A Preliminary Study of the Qin Period Inscribed Slips from Liye

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On June 3rd, 2002, the No. 1 well of the city-site at Liye in Longshan County, Hunan, began to yield inscribed slips, which was followed by the discovery of voluminous inscribed slips and tablets in the same well. The finds total as many as about 36,000 pieces according to estimation. In the present paper, I would like to deal with some problems on them so as to evoke further research and discussion.

I. Calendar First Day of the Moon

The first interesting point of the Liye slips and tablets as such an important discovery, of course, is the problem of their date. The preliminary excavation report dates them to the time from the 25th year of Qin King Zheng’s reign to the first year of the Second Qin Emperor’s reign. Do they undoubtedly belong to the Qin? This can be determined by examining the recorded li shuo (calendar first days of moons), which have been quoted a lot in this report, such as:

- The 5th moon with xinsi as the shuo (first day of the moon), 26th year
- The 8th moon with gengxu as the shuo
- The 2nd moon with bingzi as the shuo, 27th year
- The 8th moon with jiaxu as the shuo
- The 5th moon with xinwei as the shuo, 28th year
- The 9th moon with bingu as the shuo, 30th year
- The 1st month with wayin as the shuo, 32nd year
- The 3rd moon with xinwei as the shuo
- The 4th month with xinhou as the shuo
- The 6th moon with jiawu as the shuo, 34th year

In the aspect of year recording, these inscriptions already cover most of the dates occurring in the slips and tablets.

Through comparison with the relevant calendars known from present calculation, it is easy to confirm that the above dates were all in the Qin period. Consulting Xu Xiqi’s Xizhou (Gonghe) Zhi Xihan Lipu (Calendar from the Western Zhou (Gonghe Reign) to the Western Han), the latest in this type of publication, we see that those li shuo almost all conform to the Calendar. The only discrepancy is the eighth month with jiaxu as the shuo, 27th year, which, according to the Calendar, began from guiyou day. The difference for one day must owe to the establishment of an additional greater moon between the third and the seventh moons. These show the uniformity and meticulousness of the calendar observed in the Qin period.

It will be possible for us to have a relatively complete understanding of Qin calendar days after the publication of all the Liye slips and tablets. But the published records on the li shuo have already provided some material for comparison with other data on calendar days. Let us read the following examples.

The first example is the Han slips Zou Yan Shu (Report on Trial) unearthed from Zhangjiashan in Jiangling, Hubei. One of its parts "Nanjun Zushi Gai Lu…Deng Yubu 南郡卒史盖庐……等狱簿" (Prison Register by the Zushi Clerk...
II. Writing Form and Dispatching Manner of Documents

Before the discovery of the Liye slips, the administrative documents of the Qin period were little known. The material evidence was merely the document written by the Nanjun 南郡 prefect Teng 腾 in the 20th year of the First Qin Emperor’s reign unearthed from Qin tomb No. 11 at Shuihudi 聲虎地 in Yunmeng 云梦, Hubei. But this may have been a copy with some details presumably omitted, which remained unknown until the emergence of the Liye slips.

It is impressive that the administrative documents from Liye, like the Qin legal documents previously recorded, are composed after standard, mature forms, and in a succinct style. For example, some documents contain the idiom “Gan yan zhi 敢言之” (literally “This is to report that…” or “This is the report”):

Jisi day of the 9th moon with bingchen day as the shuo, 30th year. Report from Jing 敬, deputy chief of the Land Department. This is to report that the office of county government required… to go to the office. This is the report. … J1 ⑨ 981

Jiayin day of the 4th moon with bingwu day as the shuo, 32nd year. Report from Shi 是, deputy chief of the Shaonei 少内 (department in charge of financial affairs). This is to report that the yushi’s document inquiring… Now the document has been received. This is the report. … J1 ⑩ 152

Obviously the function of “Gan yan zhi” is to mark the beginning and end of the main text of documents so as to prevent tampering. A similar idiom is “Gan gao 敢告” (literally “This is to notify that…” or “This is the notice”). For example:

Jiayin day of the 4th moon with bingwu day as the shuo, 32nd year. Notice from the Qianling 迁陵 County deputy magistrate’s assistant Se to the Youyang 西阳 magistrate’s assistant. This is to notify that the document of inquiring the price of the clothes a clerk sent by your order has been received. This is the notice. … J1 ⑩ 158

The matter said in this document is the same as that in above-quoted J1 ⑩ 152, and both documents are dated the same day. As the Shaonei deputy chief Shi’s document was to submit to his superior, there occurs the wording “Gan yan zhi 敢言之.” But the Qianling deputy magistrate’s assistant Se shared the same official rank with the addressee Youyang magistrate’s assistant, so he used “Gan gao 敢告.”

The document of Nanjun prefect Teng unearthed from Shuihudi ends with the words “Mail by courier; the copy for the Jiangling Bureau, mail by post.” It means that the document was to be delivered in two ways: The first was orderly transmission through courier stations among the counties of the prefecture, while the
second was direct delivery by a special postman. Another example is the Liye slip J1 ⑮ 154, which says: “Mail delivered by the postman De 郵人得行.”

The Er Nian Lü Ling 二年律令 (Ordinances Issued in the Second Year) in the Han slips from Zhangjiashan contains the Xing Shu Lü 行书律 (Statute on Document Delivery). It stipulates to establish one post station every ten li generally and every twenty li for the area south of the river in Nanjun Prefecture, and to set up 12 substations under each station. This was a huge system. Such a great net formed in the second year of Empress Lü’s reign obviously had no counterpart in this region during the Qin period. A slip from Liye says:

Jiawu day of the first moon with wuyin day as the shuo, 32nd year. Report from the chief of Qiling 启陵 Township. This is to report that the positions of Chengli 成里 Ward chief and Qiling postman are vacant ……J1 ⑮ 157

It indicates that Qiling Township and the like were allowed to have only one postman.

As the postmen were in a small number, only a few urgent documents were delivered by special postmen, as demonstrated in J1 ⑮ 2, which says: “Mail by post from Qianling to Dongting.” Most documents were transmitted by minor clerks, commoners or even male and female servants. For example:

Brought by Assistant Chu J1 ⑮ 152
Brought by Assistant Ren J1 ⑮ 981
Delivered from the county government by express J1 ⑮ 156 and 157

The Xing Shu Lü in the Qin slips from Shuihudi says: “Old and weak servants, regardless of males or females, and untrustworthy people should not be ordered to make document delivery.” The above-quoted Liye slips reflect just the requirement of this regulation.

Another stipulation of this statute reads:

The sending and receipt of documents should be recorded along with the respective time in date and time, early or late, so as to be handled in time.

This was also well implemented as reflected from the Liye slips, where the sending and receipt of documents are often noted down exactly, not only in date, but also in the time of a day.

The time of a day was recorded in two ways. One was using the names of the periods in the day. For example:

Bingchen day of the 4th moon, morning. Delivered from the county government to Youyang by express J1 ⑮ 158

Another noteworthy point of the Liye documents is the frequent occurrence of the idiom “One’s hand.” The first word is a person’s name, while the “hand” can be explained to be “in person,” and the whole phrase means one’s signature. This can be exemplified with the following slips:

J1 ⑮ 158 quoted above is the document the Qianling deputy magistrate’s assistant Se sent to the Youyang magistrate’s assistant on jiayin (ninth) day of the fourth moon beginning with bingwu day, 32nd year of the First Qin Emperor’s reign. It tells that the document on the price of the clothes delivered by a clerk of the Youyang magistrate’s assistant has been received (the document is titled “Yushi’s Document Inquiring the Price of the Clothes”, see J1 ⑮ 153). The reverse of the slip is inscribed with the words:

Bingchen day of the 4th moon, morning. Delivered from the county government to Youyang by
express. Xin’s hand.

This means that the document was delivered to Youyang on bingchen (11th) day of the fourth moon. The original had been sent out, and the present J1 ⑥ 158 was a copy kept in file. Xin must have been the copier.

Receiving through the Youyang government the yushi’s document inquiring the price of the clothes, the Qinling deputy magistrate’s assistant Se transmitted it down to the Shaonei, the department in charge of financial affairs under the county government, on guichou (eighth) day of the fourth moon for handling, and pointed out that the document, i.e. J1 ⑤ 156, should be opened and read by officials of the Financial Section. The original had been handed to the Shaonei. The copier must also have been Xin.

On the next day jiayin, the Shaonei deputy chief, by the order, submitted a report, i.e. J1 ⑥ 152. The document was brought by the assistant Chu and opened by Xin, and the signer was Chu.

Thus we know that the person who signed “someone’s hand” was the clerk that copied, received or dispatched the document.

III. Dongting and Qianling

Through a careful reading of the above-quoted “Yushi’s Document of Inquiring the Price of the Clothes” and related documents in slips, it has been known that the city-site yielding the slips and tablets is the ruined seat of Qin period Qianling County belonging to Dongting Prefecture.

The document was issued by the yushi (imperial counselor agency). The position yushi of the Qin Dynasty originated from the system recorded in the Zhou Li (Ritual of the Zhou) and was headed by the yushi dafu (chief imperial counselor), assistant of the chancellor, mainly in charge of supervising and controlling the officials. With the purpose of requiring “Dongting 洞庭 to report the price of the clothes,” the document was to be sent from Xianyang 咸阳 through Dongting Prefecture to the counties under this prefecture in proper order. So it was transmitted from Youyang to Qianling, and then from the Qianling magistrate’s assistant down to the Shaonei (Financial Department) of the county government. This process reflects the Qin three-rank jurisdiction: the imperial court–Dongting Prefecture–Qianling County.

After the discovery of the Liye slips, the problem of “Dongting Prefecture” aroused a lot of discussion and inference for a period of time. My suspicions about its existence is also not dispelled until reading the slips J1 ⑤ 1–12 with the words “We do not know by which county magistrate’s signature (the troops) are garrisoned in Dongting Prefecture.”

Histories have no records on the establishment of Dongting Prefecture in the Qin period. While recounting studies of Qin prefectures, Ma Feibai 马非白 in his Qin Ji Shi 秦集史 (A Collection of Historical Records on the Qin) says that “There have always been two versions on the Qin prefectures and counties. One of them believes that there were 36 prefectures during the whole Qin period as historians relate in their works. The other maintains that the 36 prefectures were set up in the 26th year of the First Qin Emperor’s reign, not including the later established.” (The former version was brought about from Ban Gu’s Han Shu: “Dili Zhi” 汉书·地理志 (History of the Han: “Geographical Monographs”); the latter started from Pei Yin’s Shi Ji Ji Jie 裴駰·史记集解 (Commentary on the “Historical Records”) and came into its complete form in the Jin Shu: “Dili Zhi” 晋书·地理志 (History of the Jin: “Geographical Monographs”). But both do not mention Dongting Prefecture.

Originally the Qianling area belonged to Qianzhong 頭中 Prefecture of the Chu 楚 State. The Shi Ji: “Qin Benji” 史记·秦本纪 (Historical Records: “Basic Annals of the Qin”) records that in the 27th year of his reign (280 BC), the Qin King Zhaowang 昭王 ordered Sima Cuo to lead his troops on an expedition from the western Long 陇 region. With the Shu area as the base, they attacked Qianzhong of the Chu and captured it.” The “Chu Shijia” 楚世家 (“Biography of the Chu”) of the same book says that “In the 22nd year” of the Chu King Qingxiangwang 秦襄王’s reign (277 BC), “the Qin took our Wu 蘇 and Qianzhong Prefecture.” Consulting the Shui Jing “Yuanshui Zhu” 水经·沅水注 (Commentary of the Waterways Classic: “Yuanshui River”), we read that “In the 27th year of the Qin King Zhaowang’s reign, Sima Cuo, by the king’s order, led the Long and Shu troops to attack on the Chu State, which ended with the Chu’s territory north of the Hanshui River ceded to the Qin. In the 30th year, the Qin seized Wu, Qian and the southern Hanshui River valley from the Chu, and established Qianzhong Prefecture in this tract of land.” These record evidence that the Qin captured the Qianzhong region twice and finally made it a prefecture. The “Yuanshui Zhu” says further that “In the second (please read “fifth” for it) year of the First Han Emperor’s reign, the territory of previous Qianzhong was made Wuling Prefecture,” but it does not mention how
Qianzhong Prefecture was changed in the Qin period.

Wuling Prefecture of the early Han period included Henshan 侯山, Lingyang 零阳, Chongxian 充县, Youyang, Qianling, Yuanling, Chenyang 辰阳, Yiling 义陵, and Wuyang 乌阳 counties mentioned in the Han Shu: “Dili Zhi,” with the seat located in Yiling, to the south of present-day Xupu 溆浦. The Qianling County seat, as recorded in the “Yuanshui Zhu,” was situated east of present-day Baojing 保靖, at a distance from Liye. The difference between the location known from this literal record and that suggested by the present archaeological data must have been owing to the move of the seat, but both Baojing and Liye are situated on the bank of the Youshui River.

It is clearly reasonable to identify the Liye city-site as the ruined seat of Qin period Qianling County. The Liye slips, as the published show, are left over from the ruined seat of Qin period Qianling County. The Qianling County government, which is well exemplified by the original and copied documents kept in the Qianling Liye slips, as the published show, are left over from the ruined seat of Qin period Qianling County. To demonstrate the great significance of the Liye slips, I would like to cite some examples and make a brief account on them.

Example I: J1@9

The document on the obverse is a report of Qiling Township, Qianling, to the county government. It tells that Jia 嘉, deputy chief of Duxiang 都乡 (the township where the county seat was located), made representations to Qiling about the problem that the He 该 family’s and other 16 families’ move from Qiling to the Duxiang had been done without handing over the register on their ages. The chief of Qiling Township, Ying 应 by name, inquired into the issue. It turned out that Qiling had given the Duxiang a document on these families when they moved, and there were no longer any records on them, including those on their ages. So Qiling reports the matter to the county government and asks them to inform the Duxiang that the problem should be settled by the Duxiang itself.

On the reverse are the instructions of Dun Hu 敦狐, deputy magistrate’s assistant of Qianling County. It requires the chief of Duxiang to handle the matter by law, i.e. to register the movers’ ages.

The report of Qiling Township is dated 20th of the fifth moon, 26th year of the First Qin Emperor’s reign (221 BC), and the instructions of the Qianling County deputy magistrate’s assistant were received by the Duxiang on 24th. The document must have been kept in the Duxiang.

In the Qin period, age registration was very important to the government because males coming of age should be included on the roll of laborers for conscription. The Shi Ji: “Qinshihuang Benji” 史记·秦始皇本纪 (Historical Records: “Annals of the First Qin Emperor”) records that in the 16th year (231 BC), “adult males began to be demanded to register their ages with the government.” It can be better understood by referring to the words “report one’s age orally” in the Qin slips Bian Nian Ji 编年记 (Chronicles) unearthed from Shuihudi.

Example II: J1 @ 5 and 6

On the obverse of the two slips is the text telling that the document delivered from the Dongting Prefecture government on 15th of the second moon, 27th year of the First Qin Emperor’s reign (220 BC) has been sent to the counties of Dongting Prefecture. Moreover, it has been transmitted to two zushi clerks and the military commander of the Prefecture. The matter is as follows: The Dongting prefectural government was ordered to produce military supplies (including the above-mentioned
V. Comparison with Early Han Documents

In form and content, the Liye slips are comparable to a certain extent with the previously discovered slips of the early Han period. One example is a group of wooden tablets from the No. 18 tomb at Gaotai 高台 in Hubei. A comparison with the Liye slips in form suggests that the text they bear is a copied practical document.

On the obverse of Gaotai M18:35B is the document proper. As the excavation report points out, the “seventh year” should be assigned to the Han Emperor Wendi 文帝’s Qianyuan 前元 reign (174 BC), and the “gengzi” is 25th of the tenth moon. On that day, Qi, chief of Zhongxiang 中乡 Township, Jiangling, reported to the county government that Yan 燕, an adult female of Xin’an 新安, had asked to move to Andu 安都 with two adult servants and one maid and transfer their registered permanent residence to there. The dating way and the idioms “Gan yan zhi 敢言之” (This is to report that …) and “Shu dao wei bao 书到为报” (This is the report) are all identical with those used in Liye slips. On the same day, a copy of the document was sent from Jing 敬, chief’s assistant of Longshi 龙氏 Township, Jiangling, to the chief’s assistant of Andu. The signer was the clerk Ting, who must also have been the copier.

M18:35C is a list of the Yan household’s members, an appendix to the document. It suggests that Yan was the widow of a lesser marquis, so her family was given special care. Yan came from Xin’an (to the east of present-day Mianchi 濮池, Henan 河南), probably her husband’s native place. She lived in Jiangling with her husband and now, after his death, intended to move to Andu (to the southwest of the old seat of present-day Gaoyang 高阳, Hebei 河北), presumably her own homeland. The report is an official document to handle her application.

What we see today is actually a copy of the document. M18:35B and its appendix M18:35C are joined together, added with the sealing label M18:35A, and tied with two lines of silk ribbon. On the original document, the lower line must have born a clay sealing with the legend “Seal of Jiangling Magistrate’s Assistant.” But on the copy, the legend is written in ink. Close to it, in the lower left corner of the reverse of M18:35B, there is the phrase “Chan’s hand,” indicating that the copier was the clerk Chan 产. As for M18:35D, it is a list of grave goods and has nothing to do with the document. Presumably Yan died before her departure for Andu, and the copied document that should have functioned as her certificate was used as a funeral object.

The Gaotai wooden tablets provide us some material evidences of the then document form. In the way of sealing, M18:35A has its counterpart among the Liye slips, such as J1 ②, a short narrow wooden piece. J1 ② 1–12 are a group of wooden tablets related to each other. Originally they might have been tied together. This information and the like facilitate the sorting-out of this type of document.

References


Note: The original paper was published in Wenwu 2003.1: 73–81, with no figure, written by Li Xueqin 李学勤. The present version, an abridgment from the original, is prepared by Cao Nan 曹楠 and English-translated by Mo Runxian 莫润先.