The Warring States period (453–221 BCE) saw the emergence of bureaucratic techniques that connected the state with the population. These new technologies embraced—at least ideally—all individuals within the polity, associating each with precise characteristics and specific administrative structures. One of these was a system of household registration that sought to record the entire population. Registration made each person known and knowable to the state and enabled the calculation of taxes and labor service requirements. This knowledge created a new kind of power relationship and permitted the assignment and tracking of accountability at a level that would otherwise have been impossible. With the unification of the Warring States era polities under the Qin in 221 BCE, registration came to encompass the populace of the new empire.

In the process of becoming and remaining registered, each person entered into and maintained a relationship with the state. Just as the state collected information through local bureaucratic structures, so did it distribute messages about the extent of the state’s reach throughout society, making the population aware of its presence. These practices conveyed a conception of the state’s structures and capabilities to each member of the population.

Although historians have long known that systems of population registration existed in early China, there were no examples of the forms they took. In this chapter, I discuss two types of documents that archeologists have recovered in recent years from a Qin era bureaucratic center at Liye 里耶, Hunan: household registries and reckonings of debts owed by men doing military service away from home that made use of the data the registers contained. The registries contain little information about each person; just a few words sufficed to identify each one. The debt reckonings show how that information moved through the Qin bureaucracy to follow individuals from one place to another. These two types of documents together reflect a political state in a condition of mutual knowledge with its population and represent in important ways the Qin conception of their society.
The Liye Site

The Liye archeological site takes its name from the modern town Liye, located on the You River 酉水河 in the heart of the Wuling 武陵 Mountains. The site was noted and excavated in connection with the Wanmipo 碗米坡 hydroelectric project, the main part of which was carried out in 2002. Reports about the find appeared quickly in the popular press, including the Chinese national geographic magazine, that same year (Zhang Chunlong and Long Jingsha 張春龍 2002). The first formal report was published in 2003 (Hunansheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo et al. 2003a, 2003b), and the final archeological report appeared as a book in 2007 (Hunansheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2007). The Liye site has produced thousands of bureaucratic documents—most, but not all, coming from an ancient well. The documents indicate that in Qin times this was the government center of Qianling County 遷陵縣, Dongting Commandery 洞庭郡.¹

Only a portion of the documents that archeologists found at Liye has been published so far. A number have appeared only in transcription form in the archeological report and in articles; a small portion have appeared in slim volumes that combine very high quality photographic reproduction with good transcription and low cost (Zhang Chunlong 2010). In addition to the primary find of the well, archeologists have also discovered small numbers of wooden strips around the Liye site. These included the population registries, which archeologists recovered in 2005 from a pit in what they identify as a defensive moat. The book version of the report first published the content of twenty-two examples along with a few more that are so damaged they contain no legible text (Hunansheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2007: 22, 26, 203–208). Zhang Chunlong 張春龍 (2009) published a further selection of some fifty additional registries and related documents from the well. The first volume of what promises to be the complete set of Liye documents was published in 2012, as was a companion volume containing transcriptions and commentary by another research group (Liye Qin jian (yi) 2012; Chen Wei 2012); future publications promise further materials.

¹ For a summary of the find and the recovered materials, see Yates 2012–2013.