The “Statutes on Agriculture” has the oldest documented history of any statute collection in Chinese law. The statutes were probably composed in the state of Qin, at least as early as the reign of Duke Xiao (r. 361–338 BCE), when Lord Shang radically reformed the legal and agricultural system in his efforts to fortify the Qin state for greater productivity, discipline, and military achievement.1 Whereas the “Statutes on Assault” and the “Statutes on Robbery” protected the authority of the state and prohibited violations of the social and material order, the “Statutes on Agriculture” ensured the economic basis of the state by defining the standard size of agricultural fields, setting the amount of taxes due to the state based on those holdings, and regulating other vital food resources such as livestock and wild game.

1 Even though it is not mentioned as being one of the six fascicles of the apocryphal Fa jing of Li Kui, which Lord Shang supposedly brought with him to Qin for the purpose of reforming the laws of that state, the “revision” of the law during the period of King Wu of Qin is evidence that the “Statutes on Agriculture” had existed for some time and that the first items were likely composed during the period of Lord Shang’s reforms. Han-period quotations from the “Statutes on Agriculture” also contain references to the hunting of animals and violation of hunting protocol, for the root word tián 田 also means tiánliè 田獵 (to hunt) and not just ‘agricultural fields’ (Hulsewé 1955, 37). Many of the Qin statutes from the Longgang site are concerned with hunting and the regulation of Royal parks and may have been drawn from the Qin “Statutes on Stables and Parks” (Jiuyuan lü 僚苑律), which may have been developed later than the “Statutes on Agriculture” and instituted as Qin expanded its park system and increased its use of horses for both military and civil purposes. See Longgang Qin jian; Cao Lüning 2003a. For a comprehensive study of the grain production and distribution system of the Qin state, see Cao Lüning 1996; and for studies on Qin parks, see Wang Hui 2003 and Xu Weimin 2005a.
The earliest surviving quotations from the Qin “Statutes on Agriculture” come from the text of a Royal mandate of King Wu of Qin (r. 310–307 BCE) written on a board found in tomb no. 50 at the site of Haojiaping in northern Sichuan and dated precisely to September 27, 309 BCE, shortly after the Qin conquest of the region. The text contains King Wu’s mandate to his ministers to “revise again” the “Statutes on Agriculture,” followed by the detailed text of a statute defining the basic dimensions and structure of agricultural fields and their attendant path system, with specific monthly instructions for maintaining them. Despite the intervening century, this text is basically identical to no. 7 in the “Statutes on Agriculture” from Zhangjiashan tomb no. 247.

The abstract from the Qin statutes found in Shuihudi tomb no. 11 holds six items from the Qin “Statutes on Agriculture.” The fact that this section heads the entire collection of abstracts from eighteen statutes also demonstrates the central importance of the “Statutes on Agriculture” to Qin law. Those six items include provisions to report on the effects of rain, drought, or insects on the health of crops, regulations concerning grain rations for government-owned animals, a curious ban on the sale (and possibly purchase) of grain liquor by farmers as well as some seasonal prohibitions, and an item detailing a tax on hay and straw that finds nearly an exact parallel in the “Statutes on Agriculture” from Zhangjiashan tomb no. 247. The abstract from the Qin statutes found at the site of Longgang also contains some passages that clearly were drawn from the “Statutes on Agriculture,” although that statute title is not found on the extant slips. These show remarkable parallels to the text of the early Han recension found in Zhangjiashan tomb no. 247. Thus, it is quite clear that the early Han recension of the “Statutes on Agriculture” was copied almost exactly from a Qin predecessor, with only slight modifications to the penalties and fines, usually to make them harsher.

The other characteristic evident throughout the Qin and early Han “Statutes on Agriculture” is a strong influence of the tradition of ‘monthly ordinances’ (yuè lìng 月令), which were monthly requirements, prohibitions, and taboos related to the agricultural calendar. Most were based on long-term experience and common sense, like the aphorisms in a farmer’s almanac, and encouraged activities such as cutting timber only during certain months and engaging in earthmoving work during others. When the traditional practices were written into law during the Warring States period, they were greatly increased in number and complexity by the addition of notions from the correlative cosmology popular at that time, in which the actions of the ruler and his people were supposed to be in harmony with the waxing and waning of yin and yang and

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2 See no. 10 (slip nos. 251–52n67) in this section.