SLAVERY IN EARLY CHINA:
A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH

BY

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the nature of slavery in early China from a comparative socio-cultural perspective, using the sociological approach of Orlando Patterson (Slavery and Social Death, 1982). Marxist and other theoretical positions are rejected in favor of viewing slaves not as the object of property, but rather seeing that slaves could not be the subject of property. In other words, slaves are “dominated non-persons.” The focus of the inquiry is on interpreting the diverse materials relating to slaves in the Qin legal documents discovered at Shuihudi, Hunan Province, in 1975. Brief consideration is given to other statuses, such as the convict status of lichen and liqie (male and female bondservants), and whether they should be considered slaves or not. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of analyzing early Chinese slavery within its culturally rich context of ritual and cosmological conceptions and practices.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, slavery has become the topic of numerous studies to such an extent that one might say that slavery has become
an academic industry in its own right (cf. Karras 1991; Miller 1985; Parish 1989). The reasons for this interest in slavery stem from, on the one hand, the work of the so-called cliometricians, led by Fogel and Engerman (1974), who developed new historical and statistical techniques to reevaluate the nature and economics of the slave system from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in the area that became the southern United States, and on the other, from studies of ancient slavery by historians of Classical Greece and Rome (Finley 1968, 1980, 1983). In addition, Western Marxist scholars attempted to develop the scattered and rudimentary remarks of Marx and Engels on the theory of pre-capitalist modes of production into a rigorously scientific formulation. They have tried to apply Marx’s methodology in general theoretical terms as well as to the analysis of particular social formations in which slavery has been found to exist. Perry Anderson (1974) has been among the most prominent scholars in England to devote attention to the issues. In France, the group of anthropologists around Claude Meillassoux (1975, 1978) have examined much ethnographic material from Africa. In Western studies of modern China, James Watson (1980a, b, c) has written detailed ethnographic papers and developed more general, comparative theories on the relations between Asian and African systems of slavery. Simultaneously, Orlando Patterson (1979, 1982) developed his own, highly original theories on the topic of slavery in general.

The question of slavery in ancient China, however, was passed over by most Western experts on slavery and even by specialists on China, despite this growing interest in the topic of slavery among historians in general. In this essay, I would like to analyze some of the new evidence relating to slavery in ancient China that has only recently come to light, in the hopes that the discussions of the question of slavery will lead to a better understanding of the economic and social basis of the traditional Chinese state. In addition, I hope to bring the ancient Chinese evidence to the attention of those involved in the international debate about the nature of slavery and its role in the development of world history.

Since the volume of studies on slavery is enormous, in this essay I intend to use material relating to the slave systems of ancient Greece and Rome to help illuminate relevant issues in ancient China because of their comparable antiquity and their importance for laying the foundations of Western and Eastern civilizations respectively. By doing this, I do not intend to cast any aspersions on the value of drawing comparisons with other slave systems in other social formations, such as those in Africa and America: I merely wish to limit the article to manageable proportions.

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