

# ***Characteristics of the Development of Early Empires Based on a Comparison of Rome and Qin Han***

**Deng Yihan<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*University College London, Gower St, London, the United Kingdom*

*a. yihan.deng.20@ucl.ac.uk*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Rome in the west and the Qin and Han dynasties in the east became empires after a long period of warfare in a similar period. Although both shared the characteristics of empires, they still showed significant differences on the road to unification. Rome, driven by the growing power of the aristocracy, kept squeezing civilians and eventually had inner conflicts which transformed the empire into monarchies under the pressure of popular sentiment and aristocratic plutocracy. On the other hand, Qin and Han, under the premise of emphasizing blood ties, kept weakening the tradition of the previous period, laying down the logic of hereditary rule of the dynasty with divinely granted human rights and ensuring the stability of the dynasty with stable local administration and grassroots power under civil governance. This paper will take a comparative historical approach, focusing on Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties. It is illustrated from the formation of the empire and its early manifestations in politics, economy, culture, military administration, and local governance systems to explore what characteristics the early empire had.

**Keywords:** Rome, Qin and Han dynasties, empire

## **1. Introduction**

After many repetitions of definitions, the concept of empire has taken on several broad and precise characteristics, such as the fact that empires basically unify territories and peoples beyond their borders through conquest and generally have dominant political and administrative power over them [1]. The means of this conquest and unification varied and could be motivated by religious beliefs as a way to achieve the divine right of kingship. The unity of church and state in the areas ruled could be like Rome, which moved towards a monarchy under Octavian, creating an empire in the name of democracy and freedom and changing the republican form of government [2]. Moreover, the derived concept of imperialism refers to the continuous expansion of power in economic, cultural, and military-political terms to gain benefits in other regions. In recent times, empire and imperialism have also been more widely used in phenomena such as colonization and are tightly linked to globalization.

Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties are each represented as early empires in the East and West, and through them, more characteristics of early empires can be discovered. The exploration of the causes of empire formation can be broadened. This paper will first discuss the characteristics of the early empires from the perspectives of politics, economy, ethnic culture, and military and local governance systems.

## 2. The Geographic Element in the Foundation of Empire

The essential difference between Rome and the Qin and Han in terms of empire building is that the Roman Empire was built based on expansion, while the Qin and Han Empires were built based on unification. First, the geography of Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties determined a vast difference in the development of the two countries and the foundation of their empires. The Chinese culture originated in the plains and was an agricultural civilization built on the Yellow River. On the other hand, Rome was originally founded on the hills and relied on the Tiber River to develop agriculture. During the long civilizational process that followed, the advantage of the plains meant easier population circulation and cultural diffusion, which allowed China, even during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, to have several scattered regions with nearly similar levels of cultural and civilizational development - whether it was religious beliefs, written language, or traditional customs and habits. They also have a presumably common perception of the ancestors of the Middle Kingdom civilization, namely the legend of the Five Emperors of Yanhuang. This gave the people of the Chinese region a relatively similar sense of national identity. Therefore, after the Qin and Han dynasties reached unification, the written language and dominant ideas soon achieved relatively easy unification, ensuring the empire's stability. By linking the surrounding regions that shared similar civilizations and cultures into a new, vast empire, Qin and Han dynasties were built on unity and homogeneity.

In contrast, while Rome's constant conquests during the republican period did allow it to accumulate a large amount of territory and resources on which to build its future empire, the people and cultures of those conquered regions were very different from Rome. The topography of the Mediterranean Sea kept cultures apart in an era of poor transportation. The Mediterranean was surrounded by different continents, each with its climatic characteristics and economic base, and each developed a very different civilization. Therefore, it was not easy to unify Rome culturally even after the establishment of the empire. One of the most critical components of civilization - language and writing alone - was challenging to unify. The traditional language of the Romans was Latin. However, Greece's political and cultural glory led many early Roman aristocrats to have their sons and daughters learn exposure to and even spread the Greek language and culture. Moreover, Gaul and Britain were even more barbarians in the eyes of the Romans, having a more backward civilization than Rome's, and could not share their culture with them [3]. Therefore, the establishment of the Roman Empire was accompanied by the conquest and leadership of the "higher civilization" over the "lower civilization". Under the Roman Empire, the native Romans, who had Roman citizenship, could not reach a cultural and national consensus with the slaves and other backward peoples in the conquered areas, compared to the similar national identity of the Chinese.

It follows that the nature of an empire will be influenced first and foremost by the process of establishment and that a state cannot be established without the influence of geography. The people of the plains may have been more likely to build a state with a higher sense of national identity and cultural homogeneity.

## 3. Differences in Class Composition

The different foundations on which the empire was built influenced their class composition. First of all, Rome was not as enormously inclusive of the peoples of the conquered regions as the Qin and Han. Because of the disparate civilizational development and ethnic culture, Rome mostly treated the conquered peoples with subordination belonging to the superior and dominant ones. As a result, the people of the conquered regions rarely received Roman citizenship, and most of the barbarians identified by the Romans ended up as slaves of the Roman nobility. Even in the administration of

the army, Rome's regular army and the army composed of barbarians were completely different legions and formations [4].

In contrast, due to the similar degree of civilizational development and national identity, the slaves of the Qin and Han were mostly criminals, and there was no default of the conquered people to lower classes and slaves. In Qin and Han, classes were based on private ownership of land and consisted of landlords, peasants, and merchants. The nobles of the Qin and Han were the landowners who owned large tracts of land, and the origin of the landowners varied. The upper strata of the landowning class, from the Qin to the middle of the Western Han Dynasty, were military landlords, and from the middle of the Western Han Dynasty to the Eastern Han Dynasty, they were gentry landlords.

The military landlords were formed during the Warring States period by giving titles for military service. Although the clan landlords also had fields and houses, they did not have military titles, so their status was not as high as that of the military landlords. During the Warring States Period, Qin reformed under the leadership of Shang Yang. According to the *Shiji* written by Sima qian, Qin stipulated that those who had military merit should be awarded the title at the lead rate. A clan without military merit cannot be given a military rank. Those who have military merit appear honorable, those who do not have military merit are rich but have no honor [5]. The landlords of the gentry were the descendants of the nobles of the Warring States and the emerging wealthy surnames of the Western Han Dynasty. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the landlords of the gentry operated large landholdings and controlled the dependent peasants economically; politically, they held elections and monopolized power at all levels; culturally, they passed down family studies and were repeatedly high officials, forming a large clan of local tyrants.

#### 4. Difference in Political Systems

The second difference is the impact of the different empire-building foundations on establishing political systems. Although both Rome and the Qin and Han dynasties were monarchies, the legitimacy of their monarchs differed. The Qin-Han monarchy succeeded in legitimizing the existence of a monarch in the name of "divinely granted human rights" because the people shared similar beliefs and traditional culture. Based on this, a hereditary system was developed, and a system of monarchical succession dominated by blood ties was formed [6].

In contrast, in Rome, which did not have a unified culture and beliefs, the monarch was legitimized in the name of "freedom" and "the representative of the people". The early Roman Empire still had a system in which the leader was still legally elected by the citizens. This system became essential to Rome's complete transformation into a monarchy. The election of the citizens and the Senate was essential in the election of the emperor, so there were often instances of rebellions in the name of liberal democracy, where people were collected or coerced into electing others to achieve a successful rebellion and become the monarch. Nonetheless, at the end of the Roman Empire, the class gap and the cultural divide between the various ethnic groups caused a lot of rebellions and revolts, and the Livelihood issues produced due to wars and economic problems could only be better achieved by dictators such as Octavian, who had military power and a successful rebellion [7]. In contrast, the Qin dynasty, with its three princes and nine ministers, was designed for absolute centralization and unification, ensuring the political character of the supremacy of the imperial power and the supremacy of the emperor.

It follows that empires were not necessarily built under the absolute leadership of the emperor. With ethnic homogeneity like the Qin and Han dynasties, with unification from language and culture to currency, it was easier to produce a stable absolute dictatorial monarch as the empire's leader. In contrast, as represented by Rome, an empire with a fragmented national culture under aristocratic politics was more likely to produce rapid turnover and frequent changes of monarchs. In

the Qin and Han dynasties, it was the absolute dictatorship of the monarch that led to tyranny and the discontent of the people, which led to the downfall of Qin, while in Rome, it was the lack of a leader who could begin to focus on the lives of the people during the republican period that led to riots by the people who could not solve the problem of survival, which was finally solved by the monarchy.

## 5. The Difference in the Local Management of the Empires

The empire's system of local administration greatly affected the political roots and the local management of the empire. Roman politics was an elite politics led by the nobility, so most still had solid military power and voice under the constant change of the emperor by elections. In this period, becoming a provincial governor of the expanding areas was a significant part of the political career for the nobles. As early as the Republican period, Rome began to establish a system of provinces in the Sicilian peninsula to govern its expanding territory. At that time, the consuls were granted military command in the provinces by the Senate. After the change to an imperial monarchy, the Senate continued to decide on the next provincial governor for most of the territories expanded during the republican period [8]. However, under the new system, the emperor appointed governors in imperial provinces, territories newly expanded. Most provincial governors were still senatorial aristocrats, whether authorized by the emperor or the Senate. Thus, as mentioned earlier, this allowed the aristocrats to wield a great deal of military power to commit treason and usurp power [9].

In contrast, during the Shang Dynasty, China had a feudal system that gave rise to a class of landlords. At the same time, the land was constantly traded in the hands of merchants. Eventually, the land sphere of influence of some of the nobles became larger and larger, gradually forming local secessionist forces. The system of prefectures and counties implemented during the Qin and Han dynasties formed centralized vertical management of localities. By establishing counties and prefectures as units of regional management, the "grand unification" system of government was consolidated. China moved from an aristocratic feudal system to a feudal autocracy. During the Han dynasty, the "Thorough Encyclical Order" is adopted by the emperor, allowing the rich to subdivide their own land to their children and establish a smaller State. As a result, provinces governed by big clans are divided into many small counties, becoming unable to fight again with the Central [10]. Finally, the landlords' land and military power never exceeded a range that could compete with the central government and gradually eliminated the local secessionist forces that had emerged from the feudal system.

On the other hand, the Roman provincial system allowed the nobles to hold a large amount of military power for mutiny. However, it also allowed the Senate to still have a certain amount of say under the emperor's system, and there was no absolute dictatorship of the emperor as in Qin and Han. The Qin-Han system of counties allowed the emperor and the central government to have more vertical and unified management of local areas. By dividing up the land, Qin and Han dismantled the landed aristocracy's voice and military power and ensured the monarchy's stable operation under the hereditary system.

## 6. Differences in the Ruling Logic

The logic of imperial rule in Rome and Qin and Han dynasties was the opposite. Under the Qin and Han administrations, the gap between the status of ordinary citizens and the nobility was not particularly wide. Even normal people like farmers had the opportunity to become part of the upper class. It can be seen in the tax policies in Qin and Han as well. With the development of productivity and increased social wealth, some taxes since the Qin and Han dynasties were again

directed at merchants and merchants to the entire population, and the transformation of the collection objects went through a long conversion process. In contrast, its significance as a universal property tax occurred under Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty. It was inseparable from the land taxation policy and the need for social order stability in this period [11]. The grassroots regime in the Qin and Han dynasties was so mature that the meaning of the existence of soldiers was closer to that of small farmers who were urgently incorporated into the military establishment system in times of war. Therefore, the basis of taxation in the Qin and Han was still agriculture, not being a soldier.

The relationship between the government and the people during the Qin and Han periods was placidly tolerant, showing a feature of Politically and culturally downward compatibility. Under the Roman administration, the civilians, especially the people in the expansion areas, were always very different from the Roman citizens and nobility, so its rule logic was upwardly compatible, contrary to the Qin and Han. The lands that came from Roman conquests were held by the nobles, who accumulated wealth and turned into powerful men who held a great deal of military power and finance simultaneously in the context of the local system. Contrary to the Qin and Han dynasties, the grassroots power in Rome remained in the hands of the nobility. Even the chivalric class was given access to the Senate, which caused Roman politics to float into oligarchy and aristocracy, inevitably leading to civil unrest and subsequent dictatorship. Under the provincial system, Roman taxation and administration were directly linked to the military power and voice of the provincial governors, thus creating a link between the military and the grassroots. However, this link was not stable for Rome because it meant that the position of emperor was destined to be contested by several noblemen with large military forces, land, and the vast wealth they had accumulated in the regions they governed.

Although the logic of rule that eventually led to monarchy was quite different, with the development of the Roman empire presenting a struggle for status between nobles and the Qin and Han, where divinely granted human rights fixed the influence of blood ties, both eventually moved towards a delicate balance of relations between civilians and monarchs as the political system changed. The old system of Qin and Han, which valued blood ties, continued to dissolve into compatibility between the civilians and the nobility under Shang Yang's change of law and the county system. On the other hand, Rome was an elite politics dominated by the aristocracy, which chose to use dictatorship to ensure the stability of the political situation because it slowly ignored the voice of the civilians.

## 7. Conclusions

To sum up, although Qin and Han in the east and Rome in the west established their empires at a similar time, their geography first influenced the differences between the two based on their national cultures, and such differences, in turn, determined the opposite logic of their rule as empires. Regarding class, Qin and Han treated the civilians of the unified regions equally, and civilians had the opportunity to enter the civil service system through recommendation. In contrast, Rome maintained the relationship between the leader and the dominant barbarians. The civilians could express their political views and needs through the comitia, but most barbarians could not have Roman citizenship. In terms of local management, the local management system of the Qin and Han Dynasties constantly tightened local power through taxation and land policies to ensure further centralization and stable unity. In contrast, in Rome, the power of individual aristocrats continued to expand due to the characteristics of the aristocracy and the local system. In the end, plutocracies that held both military power and wealth were formed, triggering civil strife and frequent changes of emperors. However, Qin and Han in the east and Rome in the west had a balance of political conversion as empires. Qin and Han resolved the Western Zhou tradition of



valuing blood ties with a local system and grassroots power. In contrast, Rome resolved the contradiction between the economic base and political status of the civilians and the nobility under the republican system with the transformation of the republic into a monarchy.

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