacy, see Selbitschka 2015.

⁴⁵ On horses as motives for military action, see, e.g., Hulsewé 1979, 132–134, n. 332; Creel 1965, esp. 660. There are several references to foreign 'heavenly horses' in *Shiji* 123 and in *Hanshu* 61 and 96.

⁴⁶ Sima Qian quite frankly writes that Zhang Qian himself had advocated for a mission to the Wusun "because he had lost his title of marquis" 既失侯，因言曰， thereby suggesting that Zhang Qian, sensing a chance for rehabilitation, might very well not have been quite honest in his arguments in favor of the undertaking (*Shiji* 123.3168; cf. *Hanshu* 61.2691).

⁴⁷ Watson (1993, 242) translates "looked for opportunities to buy goods at a cheap price in the foreign countries and make a profit on their return to China." The Chinese text, however, says nothing about the envoys buying goods or about them making their profit on their return to China (even though they may have done that as well). The original text rather suggests that the envoys sold the aforementioned presents and goods that had been entrusted to them by the Han government and which they "handled as though they were their private property." The final "in the foreign states" (*wai guo* 外國) is syntactically awkward and might well be due to dittography, as the next sentence starts with *wai guo* as well. The *Hanshu* parallel accordingly omits the former *wai guo*.

with the envoys invariably talking about the value [of goods], and, estimating that the Han armies would be too far away to be able to make it to [their countries], refused to supply the Han envoys with food and provisions in order to make things difficult for them.

自博望侯開外國道以尊貴，其後從吏卒皆爭上書言外國奇怪利害，求使。[...] 其使皆貧人子，私縣官齋物，欲賤市以私其利外國。外國亦厭漢使人人有言輕重，度漢兵遠不能至，而禁其食物以苦漢使。⁴⁸

While Sima Qian may have exaggerated this point in order to make the expansionist strategy of the emperor appear ill conceived, there is no good reason to believe that his remarks on the envoys' motives were not grounded in some general truth. The passage suggests that diplomacy could indeed be used as a 'cloak for trade,' but in this case by the Chinese envoys. It demonstrates how diplomatic missions and trading activities, involving both governmental and private interests, could be intertwined, with their particular goals being at odds with one another.⁴⁹ In a similar manner, foreign states of the far west such as Jibin 罽賓 (Kashmir) or Kangju 康居 (Sogdiana), on their part, were accused by the Chinese side of sending "traveling merchants and men of low status" as pseudo-envoys, whose only interest was doing business "under the pretext of making offerings" 以獻為名,⁵⁰ or of sending a hostage prince just because they "wish[ed] to conduct trade and create a pretense through fine verbiage" 欲賈市為好辭之詐.⁵¹ It is important to note, however, that large and remote states such as Jibin and Kangju would naturally have been less interested

This reading would thus not specify where the envoys sold the goods. But even in this case, the most intuitive reading would be that they sold them in the foreign countries they visited.

48 *Shiji* 123.3171. Cf. *Hanshu* 61.2695, where Ban Gu left out the remark on the envoys' poor family background while largely adopting the rest of these statements. The last sentence quoted above is difficult with regard to the interpretation of the expression *yan qing zhong* 言輕重, with the literal meaning of *qing zhong* being 'light and heavy' (see section III.2 below). Watson (1993, 242), following a traditional commentator, translates (quite freely) "each of the Han envoys told some different story" (my emphasis). Van Ess (2014, 358, n. 125), following another commentator, takes *yan qing zhong* to mean "jdn. übervorteilen" ('to fleece s. o.'). Considering that the sentence before is talking about the envoys' marketing goods and seeking profit, I would suggest that the most contextually fitting (and generally well-attested) interpretation of *qing zhong* in this case would simply be 'cheap and expensive' or 'non-valuable and valuable,' that is, the prices or values (of goods), as already indicated as an alternative translation to the parallel *Hanshu* passage by Hulsewé 1979, 222–223, n. 842. On the passage above, see also Yü 1967, 137–138, who uses Watson's translation.

49 Other actors' motives for advocating northwestern expeditions and wars could again be totally different: A court faction of southerners, for example, appears to have pleaded for military action in the north not because of any alleged (public or private) benefits of such an undertaking, but simply because they wanted to prevent any further military engagement in the *southern* regions, fearing that in the latter case, southern locals would have to carry the load. On these events, see van Ess 2014, 343–344.

50 *Hanshu* 96.3886 (with reference to Jibin, i.e. Kashmir); cf. Hulsewé 1979, 109.

51 *Hanshu* 96.3893 (with reference to Kangju, i.e., Sogdiana); cf. Hulsewé 1979, 128 (with a slightly different translation).

in purely diplomatic relations with China than many of the rather small states of the Tarim Basin. The latter were not only neighbors to larger and more powerful city-states, but also dangerously close to the two giant empires of the Han and the Xiongnu. For them, reliable diplomatic relations – which ideally provided a certain measure of safety from military confrontation – would have tended to be much more essential. Nevertheless, here as well we have to take into account that the description of the foreign envoys' behavior was Sima Qian's personal interpretation, which fit well into his general attempt at ridiculing his emperor's passionate attempts at expanding his authority to distant lands.

On a more general note, the historiographic sources suggest that in the north and northwest, foreign relations tended to be an economic burden, rather than an asset, both for the Han Empire and at least some of the Tarim Basin city-states. Based on figures given in the *Hou Hanshu*, Yü Ying-shih has estimated the Eastern Han government's annual payments to the Xianbei 鮮卑, Xiongnu 匈奴, Qiang 羌, Wuhuan 烏桓, and the city-states of the Tarim Basin to have amounted to 750 million in cash value, or to "about one third of the annual government payroll or 7 percent of the total revenue of the empire."⁵² The scale of expenses used for diplomatic relations, moreover, was a matter of dispute at the Han court.⁵³ It should be noted, however, that the payments to all Tarim Basin polities together amounted to only one tenth of these figures (74.8 million cash), while almost one third (270 million cash)⁵⁴ was dedicated to the Xianbei. These were the Han's most powerful pastoralist neighbors at that time, having taken over large parts of the former Xiongnu territory to the north of the Han Empire.

Apart from other costly obligations,⁵⁵ some Tarim Basin polities on their part appear to have been particularly burdened by the Han government's expectation for them to supply the latter's frequent and highly manned missions with "cattle, sheep, corn, cut fodder, guides, and interpreters" 牛羊穀芻茭, 導譯.⁵⁶ In anticipation of one such mission, the rulers of Further Jushi (Jushi Hou 車師後) decided to surren-

⁵² Yü 1967, 61–64, quotation from 64.

⁵³ In 3 BCE, when the Xiongnu *chanyu* asked for a permission to personally visit the Han court, many court officials pleaded to turn down this request on the grounds of the costs the visit would involve. The emperor, however, decided not to heed their advice. He had been persuaded by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) that, despite of the high costs involved, the damage caused by a denial of the *chanyu*'s request would be far more detrimental. *Hanshu* 64B.3812–3816.

⁵⁴ Other than the total estimate of annual payments (which could only take into account ballpark figures for the unreported amount of annual payments to the Qiang and Wuhuan), the above two figures are reported explicitly in a memorial to the throne quoted in *Hou Hanshu* 45.1521.

⁵⁵ Such as expenses for gifts presented to the Han court, contributions of fertile lands for Han military garrisons, and bribes to Han officials (Yü 1967, 51, 145–147).

⁵⁶ *Hanshu* 96.3925, trans. Hulsewé 1979, 193. Sima Qian provides some summarizing figures for the frequency and size of missions during Emperor Wu's rule: Reportedly, between five and more than ten missions to foreign states were sent out each year, with the larger ones including up to several hundred envoys (*Shiji* 123.3170, trans. Watson 1993, 275).

der to the Xiongnu in 10 CE, assuming that their economic situation would not allow for the impending expenses.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the sources do suggest at least temporary dependencies on Han goods in the case of some of the predominantly pastoralist northern neighbors. It appears that from the latter's point of view, relations to the Han Empire – as a means of receiving certain desired products through gift exchange or of getting access to border markets – tended to be economically desirable.

The dynastic histories draw a complex picture as regards the reasons for Han expansion and for particular external policies. Many factors must be considered, such as the proximity and accessibility of the individual foreign polities, their pastoralist or nonpastoralist lifestyle, and their short-term economic situations. Moreover, changing forms of demands, changing levels of information, changing regional power structures, fluctuating assertiveness of the Han and other polities' governments, as well as individual motives on different operating levels had massive impacts on foreign policy decisions. The sources, however, do not suggest that the Han government envisioned establishing a flourishing long-distance network of trade for the sake of either themselves or for any merchants.

II.6 Concluding Remarks on the Source Value of the Dynastic Histories

Despite the fact that dynastic histories include a large amount of economic reflection and detail, they pose challenges to their readers. Firstly, the information we get from these chapters is distributed unevenly over time, with the absence of chapters on economy, water management, and 'money makers' in the standard history of the Later Han period (i.e., in Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu*) being only the most obvious weakness.⁵⁸ Secondly, the authors of these texts were biased not only in the general sense of writing from the perspective of the imperial center, but also in particular ways. Sima Qian disapproved of many of his ruler's centralist, interventionist, and expansionist initiatives, and his accounts often involved his personal archenemies or friends. Thus his presentation is likely to be selective, or at least overemphasizing some aspects while underemphasizing or withholding others. Thirdly, much information on economic matters, despite their apparent clarity, reveals ambiguities on closer inspection. Imprecision and other peculiarities have for generations and even centuries left scholars debating both the authors' standpoints and the implications of the policies themselves they suggest. The histories' remarks on the nature of the policies of 'equitable delivery' and the 'balanced standard' are a case in point: Their

⁵⁷ *Hanshu* 96.3925, trans. Hulsewé 1979, 192–193.

⁵⁸ As has already been mentioned, the *Shiji* and the *Hanshu* accounts themselves each feature a strong focus on particular periods within their larger time frames.

very terseness accounts for the fact that up to today, scholars keep struggling with questions about the scope, practical implications, and interdependency of these measures.⁵⁹

All these limitations notwithstanding, the historiographic works remain among the most important sources for early imperial history in general and economic history in particular. They are also indispensable with regard to the interpretation of newly excavated texts, since many of the latter's concrete and detailed contents would be hardly intelligible without the framework that is provided by, and only by, the transmitted historiographic works.

III Politico-Philosophical ‘Masters’ (zi 子)

III.1 The *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論)

The legacy of Emperor Wu's rule, with its shift toward expansionism, centralism, and economic interventionism, provoked the genesis of yet another quasi-historiographic work that is of crucial importance for our understanding of Han economic thinking and policies: The *Yantie lun* is an account of a court debate that was held in 81 BCE, a couple of years after Emperor Wu's death, on the empire's future political agenda. It was without much doubt compiled during the reign of emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–49 BCE) by a man named Huan Kuan 桓寬. The political issue from which the work derived its title was the question of whether or not the state should maintain its monopolies on salt (*yan*) and iron (*tie*) that had been introduced under Emperor Wu's rule. This question, however, was tightly connected with a set of other controversial issues, many of which were of economic significance, such as military spending, the coinage monopoly, centralized logistics, price stabilization schemes, and taxation. Comprising sixty chapters, the text presents opinions on all these matters in the form of a dialog between two opposing parties: the ‘grantee’ (*dafu* 大夫), usually identified with the interventionist policy maker Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (ca. 152–80 BCE),⁶⁰ and his critics, typically represented by the unnamed ‘learned scholars’ (*wenxue* 文學).⁶¹

⁵⁹ See, for instance, the diverging interpretations of the ‘equitable delivery’ system offered by Wang 王 1994 and Yi 亦 1994.

⁶⁰ The policies implemented by Sang Hongyang under Emperor Wu included the introduction of state monopolies as well as the ‘equitable delivery’ and ‘balanced standard’ systems. Later, from 87 to 80 BCE (which includes the time when the debates took place), he held the eminent post of imperial counselor or secretary grantee, *yushi dafu* 御史大夫. Sima Qian's “Treatise on the Balanced Standard” (see above) notoriously ends with the former sheep breeder Bu Shi's request for Sang Hongyang to be “boiled alive” (*Shiji* 30.1442, trans. Watson 1993, 83).

⁶¹ Occasionally, the text refers to other, equally unnamed speakers such as the ‘worthy’ (*xianliang* 賢良) or the ‘chancellor's scribe’ (*chengxiang shi* 丞相史). While one needs to take into account that each of these may have referred to the distinctive views of particular people or groups, the attitudes

It is, however, hard to say in what ways Huan Kuan interfered with the source material that may have been at his disposal. It is uncertain to what extent the text reflects the duality and wording of the actual debate or rather the author's modified (that is, organized, sharpened, shortened, extended, biased, or even fictionalized) version of it.⁶² That the author did interfere with his material at least to a certain extent is suggested by the fact that the learned scholars always have the last word within the individual chapters, and that the grandee faction (in contrast to the learned scholars) is explicitly said to have been left dumbfounded on occasion. Nevertheless, at least from a modern reader's perspective, the grandee's arguments do not appear to have been altered in a way that made them look generally illogical or otherwise bereft of their persuasive power.

Especially in Western scholarship, the opposing opinions that the *Yantie lun* reveals have often been read from an overly ideological point of view. Such an approach suggests that it was the learned scholars' allegedly 'Confucian' ideology, which they found in allegedly 'Confucian' texts,⁶³ and the grandee's allegedly 'legalist' doctrine, that shaped their opposing political views.⁶⁴ Most importantly, approaches focusing merely on ideology neglect the practical motives and socio-economic backgrounds that lay behind these disputes. Trying to track these down – while acknowledging the largely rhetorical nature of the debate's philosophical and moralizing underpinnings – promises to be a much more fruitful approach to the disputes found in the *Yantie lun*, and, indeed, many other Han texts. People must have had good reasons to advocate for or against military engagement in a certain place or at a certain time, in favor of or against a certain treatment of merchants, a particular form of taxation, or the government's control over coinage and the production of iron and salt. All these depended on their own or their supporters' socio-economic background, regional or local roots and networks, their role in the bureaucracy, or their potential involvement in military matters, trading activities, and

attributed to the worthy are largely concordant with those articulated by the learned scholars, while the chancellor's scribe's opinions resemble those of the grandee.

62 It has been argued that some sections appear more likely to have been "cit[ed] from what was originally an independent piece of writing" (Loewe 1993, 477) rather than from a record of oral speech. It has further been suggested that chapters 42–59 were written at a later date since they are different in style. For this argument, see Lai 1996.

63 It has been suggested that the notion of Han era 'Confucianism' (at least in the sense of an ideology) should be abandoned altogether. See, e.g., van Ess 1993b, 291; Beck 1977, 329–330.

64 The most typical example of this perspective is Kroll 1978. Chinese scholarship in the PRC, in contrast, while typically being deeply entrenched in the respective politics and ideological vocabulary of the day, has traditionally been more (though not generally) devoted to questions about the socio-economic background of the debate (Vogel 2002, 90–102). Vogel himself, however, is rather inclined to stress the alleged significance of "ideology" and of a belief in certain "principles of cosmic world order," and to advocate Kroll's approach of "understanding Sang Hongyang's economic ideas not as an isolated economic attitude, but as an organic part of his entire world view, so as to take him seriously as a philosopher" (Vogel 2002, 83–83, 102).

power struggles between mighty clans. It is therefore not conducive, for example, to fall for the learned scholars' line: The fact that their rhetorical vocabulary puts stress on 'humaneness' (*ren* 仁), 'righteousness' (*yi* 義), and 'mercy' (*en* 恩) does not imply that their standpoint was necessarily more idealistic, ethically founded, more commiserative with the 'common people' in general, or less concerned with realpolitik than the grandee's faction.⁶⁵ It is more useful to ask which parts of society they may have envisioned as the central beneficiaries of the 'mercy' and 'humaneness' arising from the concrete politico-economic measures they advocated. A very similar laissez-faire-like political agenda to the one which the learned scholars of the *Yantie lun* advocated while invoking so-called Confucian texts had typically been supported by people with a preference for texts of a more 'Daoist' nature only slightly earlier (such as, for instance, Sima Qian).⁶⁶ Meanwhile, however, Emperor Wu's establishment of the Five 'Confucian' Classics (*wu jing* 五經) as a formal textual standard for high officials' education (but not as a state ideology) at the Imperial Academy (*Taixue* 太學) had begun to leave its mark on the rhetorical style of political discussions. To put it simply, it had turned the formerly 'Daoist' conservatives into 'Confucian' conservatives, with their political standpoints largely preserved.⁶⁷

In contrast to many, especially Eastern Han texts, in which political controversies are increasingly shrouded by the surface of philological disputes, the arguments of the two *Yantie lun* parties are often quite straightforward and – thanks to the dialogical form – well defined. Furthermore, many disputes are contested on the basis of purely economic rationales by both parties. The following, for instance, is an example of how they discuss the matter of the state's involvement in economic matters by means of its 'balanced standard' and 'equitable delivery' policies:

The grandee said: "Formerly the lords in the commanderies and kingdoms sent in their respective products as tribute. The transportation was vexatious and disorganized; the goods were usually of distressingly bad quality, often failing to repay their transport costs. Therefore, transportation officers have been provided in every commandery and kingdom to assist in the delivery and transportation and for the speeding of the tribute from distant parts. So the system came to be known as 'equitable delivery.' A Receiving Bureau has been established at the capital to monopolize all the commodities, buying when prices are low, and selling when pri-

⁶⁵ Even Michael Loewe, who otherwise emphasizes the political nature of the debate, speaks of "the two points of view of the idealist and the realist" (Loewe 1974, 98).

⁶⁶ Possibly in continuation to this legacy, the learned scholars still quote Laozi on several occasions, whereas the grandee faction does not invoke him at all.

⁶⁷ On the political dimension of scholarly debates during the Han period, see Loewe 1974; van Ess 1993b. On the conservatives' (or reformists') rhetorical shift from a 'Daoist' to a 'Confucian' framework, see van Ess 1993a, 24–25. While I concede the point that the political camps, their sets of opinions, and their connection to particular texts were less bipolar and less stable than some of van Ess's assertions suggest, his central approach, that is, trying to identify practical (e.g., political, social, economic) motives behind the 'ideological' underpinnings or scholarly debates, remains valid and highly relevant for modern-day research on Han political, intellectual, social, and economic history. For a critical and thought-provoking review of van Ess 1993b, see Gentz 2003.

ces are high, with the result that the government suffers no loss and the merchants cannot speculate for profit. This is therefore known as the ‘balanced standard.’ With the balanced standard, people are safeguarded from unemployment; with the equitable delivery, people have evenly distributed labor. Both of these measures are intended to equilibrate all goods and convenience the people, and not to open the way to profit and provide a ladder to popular misdemeanor.”

大夫曰：「往者，郡國諸侯各以其方物貢輸，往來煩雜，物多苦惡，或不償其費。故郡國置輸官以相給運，而便遠方之貢，故曰均輸。開委府於京師，以籠貨物。賤即買，貴則賣。是以縣官不失實，商賈無所貿利，故曰平準。平準則民不失職，均輸則民齊勞逸。故平準、均輸，所以平萬物而便百姓，非開利孔而為民罪梯者也。」

The learned scholars said: “The ancients in levying upon and taxing the people would look for what the latter were skilled in, and not seek for those things in which they were not adept. Thus the farmers contributed the fruits of their labor, the weaving women, their products. Now the government leaves alone what the people have and exacts what they have not, with the result that the people sell their products at a cheap price to satisfy demands from above. Recently in some of the commanderies and kingdoms they ordered the people to make woven goods. The officers then caused the producers various embarrassments and bargained with them. What was collected by the officers was not only the silk from Qi and E, or cloth from Shu and Han, but also other goods manufactured by the people which were mischievously sold at a standard price. Thus the farmers suffer twice over while the weaving women are doubly taxed. We have not yet seen that your delivery is ‘equitable.’ As to the second measure under discussion, the government officers swarm out to close the door, gain control of the market and corner all commodities. With commodities cornered, prices soar; with prices rising, the merchants make private deals by way of speculation. Thus powerful officials and rich merchants store up goods and accumulate commodities waiting for a time of need. Nimble traders and unscrupulous officials buy in cheap to get high returns. We have not yet seen that your standard is ‘balanced.’”

文學曰：「古者之賦稅於民也，因其所工，不求所拙。農人納其穫，女工效其功。今釋其所有，責其所無。百姓賤賣貨物，以便上求。間者，郡國或令民作布絮，吏恣留難，與之為市。吏之所入，非獨齊、阿之縑，蜀、漢之布也，亦民間之所為耳。行姦賣平，農民重苦，女工再稅，未見輸之均也。縣官猥發，閭門擅市，則萬物并收。萬物并收，則物騰躍。騰躍，則商賈侖利。自市，則吏容姦。豪吏富商積貨儲物以待其急，輕賈姦吏收賤以取貴，未見準之平也。⁶⁸

Discussions like these significantly add to our understanding of economic policies and their implications, regarding which we would otherwise have to rely largely on the often terse or even cryptic references found in the dynastic histories. Other passages show the two parties’ differing opinions on whether or not expansion had turned out to be beneficial for the Han from a ‘balance of trade’ (or ‘balance of exchange’) perspective. This is the grandee’s opinion on the matter:

Now the treasures of the mountains and marshes and the reserves of the equitable delivery system are means of holding the balance of natural wealth and controlling the principalities.

⁶⁸ *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 4, trans. Gale 1967, 9–11 (with modifications).

Ru and Han gold and other petty articles of tribute⁶⁹ are means of inveigling foreign countries and snaring the treasures of the Hu and the Qiang. So [in exchange for] a piece of Chinese plain silk, we get Xiongnu articles worth several pieces of gold and thereby reduce the resources of our enemy. Mules, donkeys and camels enter the frontier in unbroken lines; horses, dapples and bays, and prancing mounts come into our possession. The furs of sables, marmots, foxes and badgers, colored rugs and decorated carpets fill the Imperial Treasury, while jade and auspicious stones, corals and crystals, become the state's treasures. That is to say, foreign products keep flowing in, while useful [resources] are not dissipated.

汝、漢之金，纖微之貢，所以誘外國而釣胡、羌之寶也。夫中國一端之縵，得匈奴累金之物，而損敵國之用。是以騾驢駝，銜尾入塞，驪驥驪馬，盡為我畜，驪貂狐貉，采旃文罽，充於內府，而璧玉珊瑚琉璃，咸為國之寶。是則外國之物內流，而利不外泄也。

The learned scholars, however, take a very different view:

Now mules and donkeys are not as useful as cattle and horses. Sable and marmot furs, wool and felt goods do not add substance to silk. Beautiful jades and corals come from mount Kun. Pearls and ivory are produced in Guilin. These places are more than ten thousand *li* distant from the Han [i.e., Chang'an]. Calculating the labor for farming and silk raising and the costs in material and capital, it will be found that one article of foreign import costs a price one hundred times its value, and for one handful, ten thousand weight of grain are paid. As the rulers take delight in novelties, extravagant clothing is adopted among the people below. As the rulers treasure the goods from distant lands, wealth flows outward.

今騾驢之用，不中牛馬之功，驪貂旃罽，不益錦綈之寶。美玉珊瑚出於昆山，珠璣犀象出於桂林，此距漢萬有餘里。計耕桑之功，資財之費，是一物而售百倍其價也，一揖而中萬鍾之粟也。夫上好珍怪，則淫服下流，貴遠方之物，則貨財外充。⁷⁰

Passages of this kind provide insights on several issues: For instance, and most generally, they depict both parties as arguing on purely economic grounds. More specifically, they attest to people's conception of diplomatic gifts from an economic point of view: The value of gifts is here traded off against each other with the ultimate intent of striking a bargain. The discussion further suggests that the output of this kind of exchange was thought to consist primarily of luxury items. The circle of beneficiaries of this kind of exchange will have been largely restricted to the emperor and the people close to him. This so-called trade with foreign polities is pictured here as a trade through a very tight bottleneck.

To be sure, the *Yantie lun* confronts us with the question of its value as a historical source. It is by no means certain to what extent the dialogs as presented were related to the actual debates that took place a couple of decades earlier. But in comparison to other sources, such as the *Guanzi* introduced in the next section,

⁶⁹ The sentence before makes it clear that these products were demanded by the Han court as tributary taxes from certain regions within the empire and transported across the empire by the state's 'equitable delivery' (*junshu*) system. The term 'tribute' is therefore used here (like elsewhere) with reference to something that the Han court gets, not to something that it pays.

⁷⁰ *Yantie lun jiaozhu*, 28–29, trans. Gale 1967, 14–16 (with modifications).

these problems appear rather marginal. The *Yantie lun* therefore needs to be credited with being one of the most illuminating transmitted sources for economic policy and deliberation in the Han period. Its comprehensive contents continue to offer ample potential for future research.

III.2 The *Qingzhong* 輕重 Chapters of the *Guanzi* 管子

It is uncontested that parts of the politico-philosophical work *Master Guan* (*Guanzi*) deserve to be counted among the most important ancient Chinese works on economic thinking. Whether it should be treated as a source for the early imperial period under question, however, has long been a matter of debate. The work was traditionally attributed to and named after Guan Zhong 管仲 (720–645 BCE), who is known as the chancellor and most important adviser of Duke Huan 桓 of Qi 齊 (d. 643 BCE). The latter went down in history as the first of five ‘hegemons’ (*ba* 霸) that consecutively led the states of the Chunqiu period. His predominance is typically attributed to Guan Zhong’s strategies. Many chapters of the *Guanzi* are presented in the form of dialogs between Guan Zhong and Duke Huan, with the former answering the latter’s questions. Scholars nowadays generally agree that the *Guanzi* was neither written by Guan Zhong himself nor by any other single author, but that it is a multi-authored product with a rather complex textual history, parts of which can be dated to the Han period.

In its received version, the *Guanzi* contains a group of chapters (chs. 68–85) which are primarily concerned with economic matters and are commonly referred to as the *Qingzhong* chapters.⁷¹ *Qingzhong* 輕重 literally means ‘light and heavy,’ but it may also be interpreted as ‘inexpensive and expensive’ or ‘invaluable and valuable,’ ‘value and devalue,’ or even ‘devalue what is considered valuable.’ The specific meaning of both the compound and its two parts in particular contexts (within the *Guanzi* and elsewhere) is often contested. But as a more general term, it is usually associated with the notion of a ruler’s use of economic strategies, such as the manipulation of exchange ratios, in order to consolidate state power.

As in the case of other parts of the *Guanzi*, the framing contents of the *Qingzhong* chapters are not set in a unified empire, but in a particular state (that is, Qi) that competes with its neighbors on both military and economic grounds. This alone, however, does not rule out the possibility of an early imperial dating. Modern scholars disagree on whether the *Qingzhong* chapters should be primarily read as Warring States or Former Han texts.⁷² Regarding both linguistic evidence and histori-

⁷¹ Of these, chs. 80–85 actually bear the term *qingzhong* in their headings.

⁷² In his introduction to *Guanzi Qingzhong pian xin quan* (1979, 3–50), Ma Feibai 馬非百 furthermore suggested that the *Qingzhong* chapters were produced during the interregnum of Wang Mang (r. 9–23 CE). For a summary of the different hypotheses regarding the dating of the *Qingzhong* chapters, see Rickett 1985, 2:346–357. In his *Economic History of China*, von Glahn (2016, esp. 120–

cal contexts that the chapters' contents suggest, arguments for both scenarios can be found. The multiauthor and multilayer hypothesis is therefore to be assumed for these chapters as well, even though they are more homogenous as a group than the *Guanzi* text as a whole. Furthermore, the contents of the *Qingzhong* chapters are notoriously difficult to understand. The extent of the difficulties involved, however, is hardly noticeable for non-Chinese speakers accessing the English translation by Allan Rickett,⁷³ whose (albeit careful and marked) incorporation of Chinese commentators' suggestions for character emendations, omissions, and insertions, glosses over substantial uncertainties and inconsistencies within the received text.

The *Qingzhong* chapters generally convey the ideal of a strong ruler who knows how to use economic principles (such as the interdependency of certain values) to control the flow of goods and money. The following passage from the chapter "The State's Store of Grain" (*Guo xu* 國蓄) may serve as an example:

Indeed, when things are plentiful, they will be cheap; when they are scarce, they will be expensive. When they are spread about, they will be valued lightly (*qing*); when they are concentrated, they will be valued highly (*zhong*).⁷⁴ Knowing this to be so, the prince pays attention to his country's surpluses and shortages and manages its wealth and goods. When grain is cheap, he exchanges money for food. When hemp and silk cloth are cheap, he exchanges money for clothing. He pays attention to the relative value (*qingzhong*) of things and manages them in order to maintain price stability. Therefore, the expensive and cheap may be harmonized, and the prince reaps his profits.

夫物多則賤，寡則貴。散則輕，聚則重，人君知其然，故視國之羨不足而御其財物；穀賤則以幣予食，布帛賤則以幣予衣，視物之輕重而御之以准。故貴賤可調，而君得其利。⁷⁵

State policies aimed at controlling prices by "buying when cheap and selling when expensive," which were eventually put into practice in Emperor Wu's 'balanced standard' (*pingzhun*) scheme mentioned above, are frequently recommended within the *Qingzhong* chapters. Apart from the hope of making a profit for the state, the fear that is regularly mentioned as underlying such policies is that "should the lord fail to maintain control [over prices] by these policies, the people will eventually control them" 君不守以策，則民且守。⁷⁶ This concern is often particularly connected to the fear of merchants controlling prices by engaging in hoarding and speculation.

The *Qingzhong* chapters demonstrate that quite a variety of ideas on the ideal form of taxation were floating around: Taxes were supposed to be fair in order to

123) treats the *Qingzhong* chapters as a Former Han source. Chin 2014 also uses it for her analysis of Han economic thinking.

73 Rickett 1985.

74 In this sentence, my translation diverges from Rickett's, who renders *qing* and *zhong* as "supply will exceed demand," and "demand will exceed supply," respectively.

75 *Guanzi Qingzhong pian xin quan*, 241–242, trans. Rickett 1985, 2: 384 (with modifications).

76 *Guanzi Qingzhong pian xin quan*, 160, trans. Rickett 1985, 2: 366 (with modifications).

prevent social inequalities and concentration of power among the populace, and acceptable to prevent people from tax evasion, e.g., by migration. Furthermore, several chapters are primarily concerned with the idea of indirect taxation, mainly on salt and iron.⁷⁷ The *Qingzhong* chapters also suggest a considerable awareness of the undesirable effects of certain levies, as manifest in the following (originally rhyming) mnemonics:⁷⁸

Placing a special tax on houses and verandas means harming construction (成 *dj'eng*). Placing a special tax on the six domestic animals means killing the living. (生 *sreng*). Placing a special tax on cultivated fields means restricting their cultivation (耕 *kreng*). Placing a special tax on adult males means a falsifying of their true numbers (情 *dzjieng*). Placing a special tax on households favors those blessed with abundance (贏 *rieng*).

以室廡籍，謂之毀成。以六畜籍，謂之止生。以田畝籍，謂之禁耕。以正人籍，謂之離情。以正戶籍，謂之養贏。⁷⁹

Yet another remarkable *Qingzhong* passage has been suggested to imply a “recognition of the quantity theory of money and its value.”⁸⁰ Even though the association with the theoretical approach of early modern monetary economics may be contestable, the passage does demonstrate a strong awareness of money being an important standard for measuring the wealth of a country in quantitative terms:

Duke Huan questioned Guanzi, saying, “May I ask about the proportionate [calculation of] money [supply]?” Guanzi replied, “To begin with, base [your calculation] on [the units of] tracts and households consisting of three such tracts, with one chariot per six-square *li* area and twenty-eight men providing for one chariot. As for a proportionate [calculation of] money [supply], [one then needs to calculate] how many fields of high and low productivity there are in each six-square *li* area, how much grain these will produce, what the price of grain will be, how much money will be needed in each six-square *li* area on average, and how much money will be needed in the case of high grain prices. For a proportionate [calculation of] money [supply], one then issues the money in the country [in such a way that] the money corresponds to the amount of the emerged [i.e., arable] land of the whole country. This is called ‘the proportionate [calculation of] money [supply].’”

桓公問管子曰：「請問幣乘馬？」管子對曰：「始取夫三大夫之家，方六里而一乘，二十七人而奉一乘，幣乘馬者，方六里。田之美惡若干，穀之多寡若干，穀之貴賤若干，凡方六里用幣若干，穀之重，用幣若干，故幣乘馬者，布幣於國，幣為一國陸地之數，謂之幣乘馬。」⁸¹

⁷⁷ These are chapters 72, 74, 75, and 76.

⁷⁸ Reconstructed ancient pronunciations for the characters at the end of each line are given in brackets. In modern Chinese pronunciations, the lines rhyme only partially.

⁷⁹ *Guanzi Qingzhong pian xin quan*, 241, trans. Rickett 1985, 2:382–383 (including the ancient phonetic reconstructions).

⁸⁰ Rickett 1985, 2:406.

⁸¹ *Guanzi Qingzhong pian xin quan*, 383–384; my translation deviates from the one provided by Rickett 1985, 2: 416–417.

Interesting as these and many other passages may be, the question of dating the *Qingzhong* chapters remains a serious issue. It often remains unclear whether certain historical backgrounds and particular economic challenges suggested by the chapters refer to Warring States or early imperial realities. Yet it is a notable fact that many Han people must have found them relevant for their own times. This is suggested both by references to the *Qingzhong* chapters within Han sources and by the similarities between some of the economic measures described in the chapters and those that were actually implemented during the Han period according to the dynastic histories. At least in this regard, the *Qingzhong* chapters can claim considerable source value for the Han period.

IV Manuals

Several works of a more technical nature offer valuable insights into early imperial economic history, if in a very different way than the histories and politico-philosophical treatises. Some sections of mathematical handbooks, for instance, contain valuable material for economic history. Of the two transmitted mathematical manuals from the early imperial period, the *Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art* (*Jiuzhang suanshu* 九章算術) is of particular importance in this regard. Each of its nine chapters assembles sample mathematical problems along with their solutions (by clearly stated algorithms) for a particular topic area. Some of the titles of these topic areas already indicate an economic context: The chapter “Millet and Rice” (*Su mi* 粟米), for instance, is devoted to mathematical problems concerning pricing issues and the exchange of goods at different rates.⁸²

The following section will introduce another kind of technical literature, that is, agricultural manuals. Two works of particular importance for the study of agricultural history are Fan Shengzhi’s 氾勝之 (first century BCE) *Documents of Fan Shengzhi* (*Fan Shengzhi shu* 氾勝之書)⁸³ and Cui Shi’s 崔寔 (second century CE)

⁸² For an English translation of the *Jiuzhang suanshu*, see Shen, Crossley, and Lun 1999. For a thoroughly annotated French translation, see Chemla and Guo 2004. The second transmitted mathematical work from the early imperial period, the *Gnomon of the Zhou* (*Zhoubi* 周髀, later entitled *Zhoubi suanjing* 周髀算經), is mainly concerned with astronomical and calendrical calculations. On this work, see Cullen 1996. Another mathematical treatise from the early Western Han period has been excavated from a Western Han local official’s tomb at the Zhangjiashan site. It bears the title *Writings on Reckoning* (*Suanshu shu* 算數書). Parts of its contents closely parallel those of the *Jiuzhang suanshu* and similarly touch upon practical economic issues. For English translations of this excavated work, see Cullen 2004; Dauben 2008.

⁸³ Two English translations of the reconstructed *Fan Shengzhi shu* are available: One is provided by Shi 1974. A revised version based on the latter translation is provided by Hsu 1980, 280–294. The literary catalog of Ban Gu’s *Hanshu* lists a work entitled *Fan Shengzhi* comprising 18 chapters (*pian*). It is the only (even fragmentarily) surviving text out of nine items listed under the section of agricultural works in *Hanshu* 30.1743.

Monthly Instructions for the Four Classes of People (*Simin yueling* 四民月令).⁸⁴ Both of them have come down to us only as fragments, that is, through (often extensive) citations in other works.⁸⁵

The *Documents of Fan Shengzhi* constitute a Former Han agricultural handbook with a strong focus on the activities on the field, such as plowing, sowing, fertilizing, and harvesting. It provides detailed and often quantified advice regarding the cultivation of particular crops, such as the amount of seed to be used, the depth of pits to be dug,⁸⁶ or the crop yield to be expected. Interestingly, the text also incorporates the following estimates regarding the monetary profit to be gained from the cultivation of gourds:

Each [bottle gourd] vine yields three fruits, so each pit yields twelve fruits, one *mu* produces 2,880 fruits, and 10 *mu* produces 57,600 dippers. Each dipper is worth 10 cash; so the total value is 576,000 cash.⁸⁷ You will have used 200 *shi* of silkworm manure, which together with cattle and manpower spent in cultivation will cost 26,000 cash. The remainder is 550,000 cash, exclusive of the profits from the fattened pigs and bright candles.

一本三實，一區十二實，一畝得二千八百八十實，十畝凡得五萬七千六百瓢。瓢直十錢，並直五十七萬六千文。用蠶矢二百石，牛耕、功力，直二萬六千文。餘有五十五萬。肥豬、明燭，利在其外。⁸⁸

As for the second agricultural handbook, the *Monthly Instructions* are a Later Han calendrical guide for a rural patriarch to the seasonal economic, social, and ritual activities of his farming household.⁸⁹ The recommendations suggest to have been meant neither for a very wealthy landlord's large estate nor that of a poor peasant's petty farm. They rather suit a moderately well-off farming family whose members were personally involved in basic agricultural work, but who also enjoyed some social standing within the local community. They could afford the help of (an un-

⁸⁴ An English translation of Shih Sheng-han's reconstruction of the *Monthly Instructions* is provided by Hsu 1980, 115–128. These agricultural treatises or guides are not the only early imperial texts devoted to the more practical and technical aspects of agriculture, however. Some chapters of works belonging to the politico-philosophical 'masters', like the aforementioned *Guanzi*, as well as the *Lüshi chungqiu* 呂氏春秋, also contain relevant material (Bray 1984, 48, note c).

⁸⁵ One of the works that extensively quotes from both texts is the *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 from the sixth century CE. There is some indication that the reconstructed text of the *Monthly Instructions* actually represents a large part of the original text (Ebrey 1974, 180–181).

⁸⁶ On the pit-farming method that the *Fan Shengzhi shu* describes, see Hsu 1980, 117–118.

⁸⁷ In the first reference to monetary value in this passage ("10 cash"), the Chinese text uses the ordinary expression *qian* 錢, whereas in the following instances within the passage, it uses *wen* 文. The usage of the latter term in reference to cash is quite common in texts from the period of disunion after the Han dynasty onward, but does not appear to be common in Han texts. This alone does not rule out a Han dating of the text or even of this particular passage, but it would suggest that a certain degree of precaution is in order.

⁸⁸ Shi 1974, 24–25, trans. Hsu 1980, 288 (with modifications).

⁸⁹ On the *Simin yueling*, see Ebrey 1974; Loewe 1968, 175–179.

specified number of) nonfamily working hands⁹⁰ and to occasionally “dispense virtue by relieving those in need” 布德，振贍窮乏 (first and foremost among their extended kin).⁹¹ Apart from the many details on rural life, farming technology, and seasonal agricultural work concerning a great variety of crops, the *Monthly Instructions* picture a farmer’s livelihood that was not restricted to pure subsistence farming. The text frequently advises certain time periods for buying and selling particular goods. Most of the items were to be both bought and sold (in different months, respectively), which suggests that seasonal price fluctuations were taken into account.⁹² The text also incorporates seasonal recommendations concerning the preservation and processing of food, such as the preparation of different sauces and vinegars, or of “cakes to be made as provisions for those who come and go” 作糲，以供入出之糧.⁹³ Much advice is further concerned with sericultural activities, which are presented as constituting a highly important field of work on the farm, and as one largely undertaken by women.⁹⁴

The source value of these agricultural manuals is certainly impaired by their fragmentary nature and dubious transmission. Moreover, it remains largely unclear to what extent the depicted agricultural way of life and its economic activities can be regarded as typical for Han farms in general, or for particular types of farms, or for agriculture in certain regions. Nevertheless, the handbooks provide us with illuminating insights into Han rural life and a wide range of corresponding economic activities, including trade. They offer important alternative perspectives and pie-

90 The text leaves open whether these were tenants, hired workers, or slaves. On discussions regarding this question, see Ebrey 1974, 200–201.

91 In the context of recommending relief for the poor, the text admonishes to neither “endure other people’s poverty if you have savings,” nor “exhaust the family’s accumulated riches because you covet a good name” 無或蘊財，忍人之窮；無或利名，罄家繼富， which may be taken as a further indication of the family’s socio-economic standing (*Simin yueling*, third month, trans. Ebrey 1974, 192; cf. Hsu 1980, 220). Cui Shi himself came from a well-established family from Anping 安平 in modern Henan, some of whose members were famous writers. Cui Shi held the position of grand administrator of Wuyuan 五原, a rather problematic commandery on the northern border, for a few years. His biography in the *Hou Hanshu* describes him as relatively poor and states that he started a brewing business to make a living after the expenditures on his father’s funeral had left him bankrupt. In a political essay that has been partly transmitted, Cui Shi mentions his own experiences with teaching people how to spin and weave hemp in order to improve their standard of living (*Hou Hanshu* 52.1725–1731; Ebrey 1974, 175–179).

92 The goods mentioned to be sold over the course of the year include unhusked millet, glutinous millet, soya and lesser beans, hemp, wheat, sesame, seed wheat and/or barley, thick silk, silk, and silk floss. The goods mentioned to be bought include firewood, charcoal, hempen cloth, huskless and regular barley, scrap silk wadding, wheat, silk floss, hempen and silk cloth, straw, thick and thin silk, leather shoes, glutinous millet, unhusked millet, soya and lesser beans, hemp seeds, and non-glutinous rice (Ebrey 1974, 198–199).

93 Cf. Hsu 1980, 222.

94 On women’s role in agriculture and sericulture during the early imperial period, see Hinsch 2011, 71–76.

ces of information that are typically excluded in sources like the standard histories and their center-focused point of view.

V Conclusion

Ancient Chinese authors' interest in economic policies as an important aspect of statecraft puts modern research on early imperial economic history in a comparably comfortable position with regard to the availability of transmitted textual evidence. But while these texts provide us with a surprising amount of economic detail and reflection on economic practices of the state and other economic actors, these transmitted sources tend to be biased toward the perspectives of the imperial center. Apart from some technical manuals that seem to reflect agrarian and other practices of a well-to-do, but not exceptional social class, transmitted texts do not offer much evidence on economic processes at the grassroots level. Luckily, however, recently excavated texts from tombs and local government archives are able to provide us with such long-awaited information. However, while having opened up a completely new perspective on local economies and practices, many of these excavated texts have also corroborated parts of the general picture that the transmitted sources convey. In particular, they tend to confirm the high degree of influence the imperial administration exerted on local and small-scale economic practice.

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