GENERAL ORIENTATION

This two-day international conference is designed to lay the foundations for the systematic comparative study of ancient Chinese and Mediterranean empires. While the conference focuses on the Greco-Roman empires centered in the Mediterranean, and on the Warring States and Qin/Han empires in China, the implications of this comparison range much wider. Each session of the conference brings together experts in specific subjects of the Greco-Roman and the ancient Chinese empires. Our focus is on ‘ground rules’ of ‘macro-causal analysis’ that will allow accurate case studies of each empire to be developed. These rules, in turn, will allow us to test existing predictive theories and notions of ‘robust processes’ against empirical data from environments that developed independently but were sufficiently similar to warrant systematic comparison. Toward that end, we hope that a common set of questions will be addressed: What were the dynamics between the conditions and institutions under review (demography, law, the army etc.), social structure/social power and actor/agency? How do these factors account for imperial expansion and consolidation of state power and territory? What are the determining factors within a given case study that caused imperial success or failure, and facilitated or prevented successful empire reconstitution? How does the subject discussed relate to or overlap with (other) social power networks within the state? How do the specific institutions discussed evolve over time?
INSTITUTIONS AND NEO-INSTITUTIONALISM

We focus on the institutions of empire, how they relate to the specific environments in the Mediterranean and in China, and how they evolved over time. We use the word ‘institution’ in its specific sense as used in the New Institutional Economics (NIE) school. Here we follow North in viewing institutions as ‘the rules of the game in society’ that provided structure to reduce uncertainty. Such enforced rules are constraints on human behavior and, consequently, on economic development since they affect transaction costs. Here law (especially as concerns property rights and their enforcement), the economy, belief systems and state development go hand in hand. The specification and analysis of a state's institutions vis-à-vis its social organization is an important first step in analyzing change over time triggered by changes in technology, population growth, markets and, thus, in assessing causality. Defining the ancient empires herein treated in terms of the NIE will allow comparison to subsequent state formations, and by specifying state institutions and the ways in which they evolved over time we will identify the differences between the Mediterranean and the Chinese empires.

WHY THE MEDITERRANEAN AND CHINA COMPARED?

We seek to compare Mediterranean empires with early Chinese empires for three main reasons. First, the ancient Mediterranean and Chinese empires have never been systematically compared, despite the growing academic attention to the history of empires and indeed the increased interest in China in the West. The second concerns time. At the height of the Roman and Han empires, up to one-half of the world's population was dominated by one or the other imperial system. Both empires were broadly comparable in terms of size (c.4 million square kilometers each) and population (c.60 million each), and even largely coextensive in chronological terms (221 BCE to 220 CE for the Qin/Han empire, c. 200 BC to 395 CE for the unified Roman empire). At the same time, the environment and the culture of these two imperial systems were substantially different, and these differences heavily influenced political and economic developments within these systems. It is these differences which have the most consequence for the historian. Thirdly, we believe that the macro-study of ancient empires has important consequences for how we understand the historical development of the State. The ‘Oriental Despotic’ model for Asia, which posited a causal link between the control of irrigation networks and centralized political and economic power, in contrast with the more diffused power structure of the classical states of the Mediterranean has long been recognized as unacceptable. But with what do we replace these general models? In important recent studies of social power (e.g., M. Mann) and of world history (e.g., J. Diamond), the emphasis, as with Max Weber’s work, was on the uniqueness of European institutions that led ultimately to capitalist takeoff. Conversely, other work on the ‘Great Divergence’ (K. Pomeranz) between East and West has stressed underlying similarities. Our conference has different aims and a different orientation. The resulting series of interlocking case studies will permit us to establish a more systematic profile of differences and similarities which can be used to assess the relative significance of particular variables in the development of these imperial states, and thereby establish more exactly historical causality and the mechanisms of empire.

For a more detailed outline and bibliographical references, see www.stanford.edu/~scheidel/acme.htm.