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978-0-521-24327-8 - The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C. – A.D. 220

Edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

This volume gives an account of the first of the Chinese united empires, known respectively as the Ch'in, Former Han, Hsin, and Later Han dynasties. (The terms Western and Eastern Han sometimes appear in place of Former and Later Han.) The obvious dates marking the beginning and the end of the period are those of two key events: the establishment of the Ch'in empire in 221 B.C. and the abdication of the last Han emperor in A.D. 220. However, these two specified years should not be taken as the rigid limits of the period that is covered by this volume. The events of 221 B.C. were the culmination of developments of the preceding centuries, and of necessity the first chapter of the book refers readers to the incidents, personalities, and developments of the Warring States period. Similarly, although the abdication of Hsien-ti may be regarded as the formal end of the Han dynasty, the process of imperial disruption was already far advanced long before that date; it may even be maintained that in real terms the outbreak of the revolt of the Yellow Turbans, in A.D. 184, marked the end of Han imperial authority. In considering the political developments of these last decades, when a powerless emperor still occupied the Han throne, it is essential to look forward to the succeeding period, when the disruption of the Han empire had finally taken place and its territories split between the three coexistent kingdoms of Wei, Shu-Han, and Wu.

Similarly, in considering intellectual history it has been neither practical nor desirable to limit the volume to the precise period of the Ch'in and Han dynasties. It is necessary to refer to some of the philosophical antecedents that were developed during the kingdom of Ch'in, and without which the empire could not have been created. The late Professor Demiéville's chapter, written many years ago in the context of a volume planned on different lines, continues his account of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy and religion right up to the Sui dynasty (founded A.D. 581). The chapter was written as a unity, and whereas it would have been possible to divide it into two parts, on a chronological basis, between this

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[More information](#)

volume and Volume 2, we have preferred to retain it in its original form, as the themes that are discussed are best seen in their entirety.

Consideration of the available surviving sources for Ch'in and Han history shows immediately that the coverage that can be expected will be anything but complete, and that the evidence relating to many important themes and problems is unevenly distributed over the four centuries in question. Thus, we possess more information regarding economic development for Former than for Later Han, whereas the growth of great families and changes in social structure stand out more clearly for the first two centuries A.D. than for the preceding period. It is possible to discern patterns of political change during Former Han more clearly than for Later Han; and while more is known of the impact on the conduct of government of imperial consorts and their families for Later than for Former Han, the influence of key political personalities is in some ways to be seen more sharply during the earlier than in the later period. In the field of intellectual history, we are far less well informed for the period from 200 to 100 B.C. than for the following three centuries.

Chinese scholars, historians, and officials have been studying the Ch'in and Han empires for some two thousand years, and these dynasties were among the first to attract the attention of Japanese and Western scholars of China's imperial past. The object of this volume is to present a summary of the information that is available in the primary sources in the light of the most recent critical scholarship. The research that has been undertaken so far has, however, been spread somewhat unevenly over the various aspects of Ch'in and Han history. There has, for example, been far more research on the Former than on the Later Han period. There are also still a number of important subjects about which it is impossible to write with confidence. This volume, for example, lacks any attempt to analyze climatic changes and their undoubtedly far-reaching effects. Similarly, in spite of the striking recent advances in the study of Chinese science and technology, it still seems premature to attempt a summary of such developments during Ch'in and Han times. Nor is the time yet ripe to summarize the literary achievements of the period.

#### THE WRITTEN SOURCES AND THEIR PROBLEMS

Several of the contributors to this volume discuss the value and shortcomings of the sources on which they rely and explain the significance and problems of certain material. For a general assessment of Chinese historiography and its bias, and a consideration of the sources available for the study

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of Ch'in and Han history, readers may be referred to a number of existing works.<sup>1</sup> In general, the historian of this period has perforce to rely almost exclusively on sources compiled in the peculiarly Chinese form of the Standard History (*cheng-shih*). Only exceptionally is it possible to call on other written evidence with which to identify a document on which the compilers of these works drew, to check the accuracy of their statements of fact, to examine questions of authenticity, or to balance their opinions and judgments.

Nevertheless, the very size and nature of the three Standard Histories in question, the *Shih-chi* and *Han shu* for Former Han, and the *Hou-Han shu* for Later Han, may allow some scope for alleviating these difficulties. None of the three works derive from a single author or compiler; the different groups of chapters were drawn up to satisfy different purposes; and internal consistency between the different parts of these works can be of considerable value in assessing their accuracy or validity. The critical handling of the material thus demands careful treatment.

The coverage of the three works is by no means uniform. The *Shih-chi* was designed as an overall account of all human history down to the time of its authors, and is thus concerned with the many centuries that preceded the empires before proceeding to deal with Ch'in and Han; it does not include a complete account of Former Han, stopping shortly after 100 B.C. None of the three Standard Histories treats the Hsin dynasty as an integral period worthy of the same respect accorded to a dynastic house that, however short-lived, was regarded as legitimate. The *Hou-Han shu* does not include chapters of genealogical tables corresponding with those for Former Han in the other two histories.

In all three histories it is necessary to bear in mind that the various contributors wrote from somewhat different points of view, and also at different lengths of time after the events that they were describing. Ssu-ma T'an (d. 110 B.C.), originator of the *Shih-chi*, is well known for his partiality for certain forms of Taoist thought; this does not appear to have been shared by his son, Ssu-ma Ch'ien (ca. 145–ca. 86), who was responsible for

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Édouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-Ma Ts'ien* (Paris, 1895–1905), Vol. I, pp. vii–lxi; Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost woman scholar in China, 1st century A.D.* (New York and London, 1932); Charles S. Gardner, *Chinese traditional historiography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1938); Hans Bielenstein, *The restoration of the Han dynasty*, Vol. I (BMFEA, 26 [1954], 9–81); Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York, 1958); A. F. P. Hulswé, "Notes on the historiography of the Han period," in *Historians of China and Japan*, ed. W. G. Beasley and E. G. Pulleyblank (London, 1961), pp. 31–43; Rafe de Crespigny, *The records of the Three Kingdoms* (Canberra, 1970); Donald D. Leslie, Colin Mackerras and Wang Gungwu, *Essays on the sources for Chinese history* (Canberra, 1973); and Chen Chi-yun, *Hsün Yüeh (A.D. 148–209): The life and reflections of an early medieval Confucian* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 84–126.

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the greater part of the work, ending his life in circumstances of political disgrace. Some of the extant chapters of the *Shih-chi* were added by yet another hand, in order to make good deficiencies that are known to have existed from a very early time. The *Han shu* was begun by Pan Piao (A.D. 3–54), whose essay on sovereignty forms a basic document in the history of political ideas. The work was completed mainly by his son Pan Ku (A.D. 32–92), whose sister Pan Chao (A.D. ?48–?116) added some contributions. The *Han shu* also incorporates essays such as Ma Hsü's (fl. ca. A.D. 141) account of astronomical phenomena, and an abbreviation of Liu Hsin's (d. A.D. 23) catalogue of books assembled in the imperial library.

Traditionally it has been believed that the compilers of the *Han shu* drew extensively on the *Shih-chi* for the chapters that concern the first century of Former Han; but it has also been argued that for some parts of the two works the reverse process has taken place – that some of the original chapters of the *Shih-chi* which had already disappeared at an early date have been replaced by the extant versions, compiled on the basis of the corresponding parts of the *Han shu*.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the extant *Hou-Han shu* is in fact a composite work, of which the chapters of imperial annals and biographies were written, on the basis of earlier material, by Fan Yeh (398–446), while the treatises were drawn up over a century earlier by Ssu-ma Piao (240–306).

Of these three Standard Histories, it is the *Shih-chi* and the *Han shu* that have exercised the greater impact on Chinese historical writing, not only because they established the form for the subsequent histories, but also on account of their literary qualities; for they have always been admired and imitated as examples of clear, trenchant prose. Of these two works, the *Han shu* is written by an author who admired ancient literature, and sometimes includes archaisms. In the corresponding chapters that treat the same subject, the text of the *Shih-chi* is often identical with that of the *Han shu*, except for subtle variations of language; where it varies, the *Shih-chi* may be reflecting contemporary linguistic usage rather than seeking to imitate an obsolete style. Both works include passages that are vivid, and even dramatic, such as the account of the last battle and the death of Hsiang Yü, or that of Li Ling's heroic advance into Central Asia, or the description of the passage of the Hindu Kush by venturesome travelers. The two histories also include dry statements or solemn pronouncements that derive from official or imperial decisions, and summaries of state documents.

To Western eyes, the Standard Histories suffer from a lack of sense of

<sup>2</sup> See A. F. P. Hulswé, "The problem of the authenticity of *Shih-chi* ch. 123, the memoir on Ta Yüan," *TP*, 61:1–3 (1975), 83–147; and Yves Hervouet, "La valeur relative des textes du *Che-ki* et du *Han chou*," in *Mélanges de Sinologie offerts à Monsieur Paul Demiéville* (Paris, 1974), pp. 55–76.

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causality. In addition, certain types of information are regularly missing; for instance, genealogical information for the imperial, royal, and noble families does not include references for women as completely as it does for men. There is, as with all the Standard Histories, a great preponderance of information about political matters at the capital, and comparatively little about events in the provinces of the empire.

Quantitative information is provided only occasionally or sporadically. Thus, only two counts survive from the annual registration of the population, for A.D. 2 and A.D. 140, respectively; for the earlier of these counts, figures are included for a select 10 of the 1,577 counties of the empire, chosen presumably on account of their abnormally large size; for the other counties and for different periods we may sometimes be presented with a rhetorical statement. Precise figures—for example, those given for the registered population or the extent of arable land, or for the number of volumes in the imperial library—were probably based on a real count and are therefore likely to be more accurate, barring textual errors, than the round figures given, for example, for the size of the armed forces engaged in battles.

One particular example may be quoted wherein the lack of any external control for the Standard Histories is a special weakness. This is the treatment of foreign relations, which are presented in these works through Chinese eyes, and colored by the attitudes, prejudices, and records of Chinese officials. The peoples with whom the imperial officials were in contact at this time left no written records that would give their own account of these relations and their own view of their Chinese neighbors.

To some extent the historical record of the *Shih-chi*, *Han shu*, and *Hou-Han shu* may be corrected and supplemented by other literary works written during the period or shortly thereafter. Philosophical writings, which were not specifically intended as historical statements, often provide an insight into the motives of China's contemporary governors, and discussions of ethical values quickly resolve themselves into the guidance proper for an emperor or an official. A number of works were written to describe contemporary or ideal institutions. Some were later incorporated into the Classics and survive in their entirety. Others, which derive from the hands of highly respected scholars such as Ts'ai Yung (133–92) or Ying Shao (d. ca. 204) regrettably survive only in fragmentary form. A few complete books or essays (such as the *Yen-t'ieh lun* for Former Han, and Wang Fu's *Ch'ien-fu lun* for Later Han) that were written specifically as a criticism of contemporary policy or ways of life are of great value; they serve to correct or to confirm some of the more general statements of the histories, or some of the descriptions that appear to be exaggerated. Finally, some of the Han

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poets allude in rich imagery to the ideals or expectations of the court and describe the splendors of the capital cities with loving detail; others remind us sharply of the hardships suffered by the population at the hands of its government.

Until recently, independent archival material for Ch'in and Han was almost entirely limited to fragments of documents prepared in the course of the civil and military administration of the defense lines of the northwest. These fragments of wooden and bamboo strips first came to light at sites near Tun-huang, during the course of Sir Aurel Stein's journeys of exploration to Central Asia, between 1900 and 1915. Larger collections of fragments, dating between ca. 100 B.C. and A.D. 100, were found at the nearby sites of Chü-yen (Etsin-gol) during the Sino-Swedish expedition of Sven Hedin (1927–34).<sup>3</sup> Since 1972 these pieces have been supplemented by material that may well prove to be more valuable, as it consists of a number of rolls of complete documents, found again at sites near Chü-yen.

In addition to these documents, whether fragmentary or complete, that come from the periphery of the Han empire, since about 1960 a considerable amount of material has been found in some of the archeological sites of central China. These documents include lists such as rolls of registers, or legal provisions. They may concern aspects of official practice and public life that are not described elsewhere; they may have originated from levels of government that were somewhat lower than those of the official organs whose decisions were of sufficient importance for inclusion in the Standard Histories. Some of this newly found material is of a technical nature, the meaning of whose expressions is long forgotten, and yet awaits complete elucidation.

By no means the whole corpus of these documents has been published. Unevenly spread as it is in time and place, and dependent as it has been on the chance fall of the archeologist's spade, it is potentially of great value, as a means of determining how far the writ of imperial government was actually being implemented, particularly at the lower levels of the administration. In addition, these discoveries of archival material may possibly serve to corroborate the accounts given by the formal historians, or the accuracy of a received historical text, in the same way as copies of literary works that have been found in tombs confirm the authenticity of our received texts and testify to their accuracy to an astonishing degree.

<sup>3</sup> For the texts of these documents, see Édouard Chavannes, *Les documents chinois découverts par Aurel Stein dans les sables du Turkestan Oriental* (Oxford, 1913); Henri Maspero, *Les documents chinois de la troisième expédition de Sir Aurel Stein en Asie Centrale* (London, 1953); Lao Kan, *Chü-yen Han chien k'ao-shih* (Taipei, 1960); Chung-kuo she-hui k'o-hsüeh-yüan k'ao-ku yen-chiu-so (ed.), *Chü-yen Han chien chia i pien* ([Peking]: 1980); and Michael Loewe, *Records of Han administration* (Cambridge, 1967).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

7

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Material objects that date from the Ch'in and Han periods aroused keen interest among Chinese antiquarians and collectors from at least the eleventh century. In more recent times, attention has been paid to the artifacts and monuments of the period by Western scholars such as Chavannes and Pelliot, and explorers such as Sir Aurel Stein. During the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese and American collectors and scholars likewise began to show interest in these matters, and some of the first books to describe the material evidences of history came from the pioneers who worked on this type of evidence, such as Berthold Laufer. During the 1920s the handful of Chinese, European, and American archeologists who were working in China tended to concentrate their efforts on prehistorical sites; on those of the recently identified Shang kingdom; or on the richly furnished tombs of the Chou period. But at the same time highly important work was also being done on a few sites from the Han period, by Japanese archeologists in Manchuria and Korea, or by specialists such as the members of the Sino-Swedish expedition during their exploration of Central Asia. A number of important monographs were published at this stage.<sup>4</sup>

After the disruptions of World War II and the civil war that followed, which led to the virtual cessation of archeological work, a major change affected archeology in China when the government of the People's Republic assumed responsibility. A considerable number of Chinese archeologists has been gradually trained, and many sites revealed during the course of construction works have been methodically studied and recorded. The results of these investigations have been published regularly in a number of specialist periodicals and monographs. And although these publications were discontinued during the years of the cultural revolution (1966–72), some archeological work was accomplished during those chaotic years and the results later published. Subsequently archeological publications have become more numerous, and their quality has improved consistently. Thanks to the cumulative results of training, China has now a large number of professional archeologists, but the extent of the finds that are continually coming to light is such that only a fraction of the work that is necessary can be completed.

4 E.g., Harada Yoshito and Tazawa Kingo, *Rakurō* (Tokyo, 1930); Mori Osamu and Naitō Hiroshi, *Ying-ch'eng-tzu report upon the excavation of the Han brick-tomb with fresco paintings etc. near Chien-mu-cheng-j, South Manchuria* (Tokyo and Kyoto, 1934); Koizumi Akio, *The tomb of painted basket and other two tombs of Lo-lang* (Keijo [Seoul], 1934); Oba Tsunekichi and Kayamoto Kamejirō, *Rakurō Ō Kō bo* (Keijo [Seoul], 1935); Yagi Shōzaburō, *Manshū kōkōgaku* (Tokyo, 1944); Sven Hedin et al., *History of the expedition in Asia 1927–35* (Stockholm, 1943–45); Bo Sommarström, *Archaeological researches in the Edsen-gol region, Inner Mongolia, together with the catalogue prepared by F. Bergman*, 2 vols. (Stockholm, 1956–58).

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In addition to the great majority of material evidence found in Ch'in and Han tombs, discoveries include the remains of city walls and palaces, and occasionally an industrial site such as an iron foundry. Examination of such sites and comparison with literary records has made it possible to reconstruct the plans of the capital cities and some of their buildings with confidence. Stone memorial shrines, principally from east China, are richly embellished with carvings whose subjects draw on mythology, historical incident, and scenes of everyday life. In the northwest, the remains of manuscripts to which reference is made above were found in the rubbish-pits of the Han garrison forces. There are also the remains of the watch-towers that those forces manned, and of some other buildings, such as a large granary.

While no accurate and up-to-date information is available, it may be estimated that at least 10,000 Ch'in and Han period gravesites have been identified. These are distributed over the entire Han empire and range in date over four and a half centuries. They include some where the deceased person or persons may be identified by name, and related to historical texts. For some a date may be assigned to the tomb, with greater or less precision; there are also some examples of multiple burial, at sites which amount almost to cemeteries. These burials range over the whole of society, from the immense and awe-inspiring tomb of the First Ch'in Emperor (d. 210 B.C.) or the splendid tombs of the kings and noblemen of the Han empire, to the rough and ready graves of convicts. While some of the graves have been identified as those of officials or even of persons prominent enough to be mentioned in the Standard Histories, the great majority are those of that great multitude that has left no memorial of their names or lives.

A few examples remain of the masonry gateways that flanked the entrance to tombs. Much more frequent are stone memorial stelae, erected in honor of a provincial or local official, or a prominent landowner. These stelae bear long inscriptions that recount the ancestry of the individual who was being honored, together with the offices that he had held, his public achievements, and the virtues with which he was credited. Considerable care was taken over both the literary and the calligraphic styles of the inscriptions, with the result that these became valued by bibliophiles and scholars for their literary and artistic merits; it is partly owing to the interest of such specialists that rubbings and facsimile texts or copies of a number of Han inscriptions have been preserved. The great majority of these inscriptions date from the Later Han period. Some of the information that they provide, such as details of family descent, may be accepted without reserve, and supplements that which is in the Standard Histories;



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

9

other material should be treated with reserve or scepticism, insofar as many of the inscriptions amount to panegyrics framed with appropriate rhetorical flourishes.

The principal situations wherein Ch'in and Han artifacts have been found are the unrobbed tombs of the prominent and wealthy members of society. Owing to the prevalence of a variety of beliefs about the afterlife, which predate the arrival of Buddhism in China, the funerary furnishings of these tombs are extraordinarily rich. They include precious objects of jade or bronze; vessels of bronze, lacquer, or pottery; instruments and symbolic objects used for religious purposes; talismans that would ensure a happy life hereafter; or musical instruments. In increasingly great volume, documents are being found, written either on the simple everyday stationery of wooden and bamboo strips, or as *éditions de luxe* on rolls of silk. Some of these texts were designed to help the deceased person in the life of the world to come; some may be related to the particular occupation that had been his on earth, be it that of scholar, official, legal specialist, or physician.

In addition to rare and precious objects and items included for their religious significance, tombs have yielded rich supplies of equipment used in everyday life, such as lamp stands, dishes and plates, weapons, or in the case of women, exquisite toilet boxes of lacquer. Some of the more richly furnished tombs also included supplies of clothing, food, drink, and even ready money. But perhaps the most characteristic of all funerary furnishings of Han tombs are the miniature models of buildings or objects that took their place in the regular business of life on earth. Some of these provide excellent evidence of how agricultural or other methods were improved by technology in those years. Such objects include carriages and their harnessed horses; boats with their crews; wellheads, millstones, or even farmyards, with their litters of pigs or equipment for threshing. Above all, the tombs contained figurines or depictions of the men and women who had shared a life in this world with the deceased person; they were represented in the tombs as simulacra who would provide him with company or service thereafter. Some of these figures or frescoes were those of a man's colleagues in official life; some had amused him as entertainers or musicians; some had acted in the more humble capacity of a servant, cook, charioteer, or handmaiden. Exceptionally, the body of the deceased person was preserved in a state of incorruption, thanks to the careful precautions taken by Han undertakers and the favorable conditions of terrain and climate.

The archeological evidence from the Ch'in and Han periods is spread very unevenly in time and space. The extent of the finds, which is continually growing, is now so great that it forbids full exploitation. Opportunity has not yet arisen to subject any site to a rigorous examination, with a view

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

to distinguishing different strata of occupation during Ch'in and Han. Likewise, there is necessarily a limit to the work of identification, analysis, and cataloguing of artifacts that can be achieved. A scheme of distribution, province by province, has yet to be completed with a view to establishing local characteristics or the circumstances in which ideas were transferred from place to place. Great strides have, however, been taken in drawing up schemata and chronological sequences of particular types of objects, ranging from styles of tomb structure to artifacts of bronze and iron.<sup>5</sup> The criteria of such corporate conclusions may be applied, with the necessary reserve, to the problems of dating certain sites that lack definite indication of chronology, in the form of inscriptions or other evidence. Chinese archeologists have been regularly applying carbon-14 and thermoluminescence tests to their material since 1973 and 1979, respectively, and the results of such tests have become steadily more accurate. In a variety of ways, archeology has served to correct or to corroborate the statements of the histories and other writings of Ch'in and Han. It is thanks to the combination of archeological evidence with our knowledge of Chinese mythology and religion that a new measure of precision has been introduced in tracing some of the early strands of cultural history.<sup>6</sup>

## HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The Ch'in and Han periods have been closely studied by historians from very early times. Quite justly it has been seen as one of the peaks of Chinese achievement. Early western publications that considered Ch'in and Han China in historical terms include the writings of Martin Martini (1615–61) and somewhat later, de Mailla, de Guignes, du Halde, and Gaubil. It is largely on de Mailla's *Histoire générale de la Chine*, a translation of the *T'ung-chien kang-mu* (1777–85), that Edward Gibbon drew for his occasional reference to Han China. By now, it is probable that a greater

5 For comprehensive results drawn from a large cemetery near Lo-yang, see Lo-yang ch'ü k'ao-ku fa-chüeh-tui, *Lo-yang Shao-kou Han mu* (Peking, 1959).

6 For general summaries of archeological work, see Wang Zhongshu, *Han civilization* (New Haven and London, 1982); and Hayashi Minao, *Kandai no bunbutsu* (Kyoto, 1976). Important monographs published on recently discovered sites include the following: Yün-nan sheng po-wu-kuan, *Yün-nan Chin-ning Shib-chai-shan ku-mu-ch'ün fa-chüeh pao-kao*, 2 vols. (Peking, 1959); Hu-nan sheng po-wu-kuan and Chung-kuo k'o-hsüeh yüan k'ao-ku yen-chiu-so, *Ch'ang-sha Ma-wang-tui i hao Han mu*, 2 vols. (Peking, 1973); Nei Meng-ku tzu-chih-ch'ü po-wu-kuan wen-wu kung-tso-tui, *Ho-lin-ko-erb Han-mu pi-hua* (Peking, 1978); Chung-kuo she-hui k'o-hsüeh-yüan k'ao-ku yen-chiu-so and Ho-pei sheng wen-wu kuan-li-ch'u, *Man-ch'eng Han mu fa-chüeh pao-kao*, 2 vols. (Peking, 1980); Kuang-chou shih wen-wu kuan-li wei-yüan-hui and Kuang-chou shih po-wu-kuan, *Kuang-chou Han-mu*, 2 vols. (Peking, 1981); and "Yün-meng Shui-hu-ti Ch'in mu" pien-hsieh tsu, *Yün-meng Shui-hu-ti Ch'in mu* (Peking, 1981); Cheng Te-k'un, "Han burial remains in the Huangho basin," *Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong*, 14 (1983), 145–272.