

China and Rome

What “cultural genes” did the ancient empires bequeath?

Sunny Y. Auyang

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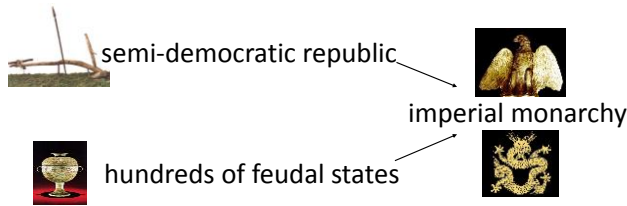
Abstract The world situation two millennia ago was uncannily similar to that of today, when the United States as a “New Rome” faces the rise of New China. From conditions as far apart as that between the West and the East in the nineteenth century, the ancient western and eastern realms converged in four centuries to two superpowers: the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty of China. The early republican or feudal experiences respectively left indelible marks on the two ancient empires, otherwise strikingly similar in scale, sophistication, and staying power. This talk analyzes and compares the Roman and Chinese styles in exercising power and maintaining order. It reveals the Roman penchant for militarism, wealthy elites, and respect for the law, and the Chinese proclivity for bureaucracy, ideological elites, and moral indoctrination. By tracing historical roots, it uncovers the origins of the “cultural genes” underlying western “hard power” and eastern “soft power” and explains why they are so resilient to the passage of time to be relevant now.

Thank you for inviting me and for the kind introduction. A couple of months ago, Professor Winterer gave a wonderful lecture here on America’s Roman heritage. She described how, after the United States led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been much talk about the American Empire and America as a “New Rome”. More recently, there are concerns about America facing the challenge of a rising New China. The world political situation today resembles that of two thousand years ago, when the coexisting Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty of early imperial China were the superpowers of the western and eastern worlds respectively. These two were among the greatest empires in world history. They left rich and influential legacies, which are like “cultural genes” that passed on through the ages. America is called a New Rome for good reasons, and New China has retained many traditional traits. Because of their legacies, the histories of ancient empires are still relevant today.

This talk tries to delineate and compare the characters of the Roman and early Chinese empires, especially their styles in exercising power and maintaining order. Many of these characters are still recognizable today. Why are they so resilient to the passage of time? To answer this question we turn to examine how these traits were shaped and entrenched in pre-imperial histories.

The Roman and Chinese Empires

“Cultural genes” formed in pre-imperial histories:



About four centuries before the formation of empire, Rome was a semi-democratic republic, a nation of farmer-soldiers. China was not a unitary state but a collection of tiny fiefdoms ruled by polished bronze-age aristocrats. The two realms eventually converged on empire under absolute monarchy. However, because their initial conditions were so different, they rose to empire via very different paths and overcame different obstacles. Just as childhood experiences shape adult characters, experiences of the rise shaped the characters of empire. We can regard the early struggles as

developing “cultural genes” that adapted to changing environmental conditions but retained a strong core. The western and eastern core style can be symbolized by the Eagle and the Dragon. As the standard of their legions and the bird of their divine emperors, the Romans had made the Eagle an emblem of power and empire, and it has stuck. Today the Eagle symbol is more commonly visible in America than even neoclassical architectures. The eagle is a real bird of prey, the dragon is a mythical creature of power, although in the East, its power is more benevolent than evil. The Dragon had long been the sign of the Chinese emperor, and by extension, the empire.

The Age of Empires: First century CE



Around the dawn of the Common Era, the Old World of civilization underwent an age of empires. Four empires, the Roman Empire, Parthia, Kushan, and Han China coexisted and maintained some peace and stability. During their time, patchworks of long distance trade appeared, which connected into the trans-continental Silk Road. Chinese Silk reached Rome around the time of Julius Caesar, but through the hands of many intermediaries. China and Rome were not direct trading partners. They sent no diplomats and never established official

relationship. Each knew the other existed, but had only the foggiest and often erroneous information about it. Because of the absence of interaction, we will compare them as isolated entities. The Roman and Chinese empires were similar in scale. Each governed about a quarter of the Earth’s population then. The land area of each was a little more than half of that of the United States. Each lasted about 5 centuries before succumbing to similar fates. Half of each empire, the more important heartland half, fell to barbarians originated beyond its northern frontier. Western Roman Empire was taken over by Germanic barbarians from beyond the Rhine and Danube, northern China overran by nomads from the Mongolian steppe. No empire is forever.

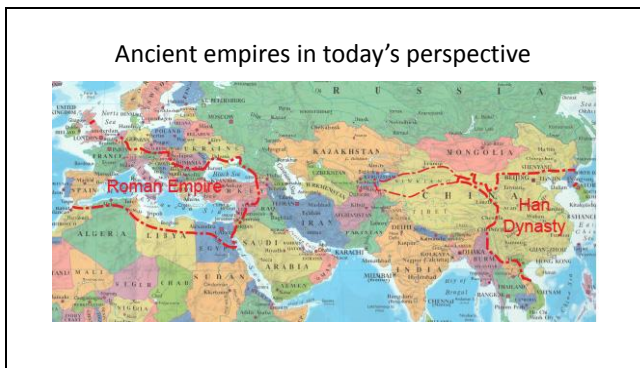
While they lasted, the two ancient empires shared many similarities. Their economies were mainly agrarian, with agriculture making up about 90 percent of the economy. Trade and craft existed, but were minor. Farmland was the dominant form of wealth, and the social prestige of landlords far surpassed that of merchants. Compared to other ancient agrarian economies, Rome and China were more monetized, with large circulation of metallic coins. It was especially so in Rome, where the currency helped to maintain the large peacetime standing army.

The Romans and Chinese equally treasured family values and reserved much power for the heads of family or clan. Families transmit not only blood and genes but also wealth and power, knowledge and skill, ideas and attitudes. The authoritarian family imbues deference and conformity with the mother's milk.

The societies of China and Rome were both conservative and stratified. Each person had specific social roles and was expected to be content with them for the order and harmony of society. Filial son, deferential wife, and obedient subject were common roles in both empires. Once, Romans in the Republic were also rightful citizens, but that was history. "Roman citizens" in the Empire had lost their political rights and were merely subjects, albeit privileged subjects. They constituted about ten percent of the Empire's population, and as conquerors, were superior to the conquered subjects.

Both empires were absolute monarchies. The Roman Empire had inherited many traits of the Roman Republic, but NOT its democratic elements. The Roman Empire was the same as oriental despotism in that it lacked the rule of law, that is, it had no constitutional law that limited the power of the emperor. Whatever the early Roman emperor called himself, the Greeks aptly called him the autocrat, the ruler answerable to none. Also, like oriental despots, the Roman emperor was hereditary. No Roman emperor who had a son living was ever peacefully succeeded by anyone else. This point is often missed, because four of the best emperors, Augustus, Trajan, Hadrian, and Antoninus Pius, were adopted sons themselves and further passed their purple to adopted sons. Yes, they did, but not because of some enlightened principle as is sometimes suggested. They did so because they had no biological son, and were therefore forced to adopt. Actions out of necessity prove no principle. Perhaps the only thing they can prove is that the Roman aristocracy had a fertility problem. That was not a problem for the Chinese.

The imperial organizations of the Roman and Chinese empires were similar. Each empire divided its realm into directly-ruled provinces, with governors appointed and dismissed by the central government. At their peaks, each empire had around 100 provinces and employed around 230 high officials for the central and the provincial governments.



Upon this broadly similar background, we can discern salient differences that accentuate the unique characters of each. One difference shows up clearly in the long perspective. Here are the former Roman and Chinese empires shown on today's political map. China has remained, and expanded. In contrast, the Roman realm had fragmented into many pieces.

Differences of the Roman and Chinese Empires

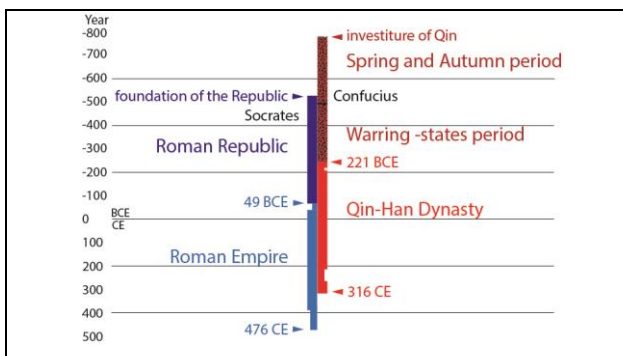


Government	Military dictatorship	Bureaucratic autocracy
Ruling elite	Wealthy aristocrats	Ideological literati
Culture	Rule by law	Confucian moralization

Other differences are visible close up. Both empires were absolute monarchies, but Rome was a military dictatorship, and China a bureaucratic autocracy. The most prominent feature of the Roman Empire was its large peacetime professional army, designed to protect the emperor's power, but turned to become an emperor maker. China faced more severe foreign threats than the Roman Empire did, but it preferred to call up troops when necessary in wartime. Instead of a permanent army, a bureaucracy dominated by devoted civilians was conspicuous in the Chinese government.

An empire's character had much to do with the composition and ethos of its political elites. In Rome, the elites were all wealthy landlords. By laws, one must meet certain wealth qualification to enter political life. Wealth always brings advantages in politics, but in China, it was not a criterion for government office. Instead, the dominant criterion was ideology, namely Confucianism. Government officers were selected from the literati versed in the Confucian canons. Thus a major power base was wealth in Rome, ideology in China.

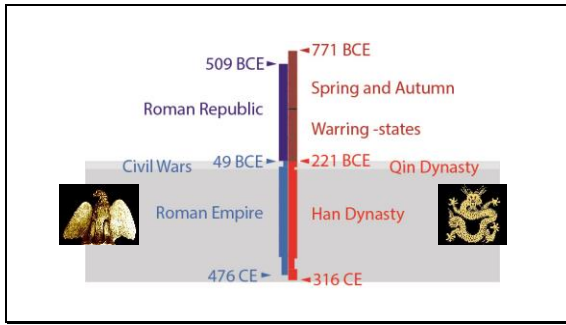
Wealthy elites treasured their property. Romans traditionally upheld the law, especially the laws that protected property rights. As I said earlier, the Roman Empire had no constitutional law that structured political power and legislative process, i.e., it lacked the rule of law. However, because Romans generally respected existing penal and civil laws and regarded law abidance a civic virtue and duty, Rome was ruled by laws. In contrast, even the rule by laws failed to take root in imperial China. The Confucians ruling elite preferred moral education and regard the law as coercive, a necessary evil fit only for a corrupt world. The different attitudes toward the law was a great disparity between China and Rome, a disparity still visible between today's China and the West.



How did these disparate characters come about?

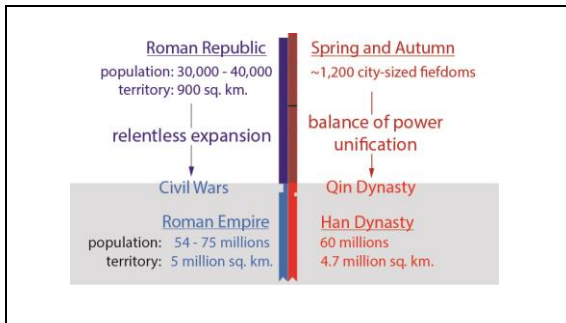
For that, we have to turn to the genesis of empires. Here are the time lines of the East and the West. The Chinese Empire began earlier. The year 221 BCE was the turning point in Chinese history: China was unified for the first time. The Roman Empire came more than a century later, and its starting point was arguable. I pick 49 BCE, the year that Julius Caesar marched on Rome and started the civil war that destroyed the Republic and commenced one-man rule.

Before the imperial age, each realm had an exciting history of rise to empire. The foundation of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE was a good starting point for our story. On the Chinese side, the future empire builder, Qin, was invested as a state in 771 BCE. Qin was an upstart in a world of venerated states with polished aristocrats. The 5 centuries preceding unification was perhaps the most influential period in Chinese history. It is traditionally divided into two. The first was the Spring and Autumn period, so named because it was covered by the Spring and Autumn compiled by Confucius who lived toward its end. The name of the subsequent period, the Warring states period, accentuates its violence. Not coincidentally, the late Roman Republic was also marked for its great wars and violent struggles. Empires do not form peacefully.



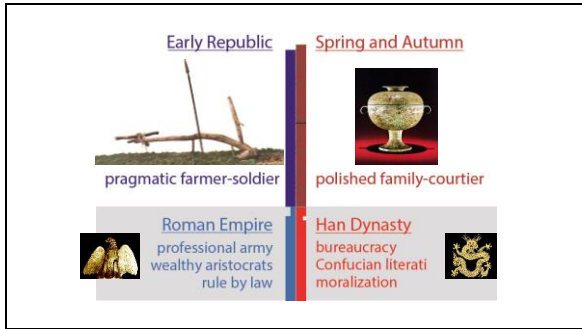
Our aim is to compare two careers, to compare who does what at what age. For that purpose the exact birthdays are not so important. For clarity of illustration I match up the starting points of the “imperial era”, so that we can compare their relative developments. The imperial age began with a two-decade pivotal period, probably the most important and famous in the history of Rome or China. It was the time of Roman civil wars featuring Caesar and Octavian, Antony and Cleopatra. On the Chinese side stood the First Emperor,

whose Qin Dynasty unified China. Although it lasted only 15 years, it had created the lasting architecture of united China. The Han Dynasty that succeeded Qin inherited most of its institutions, so that Qin-Han Dynasties are usually mentioned together as the early Chinese Empire comparable to the Roman Empire.



The two traditional stories of rise to empire have very different dramatic structures. The western story features a single star, Rome, it is a story of relentless Roman expansion, which some historians compared to the growth of the United States. In contrast, the eastern story does not feature a star until quite late. The Chinese realm was an international theater akin to the Mediterranean basin, with hundreds of city-sized fiefdoms. The Chinese story was centuries of balance of power, which somehow resembled the history of early modern Europe. The difference is that the Chinese balance of power ended in unification.

To build a large empire is no easy task. Both realms suffered centuries of warfare. To sustain large military expenditures for such long periods, the economy must be strong enough. This was especially important for the Chinese states, which did not depend as heavily as Rome did on looting and enslavement. Furthermore, military conquest is only one step in empire building. We all remember President Bush’s boast after American troops took Bagdad in the Iraq war: “Mission accomplished!” History shows it was anything but that. The conqueror must be able to govern the conquered people, and the political problems are often much more difficult than military operations. Worse, the political problems can even blowback to hurt the internal constitution of the conqueror itself. The government needs suitable political institutions to manage both the expanding territory and the army, whose size and power grow in wartimes. We will see that the Chinese warring state, especially Qin, undertook rigorous political reforms to build up an effective centralized administration fit not only to unify China but to govern the resultant empire by a civilian bureaucracy. In contrast, the late Roman Republic failed at political reforms. Its city-state government proved increasingly unable to manage the expanding empire and the growing ambition of generals, eventually leading to civil war and a military dictatorship.



Earlier we saw that the salient characters of the Roman Empire were its war machine, wealthy elite, and respect for the law; while the salient characters of the Chinese Empire were its bureaucracy, ideological elite, and indoctrination machine. To see how the empires acquired their characters, let us start from the initial conditions of their rise. The early Roman Republic was a nation of farmer-soldiers, rustic and pragmatic. Not only commoners but aristocrats shared this character, as is apparent in the

iconic legend of Cincinnatus, a patrician aristocrat who had served as consul. He labored in the field himself, but readily put down the plow and took up the sword when called to defend his country. The early Republic was not much into high culture, the Chinese states at the beginning of the Spring and autumn period were. Except the upstart Qin, the Chinese states already had four centuries of history. Their aristocrats were polished courtiers who cited poetry in political discourse and had ritualized many practices. This is one of their ritual vassals. Masters of ceremony were forerunners of Confucians. Well, the precociousness in high culture may not be a blessing for China, because it enabled some socioeconomic conditions of the time to be locked into the cultural gene.

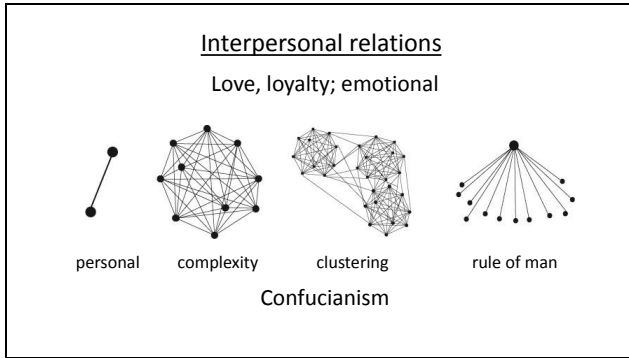


The Chinese aristocrats may be culturally ahead. However, in terms of technological, economical, and political development, China lagged far behind Rome. In the Spring and Autumn period, China was still in the late bronze age. Its main weapon was the chariot, which was monopolized by aristocrats. Bronze was expensive, and was reserved for weapons and luxury items such as ritual vassals. Production tools were mainly made of stone and hard wood. The productivity of such primitive tools was so low families could

hardly save up enough to weather draught, illness, and other misfortunes. So they grouped together in communal farming under the thumb of aristocrats. Land ownership was undifferentiated from fiefdom, transferable land property right was a notion to come. It was a thoroughly aristocrat-dominated society. This was the period that produced most of the Confucian literature that would mold the Chinese mind for more than two millennia.

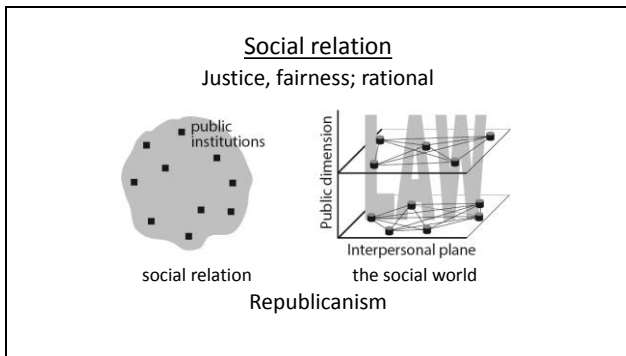
On the other side, the Roman Republic at its birth was well into the Iron Age. Inexpensive and readily available metal tools elevated productivity, enabled family farms to produce enough surplus not only to weather hard times but also to buy weapons. The early Republic's economic base was the independent proprietary farmer, who also constituted the self-equipped citizen infantry. Power emanated from the edge of the plowshare and the edge of the sword. In century-long struggle called the Conflict of the Orders, the common farmer-soldier won for themselves much power in the Republic. Farmers who tilled their own land constituted the agrarian version of the middle class. They treasured property rights and regarded its protection a major purpose of the state. Of course rich landlords couldn't agree more. From the beginning, wealth and politics worked hand in glove. Later it was reinforced by the common respect for the law.

Not only in technology and economy, in political organization too, the difference between China and Rome resembled that between China and the West in the nineteenth century. Crudely speaking, they were both aristocracies, but except for conservativeness, they were aristocracies of different kind. The senatorial aristocracy of Rome adhered to a tradition that can be called “republicanism”. The feudal aristocracy of China adhered to a tradition that can be called “Confucianism”; the name is anachronistic, actually, Confucianism is the spiritual heir of the feudal aristocracy.



To understand the two traditions, let us look at two kinds of human relations: interpersonal relation and social relation. Starting with mother and child, person to person relationship engages our emotions. Love and loyalty are its principle virtues. They are the primordial bonds of humanity, and the ones that hold through hell and high water. However, personal relations are complex, short ranged and difficult to scale up. For large societies, personal relations tend to form small clusters, with sharp in-group and out-group differentiation.

One way to cohere a large society is for unrelated persons each to feel some bond with a special person, perhaps the emperor or Chairman Mao. This is a form of the rule by man. Personal relations are ubiquitous in the world. Family relations aside, patron-client relations suffused the Roman and Chinese societies. The peculiarity of Confucian ethics is that it is almost exclusively based on personal relations. Even political affairs were dominated by personal connections, the all pervasive *guanxi* that Westerners find striking today. In this the Romans were different; they had developed another kind of relationship.



Personal relations are concrete and warm. Another way to cohere a large society is more abstract and appeals more to cool reason and commonsense. Reasonable negotiation, conflict resolution, and integration of compromises build up social institutions, impersonal and impartial rules by which everyone abides and consensus in which everyone immerses as individual. Traffic laws constitute a familiar example of such institutions. Satisfying oneself in it, one simultaneously satisfies the welfare of others, thus facilitating order and harmony,

even in large and complex societies. Justice and fairness are the principle virtues of social relations. They open the new dimension of public life, symbolized by the law, and create a society akin to a three-dimension world that incorporates heartfelt two-dimensional personal plans. The Roman Republic had a vibrant public space, embodied in the forum of the popular assemblies and the Senate of aristocrats. There individuals participated in social relationship and developed civic virtue and the idea of a commonwealth, in which each was a citizen. This extra dimension in human life was absent in feudal China, which lived on the personal plane.

The Roman Republic
The people reigned, senatorial aristocrats ruled

- Check and balance: Senate, magistrates, assemblies
- Wealth-based: citizens classified according to wealth
- Collective rule of the senatorial aristocracy:
 - Annual election of magistrates by the assemblies
 - Legislation: magistrates proposed,
the assemblies voted

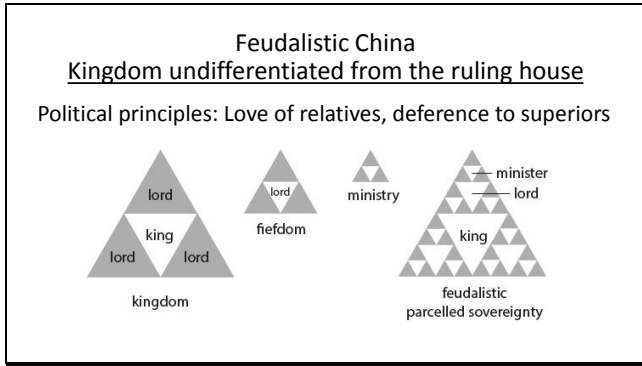
The laws and traditions of the Roman Republic took two centuries of struggle to mature. The so-called Conflict of the Orders in the 494 BCE- 287 BCE (fifth to third century BCE) was a bloodless revolution, in which the people won political power and civil rights that protected them from the arbitrary coercion of the government. The three elements of government, the Senate, the magistrates, and the people's assemblies, checked and balanced the power of each other. The Republican government of checks and balances has become inspirational for modern

political thinking, for instance in the framing of the United States Constitution.

From today's viewpoint, the most peculiar feature of the Republic was its wealth qualification. Periodic census classified all citizens into seven orders according to their wealth. The weight of a citizen's vote was proportional to his wealth. And only those in the wealthiest order were eligible to become senators and magistrates. Together they formed the senatorial aristocracy. It adhered to the tradition of collective rule. Magistrates, including consuls who held kingly power and commanded the legions, were annually elected by the assemblies. Because wealthy citizens whose votes counted most were those who could afford armaments of heavy infantry, the elections of magistrates were also the army voting for its generals. Thus the people and soldier acted as the arbiter of aristocratic competition. Strict rules that limited the terms of service ensured wide distribution of opportunities and honor among aristocrats, so that no one's power surged too far above the others. Even Scipio Africannus, who defeated Hannibal, earned the love of the people, and acquired tremendous prestige, was effectively reined in. The equality of aristocrats was the cement of senatorial collective rule. When it was upset by Pompey and Caesar, the Republic was endangered.

All citizens respected the law that guaranteed their freedom. The legislative process followed transparent rules. Magistrates proposed bills, usually clearly by the Senate. The popular assemblies heard debates pro and con, and returned an up or down vote. Their decision to reject a bill or pass it into law was final.

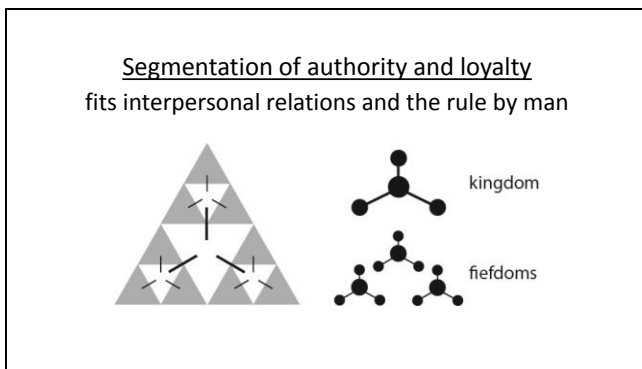
Formally, the Roman people was sovereign. They had unlimited power with their votes in elections and legislation. However, for whom and what they could vote were narrowly circumscribed by aristocrats. They could only chose from candidates who belonged to the wealthiest order and satisfied strict eligibility rules. They had no right to propose bills, no right to amend a bill proposed to them, and no right to speak singly in assembly. They could only listen to the debates arranged by aristocrats, and pass or reject a bill in its entirety. In this way they were easily manipulated by aristocratic politicians. Thus although the Republic was formally a direct democracy, in substance scholars found it to be an aristocracy. Actual power was firmly held in the hands of senatorial aristocrats.



Power was even more firmly held by aristocrats in feudal China. There, all ministers were hereditary, and most were relatives of the lord. The love of relatives and deference to superiors, the supreme personal morals of a hierarchical society, were also supreme political principles.

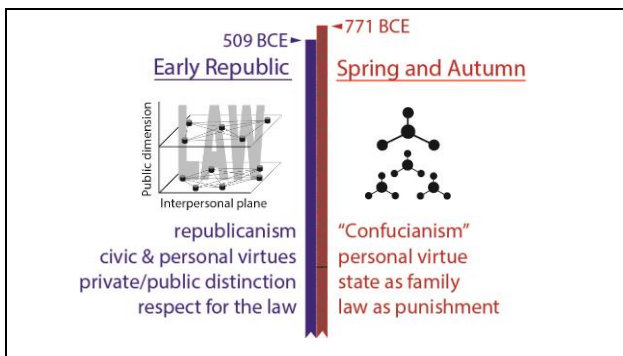
In the feudal parceling of sovereignty, the king formally reigned over the world, here represented by the big triangle. Actually, he ruled only a small royal domain, represented the inverted blank in the

middle. The remaining territory he divided and parceled out to the lords, most of whom were his sons or relatives. The lord served the king, but ruled his fiefdom almost autonomously. The lord's fiefdom had the same structure as the kingdom, except on a smaller scale and lower level. The lord directly ruled over a small seigniorial domain, and parceled out the remaining of his fiefdom to his ministers, mostly his relatives. So the whole feudal structure resembles what mathematicians call a fractal, which exhibits the same structure at each level.



A peculiarity of feudal parceling of sovereignty is the segmentation of authority and loyalty, here represented by the short solid lines. The lord owes loyalty to the king. The lord's ministers owe loyalty to the lord, but not to the king. Conversely, the king's authority extends only to the lord, not to the lord's ministers. A system based on segmented loyalty is prone to fragmentation, but it fits well with a power structure based solely on person to person relations. It eases the demand on a person by limiting the number of his political relations and

the social distance of his relational reach. It is the political institution of the clustering of personal relations, so that one's political thinking is essentially confined to his family or family-like circle. Government is a family business. Nepotism is not a vice but a virtue. Such mentality would influence Chinese society and politics long after the demise of parceled sovereignty.

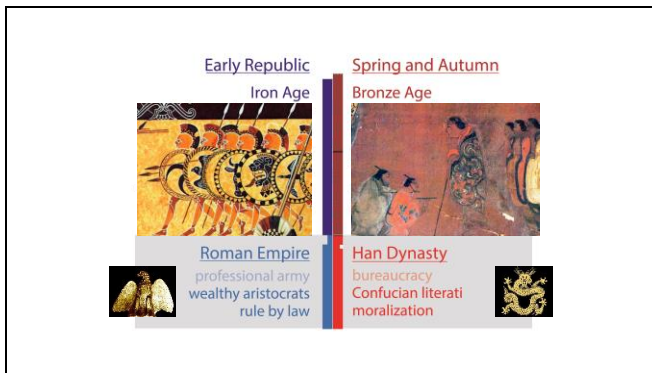


In sum, feudal Chinese recognized only personal relations and personal virtues such as love and loyalty, while the republican Romans further engaged in social relations and developed civic virtues such as justice and fairness. This difference had several consequences. First, because of the extra dimension in association, the Romans were able to introduce a public realm and distinguish it clearly from the private realm of the family. Powerful Roman families such as the Scipios produced consuls generation after generation. Sons

from prestigious families held such political advantages that some say the consuls were almost hereditary. Nevertheless, they still had to win elections, because the Roman had drawn a clear legal line between the state

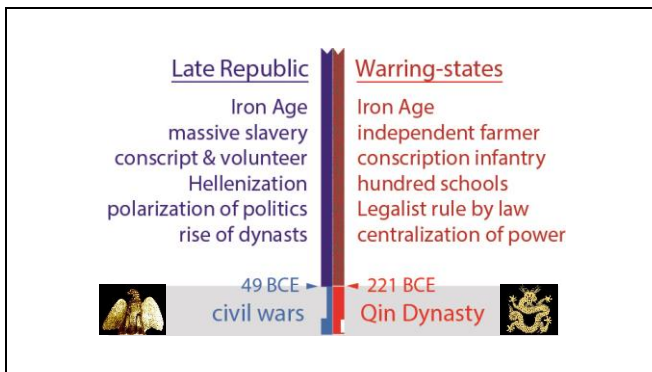
and the family, the public and the private. This public-private distinction was nonexistent in feudal China, where the state was undifferentiated from the ruling family, and political loyalty was a simple extension of filial piety.

The second consequence was their disparate attitudes toward the law, the pillar of the public dimension. The Romans were most proud of their laws and regarded law abidance as the civic duty of citizens. In contrast, the first publication of law in the Chinese states incited a vehement protest from Confucius. The law's impersonality and impartiality was a cold and callous intrusion into the warm world of personal relations, not to mention its challenge to the authority and privileges of feudal aristocrats. Generally, Confucians regard the law not as complementary but as antagonistic to the cultivation of personal virtues, on which they pride themselves. This ideology has been so strong it overwhelmed the Legalist reforms that introduced ideas similar to that of the Romans, which we will soon discuss.



To review the conditions in the early Roman Republic and the Chinese Spring and Autumn period. We saw the disparity in their technological and socioeconomic developments. The Eagle's wealth-based politics and the respect for law were already entrenched in the Republic. Social relations embodied in Rome's legal and political institutions forged a strong public spirit and solidarity, symbolized here by citizen soldiers locking shields. In contrast, feudal Chinese nursed asymmetric personal relations of a stratified society. The

Dragon's politics of family values and personal connections were deeply rooted in feudal times. The thing absent was the Chinese bureaucracy. It would soon come with Legalist reforms.

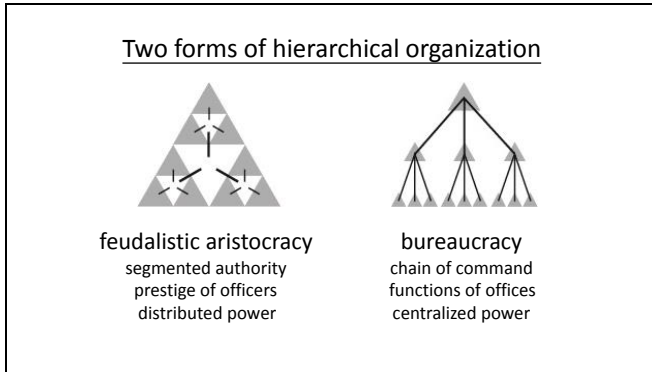


China's Warring-state period in some way resembled the twentieth century, in which China caught up with the West. China passed into the Iron Age. Its hundreds of fiefdoms coalesced into a handful of large states. The energy unleashed by technological revolution plus intense international competition created the most vibrant ferment in Chinese intellectual history. Diverse ideas flourished. A hundred new schools challenged Confucianism that hanged government on the inscrutable personal virtues of aristocrats and

sages. Pragmatic innovators called Legalists promoted the rule by laws that are specific, transparent, and impartially applied to all. The Legalist ideal of equality under the law was revolutionary. Unfortunately, it was ahead of its time. It infringed on personal relations, trod on the privileges of vested interests, incurred bitter reaction, and withered after the resurgence of Confucianism.

Among all Chinese thoughts, the Legalist comes closest to western thought. Besides the rule by laws, Legalists embarked on intense programs of state building and economic development. Their reforms disentangled the state from the ruling family. To replace royal household management, they introduced offices based on the services demanded of them, and organized these offices into an effective administrative apparatus

we call a bureaucracy. Furthermore, they based office holding on performance and merit rather than blood relations, thus opening government office to more people.

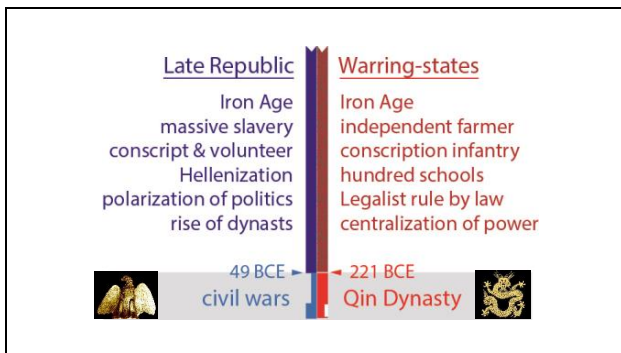


A bureaucracy is a hierarchical organization of offices, each with specific jobs, authority, and responsibility. Unlike feudalism with its segmented loyalty and authority, a bureaucracy has a chain of command that centralized power and forges a sense of loyalty to the whole. Among realistic options, the bureaucracy is the most efficient way of managing large enterprises. It is no surprise that all modern governments and large corporations have bureaucratic structures. In this respect Legalist reformers of the warring states were pioneers.



Legalist reforms were most thorough in Qin, and accounted much for its eventual victory. Qin reformers explicitly promoted the policy of farming-warfare. The state led land reclamation and waterworks, infrastructures that enhanced productivity. It encouraged small proprietary farms by systematically distributing land to individual families in return for tax and service in the infantry, which replaced chariots in battlefields. Qin's farmer-soldiers were akin to those of the Roman Republic,

except the Chinese king bought off the people with land and economic incentives instead of the vote and political incentives offered by the Roman aristocracy. By building up an effective administrative apparatus capable of harnessing the prowess of thriving small farmers-soldiers, Legalists wrested power from feudal aristocrats and concentrated it on the monarch. Such was the sociopolitical structure underpinning Qin's unification of China. The First Emperor abolished the hereditary aristocracy and directly ruled the vast realm through a centralized bureaucracy. Its efficiency would have made Augustus envious.



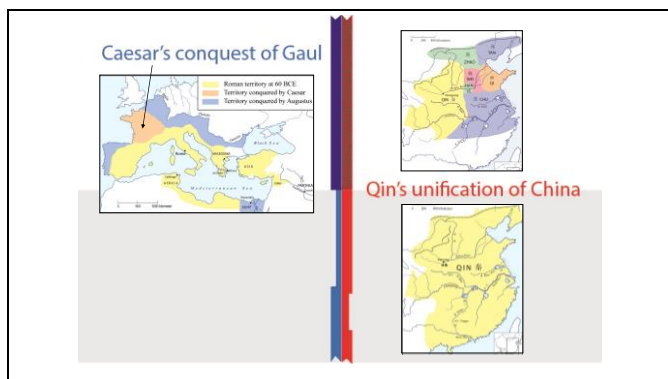
While China transformed into an economy of small proprietary farms, Rome was transforming out of it into the slave mode of production. Roman military enterprises were largely financed by massive looting and enslavement, which distorted the home economy. The small propriety farmers came under severe pressure from large slave-worked plantations. Many lost their farms. The middle class collapsed. As economic inequality sky rocketed, politics polarized. Repeated agrarian reforms aimed at rejuvenating the middle

class by distributing public land failed because of staunch aristocratic opposition. As more and more citizens lost their land and hence the ability to purchase arms, the draft faced difficulties. To fill the ranks, the state provided arms and the army turned to recruit volunteers from the poorest stratum of society. In return for their service,

the volunteer soldiers demanded land at retirement; land was the livelihood of farmers. Their vote in the assemblies and their elected officers failed to deliver what they needed, generals who could grab power by force were more promising. The failure of timely political reforms to control the growing influence of generals forged the militaristic character of the Empire, even during the long Roman Peace.

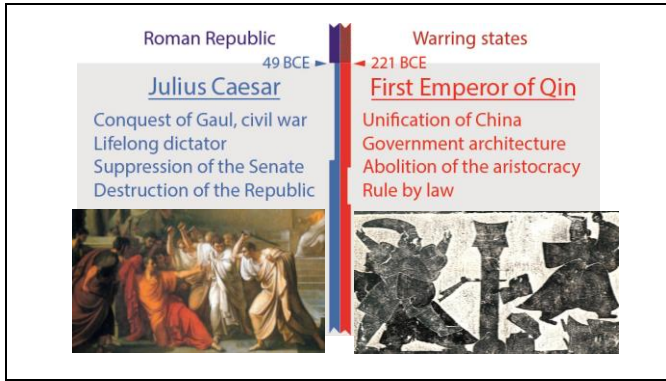
The enormous wealth and power brought by conquests stoked the personal ambition of aristocrats who commanded legions and governed provinces. Equality of aristocrats teetered as competition among them sharpened. A government designed for checks and balances of power checked itself into paralysis, unable to solve the problems generated by imperial expansion.

Ambitious aristocratic generals such as Sulla and Caesar seized the opportunities. The age of dynasts arrived. Caesar manipulated the assemblies to vote him special military commands for ten year, during which he conquered Gaul for Rome and acquired unprecedented power for himself. To suppress senators who opposed him, he fought the civil war that destroyed the Republic. Caesar's dictatorship for life effectively initiated the monarchical age. Yet even his genius underestimated the strength of republicanism. His assassination led to further civil wars, until his adopted son and heir Octavius defeated rivals to become Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.



Roman emperors came to power because of the dysfunction of the republican government. China's First Emperor capitalized on a century of Legalist reforms in Qin, which had built up an effective government with rule by laws and a strong economy. In less than ten years, about the time that Caesar took to conquer Gaul, Qin swallowed six sophisticated rivals whose combined populations more than quintupled its own, and turned the map of China from a patchwork of colors to a single realm.

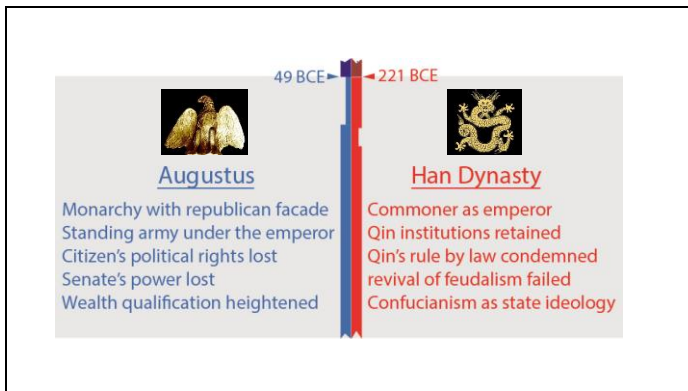
How to govern this large territory? Almost all dignitaries advocated dividing the new empire into kingdoms ruled by the emperor's sons and relatives, effectively pouring new blood into the old feudal bottle to make a country in the old fragmentary form. Objection came from a Legalist minister with humble origin, who argued that this would lead to a repeat of the warring states. The First Emperor agreed with the Legalist and decided to abolish the feudal aristocracy. No more hereditary kings, lords, or ministers. The empire would be divided into provinces with uniform structure under uniform laws. Provincial governors would be commoners, appointed and dismissed by the central government according to their performance and merit. Intensive unifying programs standardized everything from law, weight and measure, to the writing script. Even the gauge of wheels was standardized so that all carts in the empire could run in the same ruts. China would be a centralized state in this form from now on. This pivotal decision established the political architecture of imperial China and imprinted the idea of unity on the Chinese soul, crucial for China to reunify itself after repeated fragmentations in the ages to come.



Yet it was disastrous for Qin. Dissolving six thousand-year old states was disruptive enough. Abolishing the feudal aristocracy was even more radical. It embittered the entire political elite class, whose dream was to be lords and aristocrats. The elites resented the laws that held them accountable for administrative performance, and screamed cruelty when the emperor punished corrupt officials. Confucians attached to the feudal way further accused the emperor for callous immorality, because he refused to ennoble his sons and thus violated the love of relatives. The First

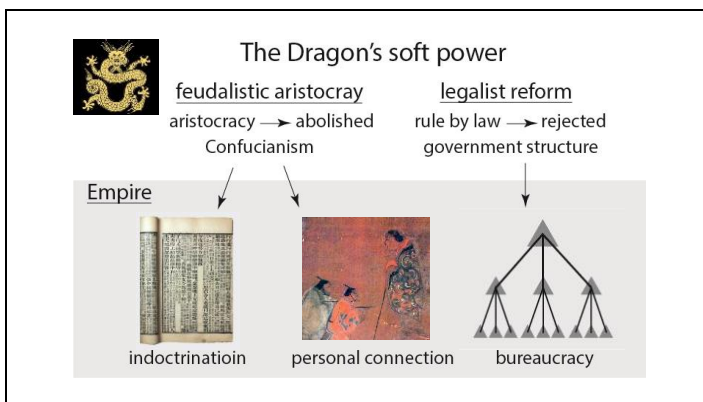
Emperor escaped three close call attempts at his life, but his posthumous reputation did not escape assassination.

Caesar was assassinated at the age of 56, the First Emperor was only 49 when claimed by some illness. Neither had prepared for the transfer of power. Perhaps this was their biggest mistake.



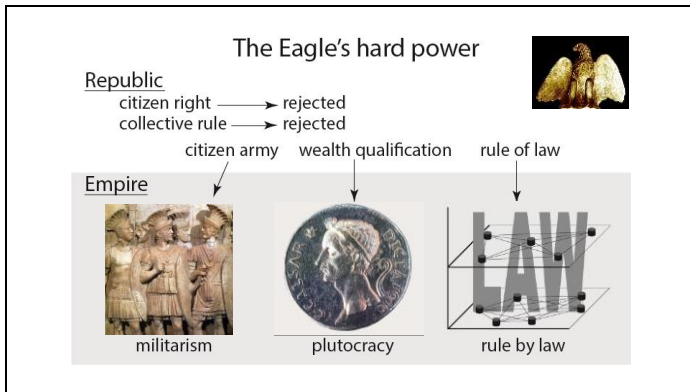
Civil war broke out after Caesar's death, further mowing down resistant republicans. Rebellion broke out soon after the First Emperor's death. The Qin Dynasty collapsed. Old aristocrats of the former warring states reasserted themselves. Opportunists mushroomed. Four years of chaotic fighting devastated the entire country and produced a commoner at the throne as the founding emperor of the Han Dynasty, setting a tempting precedent for the ambitious. The civil wars in both realms broke the backbone of old aristocrats. The horror of violent chaos made the

peace and stability under absolute monarchy seem attractive. On the other hand, the fates of Caesar and the Qin Dynasty taught their heirs a lesson. The unlimited authority of the absolute monarch is theoretical. In practice, the emperor needs the cooperation of the elites to rule effectively. To placate the elites, Augustus hid his autocracy behind a republican facade. The Han Dynasty adopted Qin institutions but condemned its rule by laws.



Fearful of Qin's fate, the Han Dynasty revived the aristocracy, but the new kings promptly realized the First Emperor's worry of repeating the warring-states violence. When the Han emperor suppressed them, few objected. The feudal aristocracy was finally abolished. However, it had bequeathed its spirit to Confucianism. Love of relatives and deference to superiors were far more agreeable to the ruling elite than the rule by laws that

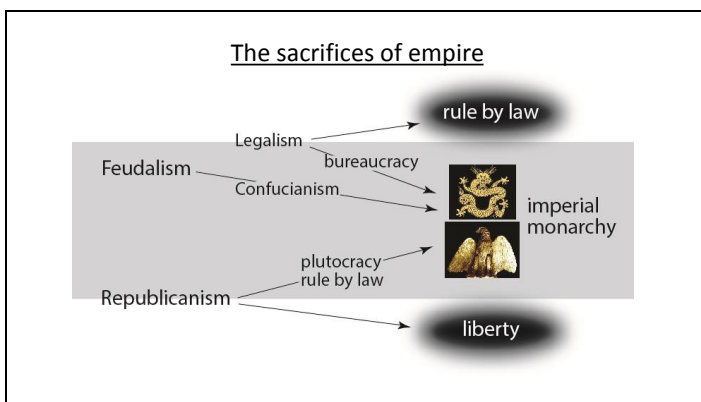
treated elites and folks equally. To buy off the elite, the Han Dynasty made Confucianism the state ideology, through which bronze-age ideals became characteristic of the Dragon. The administrative organization designed by Legalist reformers was retained, but its rule by laws was blamed for Qin's demise and condemned. Confucians literati preaching the rule of man occupied the bureaucracy, and replaced its operating principle of regulative efficiency by personal connections. They created probably the most effective and enduring secular indoctrination machine in world history. Using different slogans, the machine still operates to underpin the Dragon's soft power.



Augustus and subsequent emperors never let go the mighty war machine by which Caesar grabbed power. Militarism had always been the spirit of the Roman Eagle, but the nature of the army had changed. The republican citizen militia checked and balanced aristocratic power, but the peacetime imperial army was the emperor's tool to suppress opposition. The Romans continued to respect the law, but the process of legislation became opaque. The emperor's words acquired the force of law.

Augustus stripped the Senate of power.

However, he retained the senatorial order and heightened its wealth qualification, so that only the really rich could become government officers. The silver coin imprinted with the emperor's image was symbolic of the Eagle's hard power that united political and economic interests. Marx called on workers of the world to unite, but workers are difficult to unite; they have too many local bonds and loyalties. Elites of the world are far easier to identify their common interests and unite to protect them. Uniting landlords of the world was a secret to political success that the Roman Empire inherited from the Republic. It had a flaw, though. Land is immobile and necessarily tied to local interests. Yet the union of political power with economic power has become a cultural gene, which would again flourish when the economy produced another dominant form of wealth, capital. The Eagle happily soars over today's global capitalism.



The Roman and Chinese Empires were glorious. However, we should not forget what they had sacrificed to satisfy the ruling class. Imperial China had sacrificed its nascent rule by laws. The Confucian ruling elite equated law with punishment, and smeared it with an odor of heartlessness. Instead of definite laws, they appealed to vague personal morality in setting policies. Even today, when the West argues with the East, you can still hear one talks in legal terms, while the other moralizes.

The Roman Empire had sacrificed the Republic's liberty. Gone were the democratic elements, including the regular election of officers, the legislation by assembly votes, and the civil rights that protected citizens from government abuses. Contrary to today's idea that all nations must gravitate toward democracy, ancient Rome actually turned away from it. Democracy requires significant coherence among citizens. Coherence is easy to

achieve when imperial expansion, or economic growth, provides opportunities that can satisfy most people. But good times are not forever. When acute economic inequality and political polarization led to intolerable disorder and bloodshed, the Romans finally chose disciplined stability over ruinous liberty.



According to one myth, Rome was founded by Aeneas, who escaped the fire of Troy bearing his aged father. To his filial piety Confucians would fully identify. When all else failed, the primordial bonds of family remain. Love and loyalty, these cultural genes are shared by the Romans, the Chinese, and all humanity past, present, and future.